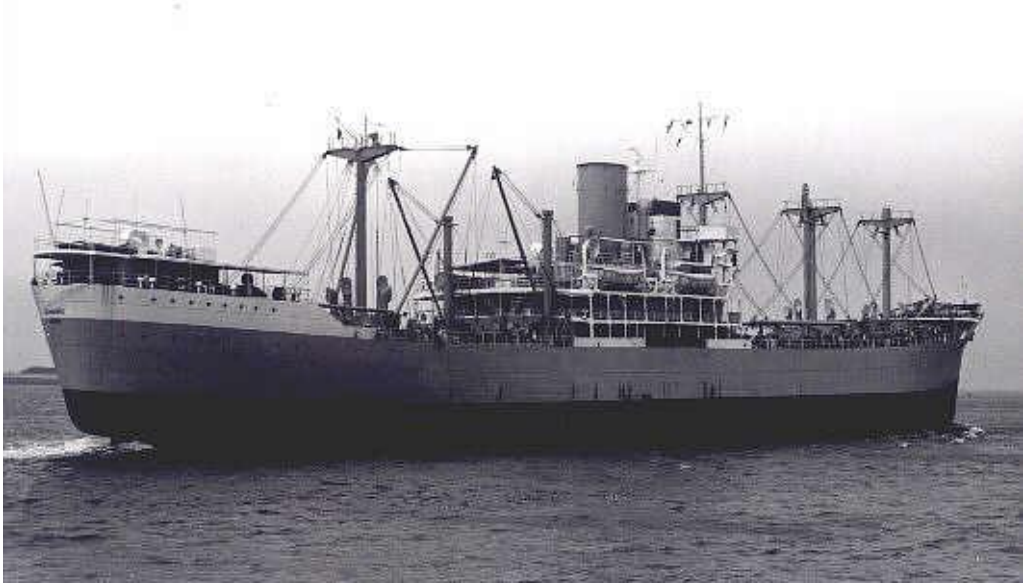
1) M.V. Benhope (GUFY) (Ben Line) 9952 GRT 6800 SHP 2nd R/O Victoria Docks London 26/7/67 - 21/11/67 London.



London, Rotterdam, then via the Cape to Port Kelang (Malaysia), Singapore, Medan (Indonesia), Bangkok, Singapore, Port Kelang (Malaysia), then back to London again. The Suez Canal was closed at that time, being blocked after the war between Israel and Egypt, so we had to go "the long way round" via the Cape of Good Hope. (During this war, Israel had sunk a couple of ships in the canal to block it. A few ships had been trapped inside whilst in transit. A few were kept manned and operational the whole time. Eventually, after several years, they sailed out again when the Canal was cleared and re-opened. Some of their cargo had been used as stores during the enforced stay, but some of the rest was still in good condition, and reached its rightful owners only a few years late!).

There was no air conditioning on the Benhope, and it was a rather old ship with riveted construction (Built in 1945). It carried general cargo in four holds,(two forward, two aft) and could carry latex rubber in the double bottom tanks. The main hatch covers were made of thick wooden planks (almost as thick as railway sleepers), covered over with 2 layers of heavy canvas when closed to keep out the sea and rain. The ship used 8 and 10 ton derricks to work cargo, with one 20 ton "heavy lift" forward. Every hatch had 4 winches with lots of wire ropes and metal pulley blocks for working the derricks. Though even then, most ships had 220v 50Hz AC power like ashore, the old Benhope only boasted a 220v DC system (which was even used for the winches and the anchor windlass, thus drawing mega-amps!). Luckily my electric razor was run off batteries, so I did not have to resort to a cutthroat and shaving soap.

Officers and cadets lived amidships, together with a maximum of 12 passengers. The Chinese seamen, stewards and engine room crew lived aft. The accommodation was small, the seamen having to share cabins. Junior officers (like me!) had to share shower and toilet arrangements, though we did have our own cabins. The cadets however were 4 to a cabin, albeit a big one. My cabin, one deck down from the bridge, was very small. It just had room for a bunk, a sofa, a small table and a few cupboards and lockers. I could look out via the single round port over the side of the ship. There was a scrap of carpet on what looked to be a lino floor, and a curtain which could be pulled across the doorway. At sea, cabin doors are almost never closed, and just a pulled curtain means one is open to visitors. I had a dim desk lamp, a lamp over my bunk so I could read in bed, and another dim lamp on the deckhead (ceiling). It was a bit drab, but it was

my home. I actually spent very little time in it. Watchkeeping, mealtimes and socialising, plus the "bronzy" on deck in good weather meant I basically used my cabin just for sleeping in.

