



Bazul Ashhab



Oon Thian Seng



Goush Marikan



Kelly Yap Ming Kwang



Karnan Thirupathy



Ting Chi Yen

**W**hen Oon Thian Seng and Bazul Ashhab set up a two-man shipping practice in 2002, not many would have expected then that T S Oon & Bazul would quickly grow into one of Asia's leading shipping law firms.

Today, the firm stands at 20 fee earners and there are already concrete plans to add another 5 lawyers to the team by next year. The firm which boasts an impressive line-up of clients including major shipping lines, marine insurers, traders, banks, P&I Clubs, ports and shipyards is consistently rated by clients as well as leading publications as one of the top shipping law firms in Singapore.

Apart from the founding partners, Oon Thian Seng (TS) and Bazul Ashhab (BA), the other partners at the firm are ex-mariner Goush Marikan (GM) who heads the firm's wet work department, dry shipping and international trade expert Kelly Yap (KY), ship finance lawyer Ting Chi Yen (CY) and international arbitration specialist Karnan Thirupathy (KT).

Talking to the partners at T S Oon & Bazul, it quickly becomes apparent that the firm is by no means prepared to rest on its already impressive achievements and that plans are well under way to take the firm to the next level.

**What factors do you think have contributed to the firm's growth?**

**BA:** Basically, there are two factors: - firstly, our ability to attract good work and clients and secondly, our focus on attracting the best lawyers.

To attract and keep clients, we need to provide them with consistent and high standards of service. The way we do this is by gaining an understanding into what our clients' real objectives are. With this understanding, we are able to devise the appropriate strategy to achieve these objectives.

While the ability to give solid legal advice is essential, I don't believe that our job ends simply with advising clients on the law. Our lawyers are all trained to offer commercially sensible solutions.

Clients also appreciate the fact that although we are based in Singapore, our experience is not limited to the local jurisdiction. Shipping is by nature international and our lawyers are adept in handling disputes throughout Asia and are often involved in coordinating matters where the issues involve multiple jurisdictions. So when a client comes to us with a problem, we can easily guide him through what needs to be done and where best to do them. We have lawyers who are qualified in England, China, India, Singapore and Malaysia and this is very useful in dealing with issues wherever they may arise.

**TS:** Apart from practical advice, quick response times are absolutely essential for shipping clients. Our partners are all available 24/7. Our Emergency Response Team led by ex-mariner Goush is able to provide immediate assistance as soon as a casualty arises anywhere in the region.

As Bazul mentioned, we pay a lot of attention to recruiting bright young lawyers. The firm's philosophy is to pay top dollar for top talent. Apart from money though, the firm is attractive to young lawyers as we make them feel from an early stage that they will have a future with us and that they will be taken care of.

**Are there any particular areas where the firm has seen significant growth?**

**TS:** While arbitration work has always been a significant part of our practice, there has been an increase in the shipping arbitration instructions we have been getting. Our lawyers are seeing an increasing number of instructions on arbitrations in London, Singapore and Hong Kong.

To further strengthen our international arbitration practice, we have recruited Karnan Thirupathy who was formerly with the shipping team at DLA Piper.

**BA:** Our marine insurance practice has also grown and we now probably have the largest dedicated marine insurance team in Asia. The team acts for a number of major international hull insurers some of whom instruct us exclusively on all their matters.

Through our advice and assistance, we have helped clients' record marked improvements in their loss ratio.

**What has the firm been busy with over the past year?**

**GM:** The wet practice has been very active over the past 12 months with us having attended to a number of casualties in the Asia Pacific region. Through our experience in the region over the years, we have built good working relationships with the relevant regional government authorities. Our Malaysian Associate office has been particularly helpful in working with the Malaysian authorities on major collisions and oil pollution cases.

**KY:** The financial crisis has kept the dry side of the shipping practice busy. There has been a significant increase in charterparty disputes owing to charterers' defaults. Apart from handling arbitrations and enforcement actions, we have also been very active in re-negotiating charterparties, advising on

FFA defaults and advising shipping clients in relation to insolvency and restructuring.

**CY:** While there has been a dip in ship finance work owing to the economic downturn, our contracts lawyers have nevertheless been busy helping clients renegotiate shipbuilding contracts and to find alternative arrangements to help them tide over the difficult period.

There are however signs of recovery and we are beginning to see renewed interest from clients on the purchase of newbuilds.

We have also been busy assisting a number of foreign banks start up their ship finance departments.

**Karnan, I understand you joined the firm in May this year from DLA Piper. What was it that prompted you to leave an international law firm to join a Singapore law firm?**

**KT:** I don't think I would have left my previous firm to join any other local Singapore shipping firm. What attracted me to T S Oon & Bazul is that this is clearly a very dynamic firm which is going places.

I have not felt any major difference in the work since joining T S Oon & Bazul. The work as well as the clients remains largely international. I have also not seen any change in the quality of clients and instructions. One difference though is that, as T S Oon & Bazul is a Singapore law practice, I am now able to advise on Singapore law without any restrictions.

**Where does the firm see itself in the next 3-4 years?**

**BA:** With continued support from our clients, we see ourselves increasing our numbers to about 40 lawyers over the next 3-4 years.

**TS:** We aim to be the top shipping law firm in Asia. These are exciting times in Asia and there is certainly room to increase our penetration into the growing regional shipping markets.