Introduction to Maritime Stories of Singapore

The earliest known inhabitants of Temasek were the “orang laut” or sea people. They lived in the sea off what is later called, “Keppel Harbour” and on the harbour shores. And they lived mostly off the sea.

In the 1300s, Temasek became Singapura. It grew in importance as one of a chain of trading centres in South East Asia. Many came here to trade mostly spices for what they need. The Dutch that came to this region after the Portuguese were almost everywhere except Singapura. The British who came after the Dutch had to be contented with what’s left. Sir Stamford Raffles recce the area and recognised the strategic importance of Singapura. It was also not yet occupied by the Dutch. Thus on 6 February 1819, Singapura became Singapore when Raffles secured control of our island to the East India Company by agreeing to pay, (according to Wikipedia), “Hussein Shah (who was the Sultan of Johore) was paid $5,000 a year while the Temenggong (governor) received $3,000 a year”. Raffles left the next day after putting Major William Farquhar in charge. And fortunately for us, he left with this (again, according to Wikipedia), an “explicit order” “to maintain free passage of ships through the Strait of Singapore”. And Singapore as a free trading post under the protection of the British flourished.

For mariners, a good account of the maritime history and development of Singapore from the 1700s to 1930s is given by Mr. F G Ritchie in his memoirs *“The Early Days of Ship Surveying in Singapore and of Ritchie & Bisset 1866 – 1928“. To know what happened after that till 1960s, we have the accounts of several mariners who were born in the 1930s and lived through that period. Mr. Ritchie’s memoirs and their accounts are in this eBook.*

In Mr. Ritchie’s account, there was a “F. Paul, then an apprentice at Keppel Harbour” who later became “Senior Chief Engineer in the Heap Eng Moh S.S. Co”. It is not clear whether Mr. Paul was born in Singapore. What is clear is that the apprenticeship scheme for preparing mariners was already established in some form by the 1900s (note that Victoria Dock was built in 1868).

What we personally know from Club 1496 members is that Singaporeans taking up apprenticeship in significant numbers began in 1958 when the 1st batch of apprentices completed their formal 5-year apprenticeship programme. A couple of hundreds must have been trained in this way till the scheme was scrapped in 1975. Many apprentices went to sea to earn good money. It was also their only way to become qualified maritime professionals.

On 18 July 1967, the British Labour Government decided to pull out of Singapore. As part of the handover, in 1968 the Singapore Harbour Board became PSA and Keppel Shipyard and the Naval Dockyard became Sembawang Shipyard. Fortunately, Jurong Shipyard was set up earlier, in 1963 as a joint venture with IHI. Thus our marine industry comprised the 3 big yards and a handful of smaller ones in Tanjong Rhu, several supplier and service companies.

The British pull out was anticipated by the Singapore Government except that it was brought forward from the mid 1970s to December 1971. This gave a spurt to Singapore’s industrialisation programme. The training capacities of vocational institutes and polytechnics were stepped up to support the demand for artisans and technicians.

Engineer training was not available at the local university and many were quickly sent abroad on sponsorships by shipyards and Colombo Plan scholarships obtained from friendly governments, to pursue degree level courses.

The various manpower developments took place from the late 1950s to 1980s. Most of the ex-apprentices, returning seafarers, technicians and scholars are with us. Most of them are Singaporeans. A significant number are non-Singaporeans who have made Singapore their home. They are all pioneers of our marine and maritime sectors. And it is through their personal memories that we record our history and learn how they shaped our heritage. Through this eBook we pay to our tribute to our pioneers for their achievement in growing our fledgling industry into a major World player in the building, conversion and repair of ships, rigs and offshore structures and the provision of just about every aspect of supporting marine services.

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