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Part Nine: Life & Times of Capt. James Peers... 'The last Empire C-Class Captain' © PFBC

Born on 15th. November 1917 in Cardiff, James Melvin Peers died at his home by Branksome Chine, Poole on 1st. May 2010

PFBC's inaugural [Hon. Commodore, Air - Capt. James Peers](#) was formerly with the RAF, BOAC & BA, also Gulf Air. He was the last surviving of the Short Empire C-Class Flying Boat Captains with BOAC, and a very keen supporter of Poole Flying Boats Celebration. [A Good Friend to us All](#), we do most certainly miss him from our various Celebrations!

His first visit to Poole was immediately prewar when he sailed with a group of friends from Penarth, and moored up at night off [Poole Harbour Yacht Club](#), which would eventually become the home of BOAC's Marine Terminal in WW2! Just a couple of days later whilst on that voyage, he also saw for the very first time the Flying Boats of IAL in the Solent.

Born in S. Wales James was educated at Penarth G.S. and went on to train as an Architect at University College Cardiff... It was whilst he was studying at Cardiff, that he had got an opportunity for a local flight in a [de Havilland Dragon Rapide](#), which was his first experience of flying, and from that point onwards his ambition, which was fired by the Flying Boats!



James like many of his compatriots interested in all things about flying was especially influenced by the writing of Antoine de St.-Exupery who successfully combined the 2 great passions of his life, flying & writing
As a most dedicated flyer, he flew an air mail route in South America
He lost his life in WW2 when shot down - ironically by a German Ace who was a fan of his prize winning stories *Night Flight* and *Grand Prix*
Left: *A de Havilland Dragon Rapide* from the era immediately prewar

During the Spring of 1940, James enlisted in the RAF & was posted to South Africa in April 1940, travelling on the 24th. aboard the Union Castle Liner [Arundel Castle](#) from Southampton. He recalled,

"All the pax were first of the 'Empire Aircrew Training' set-up...

Rhodesia was the first to start, and the pax were involved in the setting up, or to be trained as pilots.

For the majority of us, it was our first Equator Crossing, which was a rather toned-down Celebration. "

So he trained to be a pilot at the *EATS* Flying School in Rhodesia earning his Wings with Distinction to join 70 Squadron. James enjoyed joking that he *'Flew a Pair of Wellingtons'* in the Middle East ...indeed he survived one of these crashing!

He transferred to 216 Transport Command - where he got the opportunity to be seconded to Flying Boats ops at Durban:



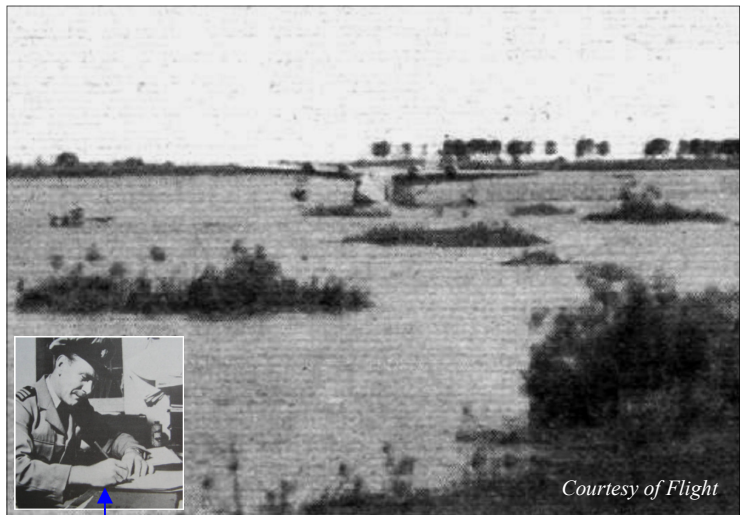
©PFBC CJPColl

Left at Durban:

Photograph taken Jan. 1942 (age 24) for James' mum - by a professional photographer Ann Ley, first wife of Capt. Tommy Rose who tragically died in a car crash!
...This couple had befriended James

Capt. Tommy Rose was to become the Senior Captain at Poole after WW2.

