

Joining the SS Benattow Part 1 by Robert Millar

It was cold and miserable; the rain more of a mist that shrouded Liverpool on this December day just before Christmas, 1972. Part of me was happy to be leaving my family to join this ship, but another part of me was nervous about stepping aboard the second ship of my Merchant Navy career. I left ss *Benvannoch* ingloriously with serious doubts that I was cut out for this career. I had just turned eighteen and I wanted another chance to prove myself. I had to believe that this ship could not be any worse than *Benvannoch*.

The taxi driver got the location of the ship from the policeman at the dock entrance, and he slowly moved down the quayside of West Brocklebank Docks. Through the forest of cranes, warehouses and other ships I could finally make out the yellow funnel of a Ben Line ship. We steered around avenues of dark warehouses and inactive cranes until we drew up at the side of the ship. The taxi driver helped me with my trunk and jokingly enquired if I had a crankshaft in there. He wished me a good Christmas and disappeared to collect his next fare.

I stared up at the grey hull of this ship and realised it was probably the ugliest ship I'd ever seen. The thin tall funnel was strangely positioned aft of the midships accommodation block as though it was stuck there as an afterthought. The place was deserted with no one working this Sunday afternoon. I grabbed the handle of my trunk and proceeded ungainly up the gangway to await this next adventure.

Landing on the main deck the only person there was a short middle-aged man with a ridiculously long beard. He wore a heavy sweater, uniform trousers, and a pair of huge checked patterned slippers.

"I'm looking for the Chief Engineer", I said to this strange looking man.

"You're looking at him," he replied in a surprisingly squeaky voice.

"Oh, I'm your new Engineer Cadet," I replied quickly not quite sure what to make of this sudden introduction to the ship's senior hierarchy.

"Well, we'd better find you a cabin then, huh? Follow me."

I lurched after him struggling with my trunk as we lifted our legs to cross the threshold of the door into the accommodation. It was pleasantly warm after the December chill and I followed him down an alleyway and stopped outside a door that said CHIEF STEWARD above it. Inside a distinguished looking Chinese man sat in a chair with three other Chinese men sitting around. The Chief Steward had a handsome face with thinning dark hair swept back over his head. He looked imposing in his uniform with two wavy stripes on his sleeves.

"Got a cabin for a cadet, Chief?" the Chief Engineer enquired. He reached up and picked a key from a rack and handed it to the Chief. "Number Eight", he said.

"Thanks Chief", the Chief Engineer said and bade me to follow him.

Now I was completely thrown. A chief engineer meeting me at the gangway and now showing me to my cabin! What the hell was this? I was on my guard and any minute I expected him to turn around and ask why I hadn't reported for duty on the morning as it clearly stated on my joining instructions. But no, he showed me into my cabin and said some of the other engineers would be joining him in his cabin at 5 pm for a beer and I was welcome to come along. I was amused to see above the door to my cabin the label, EIGHTH ENGINEER. I'd been promoted already!

I looked around my cabin that was to be my new home for the next month or so. It wasn't clear yet if I would be doing the voyage on this ship, or just the coast. My mind was caught between taking in the décor of the place and the strange experience of having the Chief Engineer welcome me aboard ship and then show me to my cabin and then – incredibly – invite me to drinks in his cabin. It was all unreal to me.

I took in the narrow bunk at the far side of the cabin next to the port (mustn't call it a window), that almost needed a step to get into it. The cabin included a day bed, a wardrobe, a sink, and an in-built desk with chair. I opened my trunk, an aluminum finished affair in which I knew I had packed far too much stuff. I hung my uniform in the wardrobe, put my boiler suits on a shelf and put my work boots, uniform shoes and trainers at the bottom of the wardrobe. I glanced uneasily at the text books I had brought with me wondering how many of them I would actually open.

I had about an hour to spare before going to find the Chief's cabin, but I didn't really feel like exploring the ship – apart from finding the toilet a short distance down the alleyway. I realised I was hungry but apart from a snack bar bought on the train, I had to stave my hunger until dinner. I wondered where the saloon was, probably near the deck officer's accommodation towards the forward part of the ship.

