Memories of an NOL Superintendent in the 1970's

I signed off from Neptune Jasper on 30th December 1972 after clocking about 19 months of sea time including 8 of those months as Acting Chief Engineer on dispensation. On 2nd January 1973 I was appointed Assistant Technical Superintendent at NOL. 2nd January 1973 is etched in my mind because our Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen decided not to tax seafarers sailing on Singapore flag vessels with effect from 1st January 1973. On top of that, NOL raised the salary of all seafarers giving a Chief Engineer $3,000 instead of $2,000. You can imagine the blow I felt. It is one of those times when you wish you were not born too early!

So on 2nd January 1973 I went to the wharf office where NOL had its Repair and Maintenance Department and Newbuildings Department. I then told my head of department, Mr. Setna that my course at Poplar College would start on 1st May so I would have to leave by end April. He said I could, "once Toh Ho Tay returns from London after his Class 1 Certificate of Competency". After this conversation Peter Yam came in and took me straight to Keppel Shipyard to take charge of the docking of Neptune Amber. I did not even have time to warm up my office chair and yours truly was thrown into the world of superintendents without any training whatsoever! NOL assumed that you knew your job and hopefully would survive. The other Superintendent was Cheong Fook Kuen ex-Naval Base Dockyard.

In my 4 months as Superintendent and before I left for London, the most memorable task was the docking of Neptune Taurus, NOL's only tanker at that time. She was purchased from World Wide Shipping HK. She was dirty and was time-chartered to Esso. The main engine was a 6 cylinder B&W. She had 2 Scotch boilers for her heating coils and cargo pumps. Before my time I heard that one boiler had collapsed and one furnace was renewed. The main engine had half her crankshaft renewed due a crack on one crankpin web. All these "casualties" happened while the ship was in NOL's ownership. When Taurus was due for docking and repairs, I was put in charge. All her main engine units were due for overhaul and one auxiliary engine needed a new crankshaft. There were many other repairs like pipelines. The repair list ran into a few pages. I was given 2 weeks to complete her docking and repairs as Esso needed her back in service.

First, we needed to gas free all her tanks after discharging at Esso terminal. This took 3 days in the South China Sea before we docked at Keppel Shipyard. Next I had to reduce cost by getting a lot of the overhauling work done cheaply. As Keppel did not allow contractors appointed by owners to do work while the ship was in the yard, I got around this restriction by rounding up 12 ex-apprentices to sign on as ship's crew to do the 7 main engine units. By so doing my gang of 12 did one auxiliary engine and 7 main engine units in 10 days. Keppel did the other auxiliary engine that required crankshaft renewal. While fitting the flywheel into the new crankshaft, Keppel's fitters over-pumped the hydraulic jacks and the flywheel went into the shaft taper by about 4 mm too much. The fitters tried to jack back the flywheel but it did budge at all. Finally it was decided to leave the flywheel as it was as it did not affect the support bearing and the thrust bearing. The engine was then boxed up and tested free running. Load was applied later with no problem. By the way, the Keppel SRM in charge was Mr Lee Teck Wee, one of our early pioneers who quit the sea for shore jobs.

Just prior to sailing off for the Gulf, I suggested that Taurus be blessed since she had so many problems. Even NOL MD Goh Chok Tong agreed. A Buddhist monk was engaged to bless the vessel for $500. She finally departed and all of us were relieved. I took my gang of ex-apprentices for "makan" and drinks.

The next morning I got a call to say that Neptune Taurus was stuck in the Malacca Straits off Port Klang. She could not heave up her anchor after a minor breakdown. I flew to her via Kuala Lumpur and by car to Port Klang. There was no tug available for hire except one from the Port Authority of Port Klang. I was allowed 4 hours usage as the tug was needed for berthing duties later. The trip to reach Taurus took about an hour leaving me with only about an hour to get her chain freed. On reaching the vessel I found the chain entangled into a lump like a ball. The chain could not be retrieve through the hawse pipe. Using the tug we hooked up the ball with a strong wire and tried to pull and jerk the ball free. After an hour of pulling nothing happened, then the tug master told me he had to return to port for berthing duties. Without any choice I instructed the 2nd Engineer to bring up the oxy-acetylene bottles to cut the chain. The bottles were brought up and just before lighting up the cutter I asked the

tug master to give it one last pull. Suddenly the whole ball miraculously dropped loose. It seemed that Taurus refused to be cut, so our blessing was answered. She quickly heaved up her chain and continued her voyage while I returned to Port Klang. But that was not the end of her story.

