How a Malaysian Country Bumpkin Stumbled into our Maritime World

Believe it or not, I was once a young and thin man, who stumbled into his maritime career unwittingly more than 50 years ago, but has remained loyal to the shipping industry every day since.

Born in a farm in Malaysia during World War II in the 1940s, I was fed mainly sweet potatoes and tapioca when I was a baby and toddler, as milk powder and rice were scarce, and too expensive to buy in those days. Maybe that's why I am not so clever, I have a tapioca brain!

In primary school, I walked to school and back every day, with a pocket allowance of 10 cents a day. This is in Malaysian currency! When I was in secondary school, I cycled, clocking 12 km each way for the day classes and 8 km each way for the evening classes to attend subjects that the school did not teach, such as mechanics and physics.

I was not good at history and literature (cannot remember dates) which were taught in the secondary school. So on days where there were night classes, I had to peddle for about 40 km. In those days, we also used our bicycles to transport our farm produce to the wet markets for sale.

With a few bicycles in the house, I started to learn to repair them when they broke down. In the farm, we started with kerosene lamps for lighting (cooking was by fire wood), then moved on to pressurized lamps and in the late 1950s, we bought our first small Honda generator with one small cylinder, sufficient to provide power to 2 fluorescent lights or a black and white TV with a 9-inch screen. Because of the limited power of the generator, every time the family want to watch TV, we had to switch off the fluorescent lights, so it was either lights or TV, cannot have both. Sounds romantic!

From learning to repair bicycles, gas lamps and then the small generator, I found out that I had a liking for mechanical work. That's the reason I applied to study engineering after my "O" levels in 1961. There was no way my parents could send me to the University or overseas. But why marine engineering?

The reason was that it was a "sandwich" course, starting with 2 years of full time study at the Singapore Polytechnic in Prince Edward Road (the building is still there but the name has since been changed to something like Bestway Building), followed by 1.5 years at sea as a cadet and the final year attached to an engineering workshop, shipyard or power station, with evening classes at the Polytechnic, leading to a Diploma in Marine Engineering. My parents had to struggle to finance me for the first 2 years only (the most affordable diploma course available at that time). While at sea as a cadet, I was given an allowance of $60 a month, with food, accommodation and working gear provided. Out of the S$60, I was able to give my mother $30 to $40 a month.

As a cadet on my first ship in 1963 with Straits Steamship, I sailed with Ron Pereira. He was the 3rd Engineer. I was allowed to ask him only two technical questions a day. Do ask Ron why he had to impose that condition on me. On graduation in 1966, I joined A P Moller as a Junior Engineer, Singapore Cosmos Shipping and subsequently Neptune Orient Lines as a Senior Sea-Going Engineer, before coming ashore in 1973. Some of my shipmates in Singapore Cosmos Shipping in 1968 included Lee Gim Hock (we called him 'lofty'), James Tan and Toh Ho Tay.

After coming ashore, I had to travel very regularly and literally had no time to get married. I managed to return only one day before my wedding in September 1973. I was attending (as a superintendent) to the grounding repair of a ship in Aioi, Japan and as the repair work could not be completed within the initial time estimated, I had to ask the Captain of the ship to help to oversee the final part of the work, to enable me to rush back and get married. What an interesting life!

Coincidentally, I was also not around to fetch my wife to the hospital for the delivery of my 2 elder children, Kason and Roy. I only managed to do that for the youngest, my daughter, Coral, in 1983. I have promised my wife that I will make up by visiting our grandchildren on the day they are born.

Ships are on my mind so much that even my youngest, my daughter, is named after an NOL ship called Neptune Coral!

Now that I have more time for reading, I have just read a book with the title "The Family CEO – Building a Happy and Successful Family" written by Simon Sim. He calls himself Simon Simple. By the way, CEO in the book refers to Chief Encouragement Officer, not Chief Executive Officer. I would like to share with you what I take away from the book.

Two things – the first is that wife is 'freehold' and children are 'leasehold'! Wife stays with us throughout our lifetime, whereas children grow up and leave us! In this light, I would like to thank my wife for her support over the years, looking after the children when they were young (and even now) and looking after me since we married.

In retirement, I plan to travel for leisure, join the PGMF club - PGMF stands for Play Golf More Frequently, read, and spend more time with my grandsons Josh, Jarel and Jovan. I will continue to attend talks and seminars as learning is a lifelong endeavour and of course to meet many of my friends who are fellow mariners.

Kee Ah Bah Kenneth
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Kenneth Kee was from the 1st batch of Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Graduates trained under the Alternative Training Scheme (July 1961 to June1966). Most of his career at sea and ashore was with NOL and later on Petroships. Cheng Huang Leng had the privilege of working with him when he was seconded to NOL. He reported that, "Besides being an excellent engineer, Kenneth is yet to be surpassed in terms of his thoroughness at scrutinising plans for new ships to be built under his charge. His handwriting for his comments on the plans is so beautiful that one would be forgiven for thinking that they were typed."

Cheng Huang Leng asked Ron Periera why he allowed only 2 questions a day from rookies like Kee Ah Bah and this is his reply:

Kenneth and a fellow student were on the 'Rajah Brooke' when I was posted there as 3rd Engineer. It was their first trip as trainees and they had to do some correspondence course work, so they kept asking the 2nd Engineer and me numerous questions whenever they could catch hold of us together. After a few days, when we met up during morning tea-break, they asked the 2nd Engineer, Roland Rodrigues and me several more questions. Roland, who loved joking with a straight face, said 'Questions, questions, so many questions. From now on both of you are allowed only 2 questions each day'. I backed Roland up with an equally straight face; but this deterred the 2 guys from asking questions for only a short while. Then they were on our backs again. Kenneth relates that story with tongue-in cheek.

It was the same story on the 'Kunak', where I sailed with 12 Deck Cadets for about 14months. Almost every night when they were on 'night look-out' duty, one or two of them would come to my cabin which had the boat-deck beside it, peep through the open porthole and ask if they could have the apple and orange that I had been given for the day. Anyway, I enjoyed the company of the younger guys, because I had been in the same predicament only 2 years before.

Ron Pereira