NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Office of Aviation Safety
Washington, D.C. 20594

May 9, 2018

Attachment 2- Flight Crew Interview Summaries – Virgin America

OPERATIONAL FACTORS

OPS17IA014AB

Interviewee: Craig George McAteer
Date: March 20, 2017
Location: Via Teleconference
Time: 1431 EDT

Via Telephone: Captain McAteer – Virgin America; Shawn Etcher – NTSB Operational Factors; James Johnson – ALPA Legal Counsel

Captain McAteer was represented by Mr. James Johnson – ALPA Legal Counsel

He was 50 years old.

He was a Captain on the Airbus A320[1] series at Virgin America. His date of hire with Virgin America was October 30, 2006.

He held an airman certificate with an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) and commercial pilot certificates with a type rating in the Airbus A-320 series aircraft, as well as a certificated flight instructor certificate. He also had a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) first class medical certificate with the limitation of he must have corrective lenses for near sighted vision.

He estimated that he had over 19,000 hours of total flight experience and over 10,000 of those hours were in the A320. All of his experience in the A320 was as a pilot in command (PIC).

When asked to describe the event as best he could, he stated that while at the gate and during push back there were no issues. During their push back, the airport closed runway 1L and 1R. During their pushback they were advised of the runway change to runway 28L or 28R. They set up for a 28L departure but expected either 28L or 28R. After pushback was complete, they changed the FMS for 28L and requested new takeoff numbers for runway 28L/R. The contacted ground control and received their taxi clearance as foxtrot 1 cross runway 1L hold short runway 1R. Everything was set up for the departure. While holding short, they were waiting for a United aircraft on Foxtrot, that they were instructed to follow to runway 28L. Once the United aircraft passed them they crossed runway 1R and taxied to the holdshort line to runway 28L following the United flight. During taxiout, they utilized "normal" taxi procedure and those items were completed prior to holding short of runway 28L. They switched to the tower frequency and heard United cleared to line up and wait (LUAW) so they would be able to determine the actual departure runway as runway 28L. After United was cleared to takeoff they were issued LUAW on runway 28L.They proceeded onto runway 28L using the companies "normal" lighting configuration, anticipated an expeditious takeoff clearance since runway 1L and 1R were closed. After remaining on the runway for some time the air traffic controller (ATC) was audibly busy on the frequency with a coast guard helicopter and a VFR[2] aircraft requesting to transition through the airspace. The transmission to the VFR aircraft was "lengthy." During the time on the runway he and his first officer (FO) began to discuss the length of time for their LUAW clearance and they knew, when they were holding short of the runway, that there was an aircraft near the San Mateo bridge which was "typical."

[1] Airbus (formerly known as Groupment d'Inerte Economique Airbus Industries, France) A-318, A-319, A-320, A-321. Source: FAA 8900.1, Figure 5-88
[2] Visual Flight Rule

However, they could not tell if that airplane was lined up for runway 28L or runway 28R. He was able to observe the approaching aircraft on the TCAS[3] screen but due to close proximity of the two runways, it was hard to ascertain which runway the airplane was lined up with. The frequency was blocked by the VFR aircraft transmission. The tower controller read back a clearance for the VFR to transition the Class B airspace and as soon as the clearance was read back, the tower controller immediately issued a go-around to the Compass flight. At that point he looked at his FO and he knew then the airplane was approaching their runway that they were on. A few seconds later, they observed the airplane overfly their aircraft. Although he could not determine the exact height the airplane over flew them, but, he stated "it was close." They both determined to follow the company standard operating procedures (SOP) for their flight to their destination and that they were fit to fly the flight. He felt the controller was "frazzled" and they elected not to tie up the frequency, asking questions. Shortly after the over flight they were issued a takeoff clearance, on the climbout all was standard, and they were transferred to departure control. They heard ATC and the Compass flight discuss the reasoning for the go-around and heard the pilot state it was "tower assigned."

There were no deferrals on the aircraft, no exterior light deferrals on the airplane.

He agreed with the lighting procedure at Virgin America. He then elaborated and stated that while at the gate the navigation lights and logo lights were illuminated. Prior to push back the beacon was illuminated.

When asked where the logo lights were located, he stated that the logo lights were in the horizontal of the tail section and they illuminate the logo on the vertical section of the tail.

The nose taxi light was illuminated for aircraft movement. When crossing runway 1L and 1R all the exterior lights were illuminated including the strobes; however, they are not nor were they required to illuminate the landing light. When they were holding short of runway 1R, the lights, except for the navigation lights, logo lights, and beacon, were turned off. Once they were issued clearance to cross runway 1R, the then turned on all of their exterior lights again until they had crossed runway 1R and then turned off the strobes, wing landing lights until at the holdshort line for runway 28L.

He further elaborated that they switched over to the tower frequency when the taxiway sign instructed them to do so; however, he did not hear the Compass flight check on to the frequency just the United flight's LUAW clearance, there were other transmissions, but he could not recall them.

Once their flight was issued the LUAW clearance or shortly prior to taking the runway, he called for the takeoff checklist "below the line." Before he entered the runway, he illuminated the nose, turn off lights, and the landing lights are extended but remain "OFF" until cleared for takeoff. Once cleared for takeoff the landing lights will then be illuminated.

The SOP called for the lights to be illuminated as he described. He further provided that if all of the lights were illuminated while LUAW, another aircraft may think they were cleared for takeoff.

[3] Traffic Collision Avoidance System

He estimated that they were LUAW for about a minute and half. He felt that that amount of time was "abnormal" for that evening as they were not departing runway 1L or runway 1R. He further clarified that on an evening like that night and with no crossing limitation from the north bound runway it was uncommon to be LUAW for that long.

The lights were the determination of the captain and the switch position was part of his flow, when taking the runway for departure.

When clearing to the left he observed the United flight lifting off. They both saw the aircraft over the San Mateo bridge. Which he added was standard for the airport and that he could see the landing lights when taking the runway.

The lights were illuminated including the strobes when taking the runway. All available lights were illuminated except for the landing lights. The strobes were located on both wings and the tail.

There were at least 3 aircraft behind them during the taxi to the runway. There was no direction, provided by the company, on delaying the illumination of the strobes, so he turns them on as soon he takes the runway.

He has flown with the FO many times and they were on leg 4 of the day. They were on day 2 of a 4-day trip.

They were both based at New York John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) base.

Their duty day started about 1100 PST[4]. That day consisted of "shorter" legs of flying.

When asked how he would classify the first officer's flying skills and adherence to the company policies; he classified him as "superior" and "far above average." He was a competent first officer. JFK is a small base and there are few crewmembers based there.

He was the pilot flying for the overfly leg.

Up until the event it was a standard nice weather evening. The day had gone "smooth" for them and was a nice day for flying and maintaining their schedule.

Interview concluded at 1510 EDT.

Interviewee: Steven Schell
Date: March 20, 2017
Location: Via Teleconference
Time: 1530 EDT

[4] Pacific Standard Time

Via Telephone: First Office Schell – Virgin America; Shawn Etcher – NTSB Operational Factors; James Johnson – ALPA Legal Counsel

First Officer Schell was represented by Mr. James Johnson – ALPA Legal Counsel

He was 42 years old.

His job title was a pilot at Virgin America as a first officer. His date of hire was September 9, 2010 and he was based at the JFK domicile.

He held an ATP certificate with ratings for single-engine and multiengine land airplane as well as type rated in the A320, Boeing 737, Lear Jet, and Beech Jet. He also had an FAA first class medical certificate with the limitation that he must wear corrective lenses.

He was the pilot monitoring for the event flight.

