La Corona's Motor Tanker *Backhuysen* (1944-1945)

By HARRY DERBYSHIRE

While browsing through an old copy of *Wireless World* a few months ago, a name from the past took me back to April 1944. Then, a callow youth of 19 years, I had all of two years at sea to my credit before joining my first tanker.

The name from the past belonged to Jan Lutterot, a diminutive young chap of around 24 years. In those days, he answered to the name of "Lucky" Lutterot, the man who never lost a ship! In 1996, his luck surfaced again in the shape of a valuable multi-band radio communication receiver: first prize in a *Wireless World* competition.

"Lucky" Lutterot served in World War Two on tankers carrying high-octane aviation gasoline. At sea when the Germans occupied the Low Countries, he came through the war without a scratch, although his ships suffered from enemy attention on more than one occasion.

Built in 1942 by Harland and Wolff for the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company as the *Empire Fletcher,* she was transferred to the Dutch flag in 1994 and renamed *Backhuysen.* Her new owners were La Corona NV Petroleum Maatschappij, a subsidiary of the British company. By 1944, La Corona had suffered many tanker losses and badly needed replacements. One such was the motor tanker *Backhuysen.*

On April 1st 1944, I joined her in Birkenhead, signing on as 3rd Radio and Signals Officer. Unlike my previous posting, when I shared a cabin with a fellow radio officer, I now had my own cabin, complete with desk and drawers, two chairs, a settee, a coffee table, a wardrobe with drawers and a wide, double occupancy bunk!

Personnel on La Corona's ships ate well, and the *Backhuysen* was no exception. Our Chinese galley staff cooked excellent Dutch dishes with no scrimping! In addition, the bonded storeroom came fully stocked because, as I soon discovered, Dutchmen like their creature comforts. The bonded stores came well stocked. Bols gin, or *Geneva,* as the Dutch call it, came in stone bottles at 4/- a litre. British gin or whisky cost 6/- a bottle, while a 24-bottle case of beer retailed for a modest 12/-. British cigarettes in tins of 50: Players, Woodbine, Capstan, State Express, or Gold Flake cost 1/6d, while American cigarettes: Camel, Lucky Strike, Philip Morris or Chesterfield, sold at 5/- for a carton of 200 (10 packs of 20). And last but not least, the inevitable Dutch cigars. Teetotallers and non-smokers selected their goodies from a variety of soft drinks, toffees and chocolates.

On Sunday mornings, off-duty officers enjoyed a standing invitation from Captain David de Gans for a pre-lunch drink. Unlike many captains, de

Gans preferred to mess with his officers rather than dine in solitary splendour, as did the captain on my next Dutch ship, the mv *Van Ruysdael.* Middle-aged and a trifle overweight, Captain de Gans stood about six-feet tall. A typical Dutchman, with blond hair and blue eyes, he seemed at all times pleasant, although a junior like me hardly ever came in contact with him. Aspiring to better things than a tanker command, he had a junior engineer, Magill, instruct him in for an hour each day on mathematics. Magill, an ex-shipyard apprentice, possessed an engineering degree from Queen's University, Belfast. His ambition, after the war, was to become a surveyor.

A long-serving captain with La Corona, Captain de Gans held a Netherlands Bronze Cross, awarded for bravery in action.

Sunday lunch consisted of East Indies rice table – a meal out of this world. Ice-cold lager came with the meal and everyone except the twelve-to-four watch sank a few jars before retiring for the afternoon *siesta.*

On the ship's first voyage under the Dutch flag, we sailed from Birkenhead for Port Carteret in New Jersey, to load a full cargo of 100-octane aviation gasoline for delivery at Shellhaven, on the Thames. On this trip, two La Corona captains currently without a command signed on as supernumeraries. La Corona adopted this procedure because it was cheaper than paying wages plus subsistence allowance ashore. These seasoned master mariners weren't exactly overjoyed at being victims of blatant cost cutting, but that's how it was.

While entering Port Carteret, we saw a mirror image of our ship: a grey-painted tanker alongside the loading berth, even to the dummy funnel amidships. "That's the *Empire Chapman,* a sister ship," said a junior engineer who had served his time with Harland and Wolff. We never saw our "sister" again although I understand she survived the war. She deserved to, as Harland and Wolff ships were built to last.

