

Kan Seng Chut's Sagas Part 2: Neptune Agate & Neptune Jasper

After my service on Neptune Garnet and Neptune Amber, and looking back it seems that I was destined to crack problems wherever I was assigned. I signed off Amber for my hemorrhoid operations. After a month leave I was called up to join Neptune Agate as 2nd Engineer. Also called up were Kee Ah Bah as Chief Engineer and Chai Chee Kiang who just got his 2nd Class Certificate of Competency as 3rd Engineer. When we boarded the vessel anchored at Eastern Anchorage where it was anchored, we discovered that the previous Chief Engineer, an Indian and the 2nd Engineer, Sam Choo had already left. So there was no formal handover of duties. The remaining engineers were 3rd Engineer Tan Seng Kong, 4th Engineer Khoo Boon San and 3 engine cadets - Yap Soon Huat (I may not got his name correctly) and Alias Katan. The 3rd cadet (I forgot his name) was Chinese whom I was later told that he gave up his career as a marine engineer.

The Master was Captain Mark Tozer and he told us that we needed to sail immediately for the Gulf and within an hour, we set off. The main engine was a 6-cylinder Harland and Wolff opposed piston engine, similar but newer to the one on Neptune Garnet. After dropping the pilot we increased speed. Soon the main engine tensioning rod for the timing chain was jumping at every stroke. I asked Seng Kong who said that this had been the situation since he joined the ship about 6 months earlier. Soon the exhaust temperatures for all the units were unusually high and then a scavenge fire started, filling the whole engine room with white smoke. It seemed that scavenge fires were a common occurrence for this ship with fires every 2 days! We reduced the engine rpm to allow the exhaust temperature to lower and could cruise at 9 to 10 knots. With the vessel on time charter (to COSCO), I then realised that I was being enlisted by NOL to solve yet another problem!

A quick check on her records revealed that 5 out of 6 liners were worn out. Only one liner was renewed recently during her docking in HK. Curiously, she had 5 new liners on board stored in the tonnage hatch, aft of No 6 Hatch instead of in the Engine Room. Through Seng Kong, I learned that Cheong Fook Kuen was the NOL Superintendent in charge during the docking and he supplied the new liners after the docking. The liners were stored in the tonnage hatch because the vessel's cranes could not reach the engine room skylight and the Chief Engineer did nothing to transfer the liners into the Engine Room.

On top of this situation, it seemed that the generators often tripped causing blackouts and the records showed that based on running hours, all 3 auxiliary engines were due for complete overhaul. The air condition system also needed overhauling for our cabins were like saunas at about 30 degrees C. So practically we inherited a ship that needed a major overhaul from top to bottom. Even Kee Ah Bah shook his head cursing the previous Chief Engineer and 2nd Engineer for leaving without alerting us of the adverse condition the ship was in.

On arrival Basrah for discharge we began to tackle the tensioning rod problem. The engine record showed that NOL had engaged a specialist from Harland and Wolf to correct the jumping but was told it did not last. After 2 days the jumping started again. I found that the tension spring was renewed but its free length was shorter by 40 mm compared to her original spring. Thus we could not follow the Makers' instruction manual to reset the tensioning rod spring settings. While figuring out what to do, we received the message from NOL that Kee Ah Bah was recalled to join NOL's New Building Department as Superintendent. We had to continue without a Chief Engineer on board. We managed to persuade the shore crane driver to transfer one liner from the tonnage hatch to the Engine Room. So we got one liner changed.

After discharge we went to Khorramshahr to load bulk urea for Shanghai. About 2 days prior to departure I asked Captain Tozer when the new Chief Engineer would be coming. He said, "You are now the acting Chief Engineer. Chai Chee Kiang is promoted to 2nd Engineer". I then asked him how come he did not inform me until I asked. He just replied that he forgotten but I doubted it. So now I have a 2nd Engineer whose Certificate of Competency was not even dry yet, one "old" 3rd Engineer and 4th Engineer, one electrician and 3 cadets to tackle and a worn down main engine. it would be a challenge for us to turn the situation around.

