

Cadetship II

I feel a need to share my humble story.

Around January '73, after completing the 2nd year Marine Course, I was posted to MV Neptune Emerald for my 1 year sea training. Neptune Emerald was the first new container ship to be ordered by NOL. It was NOL's Flagship then.

I, together with another cadet, the 2nd mate, stewards and cooks flew to Turku, Finland. We took a long flight to Karachi, Frankfurt, and Copenhagen and finally reached freezing Turku. It was the 1st time I flew. I was around 17 years old then. The next day we joined the ship at the Turku Shipyard, and quickly the ship set sail on her maiden voyage to Singapore.

My story is about the manner I was treated by the 2nd Engineer, a Singaporean. He was one of the favourite 2nd Engineers during that time. Trained at Keppel Shipyard, studied part time at Singapore Polytechnic, and sailed with NOL. At that time another 2nd Engineer (earmarked to join Neptune Sapphire), a short Chinese Singaporean was also travelling with us for a short trip in Europe.

The 2nd engineer treated my friend and I like 'enemies'. Our 1st task was to clean the already very clean engine room. We were to mop away any oil from the machinery. At the beginning of each shift I was instructed to top up the cylinder oil tank situated about 2 to 3-storey up from the cylinder head platform. Access was via a steep ladder! This was a small tank of about 1 cubic metre. Topping up the tank manually using a pail took me most of my watch keeping time. It was cold and the ship was rolling slightly. I was very tired by this task and was sea sick due to the rolling. It was one of the very difficult times of my life.

The 2nd Engineer had no feeling towards our plight - the cold weather, the new environment, the strenuous work, the rolling sea, the interrupted and insufficient sleep due to watch-keeping etc. Instead he called us up 2 hours before and after our watch duty, to be at the engine room for stand-by duty when the ship was arriving or departing port. Sometimes, after our 4 to 8 am shift, he would call us down to the engine room after our breakfast to do cleaning work. I guess he wanted to impress, that one can even sleep on the engine room floor plate!

My friend and I were very depressed by the work and treatment we received. We discussed giving up marine engineering and plan to fly back to Singapore once the ship reached London.

Due to financial reason, only my friend left the ship, and flew back to Singapore from London. He subsequently changed course to Mechanical engineering.

I continued to be treated by the 2nd engineer in this manner, until I was transferred to Neptune Jasper about 6 months later. I left sailing after obtaining the 2nd Class Motor Certificate of Competency.

I cannot understand why this 'favourite' of NOL treated a 17 year old in this manner. He might be holding a key position in NOL, without empathy one will not be able to gain respect from others.

I also cannot understand why the management of our national carrier treated her own people in this manner. We were used as cheap labour - standing in or being made to fill the posts for watchkeepers and greasers, and were treated badly. Even foreign Shipping companies treated Singaporean cadets much better than NOL.

Henry Ong Kok Seong
30 April 2010

Henry Ong Kok Seong graduated with a Diploma in Marine Engineering in 1975. He sailed with Reefer Lines till he got his 2nd Class Engineer Certificate of Competency before coming ashore to work for a few companies including the PSA, Deutz and Kobelco. He then worked for the Public Utilities Board for the next 30 years, the first 15 years on the running and maintenance of machinery at Singapore's water treatment plant located in Johor and the remaining 15 years in Singapore before retiring in 2014.

Photograph below: Henry Ong saying goodbye to his folks before leaving in 1973 for Turku in Finland to join his first ship, Neptune Emerald



↑ At Paya Lebar Airport with the 2nd Mate (foreground with tie)

I WAS CARRY A BLACK BAG

↑ Yusof, the crew administrator

↓ At Turku, Finland. Unloading luggage to the hotel. My fellow cadet was at the background, the cooks and stewards were at the foreground



Photograph above: Henry Ong and his shipmates arriving at their hotel in Finland.