The radio room (which had a comfortable, lived in sort of atmosphere) had a rather old Oceanspan transmitter (crystal controlled with 100 watts output from three parallel 807's), an Atalanta receiver (a 15 KHz to 25 MHz double superhet), together with the standard Autokey (an electric motor driving cams and relays to automatically send a distress message). An Alert 500 KHz auto alarm receiver(with mechanical decoding of the alarm signal using a motor driven ratchet and pawl system with relays and cams). The timing was done electronically with a valve multivibrator derived motor clock, integrators and timers. A Salvor 500 KHz emergency transmitter and an emergency receiver rounded off the installation. The radio room did however have 50 cycles AC mains for the radio equipment, obtained from a motor alternator in the engine room. We were therefore able to use standard equipment and dispense with vibrator power packs, rotary transformers and huge resistance mats for charging the batteries from the DC mains.

This was all equipment I had trained with, and as such was no problem. One thing which did take a little getting used to, however, was that when the ship was underway, the engine vibration caused all CW notes on the higher bands to become very warbly. To my inexperienced ear, they were somewhat difficult to read. The receiver had a free running local oscillator, so on the higher bands (16 and 22 MHz) it became a bit microphonic. A large heavy brass Marconi type 365 morse key was screwed to the operating table, and, as stipulated by the radio regulations, the chair had a large bottle screw enabling it to be securely fixed to the deck. In rough weather you might be thrown out of the chair, but at least THAT would stay in place!

The radar was an old Marconi MK IV unit, manufactured in the 50's, which produced an evil blue flickering glow from the ignitron modulator valve in the transceiver unit. The ignitron was a high voltage, high pressure hydrogen switch, used to discharge the radar pulse forming network and fire the magnetron. It looked a bit like a bomb really, with its securing net tightly stretched over a large, thick, yellowish glass envelope. I was always rather careful when near it in case it did explode! The radar transmitter and receiver rack, together with the huge motor generator for supplying the 400Hz AC power for it, were set in an outside locker. This made it fun to try to service, as it was impossible to observe the radar screen and the transceiver electronics at the same time! There was a small oscilloscope and metering on the transceiver rack, but it was still often better to see the display itself.

As trainee, I was not responsible for the radar, but looked on with interest when my chief had to service it. I was used for interpreting the radar display when any tuning or repairs were done and shouting the results to him in the locker outside! I had to shout really loud as the motor generator made a hell of a din! If all else failed, I had to run around the corner and gesticulate wildly until he noticed!

Our main radio antenna was a big wire T strung between the forward and after masts, and fed virtually in the middle. It had to be lowered in every port so the cargo operations would not break it. One of my jobs was to check it was not kinked, and that the insulators were clean and undamaged. I had also to ensure that all joints were tight and that halyards and safety links were in good condition. On a cluttered deck, with lots of other wires, ropes and bits of cargo, it was by no means easy nor a particularly clean job sometimes.

Seeing as this was a DC ship, and there was no AC mains supply to the radio room for general use, I had to build a battery supply system for my "bug" key relays. The standard Marconi Morse key had two sets of contacts, one to

key the transmitter, the other to mute the receiver. My bug key would only do this by using external relays, powered by a battery. Although I could work the hand Morse key quite well, it was much easier with a semi-automatic "bug". The only drawback being that when the ship rolled heavily, I could end up with the vibrating reed used for sending the dots not working properly. It was designed to be horizontal, and not inclined at 45 degrees on a rolling ship! My “Chief” was also not all that happy about it. He made me wait until I had demonstrated I could use the “normal” Morse key to his satisfaction. In the end though, he hadto admit, it made things a lot easier, and I often got the job of sending any long messages because of it.