Note: [IAL Lion](#) on the Capt's Brevet



Courtesy of Flight

Capt. Tommy Rose (inset): *G-ADHL Canopus* & islands of Sudd at Malakal

Out of 24 RAF volunteers he was one of 5 to be successful & who with BOAC subsequently attained the rank of Captain. In joining BOAC Operations in January 1942 he received the rank of an 'Honorary acting Second Officer - on probation': Of which he later described as being 'a wonderful title some office boy must have dreamed up for RAF seconded pilots'!

On Journeys he always took a book with him about Flying, Sailing or just a good novel to occupy his mind on stop-overs.

The Durban FB Ops were known as '8 Line' - whilst UK FB Ops were '4 Line'. Landplane operations had other numbers.

When cut off from the UK a route north from Durban to Cairo, then s.eastwards became fondly known as *The Horseshoe*. This route, *via* East Africa, next the Rift Valley, up the R. Nile to Cairo, then on to Baghdad, Basra and Karachi - before hooking round & down to Calcutta, Rangoon, Bangkok, to Singapore, Darwin to Sydney (*with a connection to Auckland*), had stages of approx. 700 miles - including intermediate refuelling stops (*James quipped it was more akin to The Banana*) and continued until Japanese forces entered the War, and in taking Singapore causing diversions, and then suspension etc.



Left: Publicity shot at Dar es Salaam close to St. Joseph's Cathedral
Standing on the wing of an Empire C-Class Capt. James Peers as an ICUS (in command under supervision) is flanked by 2 fellow officers Captain 'Bonzo' Brown (pointing) with 2nd. Officer Jones, in 1946



Vital links to the UK & US were restored *via* River Congo and West Africa + Portugal to BOAC's base at Poole Harbour. He frequently flew 'Cs' Durban-Cairo (*with 200 return trips*) and the section through to Karachi etc. (*he never got to NZ*). James piloted a total of 14 C-Class, from famous class leader *G-ADHL Canopus* to Caledonia, Cambria, Castor, *Corsair*, Cassiopeia, Ceres, Cameronian, Coorong, Carpentaria & Cooe, also S30 types *G-AFCT Cathay* & *G-AFKZ Champion*, through to S33 type *G-AFRA Cleopatra*, which he admitted was his particular favourite *when flying along the River Nile* !

Although BOAC had officially been launched for April 1940 having subsumed IAL, those based at Congella in particular still continued to identify with the *old company* with inference of upholding the Imperial tradition and the British Empire: This was reinforced by the uniforms etc. with many sundry items, which had to 'make do & mend' until replaced late-on !

" Pax were mainly Military with a few Politicians; in wartime I don't think there many if any normal fare-paying pax flying through Mozambique - then a Portuguese territory - the 'Military' were certainly required to wear civilian clothes - when they reverted to 'uniform', outside this Portuguese territory, it was somewhat amazing how often the ones that had appeared to be 'other ranks' turned out to be Generals or Admirals - and vice-versa. "

© PFBC CJP Coll

In 1944 James returned to the UK in a Wellington bomb-bay to collect *G-AFCI Golden Hind* and then to fly the link route to Durban, where he remained based till Peace, and closure of BOAC Congella Base & the African part of the Horseshoe. In collecting *Golden Hind* from Rochester he found there was radio silence & Hythe Base on the Solent waved them away. Same happened again at Poole & Mount Batten, just reaching Pembroke Dock with little fuel left he realised it was D-Day !



PFBC HLM Mrs Carolyn Dee was a young girl when at Durban (aged 8) where her father Bill Draine an FB Engineer had been moved by IAL from the base at Tiberius, in advance of the severing of the Mediterranean route to the UK. The family remained there throughout the remainder of WW2. In July 1945, they bid fond farewells and boarded *G-AFCI Golden Hind* for a flight to Poole with various staff as pax to end their time at Congella !

The following extracts tell of James' experiences and adventures during the Dark Days of WW2 whilst based at Durban:

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"Flew a Catalina once in Durban, very odd but memorable experience..."

"Must have been early 1944: BOAC used the 'Mayfair' Hotel to accommodate new arrivals, and some of the unmarried people (as I was then), and so stayed on there for some time with special room arrangements. The hotel was also used for accommodation by the RAF, as there was no real RAF base there.

