

MASTERING A VOYAGE

▶ Captain Dominic Tan, 42, a shipmaster with ASEAN Cables (ACPL), oversees a crew of about 50 on board the cable ship, *ASEAN Restorer*. ACPL, a joint venture of six ASEAN telecommunications companies, was incorporated in Singapore in 1986 at the initiative of the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Posts and Telecommunications. The company repairs and maintains submarine cables around South-east Asia and the Indian Ocean, and has been one of the leading companies in the submarine telecommunications fiber optic cable industry. Capt Tan shares with *Singapore Nautilus* his experiences of battling rough seas and spending long periods away from his wife and 14-year-old son.

How did you become a ship captain? What do you love about your job?

I have worked in the shipping industry for 16 years, and have been a ship captain for four years. I started out as a deck cadet on board tankers in 1994 after my national service (NS). Because I come from a poor family, taking up the fully-sponsored Diploma in Nautical Studies would not cause any financial burden to my family. I was determined to break away from my situation, and worked my way through the ranks before getting to where I am today.

What I love most is the opportunity to travel. Some of the more exotic places I've travelled to prior to joining ACPL are the Republic of Congo (Africa), Zhanjiang (China) and Incheon (South Korea). My

favourite destination is Hong Kong because of its beautiful coast, and the sight of the city lit up at night. There's also no need to deal with morning traffic, and I still find myself learning many new and different things on the job every day.

What is your typical routine?

I am typically away at sea for six to seven months a year. Each commission lasts three to four months, followed by paid leave of one-and-a-half to two months. On a typical workday, I make sure that everything is in good order and that the ship is operationally ready. I also check that the ship's statutory certificates are in place and ready before we depart.

During cable repair operations, my primary role is to plan and coordinate the repair work among various departments, such as deck, engine, cable and subsea. I split shifts with my Chief Officer as the repair goes on round the clock. There are several steps in a repair operation, from locating the actual cable fault to retrieving the faulty cable and bringing it on board, and replacing the faulty section with good cable stock before restoring the repaired cable in position on the seabed. All these steps have to be closely monitored and executed with care, to ensure the cable system runs properly after our repair.

I also manage 50 staff from different countries such as India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Malaysia. The different nationalities and cultures can make

communication tough at times, but I encourage them to adapt and get along.

How do you manage difficult situations at sea?

To guard against piracy, we conduct nightly patrols on board, and this includes always putting out our water hoses as a precaution. So far, there have been no piracy attempts on our vessel. We've also sailed to Hong Kong during its monsoon season, with swells reaching up to 4m high. Even the most veteran seafarer also became seasick, but with the right motivation, we've always managed to overcome rough waters and tough situations.

Can you highlight a memorable experience as a ship captain?

I remember being tasked, along with my crew, to repair a cable south-east of Pedra Branca and east of Bintan Island in 2012. We were puzzled, as the 7km long cable was missing and couldn't be located even after two days of intensive searching. It turned out that the cable had been stolen. The fishermen who stole the cable were caught, but because the original cable had been cut into pieces and resold, we re-cabled using spare cables on board our ship. The entire project took about a month to complete!

How do you pass the time on the ship, and how do you cope with being away for long periods of time?

CAPTAIN DOMINIC TAN SHARES WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING THE MASTER OF A VESSEL, MANAGING A DIVERSE CREW, OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AT SEA, AND EVEN HELPING THE AUTHORITIES SOLVE A MYSTERY OF MISSING CABLES. BY DESMOND NG

I keep myself entertained on board by watching movies, and having occasional karaoke sessions. I'm getting used to being away from home for long periods at a time, and the Internet connection on board the ship makes things easier – I can keep in touch with my family that way.

What qualities do you feel are crucial for ship captains to have?

A ship captain must have leadership qualities, patience, and a good sense of humour. He or she must also be able to understand and manage people. In terms of technical knowledge, a ship captain must be well versed with shipping fundamentals. You can't just depend on technology, which is now so advanced that ships can be run with a lean crew of 16 to 20. There is always a chance of technology failing, or being affected by unforeseen events such as abnormal solar activity, which affects the accuracy of the ship's positioning via GPS. A good ship captain has to know both the capabilities and the limitations of the ship, so as to keep things in order.

As most unfortunate events are caused by human error and poor decisions, a good ship captain has to anticipate and know how to handle any situation at sea effectively, or results could end up being disastrous. There's also the importance of keeping calm and treading carefully in any decision-making process – I always remind my officers to check, double check, and check a third time before taking any action.



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