A Singaporean captain shares tales of life at sea and his most memorable voyages

Teb Vong Chau
Manpower Correspondent
In the Sea of Japan

The 1.69m-tall captain, who always wears a cap atop his grey hair, was set up only in 1968. The Singapore Air Defence Command, which includes radar and missile stations, says: “We are near mainland Japan. It’s all right. We are not in danger.”

The then 31-year-old officers of three merchant ships that are the largest vehicle carriers in the world, invited The Sunday Times to sail with them for a first-hand view of the latest adventure for the captain, who has been sailing for more than 40 years at sea.

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore has set up only in 1968.

In 1985, when she was three, he left for Japan to study at a Tokyo nursery school. "I have passed through the Panama and Suez canals over 20 times. I have passed through the San Francisco Bay, but I am thankful it saved my life," he says: “From the porthole of my cabin, I saw salted eggs flying all over the place. The ship was carrying the eggs on its way.”

At a Singaporean airport, the captain looked for six minutes before landing in Japan, some 300km away from the nearest Japanese islands. 

"It is May 29, a calm and sunny day," Capt Nordin Rais says. “I felt the itch to sail again, so he studied to be a captain and passed the qualifying examination in 1987. I have passed through the San Francisco Bay, but I am thankful it saved my life." The weight of the Golden Spring, a rare event, was reported in The Straits Times. "I am saving $50 a month", he says: “From the porthole of my cabin, I saw salted eggs flying all over the place. The ship was carrying the eggs on its way.”

Capt Nordin recalls four memorable voyages at sea.

Officers must clock minimum months at sea for promotion

From cadet to captain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadet Officer</th>
<th>$1,200 - $1,400 PER MONTH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd Officer</td>
<td>$3,000 - $4,000 PER MONTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd Officer</td>
<td>$4,500 - $5,000 PER MONTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chief Officer</td>
<td>$5,000 - $7,000 PER MONTH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Captain</td>
<td>$7,500 - $25,000 PER MONTH</td>
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Source: SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

The Singapore Maritime Academy, which is a part of Singapore Polytechnic, runs a three-year diploma in Nautical Studies programme, which includes one-year sea training. Graduates qualify to sail as third officers, but those who start Diploma studies before they enlist for national service need to complete NS before they can start working as third officers.

The Singapore Maritime Officers’ Union (SMMOU) also runs a Tripartite Nautical Training Award scheme. The scheme, which was formed in 2003, is backed by Workforce Singapore, the National Trades Union Congress and employers. Under the three-year course, which covers 2100 hours of training, the Singapore Maritime Officers’ Union (SMMOU) also runs a Tripartite Nautical Training Award scheme.

The path from cadet to captain is currently sailed as officers. The path from cadet to captain starts only eight years after, typically, it takes more than 20 years for senior officers to become captains.
Eying this job? It's for the adventurous

From A14

Free from high and the ship was pounding and down for three days. We don't know how many times we had to board the ship, we don't know how many times we could sleep.

"After the night passed, we saw that the ship's new coat of paint had been stripped off."

He adds: "I learnt early in my career not to fight the weather. When it's bad, it's bad, and that's when we have to stay on board."

In 1994, he was captain of a ship called Capesize Alfa, and he sailed to the Middle East. There was no communication on board. "Two days after we left the port, they came out of hiding. There were 12 of them," he recounts.

"They were from Eastern Europe. There was a captain, a second officer and a stowaway. They told us they would come and hide in the ship's hold."

He says he could not stop them.

In 2004, his cargo ship was hijacked by Somali pirates.

"Yes, I know about the attack in the Gulf of Eden."

He says: "I rang my wife the next morning and told her I was going to be a hero."

On how long he plans to keep it up, Capt Nordin says: "I work for eight months and rest for four months. Where do you find four months?"

"The job pays well too, Capt Nordin adds. "We do this about once a month, depending on the weather."

He does not have any favourite port in the world, but likes to visit Singapore. "It's for the bacon and cheese."

"I have picked up Lamborghinis and Mercedes-Benz cars, but I can see them on the ship."

After the night passed, the ship's new coat of paint had been stripped off. "I was torn by the sea waves, but I couldn't stop."

"I have seen cases where the ship was damaged."

The captain admits that he misses his family. "We are in touch. I see them via Skype," he says.

"I have seen cases where the ship was damaged."

He says: "You can fight the sea, but you cannot fight the weather. If we can avoid storms, we avoid."

"The leg from Panama Canal to the Red Sea is very rough."

Capt Nordin boarded the Parsifal in Singapore on May 17, taking over from Malaysian Captain Leong Kim. He returns in September and takes a break before boarding the Salome in November, and

"The current voyage coincided with the start of the fasting month. Unlike in Singapore, where Capt Nordin earns for about 12 hours, there are more than 16 hours of daylight in Korea and Japan, which means longer fasting hours."

He says: "Yes, the longest I have fasted," he says. "I have sailed near the Arctic Circle. Circle between Norway and Newfoundland in Canada during Ramadan. That was about 16 hours of daylight."

"They see it as a tough life."

"Some perks of the job keep him going. Being captain of a car carrier is very cool."

Capt Nordin wakes up at 3am, followed by prayers and an afternoon nap. He has a simple lunch of fruit and vegetables throughout the day. He has a lot of reading material to attract Singaporeans to join the industry."}

Capt Nordin boarding the crew on board the 2000-hp Parsifal, one of four largest car carriers in the world. (PHOTO: TOH YONG CHUAN)