Kan Seng Chut and David Chin were among the pioneers of our Singapore Marine Industry. Both rose from the Shipyard Apprenticeship Scheme that began in 1958 and they were the 1962 batch. Here, they share their accounts of how they took the apprenticeship route to become marine engineers.

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The Apprenticeship Route to become Marine Engineers

Poverty drove most of us into the apprenticeship scheme. And I often wonder what and where I would be today had I got the money to graduate from a university.

I completed my GCE 'O' Level in 1961 with 5 A's. I went on to Beatty Secondary School for my A-Levels, but it soon dawned on me that my parents simply would not be able to pay my university fees. My second brother, Billy Kun who completed his Naval Base Dockyard apprenticeship was then sailing and earning about $800 per month on a naval LST ship. This was "big" money for in 1962 a graduate could get only $400. So I decided to emulate my brother and joined the Singapore Harbour Board (SHB) Dockyard apprenticeship scheme. My classmates in Beatty were amazed that I left school to earn $14.96 per week. They of course did not know that I had no money to take the university route.

My main consolation was I could still study at the Singapore Polytechnic to pursue the part-time Day-Release Course in Mechanical Engineering. My course fee was paid for by the SHB. I could at the same time and with my apprenticeship allowance continue my studies at A-level in the Lembaga class at Beatty. This meant having to juggle my attendance at Beatty where classes start from 6pm and end at 10 pm on Mondays through to Fridays and night classes at Singapore Polytechnic. After 5 months I was physically and mentally tired and it was clear that I had to drop one of the classes. I decided to drop my A-level classes and concentrate on my classes at Singapore Polytechnic. I cleared my 1st year without any problem since I came from Tanjong Katong Secondary Technical School – one of only two technical schools in Singapore then. In fact I passed every year in Singapore Polytechnic without much problem.

Looking back I think the apprenticeship scheme with part-time study in Singapore Polytechnic is the best way to study engineering and it is a pity that our government stopped this novel scheme altogether. Anyway I enjoyed the training I received at SHB and at playing truant. I remember one incident – instead of working, a few of us were studying one morning under the wharf just adjacent to the Outside Fitters lockers. Suddenly Mr. May, the Head Foreman jumped down to confirm his suspicion that we were gambling. He was amazed to discover us studying and told us to carry on knowing that our final examination was coming up soon. With such an understanding 'ang moh' we were very grateful and repaid Mr. May by giving him a farewell party when he retired.

The other person who was instrumental in charting my career was Mr. Norman Webb whom I consulted during my final year in SHB and Singapore Polytechnic. I was offered a place as a junior engineer with Bank Line. In 1967 it was very difficult to get a sailing job especially on foreign ships. Foreign going Singapore flag ships were almost non-existent. So I was caught between taking the job and foregoing my Singapore Polytechnic diploma. I was given less then 6 hours to accept the offer for the 'Yewbank' had only one day port stay. Unable to decide I went to Mr. Norman Webb and told him of my dilemma. He asked whether my ambition was to go to sea and stay at sea till I obtain the Class 1 Certificate of Competency. I told him 'yes'. He said with my 5th year Singapore Polytechnic background I should easily get through my Class 1 subjects quite comfortably. Moreover he said with the Class 1 Certificate of Competency it's more valuable than the Polytechnic diploma He also said with the Class 1 Certificate of Competency I could get my Chartered Engineer status but not with my Polytechnic diploma. So with this advice from Mr. Webb I quickly signed on my first ship to clock my sea time. The rest as they say is history. I cleared my Class 1 Certificate of Competency in August 1973 - 2 months before the October 1973 dateline for the Chartered Engineer status.

Although I took a big risk with only 2 months margin I was quite confident to clear it on my first attempt and I did it - all thanks to Mr. Norman Webb's valuable advice in 1967.

Looking back I think a lot of ex-apprentices will have some good stories to share. That's my story - no regrets earning $14.96 per week in 1962

Kan Seng Chut
May 2013.

Yes, Norman Webb was a really nice fellow. He was very helpful to us naughty apprentices.

I still remember Seng Chut leaving us (from Singapore Polytechnic) that day. How shocked we were, when you had to leave immediately. I think it was Hylam Ong who asked if you had made a girl pregnant to have to run away suddenly!

From our batch, you, Elvis Tham and I survived until the 5th year of the Technician Diploma course, then you went off to sea and I think Elvis left too, leaving me to be the only one to complete the course, sat for the exams and obtained the Diploma. Actually another from our batch did get the Diploma too — 1 year before I did. He was Ee Lee Yah, who because of his excellent results from Queenstown Technical School got direct entry into the 2nd year of the Polytechnic Diploma course, whilst you, Elvis and I did it from the 1styear. Lee Yah therefore studied with "Chinaman", "Main Engine" and Wong Liang Seng of the 1961 batch and after getting his Diploma, left our 5th year to join our Pasir Panjang Power Station as a Shift Engineer.