As we set sail for Shanghai, I told Captain Tozer of our need to stop the main engine a couple of times in order to allow us to adjust the tensioning rod. Once in open sea we started to tighten the spring tension by trial and error. After each tightening we stopped the engine, opened the chain casing to manually check the chain tension to avoid over tensioning and then restart the engine to full rpm to check if the tensioning rod still jumps. It took a few iterations before we met with success. When the tensioning rod stopped to jump, we stopped the engine again to check the chain tension manually. The rule of thumb was the longest section of the chain between 2 sprockets wheels must be able to deflect one chain link length either way. Once this distance was within limits we locked up the tensioning rod with its lock nut. We even tack-welded the lock nut to prevent it from loosening while in operations. The engine was then restarted to continue the voyage to Shanghai. The voyage went smoothly. With one new liner in operation the scavenge fires occurred once every 4 to 5 days. During the voyage we started to overhaul the auxiliary engines one by one.

In Shanghai our port stay was estimated at 2 weeks. As the ships gears were occupied with cargo operations and as there were no shore cranes available for us to lift one more liner into the Engine Room, we had to think of alternatives. We then decided to lift one liner through the starboard accommodation spaces. Some eye pads were welded on to the under deck ceilings for hanging chain blocks. By using the ship's crane at aft No 5 hold one liner was lifted up to starboard deck between No 4 hold and No 5 hold. Then with the crane at forward of No 4 hold the liner was swung over to the starboard shipside adjacent to the alleyway door immediately below the boat deck. With 2 chain blocks the liner was then transferred to the main deck. The liner was then shifted into the alleyway and down two decks to the Engine Room entrance. With the Engine Room crane the liner was lifted on to the top platform. So the 2nd liner was renewed.

By the time we departed Shanghai we renewed 2 liners and overhauled 2 auxiliary engines. We also overhauled the air condition system and were able to enjoy a comfortable 22 degrees C in the cabins. Our next discharge port was Sydney and the voyage went smoothly with just 2 to 3 scavenge fires.

In Sydney the Aussie stevedores were slow giving us plenty of time to sling out the remaining 3 liners out the tonnage hatch, do the passing manoeuvres to transfer the liners via the accommodation spaces. We managed to change 2 more liners, leaving the last one for the next discharge port. We had almost a month stay in Sydney and beside working all of us had and good time ashore.

After loading we left Sydney for Dalian. Again, the voyage went smoothly. There was no stoppage or scavenge fire. On arrival Dalian we had to anchor while waiting for berthing instructions. I asked the Master if we could change our last liner. "It's risky since we may be berthing anytime, however, I will bet one dinner if your team can do it by 5 pm the next day' I took on the bet and told my engineers and crew to be ready the next morning by 8am. By then our team was so good at changing liners that 4 pm Captain Tozer lost the bet. With the last liner changed we had within 4 months solved the tensioning rod and scavenge fire problem and completed all the necessary overhauls. I then told myself that now I could relax

and stay for another 3 more months to fulfil the 18 months sea time requirement for my Class 1 Certificate of Competency examination.

After Dalian we called at Hong Kong to load for Osaka. On arrival Osaka we anchored for berthing instructions. After 2 days we were told to leave the anchorage as a typhoon was heading for Osaka. We steamed out and the Master found a safe spot. The Chief Mate was stationed at the forecastle. He dropped 8 shackles out of 9 shackles of the starboard chain into the water. The ship was dragging so the Master ordered to drop 8 shackles of the port chain into the sea. The ship was steady, despite the choppy sea.

