Certificate of Competency Examinations in Singapore and UK

The Certificate of Competency system of examination implemented by the British from day one till today i.e. written, followed by an oral examination in the GP and Motor papers was very novel. The orals gave a chance for the candidate to make amends should he/she did not do well in the written papers. However it was the fear and stress in the orals that drove many candidates from re-appearing or re-taking the Certificate of Competency Examination. In the 1960s these exams were held every month in the Marine Department in Fullerton Building. If one failed the EK papers the candidate could retake the examinations held during the following months until he/she passed. Quite a lot quit after 1 to 2 attempts and gave up their marine career for shore jobs in shipyards, ship repair companies etc. Some totally moved on to entirely new fields like sales, life insurance, stock broking, etc. We lost quite a large pool of mariners because of the fear in orals examination.

In 1968, I took my 2nd Class Certificate of Competency examination in Singapore and I thought I did a reasonably good paper. There were 6 candidates in that examination but only one passed, he was Cheong Kwek Fong from the Singapore Polytechnic alternative scheme. The examiner was a Mr. Slatter. Not discouraged the following month I sat for the examination again. This time the examiner was Mr. Alfred Heng. However I knew I would not pass as I did not do a good written paper. Out of round 2 and running short of money I accidentally joined NOL. I was sitting outside waiting for a friend who was being interviewed by Lua Cheng Eng for a sailing post. However he was not accepted as he had no sea experience. Then Lua came out of the building and asked if I was keen to go to Liverpool to take delivery of a general cargo ship. I was if it was for a short term say, 2 to 3 months as I wanted to retake my 2nd Class Exam. Lua said, “No problem, the moment the ship arrived Singapore you can sign off”. With this assurance, I took on his offer as 4th Engineer. My other motive was to watch Liverpool Football Club play in Liverpool. Off I flew off with the whole crew to Liverpool. That was where I met Lim Tau Kok who needed another 6 months sea time for his cadetship. The vessel was an old (built in 1956) general cargo ship about 9000 dwt renamed 'Neptune Garnet'.

To cut the story short she went almost round the world before touching Singapore, about 8 months later. I was the first to walk down the gangway but was held back to complete the dry docking before I could sign off. During the docking period in Sembawang Shipyard Mr. Chan Boon Tin, who was a marine department surveyor/examiner was temporary seconded to NOL as Superintendent in charge of the repairs. I met Mr. Chan a few times on board during the repairs in Sembawang. After the docking, I finally left the vessel to prepare for my 3rd attempt for the 2nd Class Certificate of Competency. I was very determined to do well and 2 weeks later went for the examination. There were 6 to 7 candidates appearing for this sitting, one of them was Tan Kiang. I did a good written paper and I even coloured all my sketches. I was the 1st candidate lined up for the oral examination. The examiner was Mr Chan Boon Tin much to my relief. Mr. Chan went through my papers and then asked me if I am going back to sea for my Class 1 sea time. I replied 'yes off course' He then said, ' OK, you will go to Rotterdam as 3rd Engineer to take delivery of another NOL vessel.' He then stamped my examination slip.

So I finally passed my Class 2 (Motor) Certificate of Competency after 3 attempts. Looking back I know there were 2 others, Caesar Tun and Gerry Pereira who took more than 3 attempts, but their 'Never Say Die' attitudes kept them till Class 1. However some after 2 to 3 attempts would give up totally. As usual after the orals all the candidates would gather round to compare notes. Tan Kiang did not pass in that examination which we took together. When I asked him after he came out of the oral examination what happened. He said 'you loh' .He said the examiner Mr. Chan showed my sketches in colour to him and told him, “That’s what I expect to see from you the next time”. I think Tan Kiang did not try again and he joined Keppel Shipyard as a repair foreman. He later rose to Chief Estimator in Keppel.

Coming back to the orals, I feel that the examiners in our Marine Dept in the 60s and 70s were too strict and they tend to exert fear on the candidates; and being under stress during the orals the candidates could not think properly thus made more mistakes than giving the correct answers. More mistakes meant more tricky questions from the examiner and finally failure. And because of the low percentage of passes in Singapore for Class 1 and 2, quite a lot of students opted to go to Australia or UK for their Certificate of Competency

exams. After my Class 2, I went back to NOL to clock my 18 months sea time for my Class1 Certificate of Competency. I also made up my mind to go to London for my Class 1 Certificate of Competency instead of appearing in Singapore. At Poplar, I passed on my 1st attempt in 1973.

In ending I can say that one must score well in the written EK papers first, the orals will be easier and faster and the chances of passing are very high. When I went for my orals in London the atmosphere was totally different. At the appointed time I knocked on the door of the examiner, Mr. Townson opened the door, greeted me and ushered me to my seat. He even took my coat to hang in his wardrobe! He made us relax and feel comfortable before posing his first question. The same could not be said of our Singapore examiners - they seem to want to eat us up before asking their first question and as candidates, no one dared to lodge a complaint. Hopefully such practices by our examiners no longer exist today.

