

How I Became a Marine Engineer (Part 6)

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Secondment to Neptune Orient Lines (... continued from Part 5)

The second part of the answer came during the technical discussions. At 8pm on the night before we were to sign the contract with IHI, Kee Ah Bah wanted the switchboard modified so that more maintenance room for an adjacent machinery item was made available. The IHI engineers were most unhappy with what to me (the rookie) was a simple request. On hearing their explanations I could emphasize with the Japanese for what we asked for was a substantial design change to the engine room! However, Soe Aung insisted on the need for the change before we adjourned for dinner. I enjoyed the dinner and I was sure the IHI engineers did not.

We parted at about 11pm. We went to bed. They must have worked overnight otherwise how could they present us, at 9am the next morning, a new set of engine room drawings? Simply amazing! For one must remember that computers were NOT common in 1976. Apple appeared only in 1977. IHI had a computer centre equipped with mainframes but I did not see a single computer terminal elsewhere in their offices. I do wonder whether our designers could match their IHI counterparts today with desktops at least 1,000 times more powerful than their predecessors.

Here's an anecdote I cannot help sharing for it still amuses me every time I think about Soe Aung's caution made to me before dinner, "When the host ask what we like for dessert, please ask for anything except water melon". It became plain to me when I saw the price tag for a water melon in the supermarket – 10,000 yen! We in Singapore got no water melon industry to protect and hence could enjoy a water melon for \$3.

Getting to dinner that evening was also one incident I could not forget. We were chauffeured for almost one hour to cover about 500 metres up one road, did a U-turn and then back that same road for about 400 metres to the restaurant. Had we knew earlier, we would have asked our hosts to walk across the road and get to eat in 5 minutes! Though I understood the need to observe protocol, I thought the length the Japanese would go to was mind boggling.

Not long after contract signing, we began to receive regular parcels of detail plans for Hull 1020 issued to us for approval. I remembered "1020" because Tan Hood Kim, one of the drivers at NOL came around to collect our 4D bets and I won (for the first time in my life) \$250.

I also learned a lot about ship machinery systems from Kee Ah Bah especially on arrangements that must be provided so that the key equipment items could be maintained at sea. Kee Ah Bah was and still is second to none when it comes to details. Nothing escaped his scrutiny and I thanked goodness that he checked my work. I am a big picture person and I am indebted to Kee Ah Bah for picking up some of the errors I missed! Without him, I would be that "idiot" whenever those marine engineers who sailed on Neptune Pearl and Neptune Coral cursed, "Whoever approved the plan for our ship must be an idiot!"

I also discovered that it was possible for a person to produce hand written text that could surpass (because the hand writings were so beautiful) typed text. The only other person who could write so beautifully was probably Paul Soh, one of my students. Sadly, he died young of diabetes. My wife who served as our Secretary at our site office in IHI Kure often lamented on the need to type when Kee Ah Bah's handwritten drafts were so pleasant to behold!

..... To be Continued in Part 7.....