



PILOT SMASHES INTO SEVEN RUNWAY LIGHTS, KEEPS ON FLYING

News / Airlines



A passenger plane captain kept flying without alerting Auckland air traffic controllers even after smashing into seven runway lights, sending debris flying.

The Chilean LAN Airlines captain lost his bearings taking off from Auckland before correcting himself, an investigation has found.

The lights, standing some 30cm off the ground, were wrecked when the Airbus A340 carrying 196 passengers took off from Auckland in May 2013.

The Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) published its final report about the rare "runway excursion" nearly three years later.

TAIC said that when the pilots were carrying out final checks before take-off, the captain "lost awareness of precisely where his aeroplane was" in relation to the middle of the runway.

Accelerating to take-off speed before sunrise on Saturday May 18, the captain realised the Airbus A340 was out of line with the runway centre.

"He steered the aeroplane back onto the runway centreline and continued with the take-off. The pilots did not report the incident to air traffic control at the time," the TAIC report said.

The Airbus' tyres trashed the lights.

The runway was closed for 20 minutes while the debris was removed," the TAIC report added.

When the plane was inspected after landing in Sydney, two tyres were found to be damaged and had to be replaced.

The Commission said the incident was a reminder pilots should report debris on runways immediately.

State-owned enterprise Airways Corporation owned the Auckland lights, which cost about \$2500 to replace, Airways said at the time.

The TAIC report found guidance signs parallel to the runway caused a potential optical illusion, and the captain and first officer had no little time to realise the error.

The Commission also raised two broader safety issues.

The first related to intensity settings for airport lighting, the second to "administrative errors and potential ambiguity" in the way international standards for airport design and operations might be interpreted.

The TAIC said it told the Director of Civil Aviation and Auckland International Airport's chief executive about these possible issues.

The Commission said runway excursions had happened at Auckland only five times since 2005, and these mostly involved light, single or twin-engine domestic planes.

LAN Airlines publicly apologised for the incident within a fortnight.

The captain was experienced, with about 32,300 hours flying time experience.

The Federal Aviation Administration said runway excursions could happen for many different reasons, including unstable approaches and runway conditions.

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