

## Downing of 'Chinese balloon' makes spectacle over tourism hub

- A Monitor Desk Report

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The downing of a suspected Chinese spy balloon just off South Carolina's coast created a spectacle over one of the state's tourism hubs and drew crowds reacting with a mixture of bewildered gazing, distress and cheering.

The balloon was struck by a missile from an F-22 fighter just off Myrtle Beach, fascinating sky-watchers across a populous area known as the Grand Strand for its miles of beaches that draw retirees and vacationers. Crowds gathered in neighborhoods, hotel parking lots and beaches to watch the balloon hover, with some cheering just after it went down.

The festive mood belied the seriousness of the situation, with law enforcement around the county of 366,000 warning people not to touch any debris and to instead call dispatchers.

"Members of the US Military are coordinating to collect debris; however, fragments may make it to the coastline," the Horry County Police Department said in a statement.

Ashlyn Preaux, 33, went out to get her mail in Forestbrook, South Carolina, just inland of Myrtle Beach when she saw her neighbors gathered outside. Curious, she

went to see what they were looking at. It was easy to spot the balloon in the cloudless blue sky and then what appeared to be fighter jets circling overhead as well. After the strike, she could see the balloon start to fall apart and fall from the sky.

“I did not anticipate waking up to be in a Top Gun movie today,” she said.

The balloon hovered directly above the Hardy family as they checked into their oceanfront hotel in Myrtle Beach. The family from Anderson joined several employees in the parking lot taking videos of the scene unfolding above before going up to their room ahead of the missile strike.

Logan Hardy, 12, said the moment of impact generated a “boom” that shook the building. His room’s balcony gave the middle-schooler a clear view of the debris dropping.

“It looked like stars falling down,” he said, adding: “I will never forget this day.”

Some watchers rushed to nearby beaches as the balloon approached the ocean. Travis Huffstetler, who captured photos of the balloon, said the packed Garden City Beach almost looked like summertime on the chilly winter day with people looking skyward and taking pictures and videos on their phones.

When the balloon began crossing the water, Mark Doss, 54, drove a golf cart three blocks down from his home to Garden City Beach. There, Doss said he and his two teenage children spent 90 minutes watching the balloon strike and waiting in vain for debris to wash ashore.

The sheer size of the white orb awed Doss, who said the approaching fighter jet looked like a little model airplane. Doss recalled a “white puff of smoke” after the missile struck the balloon.

“That one jet made a beeline straight to it □ wham!” Doss said.

Life continued uninterrupted for many others into the evening. Doss described the spectacle from a biker bar. There, Saturday night thrill seekers gathered like normal as if international tensions had not played out hours earlier 60,000 feet (18,300 meters) above them. A cover band performed while people shot pool and huddled around patio heaters. Along the Myrtle Beach Boardwalk, nightlife staff went unbothered by the day’s events. Other line-waiters outside a club had completely missed the news.

But the severity of the growing diplomatic turmoil was not lost on Doss. He lamented the stress the events placed on his two teenage children, whose exposure to such sights had previously only come through the big screen.

State Sen. Greg Hembree of Horry, who represents the area in the South Carolina General Assembly, watched the strike from his neighbor's backyard.

The sight was both impressive and “a little bit scary” for Hembree, who said Americans typically expect such images to come from other countries.

“It was stunning,” Hembree said. “You don't ever think you're going to see a live

engagement with an adversary in sort of a military context.”

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