New Boeing 747-400ER Takes to the Skies in Debut Flight

The new 747-400ER (extended range) soared northward into the skies above Paine Field for the first time, formally beginning its flight test program.

A crowd of Boeing [NYSE:BA] employees stood along the runway and cheered. The airplane is the 1,308th 747 assembled by Boeing in its Everett factory, making it by far the world's most popular widebody jetliner.

"This is just an awesome feeling," said Kurt Kraft, 747-400ER program manager after watching the airplane take off. "I'm so proud of our team and what they've accomplished -- working together with customers, suppliers and regulatory agencies to take the next logical step in this great airplane's evolution. In our business, whether you design, build, fly or maintain airplanes, there's nothing more special than a first flight."

With a maximum takeoff weight of 910,000 pounds (412,770 kilograms), the 747-400ER is now the largest and fastest commercial airplane in the sky -- cruising at Mach 0.85, or 85 percent of the speed of sound. Capt. Joe MacDonald, 747 chief pilot, was at the controls this morning when the gleaming red, white and blue 747-400ER lifted off the runway at exactly 10 a.m.

"Whatever the phase of flight, this airplane handles effortlessly and flawlessly," MacDonald said. "It's a 747 with a Boeing pedigree. That's as good as it gets."

Alongside MacDonald in the cockpit was Capt. Mark Feuerstein, 747 assistant chief pilot. Together, they will fly the airplane known internally at Boeing as "RF001" for several hours and perform a series of tests on the airplane's systems before landing at Boeing Field in Seattle. The new 747-400ER's tail number is, appropriately, N747ER.

The airplane is one of two 747-400ERs that will be tested over the next three months to certify that it meets all regulatory and customer requirements prior to delivery to launch customer Qantas Airways. The second 747-400ER now is in the final stages of assembly.

Together, the two test airplanes will rack up more than 275 hours of flight-testing and about 400 hours of ground tests. Before RF001 took off for the first time today, it had already accumulated nearly 200 test hours, validating data gained by engineering analysis and in the laboratory. One of those tests was the taxi test, completed just yesterday -- signifying the airplane was ready for flight.

"While we've been testing the airplane and its systems on the ground for some time, this is really the day we've been waiting for," said Art Fanning, 747 chief engineer for testing. "There's just something magical about a first flight."

The 747-400ER provides new features and capabilities that add value for customers, including the 747-400ER's spacious new Boeing signature interior architecture -- similar to that in the 777 and 767. The new capabilities include greater range or more payload, a choice customers make to best fit their operations.

The 747-400ERs -- available as both passenger and freighter airplanes -- are the same size as today's 747-400s, but they allow airlines and cargo carriers to fly longer routes, or carry more cargo or passengers on existing routes. To support this enhanced capability, the new 747-400ER freighter and passenger versions have increased their gross takeoff weight by 35,000 pounds (15,870 kilograms) to 910,000 pounds (412,770 kilograms). Both airplanes offer an unbeatable combination of payload, range and speed.

The 747-400ER program was formally launched in November 2000 with an order from Qantas Airways, which is scheduled to receive its first airplane in October. The first 747-400ER rolled out of the Everett factory hangar in June 2002. The first 747-400ER Freighter also will be delivered in October.

In addition to the 747-400ER, Boeing also is developing two new longer-range 777s, the 777-300ER (extended range) and the 777-200LR (longer-range). Production has already begun on the first of the two 777s, the 777-300ER; rollout is scheduled for November 2002. These longer-range 777s complement the 747-400, and together the two airplane programs form the backbone of the Boeing long-range airplane strategy.

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