

Low-Flying AF Cargo Plane Violated Rules, General Says

By Felicity Barringer
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An Air Force reserve general at Andrews Air Force Base has confirmed that a reserve officer piloting a huge C-130 cargo plane was performing unauthorized maneuvers last week when the plane swooped low enough to terrify residents of a Waldorf neighborhood.

"The pilot of the C-130 did in fact perform maneuvers not authorized by U.S. Air Force directives," according to the statement issued by Brig. Gen. Charles E. Jones III, who was investigating complaints by residents of the Elsa Avenue area in Northern Charles County.

Jones' statement did not identify the name or rank of the commander of the plane and said only that "appropriate disciplinary action is being considered."

According to Gerald Lavey, a spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration, neither civilian nor military aircraft are premitted to fly lower than 1,000 feet in populated areas unless a special waiver has been granted. No waiver had been granted in this case.

Neither Lavey nor any Air Force spokesman knew how low the C-130 had flown over the neighborhood.

The April 8 flight of the plane, which has a 132-foot wingspan and a belly large enough to carry trucks and other heavy equipment, scared homebound school bus drivers into halting their buses and praying.

Residents of the Elsa Avenue neighborhood complained that the aircraft seemed to be at treetop level, and several said they were convinced it would shear off their roofs. One resident, Delores Phillips, said she could clearly see the pilot and copilot as the plane flew by.

Her neighbor, Bonnie Seidl, remained dissatisfied yesterday with the Air Force's handling of the incident. "It's sort of an ambiguous thing right now," she said. "I hope they're going to do something to (the pilot).

"What he did was totally irresponsible and I hate to think that he's going to be able to fly again," she added.

In his statement, Gen. Jones -- who commands the 459th Tactical Airlift Wing, to which the pilot belonged -- said that "the integrity and professionalism of (the Air Force Reserve) will not be compromised by wanton violations of U.S. Air Force directives."

Lt. Col. Bob Thatcher, public relations officer at Andrews, said that three other airmen besides the pilot were on board the four-engine, Lockheed-Hercules plane when it circled over the area near the Charles County-Prince George's County line.

Only the pilot, he added, would be held responsible for the incident.

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