At one time there was a Catalina crew also billeted there, for the one and only of this type of aircraft based at Durban. One morning I saw the RAF crew looking very disconsolate; the Skipper said that they had been ordered to fly out and protect a merchant vessel that had been torpedoed about 100 miles out, and shepherd it into Durban...

Also, to find the U-boat if possible !

*However, the co-pilot was ill, with a very bad case of the 's***s' and unable to fly: They were not allowed to fly with one pilot only. My original feeling was sod the rules, why don't you just get airborne - but it could involve 10-11 hours flying which was rather a bit much for only one pilot.*

I was in BOAC uniform, yet said;

"If I go upstairs and change epaulettes, wings (- I had 'Imperial Airways' wings on) and buttons, I will be an RAF Flt/Lt Pilot... I've never been on a Catalina, but have over 2,000 hours in command on Flying Boats and would be happy to fly as co-pilot if that would help." "

"So I did the changes - reverted to an RAF Pilot - and we charged off to find the ship. It was a medium size merchant ship with a 4-5 metre hole in the starboard side above the waterline - as though the torpedo had leapt out of the water before striking ! Somehow, the crew had managed to trim a list to port so that the hole was just above water level ! The ship was able to make a reasonable speed to Durban under it's own power. We shepherded it for about 10 hours. Pity we didn't see the U boat - I did the flying, round and round the ship, while the proper crew were in the gun-blisters and other lookout points: Seemed the best way to go about it, and the RAF crew were able to do what they had been tasked to do. Eventually it got in safely... This was to be my only firsthand experience on a Catalina ."

["Theirs' was a single aircraft, with one crew only, which created the problem, and I don't really know what they were doing there on their own... Later on there were 3 Catalinas based alongside the BOAC Congella Base, Durban. "]

"A 'dual identity' setup did present some problems in Durban:

Our RAF base was Heliopolis - Cairo, a long way away - so we weren't on base - on duty, so could wear civilian clothes - if we had any(!) and in BOAC guise we could wear civvies in Durban, and were required to wear uniform only when on duty, which was when carrying out a 'test-flight' on the 'boat we were taking out on service the next day, or attending a 'Voyage Conference' the day after returning from the 'Horsehoe'. Having been in uniform since the start of the War, I was now happy to wear civvies most of the time, and only occasionally wore one or the other uniform...

Walking out of the Hotel one morning, I was accosted by a very belligerent elderly lady who very angrily asked:

"Young man, you appear healthy and fit, why aren't you 'Up North' fighting ?! " "

"I was so nonplussed, having just come from 'Up North' after an Operational Tour in Bomber Command, that all I could rather flippantly reply was:

"I've been Up North, fighting, and I didn't like it - Up North is full of Egyptians, Germans & Italians. I don't really mind the Germans and Italians, but I do hate the heat and desert !"

"That was greeted by a loud 'HMPH' of disbelief and I realised that I was about to get a heavy 'hand bagging' if I didn't move smartly ---so I left.

A few days later I was in RAF uniform when I encountered her again ----- got a very cross eyed look, but no comment !

A few days on, I again passed the same elderly lady, this time I was in my BOAC Captain's uniform, with all it's gold braid and Imperial Airways' stuff, as I was off to do a test flight... This time she looked even more cross-eyed and said,

"Where do you get those fancy dress uniforms - and it is illegal to impersonate Military Officers !!!"

"I thought the poor dear probably has a Grandson 'Up North' and worries about him: There was a considerable South African input to the war in N. Africa - we had a complete SA crew on one of our Squadron a/c - never understood why ! [Tragically I saw them shot down over Benina Airfield in Benghazi - no one got out, but that is another long story.]

