

Signal Chat Leak Angers U.S. Military Pilots

Men and women who have taken to the air on behalf of the United States expressed bewilderment after the leak of attack plans. “You’re going to kill somebody,” one pilot said.



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Reporting from Washington

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The intelligence breach was bad enough, current and former fighter pilots said. But Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s refusal to acknowledge that he should not have disclosed sensitive information about when American fighter pilots would attack sites in Yemen, they said, was even worse.

On air bases, in aircraft carrier “ready rooms” and in communities near military bases this week, there was consternation. The news that senior officials in the Trump administration discussed plans on Signal, a commercial messaging app, for an impending attack angered and bewildered men and women who have taken to the air on behalf of the United States.

The mistaken inclusion of the editor in chief of The Atlantic in the chat and Mr. Hegseth’s insistence that he did nothing wrong by disclosing the secret plans upend decades of military doctrine about operational security, a dozen Air Force and Navy fighter pilots said.

Worse, they said, is that going forward, they can no longer be certain that the Pentagon is focused on their safety when they strap into cockpits.

“The whole point about aviation safety is that you have to have the humility to understand that you are imperfect, because everybody screws up. Everybody makes mistakes,” said Lt. John Gadzinski, a retired Navy F-14 pilot who flew combat missions from aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. “But ultimately, if you can’t admit when you’re wrong, you’re going to kill somebody because your ego is too big.”

He and other pilots said that each day since Monday, when The Atlantic published an

article about the chat disclosures, had brought a stunning new revelation. First came the news that Mr. Hegseth had put the operational sequencing, or flight schedules, for the F/A-18 Hornets targeting the Houthi militia in Yemen on March 15 in the unclassified Signal group chat, which included several other senior officials.

“We intentionally don’t share plans with people who don’t need to know,” said one Navy F/A-18 pilot, who has flown frequently in missions in the Middle East. “You don’t share what time we’re supposed to show up over a target. You don’t want to telegraph that we’re about to show up on someone’s doorstep; that’s putting your crew at risk.” He and several other current and former pilots spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid reprisals from the Pentagon and from allies of President Trump.

But then came Mr. Hegseth’s initial response to the disclosures. He attacked Jeffrey Goldberg, the Atlantic editor, as a “so-called journalist,” and sought refuge in a semantic argument, saying that he had never disclosed “war plans.”

So on Wednesday, The Atlantic published the actual text of what he had written, at 11:44 a.m. the day of the attack, in the group chat: “1215et: F-18s LAUNCH (1st strike package),” Mr. Hegseth texted, some 30 minutes before it happened. “1345: ‘Trigger Based’ F-18 1st Strike window Starts (Target Terrorist is @his Known Location so SHOULD BE ON TIME).”

This text was two hours in advance of the strikes.

Mr. Hegseth added: “1410: More F-18s LAUNCH (2nd strike package).” And then, “1536: F-18 2nd Strike Starts — also first sea-based Tomahawks launched.”

That text gave almost three hours’ notice.

On Wednesday, Mr. Hegseth called his disclosure a “team update” to “provide updates in real time, general updates in real time” to keep Trump national security officials informed.

But details of military operations are usually kept so secret that even the service members taking part in them are “locked down.” That sometimes means they are not allowed to speak to others who do not have a need to know, let alone tell people about the plans, the fighter pilots interviewed said. In aircraft carrier “ready rooms,” where flight squadrons spend their time when they are not in the air, crews burn instructions to destroy them.

“It’s important to understand the degree that OPSEC is involved in every aspect of your life on an aircraft carrier,” said former Navy Capt. Joseph Capalbo, who commanded a

carrier air wing and two F/A-18 squadrons, in a reference to operational security. “Red Sea ops are conducted in complete silence — no one is talking on the radio. Because everything can be heard by somebody.”

A former Air Force fighter pilot, Maj. Anthony Bourke, added: “When you disclose operational security, people can get killed.” He said that “these things are not taken lightly. I have never met anybody in the military who does not know this.”

Mr. Hegseth, a former Fox News weekend host, served as a National Guard infantryman.

Cmdr. Parker Kulda, a former Navy F/A-18 pilot, called Mr. Hegseth’s disclosures, and subsequent response to them, “infuriating.”

“It’s so beyond what I would expect from anyone in the military,” said Commander Kulda, who also flew combat missions in the Middle East. “The idea that the secretary of defense, who should know better, has done this, is just mind-boggling.”

Senior Defense Department officials and military analysts say that the Houthis possess air defenses, provided by Iran, that can target American warplanes.

“The Houthis have received several types of Iranian surface-to-air missiles designed to be capable of engaging fighter jets, including at high altitudes,” said Fabian Hinz, a military analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Indeed, Houthi rebels for the first time fired surface-to-air missiles at an F-16 fighter jet on Feb. 19, a senior U.S. official said. The missiles missed the fighter. The Houthis have shot down several slower-flying U.S. Air Force drones.

The Trump administration has insisted that none of the information on the chat was classified, and Mr. Hegseth and other officials have said it was not a “war plan.”

Sean Parnell, the Pentagon spokesman, said in response to a New York Times inquiry that the Signal chat “referenced by The Atlantic was not a forum for the official planning and execution of military operations — which also involved Joint Staff and Joint Force leadership.”

The chat included Vice President JD Vance; Secretary of State Marco Rubio; the national security adviser, Michael Waltz; and others, but not the acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Christopher Grady, the highest-ranking military official.

Mr. Parnell said that “military leadership are frequently not included in political meetings.”

Vice Adm. Kevin M. Donegan, a former F/A-18 pilot who served as commander of U.S.

naval forces in the Middle East, also pushed back on the idea that aviators' safety had ever been at risk from the disclosure of information on the March 15 attacks.

"Assuming the timeline and information reported is true, the likelihood of anything getting to anyone who could have done anything in such a short time was very low," Admiral Donegan said. "In the end our planes did not get shot down and no U.S. service personnel were injured or died."

But one former senior Defense Department official with military experience said Mr. Hegseth's text describing launch times and the type of strike aircraft was, indeed, classified information that could have jeopardized pilots' lives if it had been released or obtained.

A former Navy F/A-18 squadron commander also said that pilots flying combat missions would have considered the contents of Mr. Hegseth's text classified information. Revealing the details in text was "extremely cavalier," the former pilot said.

Had the Houthis learned the precise time of strikes and that they would be conducted by carrier-based attack planes in the northern Red Sea, they could have repositioned and prepared air defenses that have already shot down several remotely piloted American drones, the former Navy pilot said.

Although Mr. Hegseth has dismissed the risks to the Navy pilots flying those attack missions, videos released by U.S. Central Command tell a different tale.

Some of the F/A-18 Hornets shown taking off from the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Harry S. Truman in the Red Sea were armed with 500-pound and 1,000-pound bombs that could only be dropped well within range of the Houthis' air defenses.

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