

Writing the playbook: American to offer more than 1,000 cargo-only flights this September

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Carrier to offer Cargo customers double the number of flights from August

When American Airlines relaunched cargo-only flights in March, its Cargo team started with 20 flights to two cities. This September, its cargo-only schedule will total more than 1,000 flights serving 32 destinations — doubling its cargo-only flying compared to August.

Since being reintroduced after a 35-year hiatus, these flights have helped the airline's customers move more than 45 million pounds of critical goods around the world amidst the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. But getting the first flight off the ground was nothing short of a symphony, played by team members from across the company.

"We didn't have a playbook. We'd never done this before," said Maulin Vakil, American's Director of Cargo Customer Care. "We began to explore how much cargo we could take if we couldn't transport passengers."

Team members from the airline's Cargo, Network Planning and Operations teams joined forces to write a new strategy. The plan would allow American Airlines Cargo to better serve its shippers despite a decreased passenger

flight schedule resulting from the pandemic.

"We're a passenger airline that also carries cargo, but the pandemic impacted that model," said Chris Isaac, Director of Cargo Revenue Management at the time. "COVID-19 made parts of our passenger schedule unpredictable."

After walking through dozens of what-if scenarios, team members discovered it would be possible to successfully fly regularly scheduled long-haul service with nothing but cargo in the aircraft's belly. The first flight, however, would have to be planned with no stone unturned.

The final push to plan American's first cargo-only service since 1984 came as the COVID-19 outbreak progressed and the vast majority of passenger air travel to Asia and Europe was suspended. On March 17 — four days after most air travel between the United States and Europe was paused — the team that had originally explored the possibility of cargo-only flying was called to put their plan in motion. After exploring their options, the group began planning a cargo-only flight from Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) to Frankfurt (FRA) scheduled to take off on Friday, March 20.

While figuring out the safety, logistics and economics of the flight was a challenge, team members were prepared for the test. Crews were briefed, safety procedures were established and international rules were carefully followed.

Four days after the team set their plan into motion, American operated a Boeing 777-300 from DFW to FRA as its first cargo-only flight of the 21st century.

With the flight to FRA a success, American began operating cargo-only flights to Hong Kong (HKG) shortly after. A few weeks later, team members planned safe and efficient ways to serve Shanghai (PVG), Beijing (PEK) and Seoul (ICN). Many of these flights deliver PPE and medical supplies from Asia to U.S. soil, as well as mail, clothing and hard goods.

"We had to build all of this out and coordinate how it flows with our scheduled passenger service because, well, we're a passenger airline," said Tom Howard, a manager at American's Integrated Operations Center, who led the development of the operation.

"It's satisfying to know that we are both keeping American in the air and keeping the world economy afloat," said Dennis Fiddler, a Customer Service manager at American's cargo facility in Miami. "We ensure countries are able to supply others with essential supplies. Although it feels like our borders are further apart because of COVID-19, our team is able to shorten that distance during this time of need."

"It feels great to know that my job as a Crew Chief helps the world move critical supplies, and these cargo-only flights support international trade during this pandemic," said Customer Operations Crew Chief Kevin Starling.

An idea that initially started as a few test flights has since flourished, quickly becoming a dependable service for Cargo customers as demand around the world continues to grow. This September, more than 1,000 scheduled

cargo-only flights will be accompanied by more than 1,200 passenger flights also offering cargo services — giving Cargo customers access to more than 2,200 flights throughout the month.

In September 2020, American will double its cargo-only flying schedule from the month prior, providing customers with more than 1,000 widebody cargo-only flights.

