

RUNWAY BLINDSIDE

A runway collision is narrowly averted, raising a host of questions for a pilot in a hurry. Name withheld

Courtesy Mike Cleaver

It was a Saturday morning and I was rostered to make three flights: a local scenic, a two-hour charter, and a one-and-a-half-hour flight with a photographer who wanted to get some aerial photos of the area. A second photography flight was scheduled after mine, which was to be flown by one of the company's senior pilots.

I arrived at work early to prepare for the flights and saw the maintenance guys working on the aircraft. The aircraft had just been through a 100-hourly and I had been told it would be out of the workshop by now.

It turned out that after the aircraft was serviced, an open circuit had developed between the right magneto and the plugs, causing a considerable RPM drop during the mag check. The engineers told me I would have the aircraft in an hour for a test run. This would put me behind schedule for the rest of the day.

My first passengers arrived, and I broke the news to them. Not long after, a second set of passengers arrived and I told them about the delay. It was a nice morning, and the passengers seemed happy drinking coffee and reading the morning papers

while they waited.

The airfield is a relatively busy CTAF, with several flying schools including fixed-wing, rotary and ultra-light operations. The aerodrome also includes two other airfields within 15 nm, so the radio chatter can be quite busy, particularly on weekends.

In my peripheral vision I could see an ultralight of the same type on runway 12, in the touch-and-go phase, approximately 100 m away.

The aircraft was eventually wheeled out of the hangar and a test run confirmed the problem was fixed. The first two trips went without incident, though by the time I returned to pick up my third passenger, problems were starting to build.

The photographer was anxious to get airborne: minor pockets of cumulus cloud were starting to develop in the west, and he didn't want them to affect his shots. He pointed out that this would be a waste of

his time and money, and I was anxious to speed up the departure, so as not to disappoint him. I still had to complete the required company paperwork, remove the aircraft door, discuss the sites the photographer wanted to shoot, and co-ordinate with ATC.

By the time I was in the aircraft and taxiing again, I was two hours behind schedule.

At this point it's necessary to offer some background information about the aerodrome, which has two intersecting bitumen runways, 05/23 and 12/30, which are about the same length and 70 degrees apart. The main apron area is located adjacent to the threshold of 23, which is the preferred runway. However, when wind conditions favour 12/30, departing aircraft taxi down 05/23 before backtracking down 12 or 30.

Significantly, there is a relatively large forest between the apron area and 12/30. As a result, it is not possible to see 12/30 from the apron or from the threshold of runway 23.

Soon after I completed the run-up, I heard an ultralight call "Base, 12" on the CTAF. I was familiar with the aircraft and

its callsign. I held at the threshold of 23, visually cleared 05/23 of traffic, then called, "Entering and backtracking 05 for 12". I had not sighted the ultralight on base, and didn't expect to, as the trees obscured that part of the circuit area.

As I backtracked on 05, I assessed the wind as acceptable for a 05 departure. I then saw what I thought was the ultralight that had previously called "Base 12". It was approximately mid-downwind on a right-hand circuit for 12. (Noise abatement procedures required right-hand circuits on 12 and 23.) Without a second thought, I then changed my intentions: I would depart from 05. This would sequence with the ultralight traffic, make for a straight out departure, and save the photographer time and money.

I then radioed my intentions to cross 12/30, and with the ultralight still visual, entered to cross 12. At this moment I heard my callsign called on the CTAF frequency,

along with "No!"

In my peripheral vision I could see an ultralight of the same type on runway 12, in the touch-and-go phase, approximately 100 m away. I immediately opened the throttle and accelerated across the runway. As I already had momentum, the transit across the runway was quick.

The ultralight passed behind me by about 50 m.

My tail was between my legs, and I felt embarrassed, and extremely disappointed that I could allow this situation to develop. I allowed the second ultralight to touch-and-go, and then departed on Runway 05.

I assumed the aircraft that called base had made a mistake, and was actually downwind.