It was a real irony that I received the Diploma, as I really should not have even gotten into the course at all, as the entrance requirement then in 1962 was a Pass in English, a Pass in Mathematics and a Pass in a Science Subject at "O" Level. I had Credits in English and Mathematics, but I failed my Physics with Chemistry. I was an Art's stream student that hated Science subjects.

So the Polytechnic turned down my application. However, I went to see the Polytechnic's Registrar and pointed out to him that I had a Credit in Additional Mathematics too and that Additional Mathematics included Mechanics, so could he consider that my Credit in Additional Mathematics to be equal to a Pass in a Science Subject. He was most kind and agreed – on the condition that I pass the 1styear, if not, then out I go — there would be no referral subjects for me.

Fortunately I passed—due entirely to the help that you and Elvis gave me throughout the 1st year with the Engineering Science subject. I must confess that although I persuaded the Registrar that I knew Mechanics, I really did not, as I passed Additional Mathematics because I liked Calculus---actually I ignored the Mechanics part of the course at school. So I had to really learn Mechanics from Elvis and you (both Tanjong Rhu Technical School students) I still remember you both trying to teach me how to solve the problem of a ladder sliding down the wall—by resolution of forces and friction. You guys taught me hiding behind the lathe in the Machine Shop.

Looking back it was just typical of us apprentices – to try to, if necessary, even con the Registrar of the Polytechnic. But once given a chance, we showed that we can rise to the 2nd chance and do it, and through the kind grace of God, I went on to even get a Degree in Engineering.

David Chin Soon Siong
May 2013

Thanks to David Chin, we got to understand how these colourful characters got their nicknames:

Hylam Ong is Ong Keng Yong who is from my 1962 batch. He was employed by K.C. Lee of FELS as Marketing Manager (before he sold FELS to Keppel). Ong did so well that he

left to form his own Marine Contracting Company—made his millions and drank himself to death, about 20 years ago.

The Hylam that Seng Chut referred to as helping those who got bullied is a different Hylam. He is Hylam Lim—real name Lim Yu Tang (Yes, like the famous writer's name). Y.T Lim is a real rough diamond and was like the gambling ringleader—so all the tough guys respected him. He is always helpful to younger apprentices. Hylam Lim went to sea, came back to Keppel as Foreman Engineer and became later a Ship Repair Manager. He died about 5 years ago. I always remember him as the one that rides his scooter to Aliwal Street (near Arab Street) to buy "nasi padang" for us all. He did that almost every day.

Chinaman is Chan Kam Moon. We have lost touch with him, since he finished his apprenticeship. A bright chap, but quite tough on his juniors, so not many of us dared to approach him much. I think he joined Shell or the Power Station too.

Main Engine is K.C. Lee—or Lee Kum Chuen. He was 1 year our senior and is called Main Engine, as he refuses to work on anything other than the main engines of the ship, so when a repair come in, he would refuse to work on pipes, pumps or even generators—he would only work on the Main Engine.

As most apprentices do not do serious work at all, the Chargehands and No: 1's were happy that an apprentice works at all, so even a fussy working apprentice was most welcome. K.C. Lee still regularly attends 1496 get-togethers.

Seng Chut provided this rejoinder to David's input:

What David said was correct especially the 1st year when we helped him in technical drawing. We did technical drawing for 4 years at Tanjong Katong Technical School, so the Polytechnic 1st year drawing syllabus was "chicken feed". I also remember that when I sat for the drawing paper for the Part A 2nd Class at the Marine Department, I completed my drawing in 3 hours 30 minutes – well within the 6 hours 30 minutes provided. I asked the examiner, I think Mr. Slatter for permission to leave. He took a look at my finished drawing, shook his head and said, "You cannot leave until the end at 3.30 pm" In the meantime, I could see that all the rest of the candidates, including Elvis, were still struggling trying to complete their drawings. Later, I found out that I was the only who chose the coupling drawing while the rest chose the gearbox drawing. For the coupling I only need to draw 2 views whereas the gearbox drawing needed 3 views and hence more time to complete. A week later the results were out, I and Elvis passed.

The spirit of comradeship of apprentices was always there, be it in studies, work or otherwise. There was always a big brother around to help the weak and this unselfish act stayed for life. If any apprentice was being bullied, big brothers like Terry Soh, "Gurka", Hai Nam and several others would step in to help. If an apprentice was weak in his studies, fellow apprentices like Charles Foo, Quek Tee Dhye, David Chin and sometimes myself would help out.

Serving apprenticeship builds up one's character besides learning a trade or skill for our future career path. Thus I agree with David that it is a pity when such a scheme was discontinued in the mid 80s by our government. Finally we must acknowledged the British who started the apprenticeship scheme with part-time studies – very much to the benefit of most us who served our apprenticeship in the 50s, 60s and 70s. I think the Germans still have this system for those who could not go to university but are willing to dirty their hands to learn a skill or trade and still earn a good living.