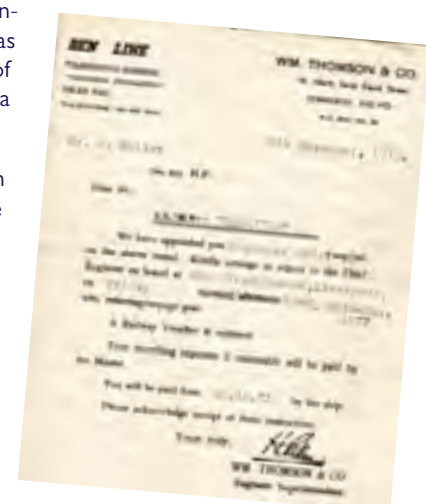
The Chief's cabin was located at the forward end of the aft accommodation block. I had figured out that it was tradition, based on what I'd seen on *Benvannoch*, that engineers were placed aft and the deck officers forward. Logical I guessed, as the Bridge was always forward and the engine room always aft. Still, I'm sure many engineers saw that as a slight to their dignity. I also suppose that the name 'engineer' when compared to 'deck officer' dictated who had precedence on these ships.

I found his cabin, knocked on the door and went in.

"Who's a pretty boy then?" the Chief hailed from his position in a large comfortable leather armchair.

I detected enhanced joviality in this voice that I don't think was there when we first met. He also looked drunk, but it had only been just over an hour since I had seen him last, so I dismissed that. There were four other engineers in the cabin, all in uniform and all but one had the two stripes of third engineers, one had three stripes – the Second Engineer. The Chief told me to get a beer out of the fridge and I took a can of Tennent's lager. I noticed no one else was using a glass so I pierced the top of the can in two places and found a spare seat and sat down.

The Chief went around the room and introduced everyone and he remembered my name and introduced me. The topics of conversation ranged from being away from home over Christmas and New Year, to when we'd be sailing from Liverpool, our ports of call and why there were no junior engineers yet. I later found out there was a Chinese Seventh Engineer



Full Ahead

who had sailed on the previous voyage and was still onboard.

My only involvement in the conversation was telling everyone I was from Falkirk, that I'd been on the *Benvannoch* and wasn't sure if I'd be doing the next voyage on this ship or not.

They all gave off an air of carefree fun and as the conversation continued, I gathered that many of them had sailed together previously. Apart from the Chief, the conversation seemed to be dominated in turn by two very chatty guys, Alex and Eddie, both Geordies. One of the others, Jim, another Geordie, was not as ebullient as Alex but was just as engaged in the conversation. The third guy was the quietest. His name was Tom, from Glasgow, and, as the session continued, I learned he was sailing his first trip as a Second Engineer. He was tall, dark haired and had a seriousness to him. I was slightly on my guard with him as I knew he would be my day-to-day boss. Eddie, the one wearing three stripes on his arm, was, as I discovered, sailing as a third engineer. I later deduced he was what was known as a "Motor Second" doing his time on steam ships. He had a sparkle to his eyes that I liked.

As I sat there, I began to relax and felt at ease in the cabin that seemed dominated by Geordie accents. The Chief was getting drunker all the time and his voice seemed to rise in pitch each time he spoke.

At six o'clock the sound of Chinese chimes sounded dinner and we finished our beers and proceeded down to the saloon which, as I had guessed, was in the forward part of the accommodation. The stewards sat us according to our rank and I was placed at a table on my own to be joined shortly by a deck cadet.

For the first two weeks the ship stayed in Liverpool. It seemed the dock workers or *dockies*, only worked intermittently and never when it rained. I was mainly occupied with getting to know the engine room. Second Engineer, Tom, took time to show me around and get me involved with maintenance and usually I worked alongside one of the Thirds. He also had me trace out systems. He wanted to make diagrams of everything from bilge and ballast to fuel and steam systems. While many systems are clearly visible from catwalks and overheads, many pipes are under the walkways and that was where I seem to spend most of my time. Needless to say, my once pristine white boiler suits were now black with the grime and dirt found in the bilges.