Kan Seng Chut
May 2013

Seng Chut's memory of the CoC Exams in Singapore drew these comments from Ron Periera, Teh Kong Leong, Sam Choo and Paul Cheng:

From Ron Periera:

I fully agree with Seng Chut. Whilst I was in Straits Steamship as 3rd Engineer between April 1962 and August 1964, I heard from so many of my older colleagues that it was not possible to pass the COC 2nd Class Part 'B' first time; as the Singapore Marine Department Examiners, Ken Slater and Jim McNiel were very strict and at most times conducted Orals Exams for more than 2 hours, only to tell you at the end of that time that you had failed. I was determined to pass first time and therefore conserved all my annual leave and study leave pay for 28 months; to enable me to buy a one-way air ticket to Glasgow in August 1964 with 7 months upkeep in UK, to obtain the COC 2nd Class Part 'B'. As it so happened, I managed to obtain my COC 2nd Class (Motor) by November 1964 and after 1months holiday at my Aunt's home in Slough, enrolled in Poplar Technical College for the 3-month course for the COC 1st Class Part 'A'. I managed to pass the 1st Class Part 'A' in March 1965 and then joined Blue Star Line in London as 2nd Engineer, where I stayed until June 1966. I then joined Indo China Steam Navigation of Hong Kong and served the remaining 9 month of my sea-time, before taking 'no-pay leave' in March 1967, to sit for the COC 1st Class Part 'B' in Singapore.

I had no choice, although the 2 British Examiners were still conducting the Singapore Marine Department; because I was already married and had no money to return to the UK. Anyway, when I took the Part 'B' Exam in July 1967, I did such a good Engineering Knowledge paper that Jim McNiel admitted to me, when he began the oral examination and found me nervous that he could not fail me, unless I made an error in the safety questions that he was going to ask me. After 45 minutes, he got up and shook my hand and said that I had passed. The next day I went back to the Singapore Marine Department to receive my 1st Class COC (Motor) Certificate from the Director of Marine, Capt. Goh Chew Keng and was surprised to see that certificate cover was slightly marked with 'silverfish' insect bites. I asked why this was so and was told that mine was the first COC 1st Class Certificate to be issued in Singapore for more than 10 years. Perhaps, the Examiners softened their stance during the last year prior to their retirement from service.

From Teh Kong Leong

At the risk of upsetting some former colleagues in Marine Dept, I wonder where the culture of frightening CoC candidates came from. Our exam system came from the UK but whatever feedback I got about UK examiners (including Seng Chut's) indicate that they were very hospitable and inclined to be generous in passing candidates. One key thing that we need to bear in mind (and this can be applied to practically all regulators) is that examiners are one part of the whole chain of responsibility in the "production" of competent seafarers. Everyone in that chain should be helping to ensure that the seafarers coming out of our system are competent. Rather than trying to find reasons to fail candidates, examiners can

play a more useful role by identifying their areas of weakness and helping the candidates to overcome these deficiencies.

From Sam Choo:

Wah! So tough? Not these days man!

We helped each other to spot the likely stiff questions and had the answers prepared in advance. A well written answer was 3 /4 of the way. Tan Kiang was my class mate in college. His maths was superb. I am told that he had retired and became a priest.

Actually I passed at the first shot. But Slater and de Cruz refused to set a precedent. So de Cruz said to me, "Have a good rest and come back next month." The following month I dutifully appeared before him and he just asked of me, "Who is your superintendent?" Must be the easiest oral question! He emigrated to Australia and worked in a power station

From Paul Cheng:

Sam Choo may not remember me but we met onboard one of the NOL ship in dry dock. At that time, I suggested to you that you should not help your student spot questions, but pass on as much of your knowledge as possible to them. For example, as superintendent I came across a Chief Engineer who answered my query for high freon consumption as "because the air conditioning is running 24 hours a day". I asked him whether he had the same problem at home and he said, "Yes."

When asked why the main engine exhaust temperature was high, the same engineer explained that it was due to engine overload and listed all the possible causes for engine overload, word for word and straight from the manual. Sadly for him, the real cause was choked exhaust boiler tubes.

It does make me wonder where he obtained his Naval Architecture degree from!

Regret to say, Richard Teo have failed like me. When asked why manhole covers are not round, we were supposed to say they are oval so that the cover can be removed (except for small receivers where the covers would remain for life. My main complaint is that such a technicality is not typically taught in any of the colleges that I have attended. And to think of the answer in an oral exam hall is unfair. I might come up with the answer the examiner wanted were I in a pub or restaurant maybe. Is it a relevant question Chief Engineers?

