An Evening with The Morse Road Gang

After a few years of reminders to GT Tong and Fok Swee Yin to let me meet their gang members, I finally got an invitation one evening in March 2013 to meet them. I have named them the Morse Road Gang for all of them grew up on Morse Road. I managed to speak to a few of them in between many rounds of beer and mouthfuls of food provided by GT Tong. Here's what I found out.

Fok Swee Yin rose from apprentice to President of Keppel Cebu Shipyard, a softball player for the Pirates and used to be a band boy. There's more about him later.

Wun Kum Chuen, Kam Fook and Kum Yue are the elder 3 of 7 brothers who lived in Block 13, 41 Morse Road. Kum Chuen and Kam Fook were apprentices at the Singapore Harbour Board while Kum Yue pursued the 5 year Diploma in Marine Engineering course at the Singapore Polytechnic and graduated in 1971. On completion of his apprenticeship, Kum Chuen, the eldest, went to sea on Austasia Line and sailed 3 years before getting a land job at Salim's power plant in Java. (Soedoeno Salim was Liem Sioe Liong before he changed his name to suit the Indonesian Government. In the 1990s, he owned the biggest power plant in Asia, generating 350MW. Power was mainly for a limestone quarry and cement plant.) He retired in 2001.

Wan Kam Fook after his apprenticeship was among a batch of 7 who joined the 3-year Trainee Technician scheme offered by Keppel Shipyard. Among other roles, one of the useful roles of trainee technicians was to be able interpret the work orders to the charge-hands who spoke only Cantonese. Among the 7 were Fok Swee Yin, Lee Yue Chong, Lee Chong Beng and Wong Hong Swee. At the end of the scheme, they would be eligible for appointment as Assistant Foreman. According to Kam Fook, the pay was "OK-lah" but he was attracted to an advertisement put up by ESSO to recruit technicians. When he turned up for the qualifying test, he found "More than 1,000 applicants taking the test and only 110 would be selected. I was among the lucky few." Kam Fook probably did better than others because he passed his 2nd Class Certificate of Competency Part A. It was no wonder that Kam Fook left for, "The pay was very attractive at $400 a month plus some perks like being able to claim for transport and a typical 3 months annual bonus." Thus even in the late 1960's many apprentices left to join the oil majors or take up sea careers. Thus Kam Fook became a technician and devoted his whole working life at ESSO's refinery in Jurong.

Wan Kum Yue sailed with Bank Line for 18 months before being "grounded" when he got married. Returning to shore also meant having to serve National Service. This he did at Mindef's Naval Engineering. On ROD, he sold MWM engines for a short period before leaving to join his brother (Kam Chuen) at Salim's power plant in Java. In 1997, he was re-assigned to BatamIndo Industrial Park – a joint venture between the Salim Group and Singapore Technologies. He went to the new park with 2 old Mirrless Blackstone engines that were shipped over on a barge. He ran the park's power plant till his retirement in 2011.

Fok Swee Yin was 15 when he joined the Singapore Harbour Board as an apprentice in 1963. He retired in 2009 after serving 40 years out of his 43-year career with Keppel. He started off in Afloat instead of following his uncle, who was chief of the Machine Shop or his father who was a marine fitter. Allan Fok is Swee Yin's cousin and he was also an apprentice at SHB. Note that besides Swee Yin, one of his 4 sisters also worked for Keppel beginning in Accounts Department. She was then posted to Wartsila Singapore when it was set up as a joint venture with Keppel. When this venture was discontinued, she was re-assigned to Keppel T&T.

Fok Swee Yin shared how he went from Apprenticeship to President of a shipyard:

"Like most of my friends in our neighbourhood, I left school earlier than usual to help supplement my family income. Thus with a Secondary 3 education I joined the Singapore Harbour Board as an apprentice and attended the day-release and evenings only course at the Singapore Vocational Institute. On completion of my apprenticeship and course, I worked as a trainee technician at the SHB. The pay was low so that I left after 2 years to work for a subcontractor only to find out that things were no better. I then decided to go to sea with Bank Line. The 3 years at sea were valuable learning years on what ships and engines are all about. I came ashore in 1973 to do my 2nd Class MOT Part A. Before I could do my Part B, Mr.

Lai Park Onn asked me to join Keppel. I did without hesitation for my father just retired and I needed a job quickly to be able to support my siblings. I was appointed foreman and worked my way up the organisation as Ship Repair Manager, Yard Manager and General Manager before retiring as President of Keppel Cebu Shipyard.

As Ship Repair Manager the challenge of having to look after the whole ship myself was my most memorable experience. It is also most satisfying when you see the ship sail after all repairs were completed successfully. Working abroad required me to pick up new skills for example, when I was in Batangas in 1978 to start the repair yard, I had to learn marketing, read a balance sheet, accounting and budgeting.

I am glad that my son has followed 3 generations of Foks into our marine industry. He studied Naval Architecture on a Keppel Scholarship and is currently at Keppel's Houston office. Looking back, I have no regrets devoting my whole working career to the marine industry. The only drawback was the need to work long hours and many nights to ensure that the promises we made to owners about their ships are kept."

Swee Yin has many uncles and cousins who worked in the SHB, shipping companies or marine related businesses. His cousin, Allan Fok Kwok Wai shared his beginnings,

"I was born in 1948 and the eldest of 8 children. At 15, I was apprenticed to SHB. Like many of my neighbours, I had to help support our family. We were among the poorest however the beautiful part about Morse Road was that there was no class or rank. All were neighbourly and all doors were left open till night. I took up night class at the Gan Eng Seng Lembaga to continue my secondary school education. The fee then was an affordable $5 a month. On completion of my apprenticeship, I went sailing with local companies including Guan Guan and Kie Hock.

In about 1978 I left the marine industry to join the corrosion control industry. During this period, I learned a lot from the Americans, Swedes, Swiss, French, Austrians and Australians. I could be considered a pioneer in Tuftcoat and became one of its Directors in the end.

Today, I am semi-retired. I operate a drug addict treatment centre (URWELL) in Johor with a Singaporean partner."

Another cousin, Fok Wan Chue joined the PUB Water Department after his apprenticeship and served there till his retirement in 2002 at the age of 55. Not surprisingly, he had a hand in nearly all aspects of water from extracting raw water from Sungei Terbrau to pumping stations to treatment plants to service reservoirs to delivery of drinking water to our homes.

Robert Ong did not become an apprentice. He was however a SHB Boys' Club member and excelled in softball (see his account of the "Pirates". He was the middle boy of 8 siblings. His connection with SHB was through his grandfather who was the Chief Time Keeper. His grandfather raised the 8 (4 boys and 4 girls) for his businessman son-in-law (Robert's father) who died young at age 33 of high blood pressure. Of Robert's generation, only his brother Roland Ong was apprenticed to SHB. Roland studied at the Singapore Vocational Institute and worked in the foundry. He left Keppel for Marathon LeTourneau and was Yard Manager when it closed down in the 1980s. He then left to join Pan United Shipyard as a Project Manager. Roland died at age 59 in 2006. Robert used to live in 121 Block 9 Morse Road.

The above memories were captured by Cheng Huang Leng some time in March and April 2013