I spent my first Christmas away from home in Liverpool on the *Benattow*. The Christmas dinner turned out to be the most lavish dinner I had ever had in my eighteen years. The saloon had two huge, long dining tables. The Captain sat at the top of one, and the Chief Engineer sat at the head of the other. My eyes were captivated by the array of glassware at each place. I counted four glasses and a smaller one. I found out that one was

for white wine, one for red wine, one for port and the other for water. It was the first time I was served haggis as an appetizer and much to my amusement it was served with a "whisky sauce" – this was what the small glass was for. The atmosphere became fun and relaxed. The chief was in his element and kept up a succession of stories. I will always remember his toast to everyone given in his broad Glaswegian accent: "Here's tae us, wha's like us? Damn few and their a' deid!" I was glad I did not have to go on watch that night, but I was on at 6 am in the morning. I think it was the first time I'd gone on watch with a hangover – there would be many more of these in my career with Ben Line!

Eventually it came time to leave Liverpool. The dockies had eventually unloaded/loaded the ship and the hatches were battened down ready for sea. Preparations in the engine room had started over a day before by heating the fuel and filling the boilers. We were due to sail at six in the evening and I was to be on the twelve-to-four watch with Jim.

The day of sailing started with lighting a burner in both main boilers. The vents and drains were open and after about an hour with steam coming forcefully from them, they were closed, and pressure began to slowly build up. It was a good feeling to finally see parts of the engine room come alive and see pressure showing on the gauges. This was my second ship, and all I had ever seen was a propulsion plant lying quiet as a museum piece. It somehow never occurred to me that these powerful turbines spent more of their life spinning around at a few thousand revs per minutes, than in their present state of repose. It got noisier as more pumps were switched on including the huge seawater pumps circulating water through the main condenser. The steam valves to the main turbines were cracked open and steam eventually was seen coming from the glands at the forward and aft end of each of the three turbines. With heat on the turbines and gears it was necessary to turn them regularly to prevent distorting the shaft and gearing. The turning gear motor had to be turned every five minutes. During the day, this was my job and while at first, I enjoyed seeing the shaft turning, it did become monotonous!

This continued for the rest of the day until I came off at four. At that time, we started sea watches with Tom and Eddie taking the four-to-eight watch. I got showered, changed into my uniform and had dinner. Afterwards I found Jim and others in the bar. Just after six, and in the comfort of the smoke room, I watched as the lights of the dock slid by indicating that we had left the quay and were making our way towards the locks. I was excited and would have stayed up, but Jim suggested I get my head down before going on watch at midnight. Reluctantly I did, and I did eventually fall asleep.

TO BE CONTINUED

Books of Interest



Joining the SS Benattow Part 2 by Robert Millar

Eddie woke me up at about quarter to twelve and although I was tired, I was excited to hear the engines and the slow continuous movement of the ship. I headed along to the changing room, pulled on my boiler suit and boots, grabbed my torch and 10" spanner, and went down below.

The noise as I opened the engine room door was incredible. The turbines and the reduction gears were screaming. There was a different smell in the air, soot, fuel and an distinctive smell that had to be steam even though I knew that steam was odourless. But it was the noise that dominated everything. It was like a symphony from hell, as if banshees were screaming from the hidden depths of the bilges. The noise seemed to dissipate slightly as I descended to the control platform, but not by much.

Jim was already there and talking to Tom – senior watchkeeper to senior watchkeeper. It felt odd that Eddie, the motor second, was my equivalent and he started telling me what was going on. He probably guessed I hadn't the foggiest of what was going on, but he was respectful to treat me as the junior watchkeeper.

At the stroke of midnight, indicated by the donkeyman striking the bell eight times, Eddie took note of the revolution counter to indicate how many turns the shaft had made. He entered that in the logbook and that was the official handover of the watch.

Tom and Eddie disappeared up the stairway and Jim and I were left with the duty donkeyman.

'OK bonnie lad, I'm off for a walk around.' said Jim in his Geordie accent.

