



# Cross-country skiing in Norway – don't jump to conclusions!

Every year, kids in Norway get a week off school in February, known as "winter holiday".

I am definitely one of those who has learned to appreciate this break, a whole week "offline", spending time in the Norwegian mountains skiing or just relaxing, enjoying reading a book. A couple of years ago I was at one of my favourite winter resorts in Norway. This particular day we went out for a longer than normal cross-country skiing trip, the weather was bright and sunny, but windy and freezing cold which made it difficult to keep a conversation going. Not talking makes you sometimes even more focussed on and amazed by the beauty of the nature, - as I said, totally "offline". The skiing track was clearly marked with wooden poles, easy to follow. Suddenly, though, as we reached a fork in the track we realised they were no longer there. The track divided itself into two, one to the left, slightly downhill, the other straight ahead but on more of an incline, but which should we take? We'd left the piste map behind in the chalet, after all we knew these tracks like the back of our hand, didn't we? So without too much thought we just jumped to the conclusion that it had to be the left one, downhill; our starting point was in the valley so it had to be the one leading us

back to where we started, right? After a while we were lost... Why am I telling you this? Well, read the rest of the story and you will understand.

When returning to civilization 3 – 4 hours later, I checked my mobile and noticed a missed call - it was my safety manager calling me back to reality. Normally she would never disturb me when I'm away, so I knew it had to be something serious. It was. An Airbus 320, a passenger flight, had carried out a departure from a taxiway! I could hardly believe what I heard – how could that be possible? Lots of questions passed through my mind. The available take-off-distance on the taxiway was estimated to be about 1500m – luckily the departure had gone well, and there was no damage whatsoever.

Something rather interesting happened midway through the conversation with my safety manager, which I really regret to admit. I was eager to know the name of the airline involved – wow! This information certainly made sense. Of course it had to be that airline – "no one else would depart from a taxiway"....

I will not go through what the incident report concluded, nor tell you about all the recommendations or airport mitigations; instead, I will try to put you in the seat of the pilot and in the position of the controller involved. This is by no means an attempt to reconstruct the event. Rather I'm trying to highlight one particular aspect of human nature that is not necessarily a good one for those of us involved in safety – how tempting it is to jump to conclusions without knowing all the facts.

The aircraft was taxiing out for departure; traffic was low and the frequency very quiet. On the flight deck there were three pilots: the captain (flying), the first officer on training, plus an extra pilot monitoring him. They were behind schedule, discussed the situation amongst themselves and decided to request an intersection departure. They received clearance to the intersection, and shortly afterwards ATC passed them the departure clearance; the captain exchanged the aerodrome chart describing the taxiway system for the one describing the airborne departure route. The captain turned the aircraft to the right towards the intersection, carefully looking to the right and monitoring the taxiway line partly covered by some snow and ice patches. He continued to the right, making a full 180 degree turn. This was what he saw ahead of him.



The crew performed the standard procedures for take off and increased the power, started the roll and got airborne. When airborne they received a call from the controller, "you just departed from a taxiway". "What?", the captain thought. He hadn't noticed

anything abnormal; none of them on the flight deck had.

The controller received a request for an intersection departure. This airline hardly ever requested that, why challenge the flight crew? They must know what they are doing, right? After checking the area for vehicles and incoming aircraft (i.e. none), he issued the departure clearance. Job done, he turned around busy with something else. The aircraft had read back the departure clearance correctly and was on its way to the intersection. After some time he turned around only to see the aircraft rolling down the taxiway parallel to the runway. Fractions of a second: to abort or not to abort? He decided not to intervene; the aircraft got airborne 400 metres before the end of the taxiway.

Below is a photo from the runway, this clearly shows how the runway and the taxiway look similar from the intersection. The pictures were taken only a couple of days after the incident occurred: same weather, visibility and time of day.



I began to include this incident as a case study when giving presentations in my company. I started with a slide showing the headline news as covered in the media, which focused on – yes, you’ve guessed it, the aircraft operator. I then asked the audience the following questions: “What are you thinking now?”, “What is your reaction to these headlines?” I always got the same answer, every time, no matter who was in the audience: management, staff or ops people. We all shared the prejudiced attitude, like it or not. Then I showed the photos of the runway and the taxiway and asked “Can you spot the difference?” Most of the time, the photos were greeted with a knowing silence.

After experiencing and feeling a bit guilty about my own weakness in jumping to conclusions, I realised that my reaction was not at all unique. It worries me that my colleagues and I so easily jumped to the incorrect conclusion without knowing all the facts. How are we supposed to learn if we don’t base our decisions on the truth?

So what is all this telling us? Well, firstly we need to be aware and prepared for what we think will never ever happen. It usually does. Second, as investigators we need to put away any



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prejudice and/or preconceived ideas and deal with the reality. Lastly, as intelligent people and operators, who are trained to make quick decisions, we have to understand that our strong sides sometimes work against us, that quick decisions are sometimes made too fast, that if we do not take our time and cross-check, this can result in our jumping to the wrong conclusions.

Incidentally, after an hour or so of further skiing we did find the correct way back to our starting point, but it would have been so much quicker and easier if we had taken the map and gone straight ahead. S