



Mr Toh Kok Tia (top) was a supervisor overseeing the unloading of the containers from the MV Nihon from Rotterdam (above) when it docked here in 1972. The ship, carrying a cargo of 300 containers, was the first container vessel to dock at the Tanjong Pagar Terminal. PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, PSA CORP

I Remember: How Singapore's port grew and grew

World's busiest port by 1982

When Mr Toh Kok Tia started work as a clerk at the then Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) in 1964, the ships that docked here were mainly small coastal ships, bearing commodities such as rubber, rice or coffee, from neighbouring Indonesia or Malaysia.

The bigger boys were British ships bringing food supplies for British troops stationed here.

"The first day of work, I got the shock of my life. There was a gigantic ship, so big, coming near the wharf... Previously, I had seen only tongkangs," said Mr Toh, now 70, who worked at PSA for 48 years before retiring in 2012.

In 1965, Singapore's port was the fifth-largest in the world, said then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in December that year. He hoped, with the people's cooperation, to make it the fourth-biggest port.

In his years at PSA, Mr Toh, who has taken on roles such as assistant traffic superintendent and assistant manager, has seen the port move up the ranks to become the

world's busiest port by shipping tonnage by 1982.

He was there when Singapore opened its first container berth at Tanjong Pagar Terminal and welcomed its first container vessel – the MV Nihon from Rotterdam, the Netherlands – carrying a cargo of 300 containers on June 23, 1972.

Mr Toh was then a supervisor overseeing the unloading of the containers from the ship. The team started in the morning and finished around early evening.

These days, mega ships carrying about 20,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) – the unit measurement for containers – routinely call at Singapore. From one container terminal, there are now seven. And from having just two quay cranes, there are now more than 200.

As time passed, the cargo that originated from Singapore became lighter in weight but higher in value, said Mr Toh. Shipments of goods such as rubber, pineapple and rattan later become electronic items such as TV sets, he added.

Mr Toh was involved in cargo operations in his time at PSA. To make sure things moved along, he often had to improvise, while standing in for a crane driver or donning gloves to unleash cargo on ships to get them ready to be unloaded.

"Ultimately, our job is to see that there is no delay," said Mr Toh, who said things could get so busy that a cup of Kopi O was all that he had time for during his 7am to 3pm shift.

During the Chinese New Year holidays, while ports in places such as China have holidays, "here we work like hell", said Mr Toh, who now conducts courses as an associate trainer with PSA Institute.

The grandfather of two, who keeps himself fit by swimming, had offers from shipping firms, but chose to stay at PSA as he liked the stable hours and found his job challenging. "Every time, there's something new to learn. It's not a dead-end job, that's what I liked about it," he said.

Ho Ai Li

FACTS&FIGURES

How port operations have grown

IN 1972

PSA handled almost

25,000 TEUs

(twenty-foot equivalent units, the unit measurement for containers)

IN DECEMBER 2014

Singapore became the first port in the world to cross the

500 million TEU milestone (cumulative)

IN 2014

PSA Singapore handled

33.6 million TEUs



Source: PSA