

BOAT STRIKE SURVIVORS CLUNG TO WRECKAGE FOR SOME 45 MINUTES BEFORE U.S. MILITARY KILLED THEM

“There are a lot of disturbing aspects. But this is one of the most disturbing.”

Nick Turse

December 5 2025, 7:07 p.m.



A screenshot from the edited video President Donald Trump posted to Truth Social on Sept. 2, 2025, showing a U.S. military strike on a boat in the Caribbean Sea. Screenshot: [@realDonaldTrump/Truth Social](https://www.truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump)

TWO SURVIVORS CLUNG to the wreckage of a vessel attacked by the U.S. military for roughly 45 minutes before a second strike killed them on September 2. After about three quarters of an hour, Adm. Frank Bradley, then head of Joint Special Operations Command, ordered a follow-up strike – [first reported](#) by The Intercept in September – that killed the shipwrecked men, according to three government sources and a senior lawmaker.

Two more missiles followed that finally sank the foundering vessel. Bradley, now the chief of Special Operations Command, claimed that he conducted multiple strikes because the shipwrecked men and the fragment of the boat still posed a threat, according to the sources.

Secretary of War Pete Hegseth distanced himself from the follow-up strike during a Cabinet meeting at the White House, [telling reporters](#) he “didn’t personally see survivors” amid the fire and smoke and had left the room before the second attack was ordered. He evoked the “fog of war” to justify the decision for more strikes on the sinking ship and survivors.

Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, said Hegseth provided misleading information and that the video shared with lawmakers Thursday showed the reality in stark light.

“We had video for 48 minutes of two guys hanging off the side of a boat. There was plenty of time to make a clear and sober analysis,” Smith [told CNN](#) on Thursday. “You had two shipwrecked people on the top of the tiny little bit of the boat that was left that was capsized. They weren’t signaling to anybody. And the idea that these two were going to be able to return to the fight – even if you accept all of the questionable legal premises around this mission, around these strikes – it’s still very hard to imagine how these two were returning to any sort of fight in that condition.”

Three other sources familiar with briefings by Bradley provided to members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate and House Armed Services committees on Thursday confirmed that roughly 45 minutes elapsed between the first and second strikes. “They had at least 35 minutes of clear visual on these guys after the smoke of the first strike cleared. There were no time constraints. There was no pressure. They were in the middle of the ocean and there were no other vessels in the area,” said one of the sources. “There are a lot of disturbing aspects. But this is one of the most disturbing. We could not understand the logic behind it.”

MOST READ



Grandmother Faces Trial in Alabama for Wearing Penis Costume to No Kings Protest

[Liliana Segura](#)



“Casualty Cover-Up”: The Pentagon Is Hiding U.S. Losses Under Trump in the Middle East

[Nick Turse](#)



Far-Right Religious Leaders Advising Trump See Iran as an End Times Holy War

[Alain Stephens](#)

The three sources said that after the first strike by U.S. forces, the two men climbed aboard a small portion of the capsized boat. At some point the men began waving to something overhead, which three people familiar with the briefing said logically must have been U.S. aircraft flying above them. All three interpreted the actions of the men as signaling for help, rescue, or surrender.

“They were seen waving their arms towards the sky,” said one of the sources. “One can only assume that they saw the aircraft. Obviously, we don’t know what they were saying or thinking, but any reasonable person would assume that they saw the aircraft and were signaling either: don’t shoot or help us. But that’s not how Bradley saw it.”

Special Operations Command did not reply to questions from The Intercept prior to publication.



Read Our Complete Coverage

License to Kill

During the Thursday briefings, Bradley claimed that he believed there was cocaine in the quarter of the boat that remained afloat, according to the sources. He said the survivors could have drifted to land or to a rendezvous point with another vessel, meaning that the alleged drug traffickers still had the ability to transport a deadly weapon – cocaine – into the United States, according to one source. Bradley also claimed that without a follow-up attack, the men might rejoin “the fight,” another source said.

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., echoed that premise, telling reporters after the briefings that the additional strikes on the vessel were warranted because the shipwrecked men were “trying to flip a boat, loaded with drugs bound for the United States, back over so they could stay in the fight.”

None of the three sources who spoke to The Intercept said there was any evidence of this. “They weren’t radioing anybody and they certainly did not try to flip the boat. [Cotton’s] comments are untethered from reality,” said one of the sources.

Sarah Harrison, who previously advised Pentagon policymakers on issues related to human rights and the law of war, said that the people in the boat weren’t in any fight to begin with. “They didn’t pose an

imminent threat to U.S. forces or the lives of others. There was no lawful justification to kill them in the first place let alone the second strike,” she told The Intercept. “The only allegation was that the men were transporting drugs, a crime that doesn’t even carry the death penalty.”



Related

Secret Boat Strike Memo Justifies Killings By Claiming the Target Is Drugs, Not People

The Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel this summer produced a [classified opinion](#) intended to shield service members up and down the chain of command from prosecution. The legal theory advanced in the finding claims that narcotics on the boats are lawful military targets because their cargo generates revenue, which can be used to buy weaponry, for cartels whom the Trump administration claims are in armed conflict with the U.S.

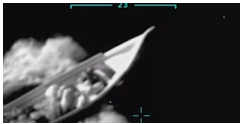
The Trump administration claims that at least 24 [designated terrorist organizations](#) are engaged in “non-international armed conflict” with the United States including the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua; Ejército de Liberación Nacional, a Colombian guerrilla insurgency; Cártel de los Soles, a Venezuelan criminal group that the U.S. [claims](#) is “headed by Nicolas Maduro and other high-ranking Venezuelan individuals”; and several groups affiliated with the Sinaloa Cartel.

The military has carried out 22 known attacks, destroying 23 boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean since September, [killing at least 87 civilians](#). The most recent attack occurred in the Pacific Ocean on Thursday and killed four people.

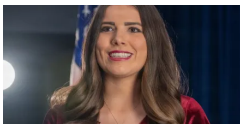
Since the attacks began, experts in the laws of war and members of Congress, [from both parties](#), have said the strikes are illegal [extrajudicial killings](#) because the military is not permitted to deliberately target civilians – even suspected criminals – who do not pose an imminent threat of violence.



RELATED



Video of U.S. Military Killing Boat Strike Survivors Is Horrifying, Lawmakers Reveal



Pentagon Claims It “Absolutely” Knows Who It Killed in Boat Strikes. Prove It, Lawmaker Says.



Department of War Disputes Second Attack on Boat Strike Survivors Was a “Double-Tap”



Bipartisan House Resolution Seeks to Block Trump War With Venezuela

**The
Intercept_**

© THE INTERCEPT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED