

EUGENE A. CERNAN

It *Can* Happen to You

A Runway Incursion Confession

My story focuses on an unintentional entry onto an active runway at a towered airport, thus violating one of the fundamental responsibilities of a pilot-in-command of an aircraft. It shows once again that we aviators are not infallible. Anyone can make a mistake when not giving full attention to the dynamics of the moment, and no one can afford to allow complacency and impatience to take over.

I consider myself to be an experienced aviator: 22 years in the Navy, 9,000-plus hours accumulated in both military and civilian aircraft, most of which were high-performance flying machines. I've made more than 200 carrier landings, and three space flights — two of which took me to the moon. All that ... and yet I violated a cardinal rule by entering an active runway without clearance. My incident should be a wake-up call for everyone, starting with myself. The message is that no matter who we are, where we have been, how many hours or landings we may have, or how good we may think we are, we all are prone to the inevitability of making a mistake — in retrospect, of doing something dumb. I am better than that. *You* are better than that. But if it can happen to me — IT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU.

My purpose in sharing my aviation history is not to impress anyone, but to remind us all that when we are the pilot-in-command of an aircraft, whether in the air or on the ground, being merely “good” is not good enough. My goal is also to remind my fellow aviators that none of us, notwithstanding our experience, is bulletproof when it comes to making a mistake. Mistakes come in all shapes and sizes. Some result in little more than embarrassment. Others can result in catastrophe.

In my case, fortunately, the result was not an incident or an accident or a catastrophe. But it was a taxi violation arising from my inadvertent entry onto the active runway without tower clearance. Extenuating circumstances in no way excuse my actions. Anyone who crawls into the cockpit of an aircraft is from that point on responsible for the safe movement of that aircraft in the air or on the ground. Preoccupation or multi-tasking when in control of a moving aircraft can, and often does, lead to unplanned negative consequences.



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The Crime

The scene of the crime was the Sugarland Regional Airport (KSGR) in Houston, Texas. It was one of those mornings when the weather was clear and ten. Up until a few years ago, KSGR had been home to my Cessna 421 *Golden Eagle*, so I was definitely familiar with my surroundings. The plan that morning was to ferry my aircraft to its current home base — Houston Executive Airport (KTME), which is about ten miles away. My Cessna had been down for three weeks for a glass panel upgrade, plus some additional avionics upgrades and maintenance. As a result, neither my aircraft nor I had flown during the maintenance time.

When I started the engines, I immediately noticed that the right manifold pressure needle remained static at ambient pressure, while the left operated normally. Having had a similar problem in the past, I suspected a faulty gauge but continued with my troubleshooting. Rather than focus on that task, though, I pressed on with the start checklist, which included bringing up the avionics. After listening to the AWOS, I called ground control for taxi, while monitoring the tower frequency as well. The ground controller replied, but, being somewhat fixated on my new glass instruments and still somewhat concerned about the restless manifold pressure on the right engine, I do not specifically recall the clearance. Most likely, I was instructed to “taxi — hold short of Runway 17/35.”

A word about the runway configuration: KSGR and KTME each have but one north/south runway. However, KSGR’s parallel taxiway is on the east side. The parallel taxiway at KTME is on the west ... and the avionics shop at KSGR is on the west side! The active runway was 17. I’m sure most can see what is coming.

Being preoccupied with my new glass cockpit, still troubleshooting the right engine, and also alert for other possible anomalies, I commenced my taxi. I knew ground control had replied to my taxi request. Somehow, though, I had my home airport — the non-towered KTME — in my mind. On reaching Runway 17, I started a left turn (north) on what would have been my north/south taxiway at Houston Executive ... only it wasn’t. At that moment I found myself square in the middle of Runway 17/35. I recognized this error almost immediately and continued my left turn to exit on the same taxiway I had used to enter. Right about then, I received a caustic call from the tower reinforcing the fact that I was now where I never intended to be. The time I



Photo by Tom Hoffmann

spent on the active runway was probably less than twenty seconds. But that would have been more than enough time to result in an accident had an aircraft been in takeoff roll or landing on Runway 17.

The Cause

The cause? Try “causes.” They are a legion: pre-occupation, multi-tasking, trying to do too many things, not confirming taxi clearance, lack of situational awareness, and anxiety about getting my airplane home after a long downtime.

Once I was back on the taxiway in re-group mode, the tower informed me of the possible violation and asked me to contact the tower after my arrival at KTME. The flight to KTME proceeded without further complications, and of course I complied with the request to call the tower after I landed.

Although my violation did not contribute to an accident or incident, it could have. History has shown that active runway incursions and taxi accidents can lead to fatalities. Ground operations require as much situational awareness as time in the air. Events like mine can, and should, be avoided.

In our aviation world, the word “professionalism” takes on its own meaning. It demands that we understand what it requires to be an aviator, not just a pilot. I pride myself on being both. But, if it can happen to me, it can happen to you as well. Please learn from my mistake, and keep your focus at all times where it should rightfully be. ✈️

Eugene A. Cernan is a retired U.S. Navy captain with more than 9,000 hours logged in both military and civilian aircraft. He is most noted for having made three space flights — two to the moon — and earned the distinction of being the last man on the moon.