16) M.V. W.A. Mather 18743 GRT. 11000 HP.
St John, N.B. 10/12/74 - 22/5/75 Punta Cardon, Venezuela.

The sea around St John, Canada and the Bay of Fundy, (which reminded me somewhat of an old American outback town), have some of the highest tides in the world. Due to various geographical factors, they get two tides a day, and each tide can reach 30 feet or more (10 metres) in height. The natural result is that currents and rip tides at various points can be fierce, and navigation needs considerable care to stay on course. The ports have extremely high quays and various ingenious ways of mooring up ships to accommodate this large tidal variation. Climbing up (or down) the gangway can be quite an experience. Leaving the ship at low tide, it's almost straight up, as the ship is well below the quay. A few hours later, on coming back to the ship at high tide, it's well above the quay and so we still have a hard climb straight up. It's not conducive to drinking too much.
On joining this ship, I was asked if I would help in a marathon fault finding exercise. The ship was stuck in port, unable to discharge its oil cargo due to the boilers not being able to be fired up. Almost every tanker has pumps aboard to discharge the cargo. When loading however, the pumping is all done ashore. All the CP tankers had Diesel engines, but the cargo pumps were powered by steam turbines. These required a large boiler, which also powered the deck machinery. At sea, the steam was provided by the waste heat from the main engine exhaust, but in port, the main engine was stopped, so a separate boiler was required. In this case, an electrical fault would not allow the boiler oil burners to be lit.
This sort of thing cost Money (with a capital M!) Port costs, plus running expenses could easily reach 10,000 dollars a day. The engineers and electrician had already spent a day trying to find the problem, without result and were dog tired. One of the reasons the fault was so difficult to trace being that the installation did not match the drawings. Also, in best marine practice, all wires were the same colour (black), and identification sleeves were sometimes missing.
After a good day spent crawling around engine room bilges (Ugh!), inside control consoles and hanging precariously from bulkheads, we found the fault. It was a waterlogged electrical junction box near the boiler causing an earth. There had been a small leak, allowing water to enter. On drying it out, all was well. A case of beer was presented to us as thanks for a job well done.

We visited some interesting places on this trip, like Jamaica and Haiti (Port-au-Prince) - which must be one of the poorest islands in the Caribbean. On my way back from a trip ashore here one night, I saw my first fireflies – really magical. It was very dark, and there were no street lights in the neighbourhood. These little lights were blinking in the grass and bushes around me. Something I will always remember.