Shortly after leaving Birkenhead to join a westbound convoy to the USA, a minor incident occurred involving opium. Smoking the stuff is a way of life for many Chinese, and our kindly chief steward, a wisened old man of skeletal appearance, was no exception. His cabin was next to mine and we shared the customary wartime escape hatch on our dividing bulkhead: a square yard of three-ply that could be dislodged with a good kick.

I turned in as usual an hour after the evening meal and soon fell asleep; unaware of opium fumes filtering through chinks in the escape hatch. When called for my watch at seven bells, I was out cold . . . and snoring loudly! After a heavy shaking, I came too, a bit light-headed, but without any recollection of virtual reality dreams enjoyed by the weed's regular users. Perhaps the fumes weren't strong enough! However, to ensure that I didn't become addicted, Chief Officer Soederhausen, a tall, slim, chain-smoking tanker veteran of 40-odd years, politely moved the old chap aft, there to smoke to his heart's content with his compatriots.

On our return convoy to the UK, we were routed via Methil, on the north side of the Firth of Forth. The anchorage held scores of merchant ships

awaiting deployment. It was there that a Liberty ship's USN gunner opened fire on an incoming British MTB. Although his aim was poor, I imagine questions would be asked in due course . . .

Our instructions on leaving Methil were to proceed coastwise to Shellhaven, on the Thames. We had no escort but were assured that the North Sea to our port side was heavily mined. On the second day, in broad daylight, an MTB appeared off our port quarter faster than our lookouts could raise the alarm. From then on, we felt safe as houses.

Shellhaven was grim in those days. I recall only a small village pub that sold weak beer.

After discharge, we left Shellhaven for Loch Ewe, a natural harbour high on the northwest Scottish coast, midway between Ullapool and Loch Gairloch. There, we enjoyed two days of gunnery practice. Royal Navy gunnery instructors came on board to make sure we knew our stuff and it was there that I learned to load and fire an Oerlikon. John Scott, a junior engineer from Lisburn, Northern Ireland, won a case of beer for accurately placing a stream of Oerlikon shells into an aerial target, high overhead.

During this exercise, money changed hands between three of our officers and a Royal Navy rating responsible for issuing ammunition. Three Webley .45 calibre revolvers and ammunition were bought for cash . . . no questions asked. Loch Ewe was a lonely place for RN personnel billeted there, and I imagine the few pounds involved helped eke out the rating's pay and provide a few week's beer money. Never in possession of anything more powerful than a Daisy air rifle, I declined the offer of a revolver. Customs officers confiscated all the handguns when we returned to the UK, early in 1945.

From Loch Ewe we joined a westbound convoy, arriving at New Jersey two weeks later. Apart from the occasional "stand to" accompanied by the sound of exploding depth charges as escorts warned off marauding U-boats, the time passed without incident. Around the southern tip of Greenland, the US Navy took over escort duties. VHF, or TBY as it was then called, was still in its infancy, and the Americans made good use of it with their incessant chatter.

In New Jersey, we loaded high-octane gas for Port de Bouc in the south of France. On this occasion, we also loaded military vehicles on deck, destined for the US Army.

As American and Free French forces had recently opened a second front in the south of France, we sailed in convoy from Oran. Apart from bomb-damaged tonnage in the harbour, Port de Bouc escaped the war lightly. I remember it as a sleepy little village where café owners sold watery wine and beer to American GIs at outrageous prices!

It was in Port de Bouc that I discovered garlic. Men and women chewed it continuously, and I found that the only way to avoid the odious smell was to chew it oneself. Drastic, but it worked.

In search of excitement, Frank Bakewell and I took off for Marseilles. Although we lacked transport, the area teemed with US army trucks and thumbing a lift did the trick every time. We came back a day later as

Marseilles proved too pricey. Bartering cigarettes brought in a few francs but even the highly paid Americans found bars and nightclubs too expensive.

