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Following Wikileaks' not very subtle hints that blimps have run away before, I decided to mine the Iraq and Afghanistan War logs provided by Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning and see what the fuss was about. (Only data provided in Manning's logs are included, other incidents, such as this one in Kabul, which killed five earlier this month, are not.)

The following table summarizes the 42 accidents involving blimps, aerostats, balloons, and JLENS, the names are used interchangeably in the logs. (A pedant will point out the differences between these things, but for the most part pedants were not writing the reports.) Their tethers snapped 33 times, primarily due to high winds (19 times), dust devils (4 times) and helicopters (4 times). There are two mentions of the cables striking power lines, and in at least three cases the Aerostat was last spotted drifting towards Iran, with no mention of equipment recovery.

The tethers have broken in winds as low as 20 knots, but have also withstood gusts of 120 knots. Winds insufficient to break the tether often caused other damage to the balloon. Dust devils had a tendency to force the aerostat to crash into the ground, its rapid ascent afterwards would snap the cable. Sometimes crews had fought to save the aerostat, realizing conditions were unfavorable, other times they discovered it was missing after the fact.

The basic point here is that the Aberdeen Aerostat's accident was not a freak. It had happened before, repeatedly. Statements that the odds of the tether breaking were “unlikely” were flat lies. Even the power outages caused by the wayward blimp were foreseeable.