The Career Path a Marine Engineer – an example for future marine engineers

I am trying to map out my career path for the guidance of young school leavers intending to take up marine engineering and the prospects ahead.

Anyone intending to take up a sea career, be it engineering or nautical, must try to draw up his/her career path right from Day 1. Once the academic and career path is drawn up the candidate must try to follow it all the way irrespective of time taken. We all know taking the Certificate of Competency examination can be long for some and short for the brighter ones but most importantly never give up half way. I had gone through this cycle with breaks/failures but I still kept my target to try harder after each failure.

I completed my GCE 'O' level in1961 in Tanjong Katong Secondary Technical School, the only 2 technical schools in Singapore then. Being a technical school we did technical drawing and pure science subjects but no biology. I did decently well and went to Beatty Secondary School for my A levels. After 3 months I realised that my poor parents did not have the money for my university education. What's next? I knew without a degree or equivalent my future working life will have limited prospects to earn a decent income and my corporate career path will be limited or no chance to reach the top. I then decided since I can't afford a degree education I will have to do it on my own by the back door- work first, save, and then try for a degree. I got hold of an advertisement by the SHB (Singapore Harbour Board) looking for apprentices for their Dockyard in Telok Blangah giving a 5 year apprenticeship scheme with part time diploma course in Mechanical Engineering at the Singapore Polytechnic, Prince Edward Road campus. I applied and got accepted and my 5-year apprenticeship started on 1 July 1962 together with the day-release part time diploma course in Mechanical Engineering. I then set my first target i.e.

1) Complete my 5 year apprenticeship together with my Poly Diploma.

2) Go sailing to clock my sea time for my Certificate of Competency examination up to Class 1 and sail as Chief Engineer.

3) Future study would be optional as it depended on my savings.

I completed item (1) partially as I got into Bank Line as Junior Engineer to clock my 18 months sea time. I then did 15 months on Yewbank and 4 months on Kim Wah. I went up for my Class 2 Certificate of Competency exam, failed 2 times in a row. I ran out of money, was conned by NOL to join Neptune Garnet as 4th Engineer for 8 months. I then re-took my Class 2 Certificate of Competency, passed, rejoined NOL as 3rd Engineer on Neptune Amber. After 4 months, I was promoted to 2nd Engineer, stayed on for another 8 months, went for 2 months leave and rejoined Neptune Agate as 2nd Engineer with Kee Ah Bah as Chief Engineer. After 1 and a half months Kee was recalled to join NOL shore staff while I was put as Acting Chief Engineer with 3rd Engineer Chia Chee Kiang as 2nd Engineer. After 5 months I was transferred to Neptune Jasper as Acting Chief Engineer, with Sim Bock Seng as Acting 2nd Engineer. I then sailed one round trip Singapore-Sydney-Melbourne-Singapore, signed off for leave and prepared for my Class 1 Certificate of Competency. However I was appointed Assistant Technical Superintendent for 4 months with NOL Repairs and Maintenance Department. I left in May '73 for a short course at Poplar Technical College for Class 1 Certificate of Competency where I passed the examination in Sept '73 and rejoined NOL shore staff as Technical Superintendent. In late '75 I did a relief 5 months trip as Chief Engineer on the Neptune Sapphire. I left NOL in '76 to join Singapore Shipping Corporation as Superintendent.

4) Served with SSC/ RCL group in various capacity as Technical Manager, Technical Director till 1991 and then resigned to start my own ship management company - Odesta Pte Ltd on 1 January 1992.

5) At Odesta I had 2 superintendents, 2 assistants, 2 girls and 1 crewing executive managing 8 vessels with Filipino and Indonesian officers and crew. I also had a 10% share in 3 feeder container vessels, time chartered out to feeder operators, Bengal Tiger Lines and Heang–A (a Korean operator). All went well until 1997 when the shipping market plummeted. Time charter rates fell by 50% in 6 months. I could foresee the world economy would drag on for the next 3 to 4 years so I took a very painful decision - I sold all the 3 ships. The buyers were Greeks, they always buy low and sell high. With the sale money we paid the bank and

still had some cash left. It was a good learning lesson for me and I decided to call it a day and took semi retirement. Since it cost me nothing going into ship owing and came out positive I invested my surplus in property and earn some rental income for my pocket money till today.

Looking back I went through a full cycle, started from apprentice, junior engineer, 4th , 3rd, 2nd, Acting Chief Engineer, then Chief Engineer, Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, Technical Manager/Director and MD of Odesta and ship owner (small portion of 10%).

Planning a career path and able to follow it all the way needs some guts and determination and plus some luck and blessings from the Lord.

I hope with this final episode of my marine life, some can learn something out of it and hopefully even do better. I wish all future mariners good luck!

Kan Seng Chut
September 2013