Why Do Marine Engineering?

The short answer for me is that I could not find a job! For the long answer, read on…..

At age 15, I completed my O-levels. Like most of my classmates, I was too poor to further my studies. To make matters worse, my father, a shopkeeper's assistant was retrenched after about 35 years of service. His employer could not afford to keep him on for a salary of $4 a day!

I decided to look for work. Though I was called up for several interviews, I failed to find a job. I discovered that I knew zilch about selling, could not type (never seen or owned a typewriter prior to my job interview) and had no clue as to what work that people do in their offices in town. I was a kampong bumpkin whose skill sets included catching spiders, climbing trees and flying kites. As all my needs were satisfied within 5 km of my squatter home, the thought of exploring downtown rarely crossed my mind. Most of the time my pockets were empty! Besides the job interviews, my other trip out of Kangkar to "Por Toi" (town) were to the National Library and that was during my A-levels! Till 1965, we had no electricity (hence no TV). Light at night came from the kerosene lamp, water came from a hole in the ground and our output also went into a hole in the ground.

My interviewers were tactful. Instead of telling me that I was good for nothing, they said, "You are too young. We are not allowed to employ anyone below 16". So what to do? I went back to school. The Government gave me a bursary worth $72 per year. That 20 cents a day meant that my parents need not worry about my pocket money.

Two years later, I completed my A-levels and decided to look for work again. This time I was better prepared. I learned how to type.

The first to respond was Shell. However, the first company to call me up for an interview in December 1966 was Chartered Bank. I got the job as cashier by answering just two questions!

> Q1: The "ang moh" boss (forgot his name) asked, "What do I know about banking?"
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> I replied, "I know nothing Sir other than that it has to do with money."
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> Q2: He asked, "If you knew nothing, why apply to work for a bank?"
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> I replied, "Sir, I need a job to help support my family. So I typed a standard appeal letter to companies whose names appeared in bold in the telephone directory. I must have sent out at least 300 letters. You are the first to call me up for an interview and that's why I am here."
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> He replied, "You are the first honest person I meet after a very long time. You start work on Monday!"

And I did on 2 January 1967 with a salary of $220 (almost double what my dad was earning as a daily rated odd job labourer). My job was to sort cheques by bank. It was easy – just punch in the amount onto a machine and place the cheque in the designated pigeon hole – one for each bank. If the job is done correctly, the final figure should tally with the sorted totals. I did my job 100% correct. However, the best part was that others were not always perfect AND I was being paid overtime to resolve the errors. I was often paid about $3 per hour to find out why there was a discrepancy of ONE cent – a common error! And I would go through each of the several hundred entries to find that missing cent. I usually do after about 3 hours. It usually was an exchange rate error. And I would earn the extra dollars to be able to treat myself to a bowl of kambing soup (30 cents) at the Prince Edward Road car park before boarding the #18 STC bus for home. On hindsight, I suspect that my team of workers whom I got along very well must have deliberately manufactured the errors to allow me to earn some extra income! I have pointed out to my supervisor that it would be cheaper to put one cent to right the shortfall than paying me overtime. He said no but was not able to explain why. Till today, accountants I have put the question to were not able to give me a simple explanation as to why it should not be done.

At the end of 3 months, the Personnel Manager (a Mr. Dieu) congratulated me for passing my probation period with a letter of confirmation. I thanked him and the next day (on 1 April 1967) handed him my letter of resignation giving 30 days notice as required in the contract. He was aghast! The interview went like this:

> "Were you the person I confirmed yesterday of your appointment with this bank?"
>
> "Yes"
>
> "And you want to resign today?"
>
> "Yes"

He called the Bank Manager (a Mr. Woodford) who asked me to see him immediately and the interview went like this:

> "Why are you leaving?"
>
> I explained, "Sir, I just won a Colombo Plan Scholarship to study Marine Engineering at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne."

Instead of scolding me, he extended his hand to mine,

> "Congratulations! Newcastle is in the North (he was from the South of England). I heard that it's cold up there. Do be prepared. I wish you well!"

I wondered what happened to Mr. Woodford and I hope that there are still enlightened managers about today!

While in school in 1966, I did put in my application for a scholarship without entertaining the idea that I could win one and go for further studies. My focus then was on finding a job. Around February 1967 when my results (C4 for GP, A for Physics, B for Pure Maths, C for Add Maths and C for Chemistry) were received, I gave up hope of a scholarship. I was disappointed for I expected 2As and 2Bs. However, I was surprised to be short-listed by the Public Service Commission and was called for an interview! Maybe my ECA helped. I played hockey for my schools (Serangoon English and Montfort).

After the usual questions, I was asked, "Why choose Marine Engineering?"

