

The SHB Artisans' Quarters, Pirates and Club 1496

In 2010, I got a couple of mariners to share their memories. About 25, mostly the older ones, did and their contributions are collated as "Memories of Mariners" and deposited in <http://www.snames.org.sg/>. Do visit the website and I am sure that you would agree with me that many of them do have interesting firsthand accounts of events that shaped our industry since the 1960s.

Recently, I was invited to a reunion of several of GT Tong's childhood neighbors when he grew up at Morse Road. He and their parents were "artisans" who worked for the Singapore Harbour Board (SHB) and they were housed in the SHB Artisans' Quarters at Morse Road. Most had followed their fathers into our marine industry and shaped Keppel Shipyard. During the course of the evening, I learned that they played together as members of the SHB Boys' Club and excelled as "Pirates" in softball. An excellent account of their exploits is given by Robert Ong. I also come to know of the existence of "Club 1496". It turned out that David Chin is their "anchor" man and I got him to tell about the club and its members.

The Singapore Harbour Board Artisans' Quarters at Morse Road

The SHB Artisans' Quarters were officially opened on 31 November 1939 by Sir Alexander Small, Singapore's Colonial Secretary. The quarters could house 216 families in 2-room units (a bedroom and a living room) with a bathroom, a kitchen and a lavatory. The units were rented to artisans at 7.5% of their salary. At that time, the SHB was a major employer of about 7,000 men. According to the Straits Times report, the units were considered "modern" with novel features like "the provision of triple clothes rods working on swivels". In 1953, another three 4-storey blocks of flats were added to bring the total to 16 blocks of flats and according to one of the residents, Wan Kam Fook, "arranged in a horseshoe along Morse Road".

(The above notes are extracted from reports by the Straits Times dated 30 November 1939 and 15 October 1953) (See this link for the original Straits Times report :<http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article.aspx?articleid=straitstimes19391130-1.2.65&sessionid=578603cbb1e043ac80db0906e0c172bd&keyword=singapore+harbour+board+artisan+quarters&token=quarters%2cartisan%2cboard%2charbour%2csingapore>).

In addition to the 216 artisans who worked for the British at the SHB, their children who grew up together in the enclave naturally followed their fathers' footsteps even after the SHB became PSA and Keppel Shipyard in 1968. The children typically began as apprentices from as young as 15 years old and during their 5-year stint followed diploma courses at the Singapore Vocational Institute or the Singapore Polytechnic on day-release and/or evenings-only programmes. After their apprenticeship, most stayed on in the shipyard and worked their way up from technicians to managers. Many left to take up sea careers and several rose to Chief Engineer positions before returning to shore postings.

The boys from the SHB Artisan Quarters who grew up together and served their apprenticeship together are in their 60s today. They meet annually to raise a glass or two and reminiscence.

Cheng Huang Leng
April 2013

The “Pirates” of the Singapore Harbour Board Boys Club (SHBBC)

“The Pirates were all boys from the Morse Road quarters. And all boys were by default, members of the SHBBC. Our club was situated along Telok Blangah Road opposite the Morse Road junction.

We began to learn to play as boys of about age 10. We were coached by Lloyd Valberg and he was also the Chief of the SHB’s Fire Department. (*Lloyd Valberg was among the first of 4 Singaporeans who competed at the London Olympics in 1948. He was a high jumper*). The boys were poor and had to share used gloves. Catching a ball thrown by our coach was painful but we persevered. We entered the Singapore Softball Championships at Division 3. Within 3 years, we were promoted to Division 1 and were undefeated champions for 7 years from 1966 to 1972. Team members included Jeffrey Fok Swee Yin, Smiler Chan, Floyd Valberg (Lloyd’s son) and his cousin Norman, 4 Schooling brothers – Chesney, Colin, Jack and Locs, myself (Robert) and my brothers Roland and Raymond, Wan Kam Fook, James Lim Wah Cheng, Hou Meng Hsien, Soh Thim Fatt and his brother Peng Fatt.

