QANTAS CAPTAIN BRYAN WELCH ENDS RECORD RUN ON THE 747

News / Airlines, Personalities

Until July 1, **Captain Bryan Welch** held the title of the longest-serving Boeing 747 pilot in commercial aviation.

During a four-decade long career, Welch flew every model of the Boeing 747 Qantas operated, from the 747-200 and 747-300 Classics to the 747-400 and 747-400ER still in service today.

That run came to an end of a dark winter's morning in July when Welch said farewell to Qantas and hello to retirement after he safely and smoothly negotiated VH-OEE's landing at Sydney Airport after a 14-hour journey from Vancouver.

As befitting someone hanging up his wings after so many years on the flightdeck, Welch was given a traditional ARFF monitor cross salute as VH-OEE made its way to the international terminal.

Welch, who only took over the title of longest-serving 747 pilot after the retirement of colleague Laurie Shears in November 2014, admitted the thought that he would never get another chance to redeem himself should he not get the landing absolutely perfect did cross his mind at various stages of the long trek across the Pacific.

But much to his relief, the aircraft made a smooth landing.

"One guy was filming on his iPad and I said jokingly we all had to say it was a good landing no

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

matter what it was," Welch recalled in an interview with *Australian Aviation* a few days after his final flight.

"Thankfully it was a really good landing.

"I enjoyed the last trip to Vancouver."

In addition to the monitor cross, Welch's wife Glynda and children Zoe and Lachlan were on board for that last flight. And more family came on board the aircraft after the passengers disembarked, including daughters Elisha and Karissa and two of his grandchildren Kai and Taj, for some photos in the flightdeck and in the cabin with the other pilots and crew.

Captain Bryan Welch after his final flight. (Karissa Welch)

FROM SCHOOL TO THE 747

Welch said he finished school in 1969, and with no flying experience successfully applied for an 18-month cadet course with Qantas in 1970, which the airline paid for.

"There were probably about 3,000 applications and there were 10 guys on my course and probably about three or four courses a year. So I was extremely lucky to get in," Welch explained.

However, Qantas's financial situation at that time meant the airline had to start retrenching pilots, which affected the cadets such as Welch who were halfway through their course.

"They told us cadets they would let us finish our course – without the instrument flying training – but we were also retrenched. They then said the would 'give you a call when we start hiring again' so all was not lost in the sense that you knew if there was a turnaround they would take you back ahead of other people."

A couple of days after the course ended in August 1971, Welch was called up for national service.

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

He spent 20 months in the Army and completed an officers training course and also gained his instructors' rating.

That rating enabled him to go out to Bankstown Airport to work for Jack Brabham Aviation, where he was also retrenched, as well as do charter work for Navair with Jim Hazleton and Frank Young, until that call from Qantas came in June 1974.

Welch started on the Boeing 707, which was coming to the end of its life in the Qantas fleet at that stage with Hong Kong and Tahiti among some of that aircraft's last routes.

"With a small number crew they used to share the flying a lot and give you a good run as a second officer," Welch said.

"You couldn't land the aircraft, but you could do everything else."

Eventually, he transitioned to the 747 in 1977, starting with the 747-200.

Welch said the 747-200 and 747-300 'Classics' were great aircraft to fly and sometimes involved some non-traditional pilot responsibilities when working on the Combi version of the type.

"That was interesting because as a second officer you had to go down mid-flight and check on the horses you were carrying and stuff like that. They could be thoroughbreds or polo horses or stock horses," Welch said.

"We even had a nerve gun there in case one horse went berserk or something like that."

Eventually, Welch achieved his command on the 747 Classics after completing his captain's course in 1989.

But his time flying the Classics was cut short after Qantas management tapped Welch and two of his colleagues to move over to the 747-400, because not enough pilots had bid for the new aircraft in the initial stages.

"If no one bids, then by our seniority system the most junior can always be assigned to anything, where that is a basing or an aircraft," Welch said.

"There were three of us at the bottom of the list as the most junior captains and when management said they were short three pilots for the -400, the three of us moved across.

"I had only checked out about six months as a 747 Classic captain when we were told to do the 747-400 course. If you had the choice you probably wouldn't want to do a second course within six months, but away we went."

Welch described the move across to the -400 series as a "big step change" when compared with the Classics.

"It wasn't so much in terms of handling, but more in the automation and navigation and management of the cockpit," Welch said.

"Those that had been on the Classics a long time had a sentimental attachment to the old way of doing things, but certainly from a flying perspective it was an easier and a better plane.

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

“The plane was good to fly, so that was enjoyable. And the flying in the early days was quite good too in that you had a little bit more down time in ports to enjoy.”

As Welch alluded to, the 747-400 heralded the era of long-haul flying with non-stop flights across the Pacific and new destinations for Qantas.

However, it was Qantas’s use of the 747-400 between Sydney and Perth that proved to be one of Welch’s favourite routes to fly on, given the often challenging winds when landing in Perth during the summer time made it a great test of pilot skill and the fact that it was a rare day flight in both directions with the 747.

“It is the body clock change and flying through the night you can’t avoid as a long-haul pilot,” Welch said.

“So Perth was a good change from those overnight flights.

“The job is fatiguing. Short-haul pilots get tired, long-haul pilots get fatigued.”

In addition to his flying career, Welch was also been involved with the union representing Qantas pilots as its secretary and vice-president for 10 years and was part of the negotiating team for half a dozen enterprise bargaining agreements.

Asked if he will miss flying, Welch says: “Those of us who have retired sometimes joke that we have handed back the keys to a very big toy that is a lot of fun to have so yes, I will miss it to some degree. But I don’t regret hitting retirement as there are lots of adventures for me still to come.”

Captain Bryan Welch with his grandsons and some of the Qantas crew on board his final flight. (Karissa Welch)

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN AVIATION
ARTICLE LINK:
https://50skyshades.com/news/personalities/qantas-captain-bryan-welch-ends-record-run-on-the-747

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.