I was a bit nervous at first being left here among all the noise. What would I do if something went wrong, but then how would I know if something went wrong? Unlike some of the ships I had visited and read about in college, this engine room did not have an alarm panel. However, I pretended I knew what I was doing and walked around the control platform looking at all the gauges. I was intrigued to see the pointer

on the telegraph had finally moved from *FINISHED WITH ENGINES* and now read *FULL AHEAD*. The boilers were above the turbines and the donkeyman walked along a walkway in front of the boilers with a rag in his hand checking the burners and looking at the water levels. Every so often he would peer through a small glass into the furnace.

After about fifteen minutes Jim returned and sat down on the wooden bench at the side of the control platform. As if by magic the donkeyman appeared with two mugs of coffee. I hadn't asked for milk or sugar, but they were both inside! Despite never taking sugar, it tasted good and strong, and I enjoyed it, but I made a mental note to ask him not to put sugar in it next time.

Jim gave an indication with his head to sit down beside him.

"So, your first watch at sea, eh Bob?" he enquired.

"Yes, first time. It all seems so different from being in port, doesn't it? Is it always this noisy?" I asked.

Jim laughed. "Yeah, gotta get used to it. You should stuff some cotton waste in your ears."

Jim went on: "OK your job is basically to take the log. Allow yourself an hour to get that. But at two o'clock we'll blow the tubes. You've not done that before have you?"

I knew the theory of blowing the soot off the tubes, in order to keep the boiler tubes clear, but was interested to see it in practice.

"After you finish your coffee, you can look around and then we'll transfer fuel. When you look around be sure to check the bilges, we might have to pump them later."

I started off walking down to the lower level. My theory classes at Leith Nautical College had taught me all about the Weir closed feed system



and I was keen to see it all in action. The steam from the low-pressure turbine exhausts into the condenser and the condensation pumps pump the water back into the boilers via a drain's cooler and the air ejector. A high-pressure feed pump then pumped the water back into the boiler via the Weir Robot feed regulator. I walked around the whole system happy to finally see this system working.

I really enjoyed this part of being at sea. It was definitely quieter down below the turbines and I started to look at everything that was running, checking gauges, feeling motors, feeling the cold seawater inside pump casings. I was intrigued to enter the shaft alley and see the huge shaft turning, driving the propeller. I had my torch in hand and shone it down into the bilges, and checked to see if there was any water coming in the stern gland. Back in the engine room, I walked around the turbines and up to the boiler flat. I could feel Jim's eyes on me but I didn't mind. I knew I was here to do a job. I was his assistant and I'm sure he wanted to make sure I was doing a good job of looking at everything.

When I got back to the control platform, we had a talk about everything that was going on. Jim had a calm approach and had probably stood hundreds of watches and he was happy to answer my questions. I really appreciated that I was on with a guy like Jim. It was as if the two weeks I had already been onboard here had already made the experience aboard *Benvannoch* a bad memory.

It was time to blow tubes. Jim got on the phone to the Bridge and got permission. I thought this was quaint but then I realized that if there was a ship nearby it wouldn't appreciate a midnight coating of soot from our boilers. With permission given, we walked up to the boiler. We would blow only one of the boilers as the other had already been taken care of by Tom and Eddie on their watch. Jim explained that it was important to check the water level in the boiler as we would be drawing a considerable amount of steam. He then indicated the soot-blowers and the pattern to follow to ensure soot was successively blown off the tubes and up the funnel. We started at the furnace and then worked our way up. We both had thick gloves on but even so it felt scary to think that superheated steam was just a few layers of valve packing away. In theory - assuming perfect combustion - there shouldn't have been any soot blown out of the boiler, but theory seemed to take a back seat on this old ship.

Soot-blowing done, it was time to transfer oil. Oil is stored in double bottoms and although some heat is applied to these tanks, they have to be pumped up to settling tanks so that any entrained water can be drained off. From the settling tank the oil is then fed to the purifier, so that all crud and nasty impurities that comes with the crude oil can be separated. I had done this operation before during port watches, so Jim was happy to tell me what to do and let me get on with it. Doing this small operation may have been routine for Jim but for me I finally realized that a senior engineer was trusting me to do things on my own. The boost this gave me in my self-confidence was immeasurable.

