An Inaugural Flight of a **747SP**... A **S**pecial **P**erformance

In late 1980 when I learned that Qantas had ordered two new Boeing 747SPs for their Sydney - Wellington service, (the first by the company for 11 years), it occurred to me that it would be appropriate, and fun, to arrange for the cabin crew on that inaugural flight to all be New Zealanders. Although Qantas is an Australian airline, its flight attendants come from a wide variety of countries such as Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Asia and New Zealand.

So, I approached the cabin crew manager and outlined my idea, and like most bosses he said he'd consider the plan and get back to me. Thus, several days later he called me into his office and said yes, he would support me and organize the appropriate rosters. I'm unsure exactly when I got the go ahead, but it was certainly three months before the new aircraft arrived, so the company had plenty of time to re-arrange rosters for all two Kiwi 747SP crews, i.e. a total of 24 flight attendants.

In due course our new rosters were produced and as I'd hoped, every flight attendant listed was a New Zealander. Whether it was my keen interest in the new 747SPs and my all-Kiwi crew idea I'm not sure, but quite unexpectedly I found I'd been rostered to operate a flight to San Francisco and then position to Everett, Washington, to take delivery of the company's first 747SP. To say I was delighted with this turn of events is an understatement!

So, in early January 1981, I found myself and eleven crew members in Seattle, Washington, my first visit to that exciting city. We were rostered to remain there for 10 days as guests of Boeing with the highlights being a guided tour of the aircraft factory and the opportunity to witness the first flight of our first 747SP, VH-EAA 'City of Gold Coast Tweed'.

Finally, the day of the maiden flight arrived, and we were bused out to a position beside the main runway at Paine Field to witness the moment our new baby took to the air. The date was 11 January 1981. Naturally we all took photos that momentous day, several of mine are located below this article.

A day or two after the maiden flight we learned that the delivery flight to Sydney was to take place on 21 January 1981. It had been decided that my crew would operate the flight from Everett to Honolulu where we'd stopover for a day before continuing on to Sydney on a normal 747 flight. In the meantime, a specially chosen crew would operate the brand-new aircraft from Honolulu to Sydney.

The next stage of the Qantas 747SP inauguration would be its flight from Sydney to Wellington, the first Qantas aircraft to do so for 11 years. The previous Qantas service from Wellington to Sydney took place on 29 March 1970 using a Lockheed L-188C Electra. In the interim period the Tasman flights to Wellington were operated by Air New Zealand Lockheed Electras, the Boeing 707s of Qantas being unable to operate from Wellington's rather short runway.

Finally, the waiting was over, and my crew and I signed up for the inaugural flight to Wellington on Saturday 31 January 1981. As I'd hoped, we were all Kiwis, with several from Wellington and the remainder from all over the country. The crew included my brother Simon who at that time was a Qantas senior steward. The flight was a short one, just a little over two and a half hours, and we touched down shortly after 2pm, the first ever 747SP (and the first 747 of any type) to land at Wellington. After clearing

customs, we were able to meet our waiting families, with several relatives having travelled from the South Island and parts of the North Island to witness their sons' and daughter's special day.

The following morning, Sunday 1 February, the aircraft made several training flights out of Wellington to check the runway's ability to take the massive aircraft at various weights. Happily, the runway turned out to be quite long enough for normal 747SP operations, in fact when we arrived the day before our Captain, Alan Terrell, deliberately brought VH-EAA to a stop using just half the runway. The Qantas hierarchy were delighted!

In the afternoon Qantas had organized for our families to participate in a special sightseeing flight to Wellington and its environs. Excitement from both crew and families knew no bounds as we boarded the aircraft for that 30-minute flight. It was the first time that I had welcomed my family on board as their Flight Service Director.

The day's excitement ended when our crew left Wellington on the 747SP for Melbourne, a day none of us will ever forget!

Stephen, with map at hand, giving passengers on the special families' flight, a running commentary. The flight included Wellington City and its environs.
This photo was taken by an official Qantas photographer.

Captain Alan Terrell greets a girl in traditional Maoru costume as FSD Stephen Berry looks on.
Qantas photo