

THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY

by Bengt Collin

it should be understood that all the details in this story are, purely fictional and any similarity to real incidents, persons or meetings is unintended.

The first accident

"Taxiing to gate two niner, Braxy 555". It was late in the evening, cold weather, unlimited visibility; he could see the stars above, it was indeed a nice evening. "Is it first left, I've never parked here before", the Captain asked his First Officer whilst gently slowing the aircraft down. "This map is at a very small scale, it's difficult to see all the details", he added by way of explanation. "I think so, the gate is next to gate thirty, just follow the green taxi lights to the left and pass behind the aircraft parked on gate thirty". The First Officer pointed with his left arm in front of the Captain to make his statement even clearer. "The people are waiting for us at the gate", the Captain commented. Just before commencing the relatively sharp left turn onto their gate, they felt a light contact with something.

From the Final Report accident one

"Since taxiing behind gate three zero is prohibited and is a potential risk of collision, we recommend clearer markings on the ground and a better description of the route in the AIP".

The Tower Manager

She had breakfast at six thirty as usual, black coffee and toast. Following a quick glance in the morning paper – Pia still preferred the paper version rather than the electronic one – she started planning her day. At the top of the agenda was a meeting with the CEO for the service provider she was employed by. Then, after lunch, her nightmare, the monthly meeting with the union representatives. She had scheduled lunch with the new airside manager for the airport, should be nice. He had started his job only a fortnight ago, she had to remember to be polite and be interested on his background.

The morning meeting with the CEO

"I have read the report on the accident outside gate twenty nine". The CEO leaned back in his black office chair. "To be honest I don't think you need to do anything at all Pia". "But the recommendations are there, I had a quick chat with one of the investigators, he recommended us to investigate if the taxiway centreline lights could be switched on and off, like at Heathrow you know", Pia replied. "The incoming aircraft was following an incorrect line of lights" she continued. "Forget about it, why should we do that?" Ollie, the CEO looked serious. "Let's be realistic, this single accident didn't hurt anybody, it is paid for by the insurance companies, it doesn't cost us anything". "But we have an increasing number of runway incursions too" Pia replied. "Don't over react Pia, perhaps more training is the solution instead". It was a quick meeting.

Lunch

"Nice to meet you Andrew and thank you for having time to talk to me so soon after you started, you must be very busy". Pia smiled at Andrew, he smiled back, she was good looking in her new black dress. They were sitting in her favourite restaurant for business meetings; not visited that often though, her budget being very tight. They were overlooking one of the aprons. "What did you do before starting your work at the airport?" "I managed a truck company", Andrew replied and added "almost the same thing as running an airport". "Interesting, I'm sure you will find several possibilities to use your experiences in your new job", Pia said and smiled at Andrew again.



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The afternoon union meeting

To say that the relation to the controllers union was superb, was the overstatement of the year. They were sitting in a warm meeting room in the ground floor of the tower building. Outside it was raining and beginning to get dark. The union representative, Chris, explained that "the controllers would not accept the use of the stop bars for legal reasons". He continued "If a controller forgets to re-activate a stop bar after it been switched off and an incident or even an accident occurs, legal action could be taken against the controller. We cannot accept that. Full stop". She didn't expect that and had nothing to say really. She was seriously considering changing job. There must be better possibilities elsewhere. "We will stop using the stop bars by tomorrow, any questions?"

The second accident

"We just follow the lights behind gate thirty and make the left turn to our gate" the Captain explained to her First Officer. "Are you sure we can pass behind that aircraft, it seems like it's parked a bit away from the gate", the First Officer replied. "Just to be sure, we'll divert slightly to

the right, you are right, it's not really at the gate, is it"? They could feel the small but distinct impact of the tail of the parked aircraft as it touched their left wingtip.

Recommendations following the second accident

"As with the previous accident at the same location, we recommend that the instructions in the AIP should be improved. We also recommend, based on this accident and other reported diversions from cleared routes leading to runway incursions, that the airport to investigate the possibility of being able to activate only relevant taxiway centreline lights.

The follow up meeting at the airport

"I just can't understand this recommendation", he had already started the discussion before sitting down at the table. Andrew looked relaxed in his red pullover and blue jeans, she could notice some grey spots in his large beard. "If someone makes a mistake it's their fault" he continued. "For example, if a truck driver was speeding, they had to pay the fines, not the company". "But comparing a speeding truck driver with an accident, actually two accidents plus a number of runway incursions is not relevant, is it?" Pia tried to stay calm. "Please explain to me why we should invest money in something we have no involvement in" Andrew quickly replied. At that very moment Pia finally decided to quit her job. Ansi, the secretary opened the door; "Can I water the plants?"

The phone call from the airline

"Good morning Andrew, welcome to your new position, may I take the possibility to bring up a problem we have?" The representative from the major airline at the airport went straight to the point without the usual small talk. "We are having problems navigating around the airport. For our many sub chartered pilots it's very challenging". "What is challenging, don't you have a map?" Andrew to late realised it perhaps was not the best answer. The airline representative didn't react, he just ignored Andrews comment. "Even I almost caused a runway incursion last week, all this

work in progress is disruptive, we can't follow the usual routes. And why have you stopped using the stop bars?"

"I have nothing to do with that, it's a Tower decision". They should train the pilots better he thought, it's not my problem, but he didn't say it.

In the Tower

It was dark, fog prevented the controllers from seeing the ground. "Could you hand me the coffee please Brent", the ground controller asked as he turned away from his HMI. He had only two aircraft on his frequency, he instructed one of them to contact the runway controller for the departure clearance, the other was an inbound international carrier, no conflicts. He started drinking his coffee, relaxing after a busy period.

"I almost switched on the stop bar at the runway entrance, I'd forgotten that they all should be off at all times" the runway controller Ken said to Brent. "I think it's a stupid decision by the Union to instruct us not to use the stop bars" Ken continued. "Ken, why is it dark here and not in China, I don't understand why it's not night at the same time everywhere". Ken completely ignored Brent's question, he normally did. "ABC123 wind calm, runway one eight cleared for take-off".

On the Flight Deck

"It's really difficult to navigate around this airport and the fog doesn't make it any easier". The Captain followed the green lights ahead, to his left and right he could see the green lights on other taxiways, it was green lights everywhere. Because of work in progress on the inner parallel taxiway, they were now following the outer taxiway, which he had never used before, instead. "Could you please check the taxi chart, I guess we should continue straight ahead, or is it slightly to the left"? While the

First Officer examined the chart, the Captain continued taxiing slowly straight ahead, unaware of the runway ahead. He wasn't sure of their position, should he stop? The visibility was very low, he could see only a few green lights ahead, it should be ok. At the same time another aircraft, a few hundred metres to the north, started it's take-off roll southbound.

The third accident

On television in another country
Following yesterday's accident involving an aircraft from one of our international carriers, the airline has made the following statement: "We understand that following two previous accidents at the same airport plus a number of reported runway incursions there, the authorities had already recommended a review of the use of the airfield guidance light control system. This has, to our knowledge, not been initiated. We will of course wait until the preliminary investigation report is released, but we will be ready to pursue legal action against the airport if this information is correct".

