AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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WHY IS A RUNWAY 7000 FEET LONG?

What a silly question to ask a group of ex-aircrew. We have told our wives/partners time and time again that we always used the full length of the runway. We have told them that take-offs are affected by such aspects as power of the aircraft's engines, the load the aircraft is carrying, the weight of fuel, the take-off speed and the outside air temperature (OAT). We have stressed that those and other elements are very good reasons for pilots to use the full runway length for take-off.

My mind sometimes wanders, but its wanderings are always back to one particular incident in April 1945 when our well-experienced skipper taxied our B24 Liberator out of a revetment at Corunna Downs in North-western Australia.

The time was 1600 hours, and we were detailed for a nuisance raid on Java in what was then Japanese-occupied Dutch East Indies. The runway OAT was in the high 30s (Centigrade).

We carried 8X250 pound delay-fused high-explosive bombs plus overload tanks in the bomb-bay filled with 600 gallons of fuel. Everybody knew that, apart from our normal fuel load,those fuel-filled tanks weighed between 6000 and 7000 pounds.

The preceding aircraft entered the 7000 feet long sealed runway, from the taxiway which was about 1000 feet from the take-off end of the runway. That pilot sensibly back-tracked to take advantage of the full runway length. He must have believed what he told his wife about runways.

We were waiting on the taxiway for his aircraft to pass that same runway entry point. The crew fully expected that, although we were running slightly late, our skipper would follow the same procedure of backtracking to the end of the runway.

As the other Lib. raced past the taxiway, our aircraft leaped forward, roared onto the runway at about 30 m.p.h., swung around to follow the other aircraft, lining-up as the throttles were advanced, all to pick up a few seconds.

My role in that frenetic chase was to call the airspeed to the skipper. At 119 m.p.h., the end of the bitumen runway disappered under the nose, so did the laterite over-run, so did some of the spinifex country before (with great relief) we were airborne.

As my wandering mind recalls that take-off, my sub-conscious reminds me that we could not apply wheel brakes to our spinning wheels before retraction, because the gyroscopic force would have caused a bit of a nose-dive, and we were still clawing for height. So the wheels stayed down longer than normal as we struggled for height, finally crossing the coast at 6000 feet, well below our lead aircraft.

Time droned on, and some 14 hours later, after debriefing plus a Salvo's coffee and a bun, a kind of masochism enveloped me, causing me to trudge, with some crew members, to the end of the runway.

Forty paces beyond the runway's end plus the 100 yard over-run, we found a recently mangled 'yacca stick' clump (they were known in those days as 'black boys', but I won't use that term).

My wandering mind visualized what a fiery crater there could have been, just past that yacca stick clump.

I continue to thank my guardian angel for bringing my skipper to the everlasting understanding that there was a perfectly good reason for a runway being 7000 feet long.