

Third Victim Found in Virginia Hot Air Balloon Crash

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Liberty Voice

The body of the third victim of the deadly hot air balloon fire in Virginia has been found. The balloon erupted in flames during the Mid-Atlantic Balloon Festival on Friday night. Having recovered all three victims of the crash, authorities with the Virginia State Police and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) now turn their attention to what caused the balloon to hit power lines, causing the deadly fire and crash. Two passengers and the pilot were killed.

The pilot of the hot air balloon, identified as Daniel Kirk of Hartley, Del., on CNN by his father, Donald Kirk, had been flying balloons for over 30 of his 66 years. A veteran of the Army, Daniel Kirk was passionate about flying balloons and extremely careful to not take balloons up if the weather conditions were not optimal. In addition to Daniel Kirk, the University of Richmond has confirmed that two members of its women's basketball program were aboard the balloon and died in the accident. Ahead of the launch of the balloon, victim Ginny Doyle, 44, posted on Instagram that she was anxious about the upcoming flight, which had been scheduled to take off earlier in the day, but was delayed due to fog. Doyle was the associate head basketball coach at the U of Richmond, had a large part in recruiting for the program and had been a star player at the university. She was accompanied on the balloon by the director of basketball operations for the school, Natalie Lewis,²⁴. The school's athletic director, Keith Gill, released a statement mourning the loss of the women.

Multiple photos of the crash show the hot air balloon bursting into flames before crashing into woods approximately 25 miles from Richmond. Witnesses report that two of the passengers aboard the plane either jumped or fell from the balloon's basket, which was still very high in the air. Over 100 rescue workers from the state and local levels performed a search for the bodies in an area of Caroline County measuring three miles in length and a quarter of a mile in width. One body was found shortly after Friday's crash and another was uncovered on Saturday, but the third

victim's burned remains were undiscovered until found today approximately 100 yards from the remains of the passenger found yesterday. None of the bodies will be identified officially pending the medical examiner's report.

One factor that will be thoroughly investigated is what weather conditions were like on Friday. Initial reports say that the weather at the time was clear and did not play a factor in the crash. At the time of the deadly accident, 13 hot air balloons had been in the air and three of them were landing in close proximity. Two of those balloons made it to earth safely, but the third hot air balloon encountered a power line on its way down, causing a fast-moving fire. In the initial moments, the pilot was seen taking safety precautions and doing everything he could to control the fire, including venting the balloon, but the balloon and the basket carrying the victims separated after an explosion tore them apart. Witnesses report hearing prayers and screams for help from the basket. The festival was canceled after the tragedy occurred. A preliminary report on the accident will be released by the NTSB early in next week.

At Meadow Event Park, the scene of Friday's festival, event organizers say that inspectors from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had inspected safety records and the balloons themselves before the hot air balloons took flight. The spokesperson for the event site, Norm Hyde, said that the safety records of all balloons in the festival were current. According to Kathleen Bergen, spokesperson for the FAA, the agency "routinely conduct(s) surveillance at air shows, balloon festivals and other aviation events," but could not confirm that FAA inspectors had been at Meadow Event Park on Friday.

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