

FOREWORD

BY SENIOR MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW

THE BRITISH BUILT THE NAVAL DOCKYARDS AT SEMBAWANG BACK IN THE 1930S to balance the growing Japanese naval fleet. It was not much help during the Second World War.

By 1967, I had a premonition that British forces would be withdrawing early from Singapore. In September that year, I visited Malta to see how they had converted their British naval dockyard into a civilian one for ship repairs. The Suez Canal was closed. I found the dry dock filled with water and the workers playing water polo in it, on full pay. I feared for them.

In London, I got in touch with Sir John Hunter of Swan Hunter at Tyneside. I interested him in immediately taking over our own civilian dockyard at Keppel, so that Swan Hunter would be familiar with our conditions, and better prepared to take over and civilianise Sembawang when the British withdrew.

Two months later in November, the British pound was devalued. In January 1968, the British announced their withdrawal by 1971. The British government was helpful. The admiralty handed over the naval dockyards to Sembawang Shipyard Pte Ltd to help the company to convert the naval dockyard gradually into a commercial shipyard. They provided work on British naval ships to be done at commercial rates. They seconded many naval officers to work with Sembawang Shipyard to ensure a smooth transition.

Conversion of other naval dockyards elsewhere had not been successful. Swan Hunter, as managing agents, did not feel confident enough to invest their money in Sembawang Shipyard. They sent out some good managers, one of whom was Neville Watson. He got on very well with the staff and stayed on for many years becoming Managing Director of Sembawang Shipyard and later director of the holding company.

I have seen Sembawang Shipyard grow year by year. Sembawang Shipyard never looked back. Singapore, conveniently sited halfway between the Gulf on the west and Japan and Korea on the east, had the tanker traffic stopping in Sembawang for repairs.

The history of Sembawang Shipyard like the history of Singapore shows how a determined people were able to overcome the odds because management and workers were prepared to meet new challenges in an intelligent manner.

I congratulate all those who have contributed to making Sembawang Shipyard a success, the workers, their union leaders, and the management. Both sides understood their responsibilities to keep increasing productivity and reducing costs so that Sembawang Shipyard is profitable. Long may this continue.



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The Story of Sembawang Shipyard*"

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