46) M.V. Mississippi
Rotterdam 9/10/85 - 1/12/85 Felixstowe.
47) M.V. Mississippi Re-signed on articles.
Felixstowe 1/12/85 - 21/1/86 Antwerp.

For a container ship The Mississippi was relatively small, which meant we could get into the smaller harbours. That in turn meant a fast turn around, and little port time. The Iran-Iraq war was also taking place, and the Gulf area was not a healthy place to be. Iraq was supposedly targeting any ships who traded with Iran, but were not too fussy as to who it was they shot at. Iran in turn was shooting at those ships supposedly trading with Iraq or its allies. Sometimes ships were fired on from high speed launches fitted with heavy machine guns, sometimes rockets were used, either from aircraft or launches. We had to pass through the Gulf war area to get to Dubai, Abu-Dhabi and Bahrain. All the crew received a 100 percent war bonus (with a minimum payment of 2 days) for the duration we were in the war zone, which was some incentive, but not much. The ship used to hang around just outside the area until after dark. Then whilst totally blacked out, we did a high speed (22 knot) night run, with our 17000 ton "speedboat" through the (normally strictly prohibited) tightly packed "oil-rig ally", close inshore of the UAE. This tactic was so that we would hopefully avoid any rockets or armed boats. Some of these oil platforms were uncharted, and occasionally there would only be a small platform for an unlit well-head poking out of the sea. It was a rather dangerous place in which to do an impersonation of an unlit speedboat at night. According to information we had from British intelligence sources, the Exocet rockets were only fitted with TV and not radar, so they could not be used at night. Despite this, I used to sleep fully clothed with a life jacket close by, wondering if I would be woken up by a large bang.

It was quite a worrying time, though the extra money did help. Any errors in navigation, or malfunction of steering could also have been just as disastrous, and would probably have made the world news, too! A ship on the normal route ahead, and one astern of us was hit by Exocet missiles and badly damaged. If the missiles were heat-seeking, they hit the engine room or funnel. If they were radar guided, they tended to hit the largest target, which was frequently the accommodation. They carried quite an appreciable warhead, and could cause severe damage to the ship, as well as to anyone who happened to be anywhere near the explosion. You can be sure that the radars and steering were maintained in tip- top condition. We used to track sea gulls at 5 miles! I did a total of three -luckily uneventful - trips into the Gulf war region, after which I was quite happy to leave the ship for something less exciting – if a little less well paid.
One of my problems on these older ships was that various electronic systems had sometimes been modified or added, without the changes being incorporated into the ship's drawings, or the drawings had been lost. In one case, I was delving into the depths of the engine room control consol looking for a fault where one generator would not start automatically. Normally one only had to press a button in the control room, but this generator would only start by hand.

I had found an unknown box with glowing valves and several fuses deep inside the engine room control consol. It did not appear on any drawing I could find. I naturally asked the electrician if he knew what it was, but neither he nor the Chief Engineer had any idea. I then asked if I could pull the fuses to investigate the box, with the proviso that I did not know what would happen. We were in harbour, but a blackout was a possibility, and would be embarrassing! I was repeatedly assured by our electrician that nothing would happen as the generator controlled by this side of the control desk was only on standby.

With that comforting thought, I carefully pulled the one amp fuse from its holder with a pair of insulated tongs. Ooops! That was a mistake! Immediately, the generators (not just one but both of them!) began to slow down and the lights started to dim. I pushed the fuse hurriedly back, but to no avail. The lights got dimmer, alarms hooted and flashed, and the engineers scurried about trying to find out what was going on. The generators stopped, the alarms were silenced and it became VERY quiet (and very dark too!).

The engine room is an eerie place when dimly lit by emergency battery lighting and flashing alarm lamps. The shouts of the engineers checking various possible trouble points could be clearly heard. After about 5 minutes of near total darkness, the generators were started again. I had, after all, pushed the fuse back so everything was back to normal! but no one could work out what had happened. The friendly, informative electrician had quietly disappeared, and I was left holding the can!

I owned up, and apart from having to buy a round of beers for the engineers, all was well. It was a tradition that anyone causing a blackout bought the beers! It was also a good incentive not to do it again as they were THIRSTY! That unknown box was very plainly marked in our fault log not to be touched! I managed to work out later that it was a part of the safety trip system for the generators, but its exact purpose was still somewhat of a mystery.

A few years later, I heard that the ship was in drydock, waiting to be sold. I wondered what would happen if someone pulled out the one amp fuse under the control desk and then left. Maybe that would have been equivalent to running off with the ships ignition key!