

NEWS RELEASE

Out with the props, in with the jets

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For Captain Malcom Ferrand, this year's July 4 celebration was bittersweet. After 50 years in the air, the Piedmont Airlines pilot was at the controls for the final time. The trip was made more memorable because he and fellow Piedmont Captain Ricky Snyder — who was also retiring — were operating the company's last revenue flight of the de Havilland Canada "Dash 8."

At exactly 6:33 p.m., Flight 4927 departed Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT) bound for Salisbury, Maryland (SBY), the headquarters of Piedmont, one of American's wholly owned subsidiaries. The final flight marked the end of an era in American Airlines history.

It's hard to overestimate the influence the Dash 8 had on the U.S. aviation industry over the last three decades. Gary Blevins, Piedmont's director of Operational Control, summed up the importance of the reliable aircraft, explaining that the Dash had one job to do and it performed it well: Provide frequent, quality air service to small communities that otherwise would have little or none. In its heyday, prior to Sept. 11, Piedmont and Allegheny operated a combined fleet of 109 Dash 8 airplanes.

The aircraft performed well in all weather conditions, sipped fuel through every oil crisis and helped American remain profitable during a difficult time in the airline industry. It had an incredible safety record and was appreciated systemwide. Air traffic controllers loved the Dash because it could take off and land on short runways in congested cities. Pilots loved the Dash because it was a blast to operate — many calling it the "pilot's plane." Piedmont's devoted Maintenance team kept them flying even after de Havilland, now Bombardier, stopped manufacturing the -100 and -300 models and parts were difficult to come by.

Flight Attendant Gwen Clark joined Malcom and Ricky on the final flight.

“There have been many a dark, stormy night spent in the cockpit of the Dash, and I was completely comfortable at the controls,” said Malcolm. “It’s been an absolute privilege flying this aircraft for 30 years, and it’s bittersweet that I am retiring on the same day as it is.”

Dozens of American Airlines team members crowded the gate in CLT to celebrate the Dash’s farewell – complete with cake, a Dash documentary video and a water cannon salute on departure.

Following the Dash 8 retirement, American Airlines is now an all jet airline.

A proper island welcome

The next day, at a much smaller airport a little further south — Hilton Head, South Carolina (HHH) — a whole town came out to celebrate the first commercial jet service to the popular destination island.

More than 150 people, not including the customers, welcomed a Republic Airline-operated Embraer E-175. The island has lobbied for jet service for years, but the runway was too short.

In preparation for the retirement of the Dash 8, the community worked with conservationists, the Chamber of Commerce and the town of Hilton Head to extend the runway to 5,000 feet, allowing American to continue service there with the now all-jet fleet.

Kelly Davis-Collins, General Manager of Hilton Head Airport for Piedmont, had tears in her eyes as the aircraft touched down.

“I never thought I would see this day,” she said. “I’m incredibly proud of my team here, the airport and the community for all working together to make this happen. American has been serving this airport for more than three decades, and jet service opens incredible opportunities for the island.”

The Beaufort County Airports Director John Rembold, Beaufort County Council Chairman Paul Sommerville, Hilton Head Mayor David Bennett, Hilton Head Island Chamber of Commerce President Bill Miles and Piedmont Senior Vice President Eric Morgan all gave remarks before cutting the ribbon in the terminal to mark the special occasion.

American now serves HHH three times daily, which means an increase in seats from 150 to 228 each way. The new aircraft provides an experience that aligns more closely with the airline’s mainline jets, with 12 seats in first class and 64 in the main cabin, for a total capacity of 76.

Captain Malcolm Ferrand is interviewed before his retirement flight on the last Dash 8 flight to Salisbury, Maryland. He’s a third-generation pilot whose grandfather flew during World War I and father flew for United Airlines. With the final flight of the de Havilland Canada “Dash 8, American is an all jet airline.

The airport hosted a ribbon cutting for the inaugural jet service.

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