

# Memories of Singapore Pioneer Mariners – The Beginning

Date Published : 28 March 2010

## Author:

### **Cheng Huang Leng**

- Self Appointed “Historian”! Memories of Singapore Pioneer Mariners Project
- Head, Marine Engineering Department from 1978 to 1981, Singapore Polytechnic

If you have collected your CPF already, you are likely to be one of the trailblazers who made Singapore’s marine industry what it is today! For example, in 1961, Mr Kenneth Kee Ah Bah was among the first batch of students to enrol for the Technician Diploma in Marine Engineering. He would be among the first to go to sea. Mr Tan Cheng Hui and I were the first Singaporeans (we joined the same day) with university degrees to teach at the Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Division.

Thus in terms of marine related professions, we have amongst us (including ladies), we have many firsts – to enter the 5-year apprenticeship scheme, to sail as Chief Engineer or Master, the first Engine Driver, the first harbour pilot, the first local ship owner, the first entrepreneur to set up a marine equipment repair company, the first to provide a bunkering service, to be the first local MD of a foreign owned subsidiary, etc, etc.

In terms of marine related work, we have amongst us many who were directly involved in the construction of the first Singapore-built Freedom vessel or oil rig, in the first major conversion work e.g. from a cargo ship into a sheep carrier, from a tanker to a FPSO, the first “jumbourizing” of a ship, etc, etc.

In terms of marine events or incidents, some of you were there when e.g. Neptune Sapphire broke into two, when Eniweitok brought down the cable car system, when Spyros exploded killing 48 people.

We are the pioneers who helped transformed Singapore into a leading maritime nation! And if we share our memories of your first experience or event or incident, we will have the history of Singapore’s maritime history. Our story will be told by you as an individual who was there as it happened. This is a lot more interesting and real than history as told by writers commissioned by corporations or institutions.

I have identified this effort which I will title: “Memories of Singapore Pioneer Mariners” as one project that we call all leave as a legacy for the next generation of mariners. Through our accounts, they will have a good feel of what we all went through to make our maritime industry what it is today.

May I have your memories please! And quickly (within the next 12 months?) too before we forget too much! NOTE: Marine related non-Singaporeans are pioneers too and are welcome to contribute their memories!

Here are two examples (one short and one long-winded!) of what two pioneers remembered.

Example 1:

Contributor: **Kenneth Kee Ah Bah** who in 1961 was a student at the Singapore Polytechnic at Prince Edward Road.

The Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Course started in July 1961. I was among the 30 odd students enrolled in the first year and by the 5th year (Graduation Year in mid-1966), 23 or 24 were awarded the Diploma in Marine Engineering. Out of this number, 19 continued at sea to serve their sea time. However, in the process, a few of them left the sea before obtaining sufficient sea time for their Class 2 exam. Nevertheless, the end result was still very good - 11 or 12 obtained their Class 1. A few came ashore after their Class 2.

Example 2:

Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Department in the early 1970s

1971: First Two Singaporeans Deployed to Teach Marine Engineering I was a Colombo Plan scholar and hence bonded to serve the Singapore Government. Having indicated an interest in teaching, I was asked to choose between the University of Singapore and the Singapore Polytechnic (fondly referred to as the "Poly"). I decided on the Poly because I felt that a degree education like the one I just went through was too theoretical to be useful to our marine industry. My impression of sea farers then was that marine engineers are hands-on people who must know and be able to do or, to quote Mr. David Chin Soon Siong, "you move if the ship does not move"!

Thus on 15 November 1971, I began my career as a teacher at the Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Division. By virtue of my Masters degree, I was given 2 increments above the bottom rung of the teaching scale and was appointed Lecturer (instead of Assistant Lecturer) with a starting salary of \$950 per month. My father's salary then was \$4 a day as a labourer with which he raised 10 kids. Immediately I retired my father who was in his late 50s and not in good health and told him to enjoy life! Mr. MK Das Gupta was Head of Marine Engineering Division. I think he quickly found that as I had never been an apprentice nor to sea, I was not very useful to him other than to teach pen and paper subjects like Heat Engines and Strength of Materials. The only other land lubber was Mr. Tan Cheng Hui, my classmate and Colombo Plan Scholar. We started work on the same day and were the first Singaporeans with university degrees to teach at the Division. He being a Naval Architect was asked to teach Naval Architecture. Nearly all the other teachers were Indians who were qualified Chief Engineers with sea experience and I can recall Messrs Pua, Upadhaya, R.K. Agrawal and N. Mistry. Thus by default, I was assigned to teach Heat Engines and Ship Construction.

\*\*\*\*\*