

Keppel Shipyard (1968 – 1982) Those Early Days ! (Part 1)

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Author: **Tham Yeng Fai**, was from the first batch of graduates in 1961 to graduate with the Diploma in Marine Engineering from the Singapore Polytechnic. He went to sea, clocked the sea time needed for his ticket but decided to come ashore to play his part in the localisation of Keppel Shipyard.

My early years at Keppel Shipyard (1968-1982)

When I joined the shipyard in February 1968, it was known as the Dockyard Department of the Port of Singapore Authority. The PSA then was a Statutory Board. As part of a plan by the Government to spin off the shipyard as a commercial enterprise and localize the management, Keppel Shipyard Pte Ltd was formed sometime in the third quarter of 1968.

Mr. Hon Sui Sen, who was then the Chairman of the Economic Development Board and the Development Bank of Singapore, was appointed the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Keppel Shipyard. Some of the other directors which come to mind were Mr. K.R. Chandra who was Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Law, Mr. Yap Ning Chew who was the Director of Public Works, Mr. S.Danabalan and Mr. Ang Kong Wah, who were at that time in the Development Bank of Singapore. There were also 2 appointees from the PSA on the Board; one of them was Mr. Billy Cheng.

The entire workforce and staff at the shipyards, previously employed by PSA, were absorbed by Keppel Shipyard. Amongst the senior staff members were the Personnel Manager – Mr. Pung Eng Huat, the Personnel Officer – Mr. P.P. Nair, the Chief Accountant – Mr. Tay Kim Kah, the Chief Timekeeper – Mr. Tan Yang Soon, and all the Foremen and Head Foremen of the various trades. The Marine Manager – Mr. T.C. Ball, the T.P. Yard Manager – Mr. May, the Electrical Superintendent – Mr. Peard, and a number of expatriate Foremen and Head Foremen were also retained and absorbed.

The facilities at Keppel Harbour comprised King's Dock, Queen's Dock, Nos. 1 & 2 Docks and their workshops, wharves, and work areas. Tanjong Pagar comprised Victoria and Albert Docks, some workshop facilities. Singapore Slipway & Engineering Company had a number of slipways

suitable for small vessels of up to 50 metres in length together with very limited workshop facilities. All these were transferred to Keppel Shipyard Pte Ltd.

In the prior years, many promising students had been selected and sent by the Government, on Colombo Plan and other scholarships, abroad, to universities in UK, Germany and Japan. Concurrently, the Marine Engineering Diploma Course was started at the Singapore Polytechnic in 1961. This was a 5 year course comprising of 2 years full-time study at the Polytechnic followed by 18 months at sea as an Engineer-Cadet and correspondence course for continuity of studies, and 12 months at an approved shore installation in Singapore and evening classes leading to a final examination. The Diploma would be recognized as valid exemption for Part A of the MOT Class 2 Engineer's Certificate. A further 18 months at sea would qualify him to sit for the full MOT Class 2 Certificate, and if successful, another 18 months at sea as a watch-keeping engineer would qualify him to sit for the MOT Class 1 Certificate. Such marine engineers were recognized as suitable and ready material for technical and management positions in shipyards, ship management, and engineering companies.

When I arrived, the shipyards were already under Swan Hunter management. The management team from Swan Hunter comprised of the Managing Director – Mr. Tom McLay, the General Manager – Mr. G Scammel, the Financial Controller – Mr. D. Hutcheon, the Works Manager – Mr. C. Clements, the Commercial Manager – Mr. N. Gregory, the Marketing Manager – Mr. Rodney Towers, the Purchasing & Stores Manager, the Chief Estimator – Mr. A.D. Clark, and five Shiprepair Managers, namely, Mr. John Harrison, Mr. Oliemans, Mr. Jim Sweeney, Mr. Ken Houston, & Mr. Harry Martin. The Training & Education Manager, Mr. Lai Park Onn, was a local. Their primary goals, under a management agreement, were to transform the company from a statutory board to a commercial enterprise, transfer management, technical, marketing, & commercial skills, as well as to implement the localization of the shipyard management.

Towards the end of my 18 month stint at sea as a junior engineer, I applied for the position of Foreman-Engineer at the then Dockyard Department of the PSA. Upon my return, I attended an interview by Mr. T.C. Ball and Mr. Pung Eng Huat and was accepted for the position of Foreman-Engineer.