With regard to the turbo charger question, I explained that the common fault was usually traced to the ball bearing that had an expected life span of 7-8000hrs in those days. I would take out the Makers manual and strip the unit step by step, taking the shaft axial and radial clearance, clean the parts thoroughly, boxed back in reverse. Did you know what answer this fine gentleman examiner wanted? Have it cross your mind to call the office? Of course he started asking in a different way, like, "Do you have a radio officer onboard?" "Don't you have a radio telephone onboard?" "As Chief Engineer don't you know that the minute you have a problem onboard you must contact the office immediately?"

Later when I was Superintendent, I realized why the Captain of a bulk carrier called me at 0300hrs. He wanted to inform me that the ship was breaking up as "I can hear squeaking sounds on the deck". Later it was the Chief Mate who went on deck to verify and assured me that the noise came from the cargo derrick. (The ship was passing heavy sea, heaving and yawing.) I guess that Captain got his ticket from people like the examiner I had at the Singapore Marine Department! By the way, the Captain and Chief Mate were both Filipinos, and the company did not have the luxury of a Port Captain or Marine Superintendent.

I do not have the pleasure of meeting Teh Kong Leong but I have heard your name being brought up on many occasions. I think the UK examiners have been through the same predicament we did and as a result are more understanding. The difference is, the UK examiner would ask questions that they think the candidate ought to know to do their job well and hence focus on technical matters, whereas in Singapore the examiners asked questions that they think we are unlikely to be able to answer. Their motive seems to try and convince us that we are not worth the position we were striving for.

Finally in parting, I wish to add that the COC is only a door opener. What we are capable of will reveal itself in the real world. And I have my share of encountering the following:

a) One guy got away for 20 years with a forge Master Degree until he met me.

b) A superintendent with a 1st Class and a Chief Engineer with Combine Ticket for 4 days could not solve the problem of extracting a broken 3.5 inch broken stud from the main engine entablature.

c) An ex-examiner from Burma could not keep a proper look out on the boiler water level causing a prime overflow.

d) A Combined or Extra 1st Class Chief engineer insisted on tracing why an engine had an erratic fault, taking 7 hours (from vessel along side to vessel departure by removing card by card and relay by relay instead taking up my (I was 2nd Engineer then) suggestion of opening the telegraph panel and re-tightening one of the two 6 mm Allen screws of the cam micro-switch.

d) Another Chief Engineer (Burmese) insisted that the lifeboat must be able to hoist up 10 persons. The davit was vibrating like hell when we tried to lift him and his 6 friends each weighed about 200 pounds who were on board the lifeboat after a fishing trip. I was charged for insubordination when I refuse to operate the davit. I was saved by Waterloo Cheong with just a transfer instead of being sacked, but I lost my probation period as a confirmed 2nd. Anyway, I had no more need for my COC since I gave up sea life.

I still remember one Singapore examiner's famous words, "The reason we are so strict is because with the 1st Class COC you can be anybody and go any where." I like him to tell that to Mr BT Tan who sold Labroy to Drydocks World. According Mr BT Tan, "It is important to know how to add and subtract that's all." We have to believe him, because he is a multi billionaire with no COC just CASH!

Paul Cheng's comment about difficulties in passing the CoC Exams in Singapore triggered this memory of Kan Seng Chut:

When I went up the first time for my 2nd Class CoC, I felt that I did a good written EK. But it seemed that the examiners in our Marine Dept had an unwritten quota system. For every 5 candidates appearing, Mr. Slater would only pass one. So if you were 2nd best, it was just too bad! That's how I felt when I failed my 1st attempt especially when I had prior to that experience, never failed any exam!

Sam Choo's helping others to spot questions triggered this comment from Kan Seng Chut:
A teacher should never encourage students to spot questions. Imagine what happen if all the so-called spotted questions did not appear? The candidates would be caught with their pants down and likely not be able to answer the questions adequately. A good teacher should cover the syllabus sufficiently to ensure that all his students are confident and well prepared for their exam.

I have done the 3 month refresher course in Poplar Technical College in 1973 and the lectures covered the whole syllabus. Our teachers would not spot questions for us. I remembered the only question the engineering lecturer told us was the propeller question. He said the examiner favourite last question was, "How to remove the propeller from the tailshaft during docking?" "If Mr Townsend asks this question it means that you are going to pass!"

True enough when I appeared before Mr Townsend, his first question was on spontaneous combustion. I gave him a decent answer but not as good as he wanted then to my surprise he asked the propeller question. I gave him a detailed answer at the end of which, he extended his right hand out and, "you have passed.' I shook his hand and thanked him. However, just before I left his room he told me to go over to the Institute of Marine Engineers (just opposite his office) to read up the topic on 'spontaneous combustion'. Off course I said 'Yes sir', took

my passing slip and went over to the I.Mar.E. building. But I did not go to the library, instead went to the reception to file in my application for my Chartered Engineer certification.