



Dr Peter Chapman - Centenary Salute & Birthday Messages

The month of July 2023 calls for very special centenary cheers and congratulations to a very special BCAL figure. Tuesday, July 18 marks the splendid 100th birthday of Doctor Peter Chapman, the airline's highly-respected Chief Medical Officer and trusted friend to so many.

Peter's 100 years span the evolution of civil aviation from its early fledgling days to the current global industry of today. Prompted and with personal encouragement from close friend and colleague, Vic Sheppard, Peter tells us about his remarkable life and career.

He was born during the summer of 1923 in a deeply rural Suffolk village where his father was Parish Vicar. After school at Aldeburgh and Hailebury, Peter was accepted as an 18-year-old medical student at London's St. Bartholomew's Hospital ('Bart's'). It was war-time and the city gave students plenty of casualty experience. Peter was especially interested in surgery and subsequently became House Surgeon at Bart's and then Redhill Hospital.

Towards the end of World War II Peter was called up into the RAF and posted to care for the Night Fighter Wing at West Malling, Kent. This effectively put an end to his surgical ambitions.

Reluctant recruit as he was, Peter found the aircrew to be "kind and welcoming." So interesting did he find aircrew work that he realised there were other things beside surgery. Peter progressed and became acting Senior Medical Officer (SMO) at 11 Group HQ with the rank of Squadron Leader just two years after joining RAF. The Service kindly agreed to teach him to fly and trained him as a parachutist for parachute rescue duties. Peter was, he admits, the original 'sucker volunteer'.

While the RAF was anxious for him to stay with a Permanent Commission, he realised this took him further away from aircraft and aircrew. Looking around, he found a post to look after BOAC aircrew. This was, however, another culture shock as Peter realised again that promotion required increased administration.

He was, therefore, delighted to be offered the post of SMO to British United Airways (BUA) and its group of companies at Gatwick. Although this really became his life's work, it started with a nearly-aborted take-off.

Peter reported to the airline on January 1, 1968 at 09.00 and was then introduced to Managing Director Alan Bristow at 11.00 - only to be fired at 11.30. Quite a short span even by Bristow's standards! This was done quite gently by the BUA boss who told him to find another job immediately. Peter consulted several 'Bristow Watchers' and was advised to keep his head down as Bristow would probably forget! This is exactly what happened and Peter continued to look after Bristow for the next 40 years until the time of his death.

Three months after joining BUA, Peter wrote and presented a paper to Bristow outlining how medical services could and should be run to be an asset to an employer - and a revenue earner. Peter found this to be a very interesting and rewarding job with nice people. He began to understand that this was hopefully his life's work.

Two years later, in 1970, BUA and Caledonian Airways merged to become British Caledonian which accepted how medical affairs should be run. Peter liaised with European Airlines and was made Chairman of European Airline Medical Directors. As BCAL spread its wings into the USA he became involved with most Airline Medical Directors there. All these were run, to him, in an outdated concept and were revenue eaters rather than revenue enhancers.

Peter's close relationship with all aircrew was helped by Flight Operations Directors Pat McKenzie and John Fugl. He was able to travel and occupy a jump seat whenever available and does not recall ever experiencing take-off or landing in a passenger seat. This, he confirms, was a very great help in encountering aircrew in their own environment and led to a series of research papers on pilot incapacitation (never previously assessed). All this eventually led to changes in international regulations. No significant changes had been made from original Board of Trade ship regulations.

Passenger safety in the case of severe illness had been unchanged for many years. It was clear to Peter that paramedic training for cabin staff volunteers should be introduced. He worked on this and the carriage of defibrillators with Professor Douglas Chamberlain. A new concept was thus developed. Cabin staff management was a great help in all this change. Peter wrote and published a book on the concept of trained paramedics in cabin crew, published by Chapman and Hall Limited. (Peter was always pleased that Charles Dickens had used the same publisher).

Peter - always known fondly as 'Doc' Chapman - retired aged 65 in 1988 at the same time as the BA/BCAL merger. He decided to set up as independent aircrew doctor and so spent the next 26 years continuing what had, after all, been his life's work. He separately gave his Gatwick and Heathrow practices to two doctors who had worked with him and who continue today.

'Doc' Chapman finally retired aged 90, which he now believes that was much too soon! He says he is now physically 'dodderly' but still full of new ideas!

by Tony Cocklin & Vic Sheppard

And by John Whitley a piece on Peter's role in the Gatwick Park Hospital

As well as catering to the medical needs of BCal aircrew and staff from our own medical centre in the airport, Peter saw the demand from other UK and foreign airlines for a similar facility. He was also very aware of the large number of BCal (and other airline) passengers who were flying into Gatwick, seeking medical attention for which they'd have to travel on to London or elsewhere. For the other airline staff, we might have been able to expand our own medical centre but, for the high-volume passenger throughput, we certainly didn't have the right facilities. It looked as if there was a revenue-earning opportunity, benefitting the local economy, which was there for the taking. The idea of a local purpose-built hospital and medical centre took shape!

