

NATIONAL SECURITY

# Admiral saw alleged drug boat strike survivors as legitimate targets, defense official says

Adm. Frank M. Bradley saw the two survivors of the first strike on an alleged drug boat as legitimate military targets based on the rules for the operation, a defense official said.

**Admiral defends decision to strike alleged drug boat twice**

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Dec. 4, 2025, 7:54 AM EST / Updated Dec. 4, 2025, 3:42 PM EST

**By Courtney Kube, Megan Lebowitz and Dan De Luce**

WASHINGTON – Adm. Frank M. Bradley saw the two survivors of a September strike on an alleged drug-smuggling boat as legitimate military targets based on the rules for the operation, which may have identified them as narco-terrorists, a defense official told NBC News.



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The military then launched a second strike on the same boat, generating controversy over whether the second strike was legal or could potentially [constitute a war crime](#).

After the first strike, the two survivors were in electronic communication with another ship suspected of being involved in narcotics trafficking, two people with knowledge of the matter said.

The details of that communication are unclear, but commanders at the Pentagon could cite the survivors' contact with a “mothership” as evidence that they were continuing to pursue drug smuggling efforts and therefore were legal targets, the sources said.



— A U.S. strike on a vessel in the southern Caribbean on Sept. 2. @realDonaldTrump via Truth Social

The [Wall Street Journal](#) reported Wednesday night that Bradley concluded that the survivors of the first Sept. 2 strike were trying to continue a drug run, making them legitimate targets. NBC News has asked the Pentagon for comment on what Bradley plans to tell lawmakers as he briefs them Thursday.

Both the House and the Senate have [launched inquiries](#) into the second strike, which killed the two survivors, [according to officials](#).

Earlier this week, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he [did not see survivors](#) after the first strike.

“The thing was on fire,” he said during a Cabinet meeting Tuesday. “It was exploded in fire and smoke. You can’t see it.”

Hegseth said “this is called the fog of war,” adding that while he watched the first strike live, he then moved on to other meetings and did not learn about the second strike until later.

The defense secretary said during Tuesday’s Cabinet meeting that Bradley “made the correct decision” and emphasized that “we have his back.”



— Adm. Frank Bradley arrives for a closed-door meeting with lawmakers Thursday.

Andrew Harnik / Getty Images

Bradley, who now serves as the head of the U.S. Special Operations Command, briefed the leaders of the House and Senate Intelligence committees and the leaders of the House and Senate Armed Services committees on the September strikes.

Rep. Jim Himes, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said, “What I saw in that room was one of the most troubling things I’ve seen in my time in public service.”

“You have two individuals in clear distress without any means of locomotion, with a destroyed vessel, who are killed by the United States,” the Connecticut lawmaker said.

He later said that “the admiral confirmed that there had not been a 'kill them all' order, and that there was not an order to grant no quarter.”

In a joint statement, Himes and the House Armed Services Committee's ranking member, Adam Smith, D-Wash., said, “we saw or heard nothing today to convince us that the decision to strike the vessel a second time was justified.”

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Tom Cotton, R-Ark., on the other hand, said he “didn’t see anything disturbing” in a video of the strikes after he was briefed by Bradley.

“The first strike, the second strike and the third and the fourth strike on Sept. 2 were entirely lawful and needful, and they were exactly what we expect our military commander to do,” Cotton told reporters.

He said that in the video, he saw two survivors “trying to flip a boat” and “load it with drugs” before they were killed.

“Adm. Bradley, Secretary Hegseth did exactly what we’d expect them to do,” he said.

Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., who received a closed-door briefing with Bradley on the Sept. 2nd strikes, said it would be “hard to watch this series of videos and not be troubled by it.”

“I have more policy questions than ever about the framing of the mission, the rules of engagement,” Coons said.

He added that he and Cotton emerged from the briefing with “different understandings” of what they saw.

In a subsequent October strike in the Caribbean that left two survivors, the U.S. military sent them to their home countries of Colombia and Ecuador to be detained and prosecuted, the

## Pentagon has said.

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