

# Thirtieth anniversary monument to blood, sweat and years

SINGAPORE'S Sembawang Shipyard reached a significant milestone earlier this week on December 1 when it celebrated the 30th anniversary of its founding.

The former Royal Navy dockyard is now a cornerstone of one of the Lion Republic's most renowned and successful corporations — SembCorp Industries.

In many ways the history of the famous yard mirrors that of Singapore itself — from an outpost of colonial Empire to a thriving, modern entity, preparing to be a world-beater in the 21st century.

The republic is fiercely proud of its roots as a maritime nation whose fortunes have for so long been wedded to those of its mighty docks and port.

The people at Sembawang Shipyard represent the heartbeat of those fortunes, and they are justifiably proud.

They have chosen to mark their three decades of progress modestly this year, perhaps mindful of the economic difficulties of the southeast Asia region.

The yard decided to shelve plans for a wider public celebration and instead opted to mark its 30th birthday in a more thoughtful manner.

It has opted to commemorate its 30th with an especially commissioned book officially launched on December 1, with Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew as guest of honour.

The publication represents the mother of all coffee table books.

Painstakingly researched and written by Singapore military historian Melanie Chew, *Of Hearts And Minds — The Story of Sembawang Shipyard*, is a *tour de force* of official history, personal reminiscence and recent documentary.

The 380-page book is a treasure trove of written and pictorial history of the yard.

It starts with Singapore's early history and

the time of Raffles, tracing the growth of the island as a trading entrepot and a place of enormous strategic importance to the British.

The early chapters will be a delight to historians of Empire.

Dr Chew has done her homework well and her researchers have obviously spent much time dealing with the Public Record Office at Kew, the Imperial War Museum, and many other institutions in Singapore and the UK.

One fascinating insight the book offers is the consensus in 1920s Britain that Singapore was a key part of Empire and therefore should have a navy base where the Far Eastern Fleet would be based.

The Admiralty pushed this argument for many years prior to the founding of the docks due to the growing threat of Japan's military ambitions.

This threat was obvious and intensified into the 1920s as Japan built its navy.

And yet despite the threat, the British continued to vacillate over whether the dock should be built or not.

Finally, the book shows, the navy dockyard only got its final go-ahead after the Dominion territories agreed to contribute substantial funds for its construction.

Even then the British Cabinet insisted that investment on the dock be scaled back due to fears of overspending.

The dock was opened in 1938 after much deliberation. Subsequent events led to the Japanese invasion only four years later.

It was a time of intense suffering for all Singaporeans which is still spoken of by older people today.

The book's most telling comment on the incident comes in the foreword written by Lee Kuan Yew.

He notes: "The British built the navy dock-

yards at Sembawang back in the 1930s to balance the growing Japanese naval fleet."

Then he adds in his own inimitable deadpan way: "It was not much help during the Second World War..."

The book takes us on through the 1960s and the gradual phasing out of Swan Hunter, the UK managing agents, and the nurturing and then accession of the home-grown talent which today makes the shipyard such a world-beater.

It also contains some wonderful personal memories of yard workers, from former managing directors to ordinary fitters and welders.

Singapore's economy today focuses more than ever on its high-tech, skills-based, modern industries such as microchip production, or service industries such as logistics.

That is inevitable in a mature, industrialised country which the republic has become.

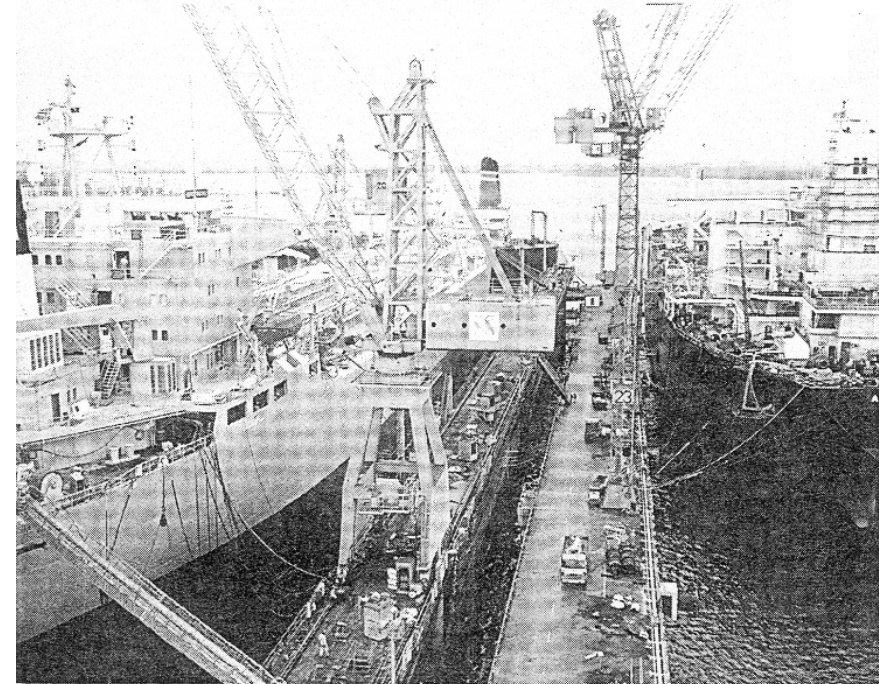
But a book like Dr Chew's also serves as a humble reminder of where Singapore has come from and where her roots really lie.

It perhaps falls to present day Sembawang chairman Philip Yeo to sum up the value of the Sembawang yard not only to his company, but to Singapore itself.

One quote in the book is both passionate and revealing:

"We talk about our assets. How many billions we have in assets. But the whole group knows that all our assets today are the result of the sweat of Sembawang Shipyard."

"The money came from the shipyard. Yes! It is a fact of life. We can be here today, talking about billions of dollars a year and how many billions in assets — it is all because of Sembawang Shipyard."



Sembawang yard: much has been done by the legions of workers to turn the yard into a world-beater after 30 years

Extracted from Lloyd's List  
5 December 1998