Back in New Jersey again, we loaded another cargo of high-octane gas, this time for discharge at Bari, on the Adriatic seaboard. The run across the Atlantic proved peaceful, with fine weather and no submarine alerts. On approaching Gibraltar, we broke from the convoy to sail independently. An hour later, a battleship loomed up at a rate of knots. As he came abeam, a signalman flashed "What ship?" on a signal lamp five times the size of our little Aldis lamp. I repeated *Backhuysen* twice before getting his receipt. "What ship?" I asked. "*Ramilles*," came the reply. "Are you our escort?" I asked, tongue in cheek. After a delay, I received the predictable "No". The big ship then made off in the general direction of Gibraltar. Strangely enough, I had the same experience in 1945, on another Dutchman.

At Port Augusta, Sicily, we anchored overnight for briefing and stores before embarking on the coastal run to Bari. In 1944, with the war in Italy raging, the Adriatic was a happy hunting ground for German MTBs based in the Yugoslav islands. However, that old sinking feeling disappeared on hearing that a large Italian cruiser had been told off to escort us all the way to our discharge port. Steaming a mile to starboard with flags streaming in the breeze, the cruiser's presence comforted us no end until, with Taranto abeam, the ship made an abrupt U-turn and headed shoreward at flank speed. And that was the last we saw of *him*!

Our DEMS gunners comprised four Royal Navy ratings, headed by a petty officer, and four Maritime Ack-ack gunners, headed by a bombardier. Between them, they operated a stern-mounted 4.7″ cannon of World War One vintage, an ack-ack 12-pounder, two Oerlikons, and two Colt-Browning 50-mm machine guns. During alerts, my small contribution was to stand behind an Oerlikon gunner and feed him large, circular magazines filled with shells. When empty, I reloaded them with three live shells, then a tracer. Thankfully, this happened only in practice, as loading meant greasing each shell individually . . . a messy business. Occasionally I got to fire the Oerlikon myself: an exhilarating experience for a teenager who had never seen a shot fired in anger.

At sea, the gunners had little to do, and when Mr Soederhausen asked if they would like to work on deck, chipping, scraping and painting, the response was unanimous. I'm pleased to say that for the best part of a year none of the DEMS lads needed to touch their pay books, leaving them with a goodly payoff to take home. Mr Soederhausen always proved the perfect gentleman. His English was immaculate – much better than mine was – but there was no denying his preference for all things American. On the other hand, his boss, the captain, was very pro-British.

Fortune smiled on us as we crept along the Italian coast and we entered Bari without sighting any German MTBs. Fortune indeed, because those high-speed killers could race across the Adriatic and appear out of nowhere as if by magic. Moreover, with experienced German gun crews quick on the trigger, our slow-moving *Backhuysen* would have been history in seconds.

Bari overflowed with British troops on local leave from the front, while hundreds of bedraggled Italian soldiers, seemingly with nowhere to go, sat listlessly on park benches or chatted on street corners. For them the war was over. Obviously penniless, they were a sad sight. Some of us took extra packs of Lucky Strike and Camel cigarettes ashore as gifts. It was little enough, but it put smiles on faces for a while.

Bari's bars offered only white wine. It was served in cut-down glass bottles that sufficed as drinking glasses. With tanked up troops swilling wine by the gallon, arguments sometimes erupted, followed by swinging fists. Strange, how pre-war regimental rivalries surfaced, while German troops fought strongly, a mere thirty miles to the north. Inevitably, those mini wars came to an abrupt conclusion as beefy Redcaps charged into the fray, blowing whistles and swinging batons!

While in Bari I bumped into a pal from my hometown, Oldham. I'll call him Jimmy. His war started in 1939 with the Territorial call-up and he'd been overseas ever since. He was a supply sergeant with a service outfit and having been in Bari since the town's capture he knew his way around. Taking me under his wing, he spirited me inside a recreation camp off limits to everyone except army personnel. There, we enjoyed beer a-plenty, but no spirits.

Jimmy wasn't short of cash. Being senior NCO of a tyre depot had its perquisites. The money was occupation currency, and Jimmy had a wad of the stuff the size of a toilet roll. As he couldn't get whisky or gin, I repaid his munificence at the camp with a bottle of each . . . after sobering up.

