

Professor Day

The beating heart of a container ship is its engine. Imagine a machine the size of a four- or five-storey building in which pistons moved by controlled explosions of air and fuel generate the motive power of up to a thousand cars. Even when the vessel is at rest, the enclosed, hot spaces deep in the engine are not pleasant, but that is where – one day in the 1980s on the Merchant Vessel TFL Enterprise – we find Nicholas Koh, clutching a small spade, some rags and a bucket, cleaning wet, slimy carbon deposits from the scavenge space by the cylinders. For the newest engineer on board, it was a tough first day at the office, but Nicholas knew how to persevere. Building on that perseverance, a capacity for strategic thinking and a lively business acumen, he has become a leader in Singaporean industry, founder of an extremely successful consultancy, an advocate for engineering education, and – I am delighted to say – a Newcastle University graduate.

Nicholas' early memories are of a childhood in the 1960s in an extended family of six siblings and four cousins. Their home must have been a lively place, the family extended still further by the seamstresses who worked for his father's lampshade-making business. Commercial and domestic life were interwoven from the beginning, the interplay between them marking much of his childhood.

Outside the home, however, these were troubled years. Nicholas vividly recalls witnessing, as a five-year-old, some of the violent street conflicts that touched the lives of many in the region in that decade. Later, the family lived through the darkest of times after the premature death of his mother when Nicholas was just 9. Persevering through economic hardship, his father and siblings worked hard and sacrificed personal opportunities for the sake of the family as a whole.

At school, Nicholas was competitive and capable, studying by day and helping the family business by night. He eventually enrolled for the Diploma in Marine Engineering at Singapore Polytechnic, a course that combined theory with industry practice in a way that – as he discovered perhaps a little too late – meant he had no holidays for four years! Nevertheless, he says that he “plunged into the course like I knew what I was doing.” “Plunged” is the operative word, for one of his greatest challenges seems to have been learning to swim!

Nicholas’ first full year at sea was not entirely spent cleaning the engine. He formed his capacity for ‘systems thinking,’ finding chains of cause and effect, maintaining, testing and caring for the ship as one of a diverse team of professionals. His final act was to say goodbye to each item of equipment, asking it to behave well as he passed its care on to his successors.

On completing his diploma, Nicholas joined the Republic of Singapore Navy. Three years later, he won a Defence Technology Training Award, bringing him to our university as the first mature student to study overseas on this scheme. He graduated top in his year, with First Class Honours in Marine Technology, winning the Weighton Medal and the Institute of Marine Engineers Book Prize. It also seems that business and family continued to be intertwined, for his eldest daughter was born in Newcastle!

Over 21 years, he held numerous senior naval appointments – too many to list today – including Head of Naval Engineering and Commanding Officer of the Tuas Maintenance Base, which won the Minister of Defence’s award in 1997. His final appointment was as Deputy Head of Naval Logistics (Ship Systems), with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. A striking feature of his naval career is the effort devoted to developing talent, masterplanning vocational growth both in technical content and capabilities.

He left the Navy in 2002, initially serving as Vice President for Defence Business at ST Engineering corporate headquarters. In 2003 he founded Victory Knights Management and Consulting Services focussing on education alongside marine and dual use technologies. In 2005, he established the Seven Seas Company, in Oman, developing trading relationships between the Middle East and Asia Pacific.

Aside from his role as a CEO, Nicholas is an advisor to the Singapore Chapter of the Asia Pacific Trade and Promotion Investment Association, a member of the British Council's Alumni Hall of Fame, a former Chair of the Awareness Committee of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers in Singapore, former Vice Chairman of the Singapore joint branch of the Royal Institution of Naval Architects and Institute of Marine Engineering, Science and Technology, and has served as a Council Member of the Institute of Shipping Management.

These achievements give us ample cause to honour Nicholas, but we have over 4000 more reasons to do so. When the University sought to establish a Masters degree in Marine Technology in Singapore, Nicholas offered his help. As one of Singapore's leading engineers and businesspeople, he fostered the industry partnerships that were crucial to forming content and encouraging participation in the programme. With his guidance, in 2003 we applied successfully for the programme to be delivered in Singapore. Nicholas further supported the programme for many years, with his company managing non-academic infrastructure from teaching space to field trips. The partnership was very successful and many of the programme's alumni live and work in Singapore today.

Nicholas was also instrumental in the University being invited to offer undergraduate degrees, initially in Naval Architecture with Marine or Offshore Engineering. In collaboration with the Singapore Institute of Technology, these have grown to encompass Food & Human Nutrition,

Mechanical Design and Manufacturing, Electrical Power and Chemical Engineering. We have now trained over 4000 students, each of them a further reason to recognise Nicholas' vision, encouragement, and perseverance.

Nicholas is a distinguished leader in Singaporean business, but to us in the University, he is far from a remote figure. He is in regular contact, keeping us up to date with national and international developments, and – with an engineer's mindset – asking hard questions! His highly collaborative approach has stood the test of time and stood our university in good stead.

Professor Day, our cities – Singapore and Newcastle – share proud engineering and seafaring histories. The sea connects us, and seafaring people connect us too – our graduates who dare to move, as Nicholas did, beyond their horizons, to discover and learn together. In one interview, asked to sum up his motto for life, Nicholas said that he sought to dare to experiment and pursue with tenacity. So, in recognition of his contributions to leadership in engineering and business, his advocacy for education, and his dedication to our university, I present to you our daring and tenacious graduate, Nicholas Koh, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Engineering *honoris causa*.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald, Public Orator

Jo Geary, Director for ASEAN Strategic Development and Engagement

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