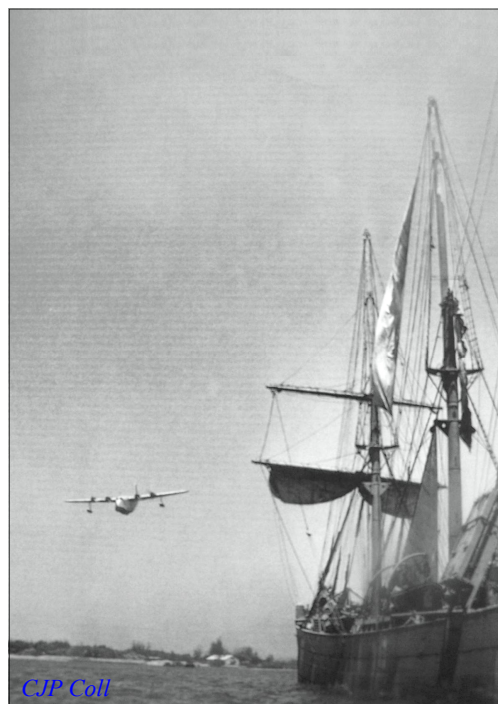
I still wore RAF 'dog tags' on a piece of string around my neck: Name, Number, Officer Blood Group - compete with holes for attachment to coffin -----if you got one! So I showed them to the dear old soul and she finally believed me !

As my guess was correct - I even took a letter up to Cairo for extra express delivery to her grandson".

© PFBC CJP Coll

Thoughtful as ever, James often walking along the path from the pier at Malakal to BOAC's wooden cabins passed huge spiders' webs that caught small birds, which he felt compelled to release back into the wild so that they could enjoy Life!

His *Empires* carried many pax safely on their travels - from the military, to diplomats, and VIPs including the [Agha Khan](#). Yet during his lifetime James was to remain ostensibly a gentle, an unassuming, and a private person, even though he had been singled out in the compilation of the Air Ministry's account 'Merchant Airmen' (- pub. HMSO, 1946) for a series of iconic photographs featuring [G-AFRA Cleopatra](#) flying around Congella, where James alongside [Capt. 'Bonzo' Brown](#) and [2nd. Officer Jones](#) had marked the pending demise of the splendour of the historic C-Classes which were soon withdrawn !



Above:

With Capt. Brown and *G-AFRA Cleopatra* above Marine Parade approaching Durban when piloted by Captain James Peers - for the purposes of photographs taken in 1946

Left: Again, *Cleopatra* passes over Maydon Wharf the take-off area in Congella Basin

Postwar, there had been no return for Capt. James Peers to his former professional training at University as an Architect !

James' last C-Class flight was in bringing *G-ADVB Corsair* (- of 'Corsairville fame') finally back to Poole 13th. January 1947, before *Corsair* was flown to be dismantled at Southampton; later to be followed by BOAC's Flying Boat Services transferred there to the new Berth 50 for April 1948, as a decision had been taken to close down all the facilities at Poole.

It was snowing as he brought *Corsair* across Sandbanks to alight at Poole ! He recalled this journey with some sadness:

" With sadness, I was the Captain on Corsair's last passenger carrying flight, which was from Durban to Poole between 7th. to 13th. January 1947 - all the pax were members of BOAC staff returning to UK on the closing down of No.8 Line and the Durban Flying Boat Base at the Congella Basin. On Corsair's approach to Poole Harbour as we passed over Sandbanks' peninsula on 'short finals', we encountered the first flakes of snow showers which were to cover the whole area for three days. Snow was an unusual occurrence for me, as I only once ever experienced this before when passing through Athens on one of the earliest flights to UK from South Africa via Cairo at the end of hostilities.

On reporting to No.4 Line headquarters at Hythe a few days later, I was horrified to see Corsair, up on the hard, being chopped up by the crew of men with long handled axes which brought me to tears. 'Pace, Sir Roy', but I couldn't help feeling then that Corsair's end would have been less ignominious, less ignoble, had she been left in the Congo: sadly, because of wartime exigencies, she had to be retrieved at all costs. A more fitting end to Corsair, or Canopus and the others, if they had arrived back in UK in less austere times - would have been for a C-class to be saved forever!"

© PFBC



Left:

A wonderfully evocative photograph of *G-ADVB Corsair* variously reckoned to be snapped at Hythe or at Rochester

However, PFBC is relatively certain that it was taken by a very talented, local Poole photographer *Sydney Batting*

The Wintertime perspective ties in with James' Account and this occasion would appear to be highly significant !

James remembered the great concern for icing at that time so it is likely *Corsair* was checked for such serious danger before leaving on a last hop over to Hythe & the dismantlers

The only FB slipways were at the former RAF Hamworthy where a view to the narrowest slip from the bluff at Lake matches that in this photograph, looking through the pine trees to Lake Shore and out across the Wareham Channel



© PFBC CJP Coll

James dug out this photograph of himself in a Solent Class FB at Poole in the Spring of 1948 just before moving to the Solent.