Our stay in Bari lasted ten days, because of congestion: berthing problems and poor pumping arrangements. Wrecked merchant ships crammed the small harbour and we were given strict orders not to souvenir-hunt because of unexploded ammunition and chemical leakage. Although German bombers inflicted little damage on residential Bari, they left their mark on the harbour, which was a mass of destroyed shipping. Lucky for us, no German bombers visited Bari during our stay. Although a cargo of 100-octane aviation gas makes quite a bang when ignited, our war-weary Dutchmen shrugged off the threat over a glass or two of Bols and a laugh: "Don't worry about it. You'll never know what hit you!"

After Bari, we sailed for Curacao, in good time for the festive season. While the ship underwent a full overall, our Dutch officers enjoyed reunions with old friends that worked in the Shell refinery or on the mosquito boats: small coastal tankers used for the run to Maracaibo. These tiny crafts' skippers came from the ranks of volunteers who preferred the work to that on deep-sea tankers. Curacao was a lovely place to live, and many Dutch seafarers retired there. The run to Maracaibo took no more than thirty-six hours, and these pocket-sized tankers could load and be back in Willemstad within the week. Of course, the trip could last a day or two longer if the skipper had a Venezuelan girl friend in Maracaibo – a hot spot in many ways!

Living was good in the Netherlands West Indies. For many Royal Dutch

Shell officers, their careers began and ended there, even to staying on in retirement. Tax was unheard of, and a young officer in charge of a mosquito boat could marry and live prosperously ever after.

Jewellery was inexpensive. An Omega Seamaster stainless steel watch cost me a month's pay, but I kept it thirty years before losing it. I scrapped my pre-war fibre suitcase to make way for a beautifully crafted all-leather suitcase with zips and outside pockets. It cost me ten US dollars. I felt a proper toff with that suitcase on leaving the ship in Liverpool a few weeks later. I arrived in my hometown, Oldham, with my posh suitcase half-filled with tins of cigarettes, bottles of Bols, nylon stockings, and bottles of scent for my mother and sister. With the aid of Frank Bakewell, who knew Liverpool and Birkenhead like the back of his hand, these dutiable items were spirited ashore before the ship cleared Customs.

Throughout the voyage, Chief Officer Soederhausen helped with my attempts to learn Dutch and was an excellent raconteur on pre-war tanker life. Back in the 1930s, he related, La Corona introduced a scheme allowing officers' wives to accompany their husbands for a short trip each year. It started well, but complications soon set in. Naturally, the captain's wife was Mother Superior, lording it over the rest. With only one clothes-washing facility amidships, rows erupted as wives asserted their seniority. Mother Superior came first, then the chief officer's wife and, in turn, the second and third mates' spouses. Complaints were made that the washroom was always filled with drying blouses, slips, knickers, and stockings!

But when some wives complained to the captain that their husbands drank too much Bols – and slept too much, their return passage to Holland came earlier than scheduled.

In his latest letter to me, Jan Lutterot said that Mr Soerderhausen failed his annual medical examination in 1946, thus ending a promising seagoing career. La Corona compensated by appointing him head of Curacao's hydrographic department. Sadly, on arrival at Willemstad, the poor man died of a massive coronary as he stepped ashore.

After New Year, we bade Willemstad goodbye, sailing for New York to join a UK-bound convoy. On arrival in Birkenhead, the British contingent left to go on leave, but not before being questioned by army intelligence bods. My army intelligence interviewer spoke precise Oxford English and wore a corporal's stripes! I ask you . . . ?

The interrogation went something like this: "Had I heard anything from the Dutch that could be seen as pro-German?" Stuff like that. "Pity that you chaps have nothing better to do," I replied. "These guys are winning the war!"

This was typical of the stuff I experienced on allied ships when docking in the UK during the war years. Another curse was Customs officers sniffing everywhere in case one had too much booze or tobacco hidden away. My favourite hiding place was the radio room's main transmitter area, with dutiable goods hidden beneath coiled wire and wireless spares.

After I left the ship, she made another New Jersey-Shellhaven voyage

before sailing for Australia. Then came a two-year time charter stint between the Dutch East Indies and the Persian Gulf. By then, Jan Lutterot felt part of the fixtures and fittings.

