



I can't remember, but I think it was my last trip on the MV Regent Leopard, a CT Bowring tanker, working between Trinidad and the petroleum depots on Canvey Island in Essex, when the incident happened.

It was February or March 1954 in the North Atlantic and bloody cold. I remember that much. I was a JOS and I was standing middle watch. We were homeward bound with our tanks full of highly inflammable liquid.

Incidentally, I was a smoker at that time and working on a tanker, it was absolutely vital that there should be no smoking outside the accommodation. For a long time afterwards, when I came ashore, I always stubbed my cigarette out whenever I came out of my house, the habit was so ingrained.

Going back to the incident at sea, it was my spell below and I was coming off watch, either look-out or the wheel, I am unsure which but I know that I was looking forward to be hitting my pit.

I crossed the flying bridge and was making my around the after end of the accommodation when I passed a cabin port-hole with the light illuminating the outside world like a beacon.

Of course, I looked into the cabin and saw a sight which shocked the socks off me. Actually, I couldn't see much because the cabin was just a swirl of smoke.

I tore into the alley way and banged on the door of the cabin. Nothing stirred and I banged again with the same result

There was no alternative but to open the door, which fortunately was unlocked, and investigate. Through the smoke was quite thick, I could make out a body on the bunk covered by bed clothes which were smouldering.

I shook the body and all I got for my trouble was a grunt. He was out to the world. Apart from the smell of the smouldering bedclothes, the other obvious smell was the reason why the occupant of the cabin was beyond caring. He obviously had a good nightcap of something alcoholic.

I was getting nowhere by trying to waken him so the only thing left was to get the burning clothing out. I dragged it out to the scuppers and as I got out in the open air it burst into flames. I dowsed it with water and felt the better for that.

Back into the cabin and again I tried to wake the culprit who, I realized, had obviously gone to sleep while smoking in his bunk. I still had no luck in arousing him, so there was only one course of action. At least he was alive – after a fashion.

I went up to the bridge and told the 2nd Mate of what happened. He just told me to go back to my cabin and I was very happy to do just that.

I never heard another word about what eventuated! The bloke in the bunk was, I think, the Chief Engineer so maybe that is the reason. I signed off at the end of the trip and left none the wiser.

It wasn't a good experience to have, considering, as I said earlier, to have happened whilst afloat on all that highly dangerous petroleum liquid!

There was another dangerous happening on that vessel when we, the ABs and I were engaged in cleaning the tanks when we were outward bound. I was fortunate in that only the ABs went down into the tanks and I was on deck with the bucket and rope lowering whatever was necessary to them. By the way, the tradition was that tank cleaning earned a tot of rum. Despite staying up top, I managed to get one too.

We had a new Peggy on that trip when he was seen to leave the after end accommodation and walk along towards the centre castle with a cigarette in his mouth. The eyes of all those on deck followed him as he went on his way. Nobody wanted to shout as it was feared that he would be shocked into just throwing the cigarette away.

As soon as he got off the flying bridge, the bosun jumped on him and he was told his fortune quick smart! A very useful lesson was learned.

- Ron Kerr