The ship had a Doxford diesel engine (which contained two opposed pistons for each "unit" and lots of moving high pressure flexible hoses, valves and crossheads). Walking along the engine room catwalk above the engine when it was running was quite an alarming experience for the uninitiated. Rocker arms, shafts and hydraulic hoses moving on all sides around you. There was no air conditioned control room for the engineers. They had to stand right next to the engine, under some big blowers, answering the engine telegraph and con-trolling the engine directly with big levers and valves. It was loud, hot and relatively primitive, but had the great advantage of being reliable. Ships of that vintage did not have much in the way of automation, so it was all “handamatic”.

We had riveted deckheads without insulation in our cabins, so one could see the bare painted steel, rivets and beams. There were several layers of muslin tied over the cabin air blowers to try to stop mosquitos and soot coming through. The air intakes and trunking were old and had not been cleaned in years. Soot from the funnel gases built up and tended to come inside when the blowers were turned on full in the tropics. I used to sweat like a pig as air conditioning was not fitted at all on this ship, and my cabin was directly under the open deck above, exposed to the sun. The steel and wood used to store up the heat of the day and seemed to radiate it out again after sundown. At night, I used to lie on the bed naked with the blowers directed full onto my body. On waking up I often found myself and the bunk spotted with black specks of soot, and soaked with sweat. The deck around the accommodation consisted of wooden planks laid over steel, carefully scrubbed every day and was kept immaculate. It was marked out for deck tennis and deck quoits for the passengers. It looked good, but somewhat lacked in its insulation properties. Heavy clumping shoes and hot tropical sun were most unwelcome by those (like myself) living below.

The crew were Hong Kong Chinese who spoke relatively good English. I even had my own steward (a novel experience!), who woke me up in the mornings with a cup of tea and brought me tea and biscuits mid morning and afternoons. He cleaned my cabin, made my bed and for a very nominal fee

washed and ironed my “dohbi” or washing. As a first trip experience, it was not to be missed!

It was on this ship that I had my very first experience of what are known as the Cape Rollers around the Southern tip of South Africa. These are caused by the almost unceasing belts of prevailing winds and storms in those latitudes. The so called “Roaring Forties” lie only just South of Capetown, and their effects can be both seen and felt. Unstopped by any land, the winds can blow completely around the globe, virtually unhindered, building up mountainous seas, almost unrivalled in their ferocity. Huge, apparently slowly moving mountains of water, topped with white foam and blowing spray, approaching closer and closer, then finally sliding under the ship causing it to roll and pound. The apparently slow motion only being due to the tremendous magnitude of the scene. Many of these moving mountains were travelling at 20 or 30 knots, with heights of 10 to 15 metres and the distance between crests of nearly a quarter of a mile. Each one represented billions of tons of water in motion. They were not going to be stopped by anything made by man. At night, only the black silhouette of the wave tops could be seen against the slightly lighter sky. Occasionally, one would rear up faster than the ship moved, then crash heavily onto the deck in a welter of foam and spray. The noise and sheer pressure of the wind, roaring and whistling, the feeling of energy, and tremendous power of sea and weather, is one that still stays with me. It has made weather study and observation an interest that continues to this day.

There is a Chinese curse which says “may you live in interesting times”. We too had our moments of interest, mostly unwelcome. It was an accepted fact that the ship rolled in these latitudes. During dinner one evening however, the ship rolled so heavily, that everyone started to slide down the sloping deck. One by one, almost in slow motion as the ship canted more and more, people slid down the slope. All ended up heaped on the leeward saloon bulkhead (on top of me and the cadets who were sitting there), together with sundry items of food, eating utensils chairs and plates. There was a great clatter of breaking crockery, yells and shouts of protest and thuds and grunts as people slid onto the bulkhead - or someone else already on it!

Afterwards all chairs were firmly chained to the deck and the heavy weather boards put up on the table to limit the crockery damage. As my place was at the apprentices’ and junior officers’ table, nearest the bulkhead, I still occasionally got the plates and contents showered on to me, but at least the seats and their occupants stayed put!

This was actually my first introduction to eating in a rough sea, an experience not to be missed! The place mat (or table cloth) is wetted with water. The plate and cups then stick to it and don’t slide very much. Of course if the ship rolls too far, the cup or glass tips over, the cutlery slides off the table and unless a swift strategic tilting of the plate is carried out, your soup makes an ugly stain on the table cloth or trousers (your own, or if you are unlucky, possibly someone else’s!). One allows this to happen only once, as the ire of the chief steward descends heavily on a lowly junior R/O! The table had ledges around the sides which could be raised to help prevent things leaping off it, the so-called heavy weather boards. It then became very awkward to eat however, as leaning ones arm on the table caused a sore spot where it rested on the ledge, and the plate was often sitting in a sort of well requiring elbows to be kept high, and the arms clear of the ledge. A very strenuous and strange position for eating.