In 1947 the *Backhuysen* saw Holland for the first time and, after a lengthy refit, was renamed *Chama*. The Greeks bought her in 1955 and renamed her *Anastasia*. Four years later, in 1959, she ended her life in a Savona breaker's yard.

Jan stayed with her until 1950. Then followed other postings on various tankers until 1955, when he joined the *Kylix*, a new Shell tanker, for his farewell voyage before swallowing the anchor. The *Kyle's* master, Gab Verboom, had been third mate on the *Backhuysen* back in 1944-1945. I remember him well as a tall, slim, blond-haired young man with film star looks, forever scrounging toffees after the bonded stores had sold out. Gab taught me Malayan and Javanese slang for use in the bars out there. Sadly, as it has never been my good fortune to visit those seamen's haunts, my vocabulary is yet to be tested.

Another character I remember well was the Dutch second engineer. A massively built fellow standing well over six feet, he had the strength of an ox. Behind his back we called him Goliath. To his face, it was Jacobus, his real name. While consuming a full bottle of *our* Bols one evening, he regaled Frank Bakewell and me with a barney that he'd had with two Chinese firemen, aboard a tanker during the war's earlier days. In their wisdom, the two decided to work only when it suited, and refused overtime on engine repairs. A ferocious row erupted on the after deck at midnight as Jacobus confronted the two. After being shoved against the ship's side, the big man lost his cool and banged the Chinamen's heads together with great force. The impact caused a bloody mess and, rather than face the consequences, Jacobus heaved the two of them overboard. That was the gist of it. The gory details were worse! He told the same story many times when drunk, without varying the details one iota, so we believed him!

Jacobus was an imposing sight in uniform, and on one occasion in Liverpool, by prior arrangement with a Chinese crewmember, he strolled through the dock gates with a large packet of opium stuffed inside his uniform greatcoat pocket. Within a quarter of a mile, a couple of Chinamen came out of the shadows to relieve him of his burden. "Sixty English pounds I get for dat," he grinned. "A month's pays, eh?" A month's pay for him, maybe, but nearer three months for me!

Mr Soederhausen told me that high-octane gasoline played havoc with a ship's tanks because of plate corrosion. This was before the days of stainless steel tanks. After five years, he said, the *Backhuysen* would haul cargo less injurious to her tanks, such as crude oil. It says much for the skill of Harland & Wolff's workforce that the ship gave such excellent service from 1942 to 1959, while sailing hundreds of thousands of miles worldwide.

In a glowing tribute to the ship, Jan Lutterot said that during his time on board she suffered only two minor engine failures, both repaired at sea.

The ship's name, *Backhuysen*, puzzled me often, and on one occasion I

asked who – or what – the name meant. Mr Soederhausen said the only Backhuysen he knew was a Dutch footballer that played in France before the war.

Years later, it transpired that ships handed over to the Dutch because of war losses were named after famous Dutch painters. In writing this article a website visit told me that Ludolf Backhuysen lived from 1631 to 1708. Although German-born, he spent his working life in Holland and became famous for paintings of stormy sea-pieces. A work of his entitled *Ships Running Aground in a Storm* can be seen at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

Fortunately, the motor tanker *Backhuysen* lived a charmed life, unlike Ludolf's works on canvas, and a good thing too!

On a final note, tankers of the *Empire Fletcher* class came out with dummy funnels abaft the bridge. I doubt if they ever fooled enemy warships and, according to Jan Lutterot, the first thing the *Backhuysen*'s crew did at the war's end was to heave the dummy funnel overboard. Knowing the Dutch, I'm sure that *that* burial service was accompanied by copious swigs of *Geneva*!

Jan said that the *Backhuysen* was the best of his many tankers. After the war, I too sailed for some years on tankers: *Atlantic Emperor*, *Francis R. Hart*, *Petroking*, *Petrokure*, *Universe Defiance*, *Cumberlandia*, *Arabian Addax*, and *Asia Culture* (OBO), to name a few. Was it wartime camaraderie . . . I don't know . . . but I agree with Jan, the *Backhuysen* rated best of all.