About 2 weeks later we got a message that the main engine timing chain had some problem. I flew to Kuwait to investigate. I found the timing chain had hair cracks on some of the links. Surprisingly the former owner World Wide Shipping had ordered a complete new duplex chain, still unused and kept in the ER platform. Thus it appeared that the former owner might have problems with her timing chain before. I had to summon some deck crew and with the engine crew pulled out the new chain from her packing box and laid it on the platform floor, Next I disconnected the joining link and connected the new chain to the old chain. With the turning gear we slowly turn the engine to allow the new chain to go in and the old chain to roll out of the crankcase, all done by manpower. Once the new chain was in place, the chain was reconnected. The chain tension was reset and the engine was ready for testing and found in order. We completed this job in time for her departure with full load of crude for Karachi. I was told to follow the ship to Karachi to monitor her performance.

Taurus had 2 main auxiliary diesel engines and one steam generator. The steam generator's output was half that of the diesel. At sea she was designed to operate on one diesel and the steam generator to meet her full steaming load. About 1 day after her departure and while having dinner in the saloon with the Chief Engineer a loud bang came from the Engine Room and then blackout. The Chief Engineer and I ran down to the Engine Room. By then the engineer on watch had started her reserved auxiliary engine and restored power. We found the auxiliary engine overhauled by Keppel was damaged. One unit completely flew off the engine. The cylinder head, piston and liner were lying on the floor. Our examination showed that the crankpin bearing connecting bolts had sheared off causing the piston to hit the cylinder head and together with its connecting rod must have lifted the liner out off the engine casing. Luckily no one was hurt. We continued our voyage to Karachi with one diesel and the steam generator at half load without further problem and berthed for discharging. Then the steam generator gave way. For cargo discharge we had no problem as all her cargo pumps were steam turbine driven. We found that all the lube oil copper pipes in the steam generator sheared had off i.e. her main bearings were virtually lubricated by an oil bath only but were not damaged. We got a workshop to fabricate new copper pipes and refitted to the steam engine and she operated with one and half generators for the next 2 months without problem until the damaged diesel was repaired.

6 months later NOL sold Neptune Taurus to the Greeks. Thus we got rid of the ship noted for having the most number of breakdowns in the history of NOL. Unfortunately she was never mentioned in her NOL book. However, for those who had sailed on her the experience gained was very rewarding for future applications. Looking back it seemed that be it at sea or ashore I was given or landed with the 'hard' ships to tackle. After Taurus I finally left for my studies in Poplar for my Class 1 Certificate of Competency exam. And the changing of the timing chain on the Taurus came in handy during the EK lectures.

Kan Seng Chut
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After completing his apprenticeship in 1967, Seng Chut went to sea. He sailed with several shipping lines as a Junior Engineer before clocking enough sea time for him to qualify for the the Class 2 CoC examination. Unfortunately, he failed twice and decided to join NOL on the "Neptune Garnet" for 10 months as 4th Engineer. His 3rd try at Class 2 CoC in Singapore was a success and with his new qualification, sailed on "Neptune Amber" as 3rd Engineer for just 3 months for he was soon promoted to 2nd Engineer. He sailed as 2nd Engineer for 12 months and then got promoted again to Acting Chief Engineer on "Neptune Agate" and "Neptune Jasper". He got his Class 1 CoC in London in September 1973 on his first try. Seng Chut then left the sea to re-join NOL as a Superintendent in the Technical Department. In 1976, he left NOL to join Singapore Shipping Corporation as to manage several portfolios as Superintendent cum Technical Manager cum Director. In 1992, he ventured out on his own to set up "Odesta Pte Ltd" to do ship management. Seng Chut retired in 1998. He has been busy giving back to society through his charity and continues to share his experience with others in our marine industry.