With the clock approaching three in the morning, it was time to start and take the log. But a cup of coffee was proffered and we sat down to take that first. The logbook is a large thin book that is a standard Ben Line publication for steam ships. When the main boilers and turbines are running the log has to be taken every four hours or each watch. I had already an idea where all the pressure and temperature gauges were located, and walked around taking these readings and noting them down on the back of a Ben Line menu card. All the tank levels had to be taken as well as numerous readings around the boilers. I had to rush to get everything done and I had a few left when Jim pointed to the clock and said to go and call the next watch.

It was 3:40 in the morning when I put Alex and Willie on the shake. I had been warned to call them one time and then wait and go back five minutes later to make sure they were out of bed. Satisfied that they were on their way I scuttled back down to the engine room to finish the log and get ready to take the revolution counter. I positioned myself

between the HP and LP turbines to get a good view of the counter, and when the donkeyman hit the chimes at 4:00 I noted the numbers and entered them in the log.

With my first sea watch under my belt I felt kind of proud of myself and was happy to tell a groggy Willie what had been going on during the watch. At about five minutes after I followed Jim up the stairs to the changing room and into the showers. Heading out of the changing room, Jim said: "See you in the smoke room for beer?" I was walking a few inches taller as I walked into my cabin and changed into jeans and a pullover.

About 10 minutes later we were all sat around the bar. The 2nd Mate and George the deck cadet joined us also. It felt unreal to be sitting here in the wee small hours heading north through the Irish Sea, pitch black outside save for the lights dotted here and there, and us sat drinking pints of lager. About five thirty we all turned in with remarks of "See you at breakfast."

I struggled to get up for breakfast, but I didn't want to stay in my cabin, I was too excited to see where we were. All I could see from my port was water disappearing into a vague misty horizon. I washed and got into my uniform and walked out onto the after deck of this part of the accommodation. There was nothing to see, no passing ships, no lights, we could have been anywhere. I stood there for a moment feeling the ship roll gently as it headed northwards at a sedate 17 knots. The chimes for breakfast sounded and I headed along to the forward part of the ship into the saloon.

I was almost eager to get back on watch at noon. But I decided to go up to the smoke room and see what books were in the library. After hanging around for a few hours it was time for lunch. The 12-4 watchkeepers always have lunch in the duty mess. Jim was there first and giving his order to Tommy, the mess room steward. It was a few days later that I found out that all mess-room stewards on Ben Line ships (perhaps all British merchant ships) are called Tommy. It was a cozy feeling sitting there in our boiler suits and chatting away. Eddie popped his head in at 11:45 to make sure we were both up and awake. The mood was very casual and relaxed and I found myself slowly being accepted as a ship's engineer.

The afternoon watch was a rerun of the earlier watch except that we didn't blow tubes. Jim disappeared into the workshop for most of the time and only came to the control platform when I was doing my walk around or to start off pumping fuel.

When we came off at four, I walked outside and smiled when I saw that we were sailing up the Minch with Uist to our port side and Skye to starboard. It was a cold misty afternoon and both islands were just dull grey shapes like some prehistoric mass of land that had yet to be sculpted and formed into something resembling home for humans and sheep. I'm sure had it been a clear sunny afternoon I would have been able to pick out crofts and cottages and sheep, but on this January afternoon I had to satisfy myself with simply noting that I had passed these islands as we progressed up the Minch around the top of Scotland to Bremerhaven in Germany.

Our stay in Bremerhaven was, for me personally, a huge let-down. This was to be my first visit to a foreign country and I was intrigued to be visiting this German port. I was probably the only person who requested German marks to go ashore with. In my naivety, I probably expected to see a quaint town with friendly pubs and shops to visit. We were in dockland, in winter, and probably the only people who might have given me a welcome nod were prostitutes. After perhaps an hour walking around the area, I came back on board, money unspent!

From Bremerhaven our next port was to be Grangemouth – right next door to Falkirk. The highlight of that passage was sailing up the River Forth, but I wasn't on deck seeing us sail under the famous Forth Rail and

Full Ahead

Road bridges, no, I was down below. But not just doing anything: I was at the controls! Tom, the Second Engineer, had me operate the steam valves. As we came into the river, the Captain (or pilot) would give orders on the telegraph, such as *Half Ahead*, *Slow Ahead*, or sometimes just phone down to request a certain RPM on the shaft. Once this was acknowledged, I would open or close the ahead steam valve to reach the requested shaft revs. All the time I was watching the various pressure gauges.

