Navy pilot dead after crash in “Star Wars Canyon” in Death Valley [Updated]

Enlarge / An F/A-18 from VFA-151, “the Vigilantes.” A similar aircraft from the squadron crashed on Wednesday flying through what aviation enthusiasts refer to as “Star Wars Canyon” in Death Valley, California.
VFA-151, US Navy

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The US Navy has confirmed the death of a pilot in the crash of a Boeing F/A-18E Super Hornet in Death Valley National Park in California on Wednesday. The pilot, who has not yet been

named, apparently crashed into the wall of what is known as "Star Wars Canyon"—an area frequently used by the Navy and other services for low-altitude flight training, adjacent to the Naval Air Weapons Station at China Lake. The area, called "Jedi Transition" by the military, is open to the public and is a hotspot for military aircraft photographers and enthusiasts because of how close aircraft pass when traversing the area. Seven onlookers suffered minor injuries as a result of the crash.

The Navy is waiting for notification of family members before releasing the pilot's name. Navy spokeswoman Lieutenant Commander Lydia Bock said in a press statement that the aircraft—from Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 151 ("the Vigilantes"), out of Naval Air Station Lemoore in California—crashed at about 10am PST on Wednesday. "The cause of the crash is under investigation," Bock said. At the time of the initial release, the status of the pilot was unknown, and search and rescue personnel were at the scene.

[Update, 5:32 PM] The Navy has now identified the pilot as Lt. Charles Z. Walker, 33. "The NAS Lemoore aviation family is grieving the loss of one of our own," Capt. James Bates, Commander of Strike Fighter Wing Pacific said in a statement. "Lt. Walker was an incredible naval aviator, husband and son. He was an integral member of the Vigilante family, and his absence will be keenly felt on this flight line. Our aviators understand the risk associated with this profession, and they knowingly accept it in service to our nation. The untimely loss of a fellow aviator and shipmate pains us all. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his family and friends."

Star Wars Canyon, so named because of its proximity to an area used as the location for filming scenes on the fictional planet Tatooine in the original *Star Wars* film, has been used for low-level flight training by the services since the 1930s. When Death Valley became a national park in 1994, the military was given a waiver to continue to use the area for flight

training. In 2010, the National Park Service installed railings along the canyon because of the popularity of the location for plane-watching. Like the Mach Loop in Wales, it is one of the few places where photographers can routinely take pictures of military aircraft from *above* as they fly past.

Enlarge / An F-117 Nighthawk Stealth Fighter flies near the "Jedi Transition" on February 27, 2019 in Death Valley, California.
Jerod Harris / Getty Images
[embedded content]
Video of aircraft flying through "Star Wars Canyon"
Witnesses said that the F/A-18 crashed at high-speed directly into a canyon wall. The aircraft exploded in a fireball, scorching the rocks. The pilot never ejected.

VF-151 is part of Carrier Air Wing 9, the air group that recently returned from deployment aboard the USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74). The *Stennis* is now in Norfolk after an around-the-world deployment, preparing for mid-life refueling of its nuclear reactors.

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