This was on the occasion of our PFBC Salterns 60 Celebration at Salterns Marina Hotel - formerly Poole Harbour Yacht Club before it was requisitioned by firstly the Army & then the RAF. It served as HQs for 461 Squadron (followed by 210) and RAF Transport Command with BOAC: Postwar BOAC to April '48.

James' association with Poole was in 1944 with Golden Hind, then with occasional flights from SA, until January 1947 when he brought home Corsair and was based here up to April 1948. He joined with his friends Captains Tommy Rose, Taffy Barrow, Bob Harwood, and others - some of whom had been in Durban.

So James was 30+ years at the time of this photo & he enjoyed the novelty that this tied in with Diamond Jubilee Celebrations.



James flew many times with his old colleague & pal 'Caspar'

Note:

With closure of Durban in March 1947, the only ones James remembered staying on were original IAL Pilots, who weren't inclined to come back to UK and possibly, having to convert to types - new to them as they were past normal retirement age:~

Captains Caspareuthus aka Caspar, 'Pop' Bellin and also 'Paddy' Shepard readily sprang to James' mind as he reminisced !

"A favourite thing for Crew members to bring back from East Africa was a 3 to 4 foot stalk of bananas, several 'hands' on one branch... On one arrival in UK, I had to restrain a Steward chasing a giant spider that accompanied the fruit The 'Crash Axe' that he was using would have done more damage to the aircraft than to the spider !" © PFBC CJP Coll

In the ensuing period at Poole and then at Southampton, as a senior Captain, James piloted Hythes (x 8) & Sandringhams (x 5) converted from the WW2 Sunderlands, from the UK to Cairo and to Karachi, before he captained the Solents & the Solent Class publicity flight on BOAC's new Springbok FB Route to a terminal at Vaaldam for transfer to Johannesburg. The newly built Solent 2 Class proved to have significant teething difficulties - which delayed delivery and flights to SA from Poole, until James diagnosed a significant problem with positioning of the floats & caught this on his cine camera ! His intervention caused the *sceptical* boffins to rethink and bring him into assist with the redesign which was successful !

"The so-called Inaugural Flight was really a publicity affair - pax were all Aviation or Travel journalists and included very interesting characters, we got on well together, and even had 're-union' meetings at the Aero Club for years later.

Airlines came under the 'Railways & Harbours' set-up of the SA government and they organised all sorts of specials for the group, Capt. Teddy Rotheram and myself included. There was a visit to Pretoria to meet General Jan Smuts, the Premier at that time, trips down Gold mines, Native dancing displays given by mine workers, Special visit to the 'Rand Show' the most important show of the year, displaying all the good things about SA., Special Braivleis (BBQ's) and lots of 'Jollies' all much appreciated and thoroughly enjoyed.

I had done most of them when based in Durban, there had been several trips to Vaaldam & a so-called Flying School there, and visits to Jo'burg & beyond when on leave between flights. 'Horseshoe' flights from Durban were 5-6 weeks long, with similar times off afterwards - never the less, it was good to do it again

We did a VIP flight from Vaaldam for a full load of notables, including a few wives: Gen. Smuts cancelled at the last minute because of government problems, but at least I had met him and shaken his hand.

One of the wives I spoke to said that the most enjoyable part of the flight was the English Brussel Sprouts in the meal they had onboard ----which we had brought out from UK !!!

Transiting Khartoum on the way back to UK, Teddy and I were presented with inscribed silver cigarette cases by the pax as mementos of the trip-----but sadly not very observant, as neither of us smoked !!!

When we got back on the aircraft, number 2 engine wouldn't start: the F/EO was the Fleet F/EO -based on seniority not ability - on a 'jolly', and completely clueless on electrics: most of the early F/EO's had little knowledge of electrics, and this one had less than most !

It ended up with me starting up No 1, then climbing into the wing, behind the engines, removing the 'Starting ignition booster' from that engine and connecting it into the No. 2 engine - replacing the faulty one - so that No.2 engine could be started, followed by 3 + 4: pax on board, so we were off to Cairo where faulty electrics could be replaced." © PFBC

The Publicity Flight for the new Springbok Route to S. Africa was on 4th. May 1948 at BOAC's Berth 50 in the Old Docks.