The Group Board agreed with such a proposal and our largest shareholder, 3i, agreed in principle to finance this. In reviewing the necessary other parties to make such a project work, we identified a construction company (Lovells) and healthcare provider (BUPA) to join us in this venture. Gatwick Park Hospital Limited was formed with Ron Lewis, Peter and me as BCal Group directors, together with representatives of 3i, Lovells and BUPA to make a truly inclusive board with very different backgrounds. We spent a lot of time drawing up business plans and attending meetings between some or all of the parties but things went remarkably smoothly, including the need to divert the River Mole which ran across the parcel of land identified for the hospital site. I well remember the topping out ceremony and I still have the programme for the dinner we had at the Savoy in June 1988, for all parties to celebrate what we'd achieved. Once the hospital opened, BUPA took full control until they later sold their chain of hospitals to Spire.

When Peter left BCal and set up his own practice, his office was of course virtually opposite the new hospital, so we'd often point across to what we'd achieved with some pride. Living in South Godstone, this is still my local private hospital and I've visited it many times since our BCal days, always marveling at the far-sightedness of Peter and others in getting this from a nice idea to a successful and essential local facility.

Peter's Birthday messages

From Goff Bowles

BUA and BCAL were very lucky to have Peter as CMO. Not the least of his many achievements was the large number of pilots he was able to help regain or renew their licenses by doing battle with the CAA on their behalf. I count myself very fortunate and privileged to have him as a friend, help and adviser for so many years.

From Rhoda Pearman

What a lovely acknowledgement for Dr Chapman's 100th birthday! Amazing. He gave me my medical before I joined BUA (British United Airways) on 4th January 1971. He's a very British gentleman.

From Chris Anderson

I read with great interest that Doc Chapman is nearing an amazing milestone. As well as my Dad, Andy Anderson and Carol Webb, who knew him well from the aircrew medical etc. I had a very fortunate interaction with him in the early 1970s. I was walking into work, from the car park adjacent to the old 1-11 hangar, when Doc Chapman joined me and enquired why I had sunglasses on at 06:45! I explained that I had suffered with painful light sensitivity for a few days and had been given an ointment for "pink eye". He immediately took me into his office and took a long look into my eyes. He said you do not have conjunctivitis, I suspect something else, and with that he telephoned Moorefields Eye Hospital, got me released from my shift in the hangar and onto a train to London.

I was promptly diagnosed with Iritis, which could easily, if left much longer, have severely damaged my irises and consequently my eyesight. Fortunately it was caught just in time and with the immediate application of the correct medication, was soon back at work. This disease does return over time, but I was always able to catch it early and am happy to say that the last occurrence was back in 1989. For me, his immediate concern for me and his desire to confirm exactly what I was suffering from, potentially saved me from some serious consequences. I'm forever grateful.

From Charles Manetta: Many congratulations Peter

From Anthony Edwards

Peter "Doc" Chapman's 100th Birthday and Vic and Tony's tribute to the life and career of a truly remarkable man. Clearly one of the guys who has made a positive difference to this industry and to this world.

From Vic Ball

Great write up on Peter Chapman, give him my best wishes. He once referred me to Douglas Chamberlain at Brighton but all was well, although at 66 I had a quadruple heart-by-pass in Guys and later a pacemaker. But all OK now, so again, congrats to Peter.

From Hugh Cowan

My wife and I were going on holiday to HKG but I was feeling terrible and it looked like our firm seats were not going to be used. A colleague suggested that I pop in to the medical centre and see what they suggested. The nurse went away and came back. "Doctor Chapman will see you now" she said. The doctor and I had met before for some unrelated condition and he greeted me as an old friend. I explained how I was feeling and how our HKG holiday in just 4 hours was in doubt. "Drop your trousers" he said. One very large injection later and we were on our way! Such a gentleman..... and a superb doctor.

From Jean Elmer

What an amazing man Doc Chapman is, his life has been a great adventure and there must be many who are grateful for the things he started.

From Vanessa Ridgway

I remember meeting him when my late husband, David Ridgway, had his medical in London. I think it was near Sloan Square. Lovely person. Great age. I wish him well.

From Angela Williams (Keiley)

I remember the Doc well from when I had an emergency appendectomy whilst on a long weekend in Gibraltar in the early seventies. I discharged myself in order to fly home as planned on the Monday, having telexed Ian Ritchie to advise him of my intentions, only to have a joint telephone call from Doc Chapman and the boss telling me it was dangerous for me to fly and that the crew were advised not to let me board!! So I stayed until the Thursday flight, reported to the medical centre on my return, and was given some dressings in order to attend to the wound. These were not in any sort of seal, so I just chucked them in my handbag - the result being that when I put on the new dressing, it set up a massive infection and I was off work for two weeks!! I had no money at the time so the GSA in Gib were authorised to cover my hospital and hotel costs, the plan being that this would be deducted monthly in instalments from my salary - I don't recall this ever actually happening!!

