Several cadet engineers have shared their experience of tough treatment from senior engineers. Here we have an engineer who had his share of tough time from cadets! Paul Cheng's memories thus provide us with the flipside what life at sea was like for cadets and engineers.

Prior to "poly boys", Naval Base Dockyard apprentices and "yard boys" blazed the mariners trail. And I know that there are many out there who have retired or are close to retirement. I also know that they had an even tougher time out at sea! I hope Paul's account would move you to share your memories with us. Please do!

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Cadetship

I cannot resist responding to the sad memories of cadets from the Poly and would like to share my experience with cadets when I was at sea as a marine engineer.

My name is Paul Cheng. I joined the Naval Base Dockyard in 1967, graduated in 1972 and then joined NOL 1972-1982. My first ship was a 25 year old general cargo vessel (Neptune Garnet). After my first watch my overall was half white (waist upward) and half black (waist downward) after waddling through bilges tracing pipelines and knocking at sea water pipes to shake off blockage. Ironically, when I signed off in 1982, I did so from a 25 year old 200,000 ton crude tanker (Fulton).

Yes, I remember in those days, people tended to band with their own i.e. poly boys, Keppel boys, base boys. Although, I was from the Naval Base, I had no prejudice against anybody - Keppel or Poly. As a senior I was interested in whether I had a good or bad junior after they leave, it was our duty to train them. And I had a few "problem" cadets of which four still remained in my memory after more than 30 years!

Case 1- Cadet X- 1977

On the first day after signing on onboard Neptune Topaz, an incident happened at 1700 hrs. I was discussing with the rest of the engineers outside the engine room workshop. This guy decided to bypass us and leave the E/R. I called him to join us and told him that it was customary to hold a briefing before knocking off (day work in port). He gave me a sneering smile. I asked him whether he had a problem. He reminded me that it was time for, "Dinner!" I pointed out to him that there would always be dinner; our briefing would take 10-15 minutes max. We were discussing whether we should finish up the overhaul work in the night and knock off the next day or continue the next day. The decision would allow us to decide whether to bathe first and then eat in the saloon in comfort or have a quick meal in our overalls in the mess room. He mumbled something and got me cheese off.

That was in fact the 2nd time in the day that he irritated me. The first time was at tea break when he was introduced to me. I patted him on the shoulder and told him to follow the fiver to his cabin to unload his luggage. He brushed the spot I patted as though it was full of dandruff. In my mind I was already thinking whether this guy was signing on as engineer cadet or what. Anyway, sharp words were exchanged and I told him not to come back the next day (vessel was in Singapore). He did not and I never heard from him again nor did I receive any word from the Office, Captain or Chief Engineer. That must have been the shortest trip he had ever made onboard a ship

I started on Neptune Topaz as fiver then to fourth. Working almost 16 hrs a day was very normal: 0800-1200hrs watch, 0000 to 0400hrs, 1300hrs till 1600hrs overhaul work, adjusting the ammonia refrigeration plant (reefer cargo) then down to the ER to relieve the 4-8 for dinner. I spent a total of 14 months on that ship.

Case No 2- Cadet Seah,1977

Whenever I lectured him about his mistake, he would tell me to, "Sack me never mind, my father gives me more money than NOL". With such an attitude, I suggested that he

change course and follow his father's footstep working in a bank. At least OUB did not collapsed like our boiler did which fortunately was of the water tube type with a working pressure of 10 bars only. Seah joined our ship with a big tin of Milo, a portable fan, a bolster and a camera hanging from his neck.

On one occasion, he was found on the monkey island having a chit chat with the "lecky" instead of carrying out his task of ballasting the double bottom with a reciprocating piston pump.

His biggest mistake: while supposing to be keeping 4-8 watch, he was found having breakfast at 0715hrs with the camera around his neck, all dressed up and ready to hit the shore. Smoke was gushing out of the engine room. The clever SOB decided to keep the boiler running by placing a nut under the fuel solenoid valve, he did not realize or forgot that the ship did not have an auto feed water system. When the vessel was in Japan, Superintendent Toh Ho Tay came onboard. I think Mr Seah signed off the same day, and went back to collecting pocket money from his father.

Case No 3 Fifth Engineer 1974

This cadet was a Poly graduate and president scholar. He was tall at 1.8 metre and weighed about 75 kg. He did not have the strength to open the sea chest valve with the (T & Y type) valve key. I told him to step into the bilges which was dry (at that time) to open with the F type valve key. He refused. He replied that it was dirty because he saw the greaser urinating into it earlier. His greatest blunder was this: he was keeping 1200-1600hrs, I told him to align the motor with the lube oil purifier with 4 small bolts. He simply tightened down the bolts and decided to start up the purifier without checking. The centrifugal coupling flew off. That was the spare coupling that we had ordered and waited for about 6 months – we were tramping and the delivery kept missing our vessel at each port. Our frustration was that lots of overtime (mine and the C/E) was incurred to fix the purifier and all ruined in a matter of minutes!

Case no 4- Fiver who want to see what happened

He was a Fiver and was caught throwing carborandum into the main engine crankcase. When question he replied, "I wanted to see what could happen". The only thing that happened was that I believed he was sacked immediately not for ignorance but for stupidity.

I believe that ex-shipyard people are tougher than Poly boys. There were exceptions like Lim Tau Kok, Ricky Wong, Liew Onn, Simon Kudus and David Lim. I had sailed with all of them. Another notable engineer who was many years my senior is Mr. C C Chay.

During rough weather onboard Neptune Sapphire, David as cadet, was the only guy brave enough to support me in trying to secure a Sulzer RD-90 cylinder head. It was a spare that broke loose. Both of us nearly died.

Mind you I do appreciate good guys like the 3rd Engineer Tan See Loke (ex-Keppel) onboard at that time. He was promoted on my recommendation from 5th to 4th and to 3rd. The 4th Engineer (poly graduate) Liew Onn, was also promoted by me from Fiver. They were very disciplined. They could party ashore and regardless of what time they returned, they would show up in the engine room before 0800hrs using 28 lb to 32 lb hammers to remove the cylinder head or main bearing or cross head bearing nuts. There were no hydraulic or pneumatic spanners then.

For cadets who were unhappy as watch keepers, I like them to know of a RSN lieutenant and ex-army 2nd lieutenant who signed on to clock sea time. Both joined as fifth engineers. They were definitely more qualified than cadets. They mopped the engine room and cleaned the filters, wiped the crankcase, replenished the cylinder oil, topped up boiler water, trace pipelines like other watch keepers. They did so without the need of being told because the Chief Engineer himself also wiped the crank case. We had kept the engine room of an 11 year old ship so clean that one could sleep on any of the floor plates. Anyway, I heard the army guy went to Newcastle to do his degree Naval Architecture or Marine Engineering. That was about 30 years ago and he should be a somebody by now.

By the way, there was a case that still puzzled me till today. There was a cadet who hated having to serve the senior watch keeper e.g. make coffee and cook noodles. So when he became 2nd and later Chief Engineer, he decided to reverse the tradition and cooked for the cadet! Yes, I was ever served by a Captain who brought beer or soft drinks for us especially when we were working on deck and under the blazing sun. But for senior officer to cook for the 8-12 watch keeper and day worker regularly before he goes to sleep? Quite unusual isn't it?

Paul Cheng
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Paul Cheng joined the Naval Base Dockyard in 1967 as an apprentice, he graduated from the Singapore Polytechnic in 1972, sailed with NOL till 1982 before continuing his career as a marine engineer ashore.