Manoeuvring a steamship of this vintage could be exciting – depending what was happening up top. It was always exciting when you were aware of things not going quite well on the Bridge. Often this would go something like this: *Slow Ahead*, *Stop*, *Half Astern*, *Full Astern*. By this time the ahead steam valve would be shut while the astern steam valve (admitting steam to the astern blades in the low-pressure turbine) would be being opened up, to bring the revs on the shaft up to around 50 RPM. The real fun was when the captain would ring a *Double Full Astern*. This was done by the telegraph pointer being rung again, remaining in the *Full Astern* position. When this happened, we knew we were about to hit the dock wall or another ship! In my time in the Merchant Navy, we never hit another ship, but there were plenty of bumps. This would be entered in the telegraph book as “Bump” with the time noted. If the Chief Engineer was in the engine room, he would take over at this point.

We were in Grangemouth for about 4 days, and so I was allowed to go home and see the family. It was a great feeling to look out from the farm and see the yellow funnel of my ship peering over the dock warehouses.

The rest of the coastal voyage on *Benattow* was calling in at Middlesbrough, Hull and finally London where we paid off. Pay-off day on these ships was a fun and a hectic time. The voyage crew would arrive and each of us had the duty of handing over to our replacement. Once that was taken care of, most of us caught a taxi to Kings Cross Station and the train north to Scotland. The other feature of pay-off day is that

beer is consumed! It starts in various cabins and then cases of Tennent's lager are procured for the trip north. This beer consumption carried on in the taxi. However, the trip from the Royal docks in London to Kings Cross takes about 45 minutes. About halfway there, my bladder was complaining, and I asked my ship mates if we could find a toilet somewhere. I was told that if we stopped, we might miss our train. I was simply told to pee in the can. Thereupon, extra holes were pierced in an empty Tennent's Lager can and there I was in the back of a London cab kneeling down to pee in a beer can. I quickly realised that one can was not going to be enough, and the stream of piss was going to be damned difficult to stop, so I uttered a quick request for a second can. With bladder emptied and two cans sitting there filled with an alternative amber liquid, the question was what to do with them. There was nothing else for it but to lower the window and water the streets of London with my piss!

I left *Benattow* on 19th February, 1973 and I was a much happier person. My faith and confidence in myself were established. I had been lucky to have a great team of engineers who took time to explain things, inspired me and allowed me to develop a lot of confidence for port watches and being an assistant watchkeeper at sea.

Brief Bio

Born in Scotland, Robert Millar served a Cadetship with Ben Line from 1970-74 and remained with the company until 1978. Following an engineering degree at Newcastle University he worked in shipyards in Newcastle, San Diego, Vancouver and Halifax NS, retiring as a manager in 2020. He is mid-way through a Master of Fine Arts degree in Fiction at Kings College, Halifax, where he currently lives.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sandra,

I greet you warmly and I introduce myself, I am the secretary of the Director of Ceremonies & Deputy Director of Ceremonies Mess of the Masonic Province of South Wales, we held our Summer Luncheon at the Cardiff Masonic Hall on Sunday 2nd June and part of our itinerary of the afternoon is to raise money for a chosen charity and as the country is commemorating the 80th anniversary of the D day Landings and as I spent a number of years in the Merchant Navy as an Engineer Officer we decided we would support the Merchant Navy Association together with the Royal British Legion, the amount raised was £400.00 which we have donated £200.00 to each charity.

I will send the £200.00 cheque to Roy Glencross and this letter I will attach to your email address along with the photo of the presentation of the cheque to our Mess President Right Worshipful Bro Gareth Jones OBE on behalf of the MN Association.

Roy indicated that it would be possible to have an entry in the Full Ahead Magazine if so, this would be a wonderful opportunity to show Freemasons supporting the wider community, if you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me my details are on the letter head.

I hope this meets with your approval.

Warmest regards

Graham W Gonthier
Mess secretary