I reported to work in early February 1968. The Head Foreman-Engineer was Mr. Norman Webb, and under him was a team of around 6 Foreman-Engineers. Apart from one ex sea-going engineer, the other 5 had been promoted from the rank & file. They were thus only semi-literate in English. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Webb was transferred to the Tanjong Pagar Yard as Yard Manager, and Mr. Leong Cheong Seng took his place as Head Foreman-Engineer. I threw myself wholeheartedly into the job and was in charge of the engineering repairs of 2-3 ships at any one time. This was partly because the other Foremen were not cooperative and refused to take charge of more than 1 ship at any one time. Around the middle of the year, Mr. Kung Yew Hock & Mr. Leong Yew Kong joined as Foreman-Engineers. When Mr. Leong Cheong Seng took a month off for his annual leave in September, I was appointed Acting Head Foreman-Engineer on the recommendation of Mr. Leong and Mr. Ball.

After Mr. Leong returned from leave to resume his position as Head Foreman-Engineer, I was sent on orientation to the Commercial Department as part of a promotion exercise. Meanwhile, Mr. Kung and Mr. Leong were settling well into their jobs, and they were joined later in the year by Mr. Toh Siong Hoe, much to the relief of the Head Foreman-Engineer. Mr. Tong Chong Heong and Mr. S.T. Fong joined the following year, followed by Mr. V. Veerappan.

Concurrently, in 1968, the scholars were returning. The early arrivals were Mr. Chua Chor Teck and Mr. Loh Wing Siew, followed by Mr. Khor Teik Lin, Mr. Michael Koh Liang Hong, Mr. Tony Yeo and Mr. Ng Siong Tee. They were given positions of Management Trainees and assumed various operational responsibilities. After a short period of traineeship, Mr. Chua was posted to Singapore Slipway & Engineering as the General Manager and Mr. Loh assumed the position of Electrical Superintendent. Mr. Khor, Mr. Koh, Mr. Yeo and Mr. Ng assumed positions of Trainee Shiprepair Managers in the Marine Department under Mr. Ball. Mr. Choo Chiau Beng, Mr. Y.Y. Fong and Mr. Lim Soon Heng joined in 1969 followed by Mr. David Chin Soon Siong and Mr. Chung Chee Kit in 1970.

Mr. Pung Eng Huat, the Personnel Manager, passed away suddenly in 1969, and Mr. Jerry Koh took over the reins for about 2 years before leaving for a position in a bank. A search for a suitable person to take over this critical position, as we were in the process of localization, ended with the appointment of Mr. Lawrence Mah. In 1971, Swan Hunter replaced their Managing Director Mr. McLay with Mr. C.N. Watson and their General Manager Mr. Scammel

with Mr. A.M. Fraser. These two new appointees proved to be more effective and competent than their predecessors.

In 1969, a core of locals led by Mr. Chua Chor Teck, Mr. Lai Park Onn, and Mr. Loh Wing Siew, started meeting after office hours to plan for the replacement of the Swan Hunter managers and the localization of the shipyard management. In 1971, the senior local officers were summoned to attend a meeting after work at the DBS Building with Mr. Hon and the other directors of Keppel Shipyard to informally sound us out on the plan which had been submitted. The lobby for localization was successful and Swan Hunter's contract was not renewed when it expired on 31st May 1972. Mr George Bogaars took over from Mr. Hon as Chairman of the Board and oversaw the localization of the management.

Mr. C.N. Watson was retained as Managing Director. Mr. Chua Chor Teck returned from Singapore Slipway as General Manager of Keppel Shipyard.

Mr. Tay Kim Kah was appointed Financial Controller and Mr. Lawrence Mah was Personnel Manager. The key operational positions were headed by Mr. Khor Teik Lin – Marine Manager, Mr. Y.F. Tham – Commercial Manager, Mr. Loh Wing Siew – Works Manager, Mr. Ng Siong Tee – Marketing Manager and Mr. T.C. Chong – Purchasing & Stores Manager.

In 1974, Mr. C.N. Watson went over to Sembawang Shipyard as Managing Director. Mr. Chua Chor Teck became Managing Director and Mr. Loh Wing Siew was promoted to General Manager and Mr. Lai Park Onn to Personnel Manager. The key operational positions were reshuffled. Mr. Kung Yew Hock was promoted to Marine Manager, Mr. Khor Teik Lin - Commercial Manager, Mr. Y.F. Tham - Works Manager, and Mr. David Chin – Marketing Manager. Mr. Lawrence Mah became Managing Director of Singapore Slipway & Engineering and Mr. Tony Yeo - Tanjong Pagar Yard Manager. Mr. Ng Siong Tee went over to head Kapal Shipmanagement and Mr. Choo Chiau Beng was sent to the Philippines as E.V.P. of our newly acquired shipyard there. A notable arrival at around this time was Mr. Teo Soon Hoe who joined as Management Accountant and rose to become the Financial Controller, taking over from Mr. Tay Kim Kah in 1984.

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