When asked to describe what he could recall about the event flight, he stated that he remembered during the push back they were give a runway change from runway 1L to runway 28L or 28R. Everything was "normal" during the taxi, and they were given a clearance of foxtrot to 28L, cross runway 1L and holdshort of runway 1R. As they were holding short of 1R they were issued taxi clearance to follow a United Boeing 737. He started the second engine on taxiout. He heard the United flight receiving a LUAW clearance for runway 28L and subsequent takeoff clearance. Immediately they were given LUAW for 28L and they conducted a "normal" taxi into position. Prior to taxiing onto the runway, he cleared to the right up the approach path. He observed airplane lights out by the bridge. There was no immediate takeoff clearance given as the tower controller was talking with a Coast Guard flight and a VFR transitioning. While they were in LUAW, the captain pointed to the TCAS saying it was "unnerving." He heard the controller issue a go-around and he looked to the right to runway 28R and he noticed no aircraft over there. Shortly after the go-around was issued, they received a takeoff clearance from the controller. The departed runway 28L and switched to their assigned departure frequency. They elected to not mention anything about the fly over on the frequency. Once on the ground in Las Vegas they called their Chief Pilot.

When asked what their lighting procedures was. He stated that while at the gate the lights on the aircraft that were on were the navigation lights and logo lights, which were located on the tail. The logo lights consisted of one light on each side of the tail. The lights were all illuminated at the gate when he did the walk around. The beacon was turned on prior to push back. During push back, he then started the No. 1 engine.

After pushback and the engine was started he called for their taxi clearance. Once he received their clearance he read back the clearance to the controller and the Captain then reiterates the clearance to him to make sure they clearly understood the clearance. Anytime the airplane is moving the nose taxi light was illuminated. When asked how far the nose taxi light illuminated the ground in front of their airplane, he estimated that it illuminated about 30 feet in front of their airplane. He further stated that the light illuminated in front of them adequately.

He classified the ground controller as "less busy than normal."

When asked to describe their company policy for illumination, he stated that anytime they cross a runway every light goes on. Those lights consist of the runway turn off, strobes, and landing lights. After crossing a runway, they turned off the landing lights, but he was not sure of the rest of the lights. When they crossed runway 1R the captain turned on all the lights. He could see the right strobe and landing lights illuminate out his right-side window.

When asked when he switched over to the tower frequency, he stated that he could not recall when he switched to tower; however, he recalled he switched it over and he remembered hearing a male controller then a female controller on the frequency. The frequency congestion sounded about "normal". He heard the United flight, that was in front of them, get a LUAW clearance and he observed that flight turn on the strobes. He typically won't look at the strobes once they are illuminated. He heard the United flight receive their takeoff clearance. He further stated that he did not recall hearing anyone check on the frequency the entire time he was monitoring the frequency.

They were given a LUAW right away, by the air traffic controller. The captain did not taxi the airplane onto the runway "fast" since the United flight was still "spooling up." The taxi lights were the first to be illuminated, then all the other lights were illuminated for their LUAW. The strobes do not illuminate the ground, but he can see the light flashing off the ground.

The captain uses and controls the light switches. They were in LUAW for about a minute to a minute and half. They thought they would be taking off instantly; however, the frequency became busy after the LUAW clearance was issued.

He did not hear anyone check on the frequency for a landing clearance.

There was at least a couple of airplanes behind them on the taxiway.

The TCAS was on a 10-mile scale when they were in LUAW. It was too difficult for them to determine which runway the airplane would be on the approach path for based on their TCAS. The altitude was about 500 feet and that was all he could recall.

The go-around was a "normal issuance" and was clear and conscience. The controller gave the entire Compass flight's call sign. He heard someone on the frequency saying "go-around." He could hear the engine "spooling up" a couple of seconds later. He looked over to the right side and saw nothing and then saw the Compass flight going over about 10 seconds later.

When asked to describe the Compass flight's position he stated it was a little to the right of them, laterally regarding their position on the centerline, during the go-around.

Shortly after the overflight, they were issued a takeoff clearance. He felt he was able to self-assess and determined he was safe to fly.

When they switched over to the departure frequency the controller was heard asking why the go-around and one of the Compass pilots stated "tower issued go-around"

There were no deferrals with the airplane and all the exterior lights were operable and operating at the time of the overflight.

When asked to describe the captains he has flown with adherence to the company procedure on exterior illumination, he stated almost everyone he has flown with have done it the same way.

He classified the captain as a better than average and follows all the procedures in their manuals.

Their trip was a 4-day trip. He has flown with the captain "quite a bit" as they both bid to start on similar days. He would estimate he has flown with the captain on about 40 different trips.

The interview concluded at 1606 EDT