Nine Pirates represented Singapore at the 1st World Men Softball Championship in 1972 and held in Manila. We returned 8th out of 10 teams. We improved to 5th out of 8 teams at the 1974 Asian Softball Championship held in Manila. We improved further to 2nd out of 5 teams at the 1976 ASEAN Games held in Kuala Lumpur. I represented Singapore from 1972 to 1975 and coached our team for the 1976 games. I was Manager for Singapore’s National Team at the 1981 SEA Games.

The Pirates’ most memorable game was against teams from the USS Enterprise (the aircraft carrier) in the 1970’s. We played a total of 3 games. We drew the first two games against their A and B teams at 1-1 and 5-5. In the final game played at the Padang, we played against their combined team made up of their best players. I made the winning hit bringing my brother Roland home to end our game at 4-1. The next day (on 16 November 1971), the Straits Times headline on the sports page reported that the “Pirates ‘sink’ Enterprise”.

Some of you may wonder how we as apprentices with a weekly allowance of \$14.96 could afford to play softball at Divisional level. Well we certainly could not afford the \$7 for a glove each but we could repay a loan at 10 cents every time we turn up for practice. That “loan” came from the Caretaker of our SHB Boys’ Club, Mr. Low Meng Chee or “Kow Soak” as we lovingly call him. Thus when we fielded our team to play in the Singapore Softball Association League Division 3, we played with our own gloves for the first time. Perhaps that gave us the impetus to play well for we were promoted to Division 2 the following year. Thereafter, as we got better, we got invited to friendly games with teams from US ships docked at Keppel. And they were friendly indeed for they gave us much needed equipments such as mitts, gloves and bats. As we progressed up the ladder and became Champions in Division 1 we were sponsored by Peter Stuyvesant. The tobacco company provided us with imported gears specially made for baseballs players in the US design after the Pittsburgh Pirates so much so that in 1969, we were the best Dress Team in the Annual Softball Jamboree. And at the same event, we also won both the Double Header games against the All-Stars Teams made up of the best players of Local, American, Canadian and Japanese Nationalities.

Sadly, the time came for the Pirates to be dissolved as most of the original players had to leave for careers at sea or report for National Service. Those left behind continued to play not as Pirates but as Kings. They too did well by continuing to win and capture the Division 1 title. Sadly, they too had to disband eventually and this time due to a lack of sponsors.

The “Pirate” as remembered by Robert Ong
March 2013

Club 1496

Club 1496 is a gathering of all ex-Keppel apprentices. Anyone who serves an apprenticeship at Keppel is an automatic member — no fees whatsoever.

The oldest Member is Wong Han Chong, who started his apprenticeship in 1957, Ron Pereira and Michael Lim of the 1958 batch are 2nd oldest members, Charles Foo and 4 others in his 1959 batch are the 3rd oldest members. Seng Chut and I are from the 1962 batch. The youngest is Choo Chiau Yong from the 1975 batch, when Keppel stopped its apprenticeship scheme, when it opened its Training Centre — which I think in hindsight is a big mistake.

Hence we now have about 85 members and usually each gathering has an attendance of between 40 to 60 members attending.

The name “1496” is from the starting salary of our first years’ apprentice pay of S\$14.96 a week. So as all of us suffered that pay for 1 year, we decided to call ourselves by that name. By the way, my subsequent salary as with all Keppel apprentices were as follows

2nd year’s pay was S\$16.28 a week

3rd year’s pay was S\$19.16 a week

4th year’s pay was S\$21.12 a week

5th year’s pay was S\$25.52 a week.

Club 1496 is about 4 years old. We typically meet twice a year, over lunch on two Saturdays—the Saturday nearest to Chap Goh Meh (15th day of the Lunar New Year) and the Saturday nearest to National Day in August. There is no set programme. Most of the time we drink, eat and reminiscence.

It is a “come as you can” type of gathering and we just go Dutch over what the lunch costs. Sometimes we have some money left over in the rounding up of what we collect, so we don’t bother with small changes, collecting either S\$30 per head or S\$50, or S\$70 per head, depending on where we dine.

I’m the organizer and “mother-hen” to chase people to attend. Kan Seng Chut is the Treasurer, meaning the chap who keeps the leftover money, after paying for the food and drinks. He is tasked to use the remainder to buy 4D—in the hope that the next lunch would then be paid from the winnings—but we have not won anything yet

The “Club 1496” as remembered by David Chin Soon Siong
April 2013