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First Person: Captain Chad Blewett recounts operating special flight to help evacuate his hometown of Yellowknife



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Chad Blewett is a Captain on the Boeing 737 Max for Air Canada, and one of the airline's first Inuit Captains.

I had seen the news of the wildfires near Yellowknife and was receiving updates from my family members who were there.

With a mandatory evacuation being ordered as the fires approached the city, I knew Air Canada would be helping with those efforts. While normally we do not fly the Boeing 737 Max 8 to Yellowknife, our teams found a way to make it happen.

When I saw flight to Yellowknife flight show up on the schedule, I immediately called crew scheduling and asked them to switch me from my assigned flight to Honolulu so that I could operate into Yellowknife instead.

Not only is Yellowknife where I am from, but the airport there is where I grew up as a pilot, and I have flown thousands of hours into Yellowknife, including on older model 737s.

So, when the chief pilot called me, and said that we had special authorization to do the first Air Canada 737 Max flight into Yellowknife, I knew I had to be on it, and that it would be no problem flying into, or out of.



Flying into Yellowknife from Vancouver, I was excited to be back, but a little anxious as well, just with the whole situation happening on the ground. We had extra support with us on the flight, including a maintenance engineer, as well as four baggage handlers to expedite the loading in Yellowknife.

As I was flying in, I was thinking about my family because my dad, my brother are still up there, my uncles and my cousins were visiting, and I was just thinking about them. I saw family inside the terminal, and they seemed calm despite everything that was going on. They said they would be leaving town the next morning.

When I made my announcement to the passengers, one of them recognized my name and let the flight attendants know. So once we were at cruise altitude, I went back and saw that it was an old colleague of mine from the local airline. I asked how she was doing and she mentioned that she was ok, but that her husband was staying behind to help with the evacuation.

Flying directly over the fire on departure, and seeing how close it was to town, was very concerning. It is pretty tough to see, you think it's never going to happen to you or your family. But I knew that the first responders on the ground would do their best to protect the city, my hometown.

I am proud of my airline’s efforts to help, as these special flights were put in within 24 hours of the evacuation order. It was an unforgettable experience, doing my small part to get friends, family, and everyone out safely during this difficult time.

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 