> I replied, "Anything to do with the sea should be good because I have read in the newspapers that shipyards like Jurong Shipyard are being established, PSA has big plans to attract ships to our port and there were lots of news about the growth of maritime sector".
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> I also added, "I do not mind getting my hands dirty. I sometimes help my neighbour repair his carburettor".

That must have tipped the balance for I remember one of the interviewers was suitably impressed. I was awarded the scholarship to read Marine Engineering at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. The course started in October 1967. I was told that from April to September, I would be given a part-time teaching job, hence the reason for having to leave Chartered Bank.

I was deployed to Yio Chu Kang Secondary School. I had a great time teaching Mathematics, Science and PE. I found out why most teachers did not like PE. It meant having to be in school most of the day. I did not mind for I enjoyed teaching. I also did not mind being asked to try the outputs (pies, cakes, laksa, etc) of the domestic science class also held outside normal school hours! Plus I was paid $275 per month – big money then!

And when the PSC asked me to stay on to do a M. Sc. in Shipbuilding with the condition that I might be deployed to teach, I agreed. I completed my studies in September 1971 and began my career with the Marine Engineering and Shipbuilding Division of the Singapore Polytechnic on 15 November 1971.

And that's the long story of how this country bumpkin entered the World of mariners!

I would also love to know how you ended up in our marine industry. Do send me your memories like what Lo Pui Sang has done (see below).

Cheng Huang Leng, student at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK from 1967 to 1971, held various positions at the Singapore Polytechnic from 1971 to 1990. Email: chenghuangleng@gmail.com

There is only ONE simple reason for taking up Marine Engineering during my time. My father needed only to pay for my first 2 years of full time study while other courses required 3 years. After that I could support myself during cadetship, save my cadet pay to fund my final year of study. With this plan, I was supposed to join the 3rd batch (in 1968) but could not afford to do so - my father died during that year. We were a poor family and I was forced to work to save enough money if I wanted to study further. My results were not good enough to qualify for any scholarship. I managed to save the money needed and I join the 8th batch as the oldest student in class, the rest were mostly 17 year olds. I envied them as they had fathers to support them.

Author: Lo Pui Sang who graduated with a Diploma in Marine Engineering in 1973. He was the 8th batch of students who took the "old" course i.e. comprising 2 years of study, 18 months at sea and 12 months of workshop and part time study. Email: lopuisang@yahoo.com.sg

I took up Marine Engineering for the following reasons:

1) To see the world

2) To earn good money

3) To get indefinite deferment from National Service

I was in the class of 1970/74, which is the first batch under the 4-year course, reduced from 5 year, and as a result, we graduated at the same time as our seniors.

I did my cadetship on board Neptune Jasper and Jade. I had a life threatening experience on board Neptune Jasper in Dec 1972 when I was downed with acute appendicitis, 2 days from Sydney. I was unable to work and in pains. Upon reaching port, I was rushed to the hospital where an operation was immediately done. My appendix has just started to burst, and this resulted in post-operative complications. Consequently, I stayed 3 weeks in a Sydney hospital and spent my Christmas there. I thanked God that I was saved just in time and was subsequently discharged and recuperated on board as a passenger on the journey back to Singapore.

I found that I didn't quite like sea farer's life and after I graduated in 1974, managed to get a job in Vosper Thornycroft as a Design Draughtsman for 3 months before calling up for National Service. It was in Vosper that I discovered my flair for design and decided to pursue this as my career thereafter. At the same time, the long arm of the Law has caught up with all the Poly Marine boys and we were all drafted to serve in the Army / Navy. 1974 was the first year that Poly Marine boys were drafted.

Marine Engineering course is actually Mechanical based with Marine subjects. The academic subjects that we covered in our studies like Electronics, Maths, Mechanics, Chemistry, and Thermodynamics were useful when I started to work as EA (Mech Design) in Philips (Audio) in 1977, after I completed my N.S. All in all, I spent about 18 years in Product Design (Consumer Electronics and Commercial products), before I switched career to Service, Supply Chain and Quality. I worked mostly in big MNC like Philips, Smith Corona, Motorola, Dell and Apple, rising thru the ranks into senior management. I was very fortunate to have worked under many good bosses who have influenced and moulded me into what I am today.

Marine Engineers often have to work under very harsh conditions & limitations on board and my 1-year cadetship has helped to “toughen” me with a “can-do” attitude.

Though I pursue a different career path, I was grateful that Marine Engineering course has well prepared its students to take on various & different challenges in the working world, as evidenced by the various shore-based professions held by former marine engineers.

I also fondly remembered Mr. Cheng, who taught Automation & Control in our final year. He is well known for his no-nonsense approach for inattentiveness in his class and his zero tolerance for non-punctuality made his students fear and respect him. Despite that, he is also both firm and fair.

Author: Ng Kian Ming, who graduated with a Diploma in Marine Engineering in 1974.