This tied-in with the Official Opening of a purpose-built dock which had been absent when at Poole, but eagerly sought-after by Capt. HWC Jimmy Alger i/c of No. 4 Line, as obviating the need for Passenger Fast Launches & the expense of the MCU

Joined by Capt. Teddy Rotheram & the Southampton Mayoral Delegation, James with G-AHIN Southampton received much media attention in this brief swansong for BOAC Flying Boats to the 31st. November 1950 - since oft referred to as BOAC's *Last Hurrah* for its FB Fleet as the Landplanes were prevailing !

To accommodate aircrew overnight BOAC provided some flats within the Old Town by the Dolphin Hotel in walking distance



CJP Coll

To the request for more facts & figures for PFBC's Archive James summed up:

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“ In 5 years from Jan. 1942 to Jan. 1947 I flew over 5,000 hours (there were no 'Flight time limitations' in those days!) which would have been about 700,000 miles at normal C-class speeds as Airspeed Indicators were in statute miles ! There would be 2 more years from UK mainly to Jo'burg via Cairo at much higher speeds of Solents - about 180 knots.”

“ In my flying days in Africa I crossed the Equator more than 200 times from Durban & inbound crossings from Cairo; further there were shuttles from Cairo to Lagos and return via Port Bell and the Congo; also Cairo to Madagascar & return via Kisumu, all of which involved crossing the Equator 2 - 4 times on each separate occasion = Hundreds !”



Left:
There were also
three Stewards -
Cox, Newfield
& A. Anderson

Right:
Southampton
alights on the
Lake Nyasa at
Cape Maclear
PFBC HLM
Dave Rose (dsc)
was i/c of MCU



© PFBC DR Coll

Although Capt. Peers was to continue his illustrious long career with BOAC captaining Comets, Britannias & Boeings etc., he will be fondly remembered for his contribution to Flying Boat History and a longterm association with Poole Harbour (like many of the ex-Flying Boat aircrew), where he greatly enjoyed the [Royal Motor Yacht Club](#) with his sailing boats ! On 14th. May 2010, his ashes were scattered at the head of former Runway No.4 - just off [Brownsea](#) in sight of [Salterns](#).

James was primarily responsible for the successful alteration (*aka* the '[Peers Modification](#)') of wing floats on the Solents: This rightly brought James further recognition of his outstanding knowledge of various of the Flying Boats' attributions with the celebratory presentation by TEAL - Tasman Empire Airways Ltd. on production of Solent 4s for New Zealand, and where Princess Elizabeth was at Short Harland in Belfast to view [Aotearoa II](#) (which James had piloted on trials there).

James once held responsibility for Flying Boats' Health & Safety at Hythe - when he was based at Southampton, and was prominent in BALPA being an expert nominated by BOAC to join the Crash Investigation team for 3 of the early Comets.

In retirement, with his friend (- with the great nickname *Biggles*), he delighted 'Channel-hopping' in a light aircraft for a decent meal (- *when spurred on by their [delight in good food](#)*) in France, or sight-seeing there and in the Channel Islands ! He vividly recalled his journeys by Flying Boats / hospitality with adventures in far-flung places...for [Poole's Flying Boat Network](#) once reached right across Europe to Africa, India, Asia, then on to Australia etc. (*also North & South America*) ! James regretted never having travelled as far as New Zealand, but did not envy at all the Flying Boat flights to America...

Yet he took great pride in commanding Comets to various American destinations, including South America esp. Santiago, where on leave he used to travel to see great friend - BOAC Poole colleague & a hero of the WW2 [Atlantic Ferry Service](#), [Capt. Carlos Madge](#), who had retired to a farm he'd purchased in the foothills of the Andes before his health began to fail.

