

## **How I Became a Marine Engineer (Part 7)**

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**Author: Cheng Huang Leng**

### **Secondment to Neptune Orient Lines ( ... continued from Part 6)**

Let me return to my quest to discover the secrets of Japanese supremacy in shipbuilding in the 1970s. It was an IHI requirement that all our comments and changes must be submitted by an agreed date after which no further change was allowed.

Till that date, we could have any number of iterations to the plan approval process as we need. IHI explained that changes after the cut off date would affect their overall building schedule and hence promised delivery dates. I think this requirement made good sense for it meant that decisions on the final design must be made and it instilled discipline on both parties to meet datelines. It also meant that the ship could be built first on paper where changes could be cheaply incorporated. Thus, for a typical new building, it could take 12 months for plan approval and planning and just 6 months to build the ship. Yards that build with only the basic plans approved run a far higher risk of cost escalation due to rework and waste.

The output of detail planning was a set of schedules used like musical scores to orchestrate the outputs of yard personnel affected and we as owner representatives. And one way to really upset the Japanese is to be the cause of a delay! What I liked about the schedules was that no activity was planned for weekends. Weekends were set aside for contingency. And during my 4 months at IHI Kure as an Owner Superintendent, I worked only one weekend. By the way, Mr. C N Watson once asked whether I would join him at Sembawang. I refused without hesitation. He laughed when I explained, "you guys work 364.5 days a year. I will have no time for golf!"

The one weekend I worked at IHI Kure was to inspect the funnel before painting. The inspection was scheduled on a Friday. Before I could examine the surfaces, it suddenly rained and the surfaces sanded down to SA2.5 were not protected. The yard needed the Saturday to rework and I agreed return to do the re-inspection. Again it rained! The supervisor asked if I was willing to come in on Sunday. I was willing, turned up at the agreed time and found that funnel painted. The next day, I complained to the QC Supervisor just to make a point and was prepared to forget about it as a funnel was not an important ship structure. To my surprise, at lunch time that day, the Yard Manager

turned up at our site office to make a personal apology and informed me that the work team would remove the paint, invite me to do the inspection and then when I am satisfied, paint the funnel again. He explained that the foreman had instructed the supervisor to proceed with the painting on the assumption that I would not turn up for the inspection. It seemed that the foreman was at one time seconded to JSL and his experience with owner superintendents was that they would not work on weekends!

As indicated earlier, I was deployed to IHI Kure for 4 months (from July to Nov 1976) as a member of a team of NOL superintendents for the construction of Neptune Pearl and Coral. The team initially comprised Lim Boon Heng, Toh Ho Tay and I. As building activities ramped up, Kee Ah Bah, RN Saxena and Peter Flyint joined us as reinforcements. And closed to sea trials, we had the benefit of Capt Ezekiel, First Officer Daniel Ng, Chief Engineer Chia Che Kiang and 2nd Engineer Tan Seng Kong. I am indebted to ALL named for they taught me more about shipbuilding than all my previous studies and attachment to shipyards!

Another group of people I was indebted to was the shipyard people starting from the Yard Manager (forgot his name). When I confided in him that I not a permanent NOL employee but was in fact a teacher, he asked what he could do to help me. I requested for unrestricted access to all parts of the yard and his permission to take all the pictures that would be useful to illustrate my lectures and to interview whoever I needed to understand the rationale for the practices of his yard. He granted all my requests by providing me with a special armband. With that, I went everywhere, took at least 1,000 slides and spoke to a cross section of yard people.

..... To be Continued in Part 8.....