NEWS RELEASE

First Officer Recounts One of American's First Relief Flights to Puerto Rico

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Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW)-based First Officer Bill Piper has visited Puerto Rico multiple times over the years. He and his wife, DFW-based flight attendant Ayse Piper, have friends there – people he considers part of his extended family. Speak with him, and he'll vividly describe the lush mountains you see as you approach, and try to capture the colors of the buildings and the water along the coastline. And then there's the rain forest. "There's just lots of green," he said. The island is special to him.

So in the days leading up to Hurricane Maria's landfall, he monitored the storm closely. On Sept. 20, the Category 4 hurricane slammed Puerto Rico with sustained winds of 155 mph. The storm dumped more than 20 inches of rain; the winds so strong that it disabled radar and cell towers. Power on the island was wiped out.

As with most who watched news coverage from afar, Bill wanted to find a way to help. "There was no communication available … to see if our friends were safe. My wife and I wanted to do more," he said.

Then came a call from Crew Scheduling: A relief flight was being organized from Miami (MIA) to San Juan (SJU) to deliver team member reinforcements and much needed supplies, and it needed a crew. "Absolutely. Put it on my schedule," Bill said. He then began to navigate the obstacles to get to MIA, which had only recently reopened following Hurricane Irma and had a backlog of travelers. On Sunday, Sept. 24 at 6:14 a.m. EDT, Bill and 12 other crew members operated the first of several Boeing 777-200s that American would send to SJU. On board were 278 passengers, 400 catered meals for team members on the ground and nearly 50,000 pounds of relief supplies, including water, generators and clothes.

The flight joined a long list of firsts in the aftermath of Maria. American was the first commercial airline to operate a relief flight to Puerto Rico on Friday, Sept. 22 on a Boeing 737-800 from MIA and the first in with a widebody aircraft – an Airbus A330 from Philadelphia (PHL) – on the same day. Monday, Sept. 25 marked the first time American had ever landed a Boeing 777-300ER in SJU. And Bill's flight was the first commercial aircraft to land at SJU with such a high quantity of relief supplies after the airport reopened.

Bill said it was a completely different view as he flew by the island this time – unimaginable devastation. The green lush was stripped, replaced with brown, barren and desert-looking terrain. All the wooden structures were decimated. The roofs of buildings, ones still standing, were gone. Water was everywhere, collected in places it shouldn't be. Sheet metal scraps littered the view any way he looked. The remnants of palm trees were snapped in half.

But he said the image that stays with him is the look on the people's faces as they taxied in and parked. "About 20 people greeted us," he said. "They were waving, giving us the thumbs up. I saw someone do the prayer sign. It was a very emotional, very humbling experience." He said it was eerie, too. "We were the only ones there. This is usually a busy place, lots of aircraft. And we were the only ones there."

The tower did have minimal power, Bill suspected using a generator. The terminal was hot, but using more generators, team members had computers running. Ground personnel, mechanics and caterers were all using generators to power operations.

With just a four-hour turnaround time, the crew got to work unloading supplies. First up, Bill delivered a satellite phone to colleagues in the terminal, enabling better operational communication. He then walked the tarmac to talk with mechanics and ramp personnel. "A couple of them had lost everything, just gone. Other team members were helping, taking care of them to meet basic needs."

Bill said some were staying at the airport, sleeping on cots in short-term set ups. At that time, there were still people who hadn't been able to get in touch with family members.

He asked them, "What do you need? What can I go back and tell them that you need the most?" They replied, simply, "Water and generators." Even with the destruction he saw and the stories he heard, Bill said that spirits were high. "They knew that we were just the beginning. More flights were coming and this was the start."

First Officer Bill Piper poses with mechanics and ground crew. Bill visited with the men during his 4-hour stop in Puerto Rico.

The Boeing 777-200 being unloaded. The plane carried relief supplies to the island.

Debris remains in an aircraft hangar destroyed by Hurricane Maria.