



Slip Sl-i-ding Away

By Lt. Bennett Goff

The crew had finished an EP-3 dispersal at Hill AFB, filled with training (also known as skiing on the 2002 Olympic slopes) and good night life.

It was a Saturday morning and the airfield did not open until 10 a.m. We coordinated with operations to takeoff at 10:30, which gave us time to file and get a weather brief.

295,000 was around 10,000 feet, with 13,500 feet available. Maximum crosswind for takeoff would be 33 knots. Factor in that Hill AFB sits at the foot of large mountains to the east. With no other activity on the field, we planned to start engines, to taxi for departure, wait to wait for the winds to come within limits. With the 3P in the left seat and me in the right, we ran checklists and taxied to the active. All taxiways were clear, but there was loose, blowing snow.

Although we had low ceilings and snow-fall during our stay, the morning of our departure dawned with only scattered clouds at 25,000 feet. Strong winds were coming over the mountains, heading 080 degrees at 30 knots, gusting to 40. They were forecast to remain high throughout the next 18 hours. The runway heading was 160 degrees, which made for quite a crosswind. We tuned in ATIS and heard the runway was dry, and the temperature was a cool 28 F. Because of the high-pressure altitude (Hill AFB is at 3,800 feet MSL) and crosswind, critical field length (CFL) at our gross weight of

As we neared the hold-short, we were cleared to position and hold. After a short delay for IFR release, we were cleared for takeoff, with winds at our limit of 33 knots. The throttles were stood up to 50 percent, and the airplane slowly rolled as the engines spun up at the high altitude. Our



speed was only five to seven knots as the 3P called, "Set takeoff thrust." The No. 1 engine spooled up slower than the other three, which required a small nosewheel-steering input to maintain centerline. I estimate our speed was 15 to 20 knots when the steering input was made. The airplane began to shudder, and we heard a loud noise in the cockpit as the nosewheel began to slide. The plane began to weathervane into the wind, and we started sliding well right of centerline, with the plane's tail coming around and the nose turning 30 to 40 degrees to the left of runway heading.

The 3P tried to pull the throttles to idle, but the FE still had his hand in place after pushing up the throttles. He

called, "Get them back," just before abort was called. Training took over, and the throttles quickly came to idle, and the 3P got the speed brakes up. We still were sliding to the right, and all I could think was, "Oh, *****, we're going into the mud." By the time the speed brakes were up, both of us were on the brakes, and from the right seat I deployed the thrust reversers, trying anything to stop the slide. I even was trying to

steer with the yoke, but I'm not sure how effective that was. The reversers brought the plane to a stop, and we came to rest 20 to 25 feet right of centerline, a few thousand feet down the runway.

I cancelled takeoff clearance with tower and requested to taxi clear. We slowly began to taxi and had no problems clearing the runway. Once clear of the active, we let tower know of our directional-control problems and requested base ops run the runway again to confirm the runway-condition reading (RCR). Fifteen minutes later, the answer came back. The first 5,000 feet of the runway was RCR 7, braking action poor, with the remaining 8,500 feet, RCR 23.

We taxied and shut down. When we reentered base ops, I asked the airfield manager what had happened with the initial RCR reading. His sheepish reply was that blowing snow had frozen on the runway in the 45 minutes between their initial field sweep and our attempted takeoff.

Yeah, thanks. The winds were forecast to remain strong and gusty throughout the day and

having to use an RCR of 5 put us well beyond crosswind and CFL limits. We coordinated with OPCON to remain another night and take off the following day with more agreeable winds.

Aviators rely on many people outside of the crew for information to keep us safe and enable us to do our mission. But when it comes to the end of the day, it is our lives, our jet, and our responsibility. 🇺🇸

Lt. Goff flies with VQ-3.

Photo composition by Allan Amen