33) Fort Steele 18743 GRT 12200 BHP
Guayanilla, Puerto Rico 6/11/80 - 6/2/81 Tampa, Florida.

Another visit to Puerto Rico. I quite liked it really. I was staying in Ponce again, in the same hotel as before. A lot of people used to promenade around the square situated nearby, so it was an interesting place to hang out. The local fire brigade (called Bombas) was also most impressive, with their shiny red engines open on display.

Waiting at anchor is quite a common occurrence on ships. The berth could be occupied, or the cargo not ready, all leading to delays. If the weather is good, we sometimes tested the lifeboats during these periods. It is always good to know that they work, and the engine starts easily. Some things however bring home how important careful attention to detail can be, and how one forgetful moment can bring disaster.

On this occasion, the boats had been cleaned and washed down. The bilge plug had been removed to ensure all the water ran out. We then had some heavy rain, and so the plug was intentionally left out to drain the rain water. A few days later, we had a lifeboat drill. The boat was lowered and it was decided to take a trip around the ship. All went well, the engine started and off we went in fine style. After a while, it was noted that an abnormal amount of water was swilling about inside the boat, and rapidly increasing. Thoughts went immediately to the bilge plug. A fumble in the water confirmed it was not in place, and could not be found. We turned back to the ship, but by this time the water had reached the engine flywheel and was spraying up over everyone. Luckily, lifeboat engines are mostly diesel, and completely sealed. The air intakes are above the engine, and theoretically, they could run completely submerged, having been designed for use in half sunken boats. It was just as well. We all had life jackets, and lifeboats are supposed to be unsinkable, having flotation chambers, but we began to feel distinctly unhappy. It could have been embarrassing to have to be rescued from one sunken lifeboat by our second one! By the time we got back to the ship the water was half way up the engine casing and we were all soaking wet. The boat was hooked to the falls, and very slowly lifted, letting the water drain out before it was lifted out of the water. The plug was found. It had been pushed under the engine by the influx of water. It was lucky we did not need the boat in earnest. The 3rd officer, who is in charge of the lifeboat maintenance, never made that mistake again!

We sometimes loaded cargo from the Shell refinery at Curacao, a rather pleasant loading port, where it is relatively easy to get into the main town of Willemstadt from the port area. This old Dutch colonial town was always well worth a visit, with its bustling market and colourful architecture.

During my trips around the world, I have crossed the Gulf Stream many times. This is always impressive, as the cold water outside the Stream may be a green-grey colour, and apparently devoid of life. The Gulf Stream, however, can be a clear blue, and carries with it animals and plants in quite large quantities. The change between these two conditions is often extremely abrupt. One can see a distinct line where the cold sea ends, and the warm Gulf Stream is flowing. The ship has temperature sensors to monitor the water temperature at the cooling water inlets. These can show a change of temperature of nearly 10 degrees on crossing between Gulf Stream water and the normal ocean. This can happen within just a few seconds, and is often logged, and the data sent to the meteorological network which we reported to regularly every 4 hours. In the winter, the transition can often also be seen in the air above the water. Often, the Gulf Stream runs just off the American coast for a while, before making a wide sweep over towards Europe. Just off New York, we were in fog, and on crossing the line of the Gulf Stream, we emerged into bright sunshine and clear air. The fog was like a wall, following the demarcation line of the water temperature change. It could be clearly seen and was quite an impressive sight.