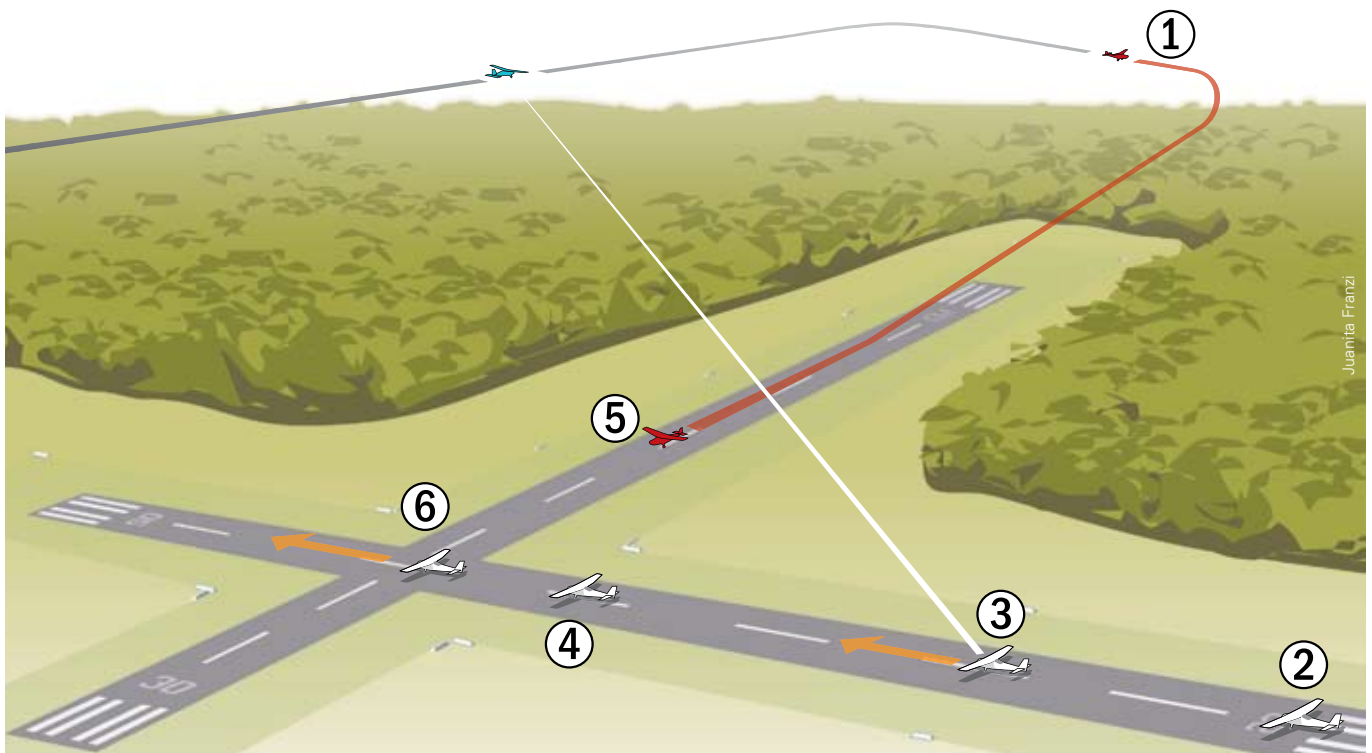
Without first stopping short of the flight strip, to visually inspect it I also crossed the obscured runway. Once again I assumed there was only one aircraft in the circuit, and I thought I had it visual – wrong!

I had succumbed to a perceived pressure to satisfy the customer, to expedite the departure so as not waste his time and money. There was also pressure from the fact there was another pilot and customer waiting for me to come back to the airfield.

Poor assumptions and critical mistakes. I also allowed myself to succumb to perceived pressure – all things that I would preach to other aircrew members not to do.

After 15 years in the RAAF, and several more in general aviation, I thought I knew safety. I'd spent 10 years as a crewmember on P3 Orions, worked as an instructor, facilitated CRM training, and done six years as a unit flying safety officer. For all that, though, I still managed to get caught out.

\$1000 Best entry



1. Ultralight reports circuit position, "Base, 12"
2. Pilot hears the "Base" call, but cannot see the ultralight (trees obscure part of the circuit area). Pilot has reported "entering and backtracking zero-five for one-two"
3. GA pilot visually identifies an ultralight aircraft on mid-downwind. It is the same

- model as the ultralight that radioed earlier, though it is not in the expected position. Pilot assumes this is the aircraft that reported "Base" earlier.
4. Pilot transmits his intentions to cross Runway 12/30 and begins taxiing across the active runway.
5. Ultralight that called "Base" is now on

- the runway and accelerating for a touch-and-go takeoff. Ultralight pilot broadcasts "No" when he realises an aircraft is crossing the runway in front of him.
6. Pilot sees the ultralight, opens the throttle and accelerates across the runway. The aircraft pass within 50m of each other.

ANALYSIS: STRESSED

By Steve Tizzard

People under stress have a tendency to hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see – even when there may be a considerable body of evidence to suggest otherwise.

This pilot appears to have suffered a kind of mental tunnel vision, which led to his incorrect assumption that he had identified the aircraft that called “base”, even though the aircraft he identified was on downwind – well away from where you would expect it to be if it had called “base” minutes earlier.

Further, in several places on around the aerodrome (namely the apron and the runway 23 threshold) trees obscured some legs of the circuit.

There is also a “familiarity” factor here. The pilot’s error was compounded

by the fact that he knew the aircraft that called “Base” and it was the same make and model as the aircraft on downwind. Even though he was more than a kilometre away from the aircraft, he was confident it was the aircraft he heard on the radio. Familiarity really does breed contempt!

The pilot’s error was compounded by the fact that he knew the aircraft that called “Base” and it was the same make and model as the aircraft on downwind.

All of these errors would have counted for nothing if the pilot had stopped his aircraft before reaching the runway intersection, and then visu-

ally checked the runways and their approach paths for traffic. He didn’t, and it was only good fortune, and the quick response of the ultralight pilot, that prevented a catastrophic collision.

There is wisdom in the expression, “more haste less speed”, which notes that the faster you try to do something, the more likely you are to make mistakes and take longer to finish a task.

The pilot put himself under unrealistic pressure to expedite the departure and save the photographer a few dollars. Concerns over weather and the initial unserviceability of the aircraft may have added to his stress levels.

Either way, a number of mistakes were made. Fortunately the pilot was able to learn from the experience, and in sharing his story has given other pilots the chance to do the same.

Steve Tizzard is a CASA flying operations inspector.

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