100 years old, what a milestone! I doubt Doc Chapman remembers this particular incident, but please on my very best wishes for a wonderful birthday.

From Una Alliman

My congratulations to Peter on his 100th birthday. I worked for BUA, BCal and BA as Air Hostess, Auntie and Crew Control retiring in 2000. Peter did my medical for my Private Pilot's Licence starting in 1974. I'll never forget Peter. Happy 100th Birthday Peter. Best Wishes

From Phippa Barrett

What a fantastic service we received from you Doc, we were so lucky to have you on board. Congratulations on your milestone birthday. Have a fantastic day.

From Kris Massie

What a wonderful career and accolade Doc Peter and now Congratulations on your 100th birthday

From Vic Attwood

I first meet Peter when he was the BOAC Doctor based in the Queens Building at Heathrow. I was with Hunting Clan, and we had an arrangement with BOAC to use their services. I had been bitten by a flamingo that had arrived on our Africargo service from Nairobi; He also did all our jabs.

Peter and I had a mutual friend in the late Graham Joss who was BOAC veterinary advisor who subsequently became our advisor in BUA and BCal.

When Peter joined us at Gatwick used to go for my inoculation updates. Peter had a very imaginative sense of humour, and this was illustrated on numerous occasions. On one occasion, I had damaged my elbow and went to see Peter who asked me to drop my trousers, I queried this and Peter's response was "I usually did aircrew medicals and that they could not tell their arse from their elbow"

On another occasion I happened to be in the Medical Unit when a young sub-contractor working in the hanger had hit his head which was bleeding and had been sent to the Medical Unit; while waiting he took off his overalls which revealed a slogan on his tee-shirt that said "I'm not stupid, I'm not thick, I wear a condom on my Pr**k". Peter came out of his office, took a look at the chap and his tee-shirt and commented "you should have worn it on your head"

Finally, congratulations Peter on reaching this milestone birthday, it has been a pleasure knowing you.

From Nick Washington-Jones: Happy 100th birthday to Peter.

From Pat Cresswell: Happy birthday to Dr Chapman

From Jim Williams: Happy Birthday Doc chapman.

From Ross Walter: Congratulations to a lovely man.

From Ann Furlong

Wow, what an achievement, congratulations to you on your 100th Birthday. I remember you as a lovely man and Doctor.

From Geoff Johnston

Happy 100th Doctor Chapman and may you have many more years to celebrate.

From Riaz Butt: Many Happy Returns of the day. Wish you many more.

From Deanna West

Congratulations Dr Chapman! Happy 100th Birthday! My late husband Alan always recalled in 1968/9 that he acquired for the boys at the 'Beverley' house, a tabby kitten from you - Dillon Thomas - he lived to be 22 yrs old - so from good stock! Have a great day!

From David Williams

Many congratulations Sir, I remember going to your office next to Terrapin One where I worked for BCAL, we needed lots of vaccines in those days

From Jennifer Grail

Lovely lovely man. Remember him well. HAPPY BIRTHDAY Peter

From Christine Jegu: Wow!!!! How fantastic!!! Happy birthday Doctor Chapman!

From Derek G Ralph: Happy birthday Doc

From Elizabeth Lockhart-Mure: My congratulations and best wishes to Peter

From Loz Allan

Dr Peter Chapman is someone I hold in the highest regard both from the professional point of view and as a person. I never forget about my recurrent medical examinations with Peter; quite simply because I trust in his judgement. Peter's wisdom to me was invaluable and medicals were a social event owing partly to his wicked sense of humour. You're admired by many Peter and a dear friend to many. Thank you. Enjoy this landmark birthday!

From David Joy: Congratulations and best wishes to Dr. Chapman on his 100th birthday.

And best wishes for a very happy 100th birthday from:

Alan Roberts, Peter Durrant, Nick Ridley, Sue Jackson-Page, Michael Atkinson, Alan Reeves, Cos Shiels, Jean Bagnell, Liz Tiley, Steve Taylor, Marie Hogbin, Graham Waters, Wendy Loxley, Andy Hudson, Davina Janman, Dave Thaxter, Ann Furlong, Christine Swift, Sally Ann Beischer, Tom Houston, John McSorley, Ian Plumridge, Richard Friend, Anthea McClelland, Russell Driver, Lindsay Smith, Jane Forrest, Jane Penney, Kris Massie, Sylvia Murphy, Richard Heywood

and all the members of the British Caledonian website and Facebook Group too.

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