How students were assigned to shipping companies as engineer cadets

As a course requirement, Marine Engineering students were required to go to sea for at least 9 months as Cadets. One of my toughest tasks was to find shipping companies to provide sufficient places for all my students – 160 of them when the course was at its peak! The companies who offered to accept cadets included:

- CF Sharp
- Guan Guan
- Honduras Reefers
- Kapal Shipmanagment
- Kie Hock
- Maersk Line
- Neptune Orient Lines
- Ocean Fleets
- Pacific International Lines
- Royal Interocean Lines
- Shell Tankers
- Singapore Shipping Agencies
- Straits Steamship
- Timur Carriers
- Thome Shipmanagement

The above list is not comprehensive for there were at least 20 companies which I will add when I remember them!

As a reward, I have decided that the top 10 students get to choose their shipping company first. Most of them would choose Maersk, Ocean Fleets and Shell where they were paid well, were given uniforms and generous allowances. The rest would be assigned by the luck of the draw as described by Daniel Chua (from the 1981 batch).

I thought my way of allocating ships to students was the fairest way. My only regret was that the Singapore Polytechnic and I were not in a position to dictate the terms of cadetship as there were more students than places offered. I was often told by Personnel Officers to “take it or leave it” when I harassed them and questioned their terms of “sponsorship”. To reject their offers meant that some of my students would be without ships. Delaying their cadetship till new offers were received meant delaying their graduation – thus the dilemma I was in.

I did have some reservations concerning Honduras Reefers Lines. Their ships carried bananas and seldom returned to Singapore! I wondered what would have happened if they were stranded in Central or South America! Fortunately, all my students completed their cadetship and returned safely, some with fond memories and some with minds made up to never sail again!

One cadet, David Ho Tai Wai returned after one voyage to say, “Sir, I am a Seven Day Adventist and I cannot work on Saturdays.” After explaining the real World to him, he decided that to keep his faith he could not be a marine engineer. We agreed that he should discontinue. He was a very bright student and I managed to get him transferred to the Mechanical Engineering course. I was told by one of his pals that after obtaining his diploma, he went on to do his degree and PhD in Hawaii. Anyone know where he is today? I do like to get in touch with him again!

Below is Daniel’s experience with one company. He was among the unfortunate and I regret that I was not able to find another company for him when he saw me. I am however glad that he learnt one of the most important lessons in life i.e. to control your own destiny or else be controlled.

I hope Daniel’s account would encourage you to share your memories of the companies and or ships they were assigned to. Did you benefit from the luck of the draw?

Cheng Huang Leng
22 June 2010

Cheng Huang Leng was Head of Marine Engineering Department, Singapore Polytechnic from 1978 to 1981.

Daniel Chua's Account:

The year was 1980. We had completed our 3rd year at Poly and were looking for placements with shipping companies. We were in a lecture theatre as we were assigned companies. As I recall, it was done by ballot.

It was a nerve wrecking as some shipping companies required the cadets to serve a bond. Some classmates and I were assigned to a local shipping company. I shall not name the company to protect the "innocent". We were relieved as this company did not have a bond or so we were told.

We proceeded to the Personnel Office at the shipping company and were shocked when we were told that there was a 1 year bond. A flood of emotions overcame us....anger, frustration, desperation, panic, all at the same time.

We headed back to Poly to look for Mr Cheng. Our point was that we were told there was no bond and the company seemed to have gone back on its word. We were hoping that Mr Cheng could "pull a rabbit out of the hat" and told us that it was ok and that there is no bond. Instead, he looked us in the eye and said, "Beggars cannot be choosers."

At that point, I realized that I had 2 choices:

1. Accept the situation as we needed the sea-time in order to graduate.
2. Find another company which was prepared to accept me without a bond.

Time was running out and I activated everyone, including relatives and friends to look for another company. Alas, it was not meant to be.

I finally sailed with this local company and as luck would have it, I was told some months later that the company had decided not to bond us after all. Things finally worked out for us. Till today, I do not know what led to the change of heart, but the lesson Mr Cheng taught me still rings in my head. From that day on, I have never allowed myself to be at the mercy of others....we shape our own destiny.

Daniel Chua Boon Leh
June 2010

Daniel Chua graduated with a Diploma in Marine Engineering in 1981. He then went on to Glasgow to pursue his degree in Naval Architecture and Ocean Engineering and returned in 1985 with a B.Sc Degree 1st Class Honours. His career was mostly in management positions in the areas of human resources, marketing, training and operations with organisations that included an airline and hotel. He is currently looking after customer service and operations for a major childcare organisation.