Drunkards on Board

I almost forgot to add this side story on how NOL recruits sea staff in her early years. Lua Cheng Eng was a Seaman Welfare Officer in the Marine Department. He was seconded to NOL to head the recruitment of all seafarers when NOL was established in 1968. How he engaged the British captain and the British electrician Mr. Frank Holiday for Neptune Garnet was something of a mystery. Both of them were piss artists. I knew in one port the captain was so drunk that he could not even stand up. So when the harbour pilot came on board our Chief Officer Jimmy Lim Ong Thong had no choice but to quickly put on the captain's uniform and usher the pilot to take the vessel into port and berthed safely. I think this British captain was sacked but I can't remember when.

The electrician was even more “classic”. From the day he came on board his meals were beer, beer and more beer be it morning, afternoon, or night. His surname Holiday fitted him exactly for he was having holidays on board instead of working. If we forbid him to drink, his hands shook, so he can't work. If we allowed him to drink, he drank till he dropped, so he could not work either! He was sacked when we called into Cape Town for repairs and flown back to London. There was no replacement for him, the Chief Engineer took over his duty but everyday at sea he would pull me along after my 8/12 watch to do maintenance work on the deck winches from after my lunch till 4 pm.

I did not protest as I did learnt quite a lot on electrical maintenance from this Polish Chief Engineer.

Looking back I just wonder how Lua Cheng Eng who started as a Seaman Welfare Officer then HR in NOL rose to be M.D./Chairman of NOL. It seems that in life it's not always how good you are but who you know that is more important for going up the corporate ladder. Guys like us who take pride in the job and worked very hard are seldom rewarded. But we all enjoyed our work and that's satisfaction, something money cannot buy!

Why join NOL and how a Master got the sack

One of the good reasons why some of us joined NOL in the early days was pride. NOL being our national line started with novices but we learn fast even with old vessels. Flying our Singapore Ensign was something we were proud off.

In the beginning we had no choice but to recruit foreigners especially in senior ranks. The Master on the Neptune Amber was a retired captain from Cunard Lines (can't remember his name).He always told us he was a Staff Captain on the QE 2 before he retired. He was a divorcee.

On my 3 trip on the Amber, NOL started to experiment using stewardess. 3 ladies were assigned to our vessel and one of them was my niece. They kept the accommodation very neat and the service was not bad. While the vessel was in London, 2 lady friends of my niece came to visit her and stayed overnight. I gave my 2nd Engineer room to them for the night while I used the one spare crew cabin. The next morning the 2 ladies left to return to work. They were Singaporeans working as nurses in London. That same afternoon this British Captain issued a circular stating, “under NOL's regulations, no female except wives of officers were allowed to stay overnight on board.” I asked the Radio Officer if he had received such a circular. The Radio Officer said no, and moreover if it was a NOL circular it should be signed by the Fleet Manager or issued by the HR department.

I kept quiet and did not question the Captain then. The next morning I went for my breakfast in my uniform in the Officers Dining Room. While eating the Captain came in with an English lady for breakfast. The Captain sat on the head table with the lady next to him. I sat with the Chief Engineer. The Captain greeted every one but did not introduce his lady friend to anyone. I waited a while before asking the Captain if the lady was his wife. He said, “No, just a friend”. “Did she stay overnight?” I asked. He said, “Yes”. I then told the Captain of his circular that clearly stated that no females were allowed to stay overnight except wives of officers. He got very angry with me for raising the question and he said "I am the Captain of this ship and that circular does not apply to me". I then said, “Look Captain this is a Singapore ship and any NOL circular applies to everyone, including you, Captain". I then took my leave. Next I wrote a letter back to NOL with a copy of the circular enclosed, giving details that if a

company circular does not apply to the Master, then I better leave to avoid problems later. I also enclosed a separate letter requesting to sign off on arrival Singapore.

On arrival Singapore I was the first one to walk down the gangway with my luggage, but I was stopped by Mr. Setna. He told me to bring my luggage back on board. I refused and said I have the right to sign off in my home port. However, next came Captain Aziz Khan and was introduced by Setna as the new Master to replace the British Master who would be taken off in HK our next port. True enough on arrival HK this British Master left the vessel. I stayed on for another 2 round trips and went on leave. Captain Aziz stayed as Master on the Amber for almost a year.

Kan Seng Chut
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