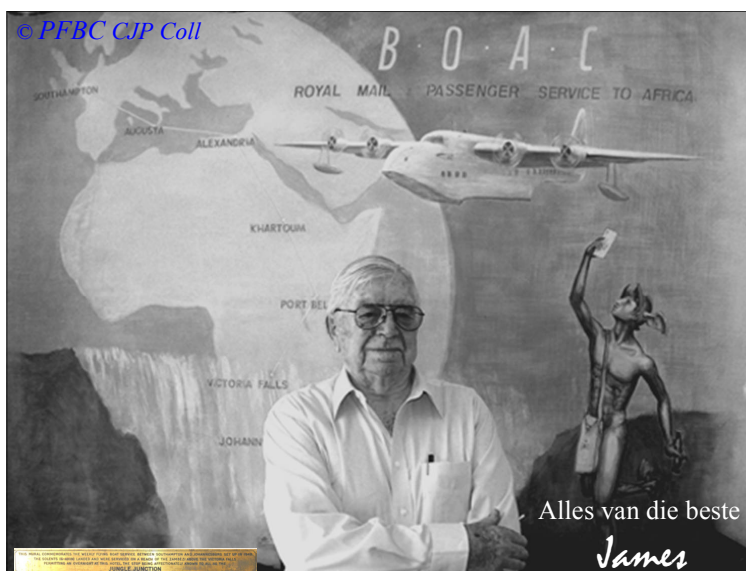
He was a keen supporter of [Vulcan to the Sky Trust](#) Charity and loved watching the [Bournemouth Air Fest](#) from his home. [Poole Flying Boats Celebration](#) was greatly honoured to have dear Captain James Peers as its first [Hon. Commodore, Air](#) !

Rht: “ On a visit to Vic Falls, two years ago, I could find no trace of the Flying Boat operation - except the 'mural' and very dilapidated brass plaque at the entrance to Vic Falls Hotel.”



Fond Memories: PFBC Carpet Bed, Poole Park in 2008 !

© PFBC CJP Coll



Aimée with acknowledgement to the supreme dedication and great friendship of Capt. James Peers in supporting the PFBC Archive !

Capt. JM (James) Peers & BOAC Service in the Flying Boat Era

[Following transfer from the RAF to BOAC Jan. 1942]

Short S.23 Empire C-Class

G-ADHL Canopus
G-ADHM Caledonia
G-ADUV Cambria
G-ADUW Castor
G-ADUX Cassiopeia
G-ADVB Corsair
G-AETX Ceres
G-AEUE Cameronian
G-AEUI Coorong → VH-ABE QEA
G-AFBJ Carpentaria
G-AFBL Cooe

Short S.30

G-AFCT Champion
G-AFKZ Cathay

Short S.33

G-AFRA Cleopatra
~~~~~

## Short S.26 Grenadier G-Class

G-AFCI Golden Hind  
~~~~~

Short S.25 Sunderland 3 Hythe Class

G-AGER Hadfield
G-AGEU Hampshire
G-AGHV Hamble
G-AGHZ Hawkesbury
G-AGIA Haslemere
G-AGJM Hythe
G-AGKY Hungerford
G-AHER Helmsdale
~~~~~

## Short S.25 Sandringham 5 Plymouth Cl

G-AHYY Portsmouth  
G-AHZA Penzance  
G-AHZC Pembroke  
G-AHZF Poole  
G-AJMZ Perth

## Short S.45 Solent 2

G-AHIL Salisbury → City of Salisbury  
G-AHIM Scarborough  
G-AHIN Southampton  
G-AHIO Somerset  
G-AHIR Sark  
G-AHIS Scapa → City of York  
G-AHIT Severn  
G-AHIU Solway  
G-AHIV Salcombe  
G-AHIW Stornoway  
G-AHIX Sussex → City of Edinburgh  
G-AHIY Southsea

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Short S45 Solent 3

G-AKNO Seaforth → City of London
G-AKNR Selkirk → City of Belfast
G-AKNS Sheerness → City of Liverpool
G-AKNT Singapore

~~~~~

## Short S45 Solent 4

ZK-AML Aotearoa II TEAL - trialled at Belfast  
[Later → G-ABOL with Aquila Airways]

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also:~

PBY-5 Consolidated Catalina

RAF (Temporary Secondment /as Volunteer
whilst with BOAC at Durban
to locate & shepherd a torpedoed ship
when the RAF pilot was not available
- in suffering from an attack of illness...
This ship then safely reached Durban !)

10 Classes of Flying Boats

6 Types

Total = 46 Individual Flying Boats