The cooks in the galley of course had an even worse time. They had metal “fiddleys” on the galley range, which clamped the saucepans in place, but the contents could still slop over if filled too full. Working in a rolling and tossing kitchen in constant danger of being burned or scalded requires

very dedicated people indeed. I was always amazed at how well they coped in bad weather. Only very occasionally indeed are hot meals cancelled, and sandwiches offered instead. When conditions are that bad, it's almost time to break out the lifejackets!

The ship was able to carry up to 12 Passengers. This was the maximum number allowed to be carried without requiring a doctor on board. Also three radio Officers would then have been needed as 24 hour radio watches are a requirement when more than 12 passengers are carried. The passengers had their own cabins of course and two stewards were employed to serve them, clean the cabins and generally make their stay pleasant. One of those passengers called Isobel, became my first real girlfriend. I was only 19 at the time and she made a big impression on me. She and her family were on route to Singapore (her father had a civil service posting there). She was blond, blue-eyed, petite and 16 years old. We remained in touch for some years, but like nearly all sea-born romances, distance and time take their toll. Later, in Bangkok, I nearly fell in love again when we went ashore to visit a few of the bars. Some of the girls working there were really very attractive indeed to a young single lad like me. My education was advancing in leaps and bounds, but that is another story!

This was the only ship I have ever been on where several officers kept pet fish. It all started with the Malaysian second Officer having some Japanese fighting fish in a small aquarium in his cabin. Then others became interested until we had about 3 or 4 aquaria in various other officers' cabins. A valve inverter was "borrowed" from another officer, (this was before the time of transistor voltage converters) which supplied 220v AC (from our 220v DC Mains) to the single large air pump. Lots of plastic air tubing was draped around the alleyways to the aquaria in various cabins. We found out that fish actually seemed to get sea-sick. In heavy weather we had to hang the aquaria from the deck-head (ceiling to you landlubbers!) to prevent the water sloshing about too much. The fish used to look very unhappy until the storm was over. They couldn't keep their depth as the ship pitched and rolled. They also probably didn't much enjoy swinging about from their deck-head sky-hook, even if the view was better!

For entertainment, we used to show films on deck when in the tropics. A large white tarpaulin was rigged between two derricks aft of the amidships accommodation as a screen, then the projector was placed on a table just aft of the passenger bar. It was a great social occasion, looked forward to, and enjoyed by everyone. We all sat outside (officers, crew and passengers) in the warm tropical night, drinking beer, eating sandwiches and watching the movies under the stars. At sea it was great, but at anchor in Malaysia and Indonesia, we were eaten alive by mosquitoes! I still have the marks on my leg left by one beastie! Occasionally one would get trapped inside the projector, so we were sometimes treated to the monstrous black shadow of an insect crawling over the screen.

The projector was mainly looked after by the electrician, but quite often we Radio Officers got called in if the sound didn't work properly. There was quite a powerful valve amplifier to be looked after (this was of course well before transistors were heard of). Salt air not being the best environment for electronics, and the general rough handling it received, it was always prone to faults. One of the projector's other main problem was the speed governor. Being a DC motor, the speed regulation was done by opening and closing spring loaded contacts on a centrifugal switch. Sometimes these would jam closed, so the projector would run fast – with some really hilarious results.

Whilst at Port Swettenham, Malaysia I found out that even quite ordinary cargo operations could be fraught with danger. One day, we were unloading a brand new, shiny red fire engine. I was looking on with interest from the bridge. We had a heavy lift derrick which could cope with the load, but one

of the Sampson post stays broke, and I thought we would lose the entire lot, derrick, mast (and fire engine) over the side. The derrick and mast gave a lurch as the wire broke with a crack. The broken stay flew through the air and hit a seaman on the head. He was very lucky, it only gave him a nasty cut. It could easily have killed him. Luckily the other stays held, and the fire engine was safely landed on the quay. Subsequent inspection showed that one of the bottle screws, used for tensioning the stays, was corroded, and had snapped. All other stays were checked, but they were ok. Maybe poor quality steel or not enough grease was to blame. Wise after the fact, all rigging was carefully inspected afterwards to ensure it didn't happen again.