The next morning the wind abated and we got orders to steam back into port for berthing. However I got a call from the Master that the windlass could not turn. I took a look and found the windlass port capstan drum bent about 30 degrees. Its driven gear was jammed dead with the main drive gear. She could not turn clockwise or anti clockwise. I asked the Chief Officer how this could happen. The Chief Officer told me that he just joined the ship and did not know that the port chain had only 8 shackles instead of the standard 9 shackles. He thought the strong current must have exerted such a tremendous force on the port chain that it in turn transmitted the force on to the capstan drum shaft, bending it. I told the Master that it was Hopson's Choice to flame cut the port chain to free it from the capstan shaft. I called the 2nd Engineer to bring out the oxy-acetylene bottles to the forecastle. The port connecting link in the chain locker was cut off and we got all the deck crew to heave out the portion manually and lashed down the port chain to prevent it from dropping into the sea. Next we removed the port capstan shaft pedestal bearing top half. Without the top half bearing cover the capstan drum could now rotate. Slowly we heaved up the starboard chain into the chain locker. Next we flipped the port chain on to the starboard gypsy and slowly heaved up the port chain and laid her on the forecastle deck. Once the port anchor was up we secured the port chain with 2 chain blocks. We steamed into port and berthed for cargo operations. Through the agent we got the repair workshop to remove the bent capstan shaft ashore for repairs. The bent section was heated up and straightened. 2 days later the capstan shaft was refitted in place and tested.

Despite this mishap we still got the vessel into port in time and avoided any off-hires.

Two days later I was told to pack up and return home. The Captain did not know why NOL was taking me off when Agate was now in tip top condition. All he knew was that the agent was waiting for me and that a new Chief Engineer from Poland would take over. The agent took me to Osaka airport for check in and handed me my boarding card. I then saw my flight was not for Singapore but Kuala Lumpur. I pulled the agent and told him that he had booked the wrong destination. The Japanese agent said, 'no mistake' and proved it with a copy of the telex instructions from NOL. It said that I was to be flown to KL to take over Neptune Jasper in Port Klang. Again without any choice I boarded the flight to KL. While on the flight I asked myself what NOL was doing. They could have flown the Polish Chief Engineer to KL and left me alone to enjoy my last 3 months of sea time on Agate.

When I boarded Neptune Jasper, Captain Sze Shaw Pao told me that Chief Engineer RN Saxena's father passed away and he had to take emergency leave. I was his replacement. Sim Bock Seng was the 2nd Engineer on dispensation and since he had been on Jasper for the last 6 months, I was quite happy and confident that he could perform. After the introductions we heaved up anchor and sailed for Sydney. There was another Master on board, Captain Lim Kian Hock, who would take over on arrival Sydney when Captain Sze go on home leave. The voyage was good and we got to Sydney safely. She then called on Melbourne for loading, returned to Sydney for top up of more cargo and some deck containers. She was fully loaded when she departed Sydney. After dropping the pilot we took a portside turn. Instead of returning to upright position after we straightened our

heading, it listed to port at about 6 degrees. Since her fuel tanks and ballast were full we could do nothing. We slowly consumed our fuel from one port double bottom tank only. After 5 days she gradually returned to upright. 2 days later the main engine suddenly stopped. After inspection her aft fuel pump drive shaft coupling was sheared off at its neck i.e. the aft 3 units no longer can fire. We did not have a spare shaft on board. The Master was informed and he asked if we could still steam on with just the forward 3 units. I replied, "Possible provided we can start the engine". We removed the coupling bolts and lifted up all the aft 3 units fuel pump rollers. We then tried to start the engine several times but she did not fire. Everyone started to look at me for ideas. And that was when my engineering knowledge was put to test. I turned the engine with the turning gear to and position with No 1 piston at 7 degrees before top dead centre (fuel injection). The turning gear was disengaged the gave the engine a kick start and she fired. With only the 3 forward units firing the engine was unbalanced and vibrating abnormally. So we slowly played with her rpm and eventually got the speed that gave us the least vibration (can't remember the rpm) and kept it all the way to Singapore. We managed to do 6 knots speed with only 3 units working.

On arrival Singapore a new shaft was supplied which we refitted during the cargo operations. The engine was tested and in order. I finally signed off as I have clocked 19 months sea time for my Class 1 Certificate of Competency exam. That's the end of my sea service with NOL.

Looking back I did not regret or curse NOL for sending me to those 4 problematic vessels as I gained a lot of experience and confidence in my shore job later on.

Kan Seng Chut
June 2013