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AIR PILOTS - COMMERCIAL AIR TRANSPORT SAFETY BRIEFING NOTE 20

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WRONG SURFACE TAKEOFFS

The Context

The prevalence of taxiway take-off attempts, wrong runway take-offs and take-offs commenced when lined up with the (correct) runway edge lights are perhaps not as rare as you might think, although most involve a night take-off and all stem from a breakdown in the performance of normal before take-off procedures and checks. They most often arise when an experienced aircraft commander is PF and the (often much younger) junior pilot is PM and not only relatively inexperienced put often being under pressure to complete tasks to an extent that leaves little or no time to monitor the actions of the PF.

Some examples of wrong surface actual or attempted take-offs

- In 2023, a Boeing 737-700 departed Las Vegas in night VMC aligned with the elevated runway edge lights instead of the unlit centreline after the Captain had taxied the aircraft into position for the First Officer to transition to PF for the take-off. The experienced PF Captain decided unnecessarily that an expeditious departure was appropriate without taking any account of the inexperienced First Officer, who in the taxi time available was unable to also monitor any of the Captain's actions. Although nosewheel tyre damage was found at destination, the occurrence was not reported and ATC did not notice the damaged edge lighting until several days later when the two facts were linked.¹
- In 2024, an Airbus A320 departing Goa Manohar in night VMC with a 60 year-old Captain as PF was cleared for an intersection take-off whilst taxiing but then turned onto the (somewhat unusually equal width but correctly lit) parallel taxiway not the runway whilst the very inexperienced First Officer was head down trying to bring up the required chart on his iPad. The TWR controller saw that the aircraft "looked too large" and issued a stop call, The take-off was rejected from a maximum speed 124 knots.²
- In 2025, a Boeing 737-800 operating a departure from Orlando FL in day VMC with the Captain as PF began take-off on the taxiway parallel to the runway for which take-off clearance had been given after missing multiple cues. Almost together, the previously head-down First Officer and ATC both recognised the error and stop was accomplished from a maximum speed of 71 knots.³
- In 2025, the Captain of an Embraer 170 departing Chennai in day VMC began take-off aligned with the runway edge lights whilst the very inexperienced First Officer was still reading out the take-off checks. Only when the First Officer looked up, recognised what was happening and called "go left" was corrective action towards the centreline taken at 80 knots. ATC only discovered the damaged edge lights later. The Captain was operating under a "Foreign Aircrew Temporary Authorisation".⁴
- In 2026, an experienced Airbus A320neo Training Captain accepted an ATC offer of an intersection take-off from Brussels when taxiing out in night VMC but, with the very low experience PM First Officer still busy head-down, then lined up and began take-off on a variable-width parallel taxiway. The First Officer only looked up from monitoring the engine instruments when he did not receive a prompt response to his 100 knot call. He then immediately realised what was happening and made four 'STOP'

¹ https://www.tsb.gc.ca/sites/default/files/2024-08/A23F0062-ENG_1.pdf 1

² <https://aaib.gov.in/Reports/2025/Serious%20Incident/Final%20report%20VT-EXT%20rev%2003.pdf>

³ <https://data.ntsb.gov/carol-repgen/api/Aviation/ReportMain/GenerateNewestReport/199887/pdf>

⁴ https://www.dgca.gov.in/digigov-portal/?baseLocale=en_US?dynamicPage=dynamicPdf/hfUnicnqOWmZ5uulK3%2Bdtg%3D%3D&mainnull

calls and the Captain responded by initiating a rejected take-off - maximum speed 127 knots. As the end of the taxiway approached, the First Officer then instructed the Captain to make a right turn to avoid a fence ahead and the aircraft finally stopped close to the intended take-off runway.⁵

Discussion

The 'wrong surface' may be the wrong runway, a taxiway or a take-off initiated when lined on the edge of the correct runway instead of the centreline. Take-offs aligned with the runway edge at night are sometimes completed without re-alignment or error recognition. A wrong surface take-off is more likely to occur at night and, whether recognised and rejected or completed, also seems more likely to involve a take-off commenced with the aircraft commander as PF and accompanied by an overloaded and/or inexperienced PM. In this situation, the PF is not only responsible for making the error but, in either of these cases, is also responsible for overloading or rushing a PM by not recognising the need to realistically match their own expectations of the PMs ability to both perform their assigned actions but to also monitor the Captain's actions at key points during the taxi to the runway.

In many cases of wrong surface take-offs, a failure to include a relevant fact in the pre-flight briefing may have been significant. For a night take-off, something as simple as whether the departure runway has centreline lighting may be worth a mention. Also, for any take-off the aircraft performance relative to the expected take-off weight is such that an intersection take-off would be possible if offered by ATC, then the potential taxi routes to such runway entry positions could usefully be included in the pre-flight briefing.

Finally, it is perhaps not surprising that wrong surface take-offs tend not to occur in low visibility, since the level of attention given to ensuring that aircraft position in relation to the departure taxi route given is - the case of both pilots - likely to be much greater than in normal visibility.

Safety Recommendations

To Aircraft Operators

- Checklists run prior to seeking taxi clearance may involve tentative assumptions about the likely runway and/or routing to it. If this occurs, the aircraft commander should be required to ensure that the implications of the change have been fully understood by both operating pilots (and any observing relief pilots) and that the pace of the taxi-out is adjusted to accommodate this if necessary.
- Despite the push for on-time departures, PF aircraft Captains must be warned never to rush pre-flight preparation or taxiing beyond the ability of the PM to have time to monitor taxi clearance compliance.
- Every aircraft commander - including those conducting line training or checking - must be aware of the order of operator priorities - Safety/On-Time/Service in that order.

To Aircraft Commanders

- Always ensure that lead-on lines from taxiways to runway centrelines are followed unless a need to backtrack makes this impossible in which case both pilots should be heads up at runway entry and until eventually lined up.
- Within any constraints imposed by SOPs, both pilots should be heads-up whenever an initially issued runway entry point for line-up (or the runway to be used) is changed from any anticipated start of take-off position anticipated in the pre-flight briefing. Both should then independently check any new taxi routing to the runway and agree on the correct actions to reach it.
- Monitoring of the pre take-off flight taxi routing is an essential part of collective airmanship. Whilst the PF for the taxi out has direct responsibility for ensuring that the taxi clearance(s) and re-clearances given are followed, the PM must ensure they actively monitor the route taken relative to each clearance given. If the aircraft commander is acting as PM, this should be easily achievable at a pace compatible with not rushing a more junior pilot acting as PF. However, if the aircraft commander is acting as PF then it is very important that they ensure that a PM, especially but not only one with low relevant experience, is always given sufficient time to passively monitor the routing of the aircraft and is explicitly encouraged to call out any imminent or actual deviations from the clearance given.
- Beware of the possibility that when take-off clearance has been given whilst still taxiing, often at some distance from the runway, the careful monitoring of runway entry may be less diligently performed if focus shifts prematurely to the take-off.

⁵ <https://mobilit.belgium.be/sites/default/files/documents/publications/2026/AAIU-2026-02-05-01-PRELIMINARY.pdf>