Fun and Games

This ship had a large crew of officers, seamen, and deck and engineer cadets. We were, I think, around 45 people on board, not counting passengers. It was a young lively crowd, and I well remember some of the games we used to play (especially after a few beers!) One of them was to play "Doxfords".

Seven of the engineers (we had lots of them) would stand in a line, representing the pistons of a Doxford diesel engine. Then the Chief Engineer (or the 2nd) would call out the firing order of the engine. (e.g. 1,3,2,5,4,7,6). The engineers then had to bob up and down in that order, first at slow ahead, then faster and faster. If he was really mean, the commanding engineer would then put his "engine" astern, which could sometimes be hilarious ... especially when the "alcoholic oil" had been flowing!

Another game we used to play was done in a totally blacked out cabin (usually hopethat of the four cadets, as it was bigger). Each participant had a large stack of beer mats (usually square ones as they flew better). Then after everyone had separated into different spots around the cabin periphery, the lights would be turned off. The object of the game was to pelt your opponent(s) (it was generally deck cadets/officers against engine cadets/officers) with beer mats as weapons. (thrown at high speed, they can HURT!) It usually degenerated however into a free for all! Everyone tried to move around as quietly as possible, and to find out where the others were. Glowing watches and/or cigarettes were a dead giveaway! If our "ammo" ran out, we would of course try to pick up any off the deck, but it was not always easy to find. Also, even with the noise of the engine, fans and blowers, it was surprising with what accuracy the ear could pick up the direction and identity of quiet breathing or the furtive sliding of a hand on deck carpeting. The loud "ouch!" as one scored a direct hit was most satisfying!

I remember visiting the seaman's mission in Port Swettenham Malaysia and the one in Singapore called Connell House, as well as some of the seedier areas of Singapore and Bangkok. We rarely went off alone, both for safety and also because it was more fun in groups of friends. Singapore at this time was a totally different city to what it is now, with lots of small shops and businesses in old dilapidated buildings both near the docks and in the town itself. It had a very mysterious and adventurous feeling, which somehow seems to have been lost in the modern cosmopolitan city of today. Being taken to a seedy bar ashore by my chief – then being left there when he disappeared off with one young lady - was an interesting experience, not to mention having to be helped back to the ship by two engineer cadets who "rescued me" from the clutches of another! I do not remember much of the last part, but I was reportedly met on the top of the gangway by the 3rd mate – who was duty watch officer, with the words "Sparklet you're pissed!". I replied "yes, I think I am - somewhat" and weaved my way to my cabin. The stories of the exploits of various crew members go around the ship, and one can be the target of good natured ribaldry. Accept it with a

laugh and a saucy reply, and all is well. One becomes accepted. To become offended only makes it worse, and one becomes an outsider and the butt of jokes. I had to accept my share of comments for that escapade, but I had no excuse – after all I knew I was guilty even if I had been "led astray".

On arrival back at London, we had to go through the locks, which kept the dock water in during low tide. One of the crew or dock workers was not fast enough, and we started moving whilst a rope was still attached. I was standing at the railing, and witnessed it all. The rope became bar taught, and started to vibrate. Then despite its size (a mooring rope was often thicker than a man's thigh) it started to hum like a bass string, then began to smoke, and finally snapped with a crack like a gun. Luckily it was a hemp rope. These do not stretch much and so do not fly back like wire, nylon or poly ropes do. It did no damage. It's quite usual for a broken synthetic or wire rope to stretch considerably before breaking, then fly back like a huge elastic band, bending iron railings and spars, well capable of killing anyone in the way. There are some horrific (true!) stories about where this has happened. Ships' ropes under stress should be (and are) given a wide berth.

The 4 month round trip went quickly, and all too soon we were back in London, ready to "pay off". I returned home by train after being duly signed off by the Shipping Master at London Docks. The majority of the officers left to go on leave. The ship would continue around the UK/European coast discharging and loading new cargo with a temporary coasting crew. Some, perhaps most of the original crew would return for the next deep sea trip. I would not. I was not a regular Ben Line man.

I had however survived my first voyage, my first storm, my first foreign port, my first love – and I had learned a lot as well. Not bad for a start, I thought!