



Traditional Shipbuilding in Terengganu

by **Engr. Chin Mee Poon**, FIEM, P. Eng.

PULAU Duyung Besar is an island located at the river mouth of Sungai Terengganu. The Sultan Mahmud Bridge, which carries the trunk road between Kuala Terengganu and the airport, has one of its major piers sitting on this island. There is a small Malay village on this island. One can get to the village by road via the bridge, or by boat from the jetty in front of Bukit Puteri in Kuala Terengganu.

During my recent visit to the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia with my wife, I made it a point to drop in on Pulau Duyung Besar, not so much to see the village as to have a look at the shipbuilding industry there.

There were once some 40 shipyards on the island. Today, only three shipyards are still in operation. The drastic reduction in the number of shipyards was not brought about by fierce competition among themselves or the economic downturn. It is mainly due to the lack of young people willing to go through the lengthy and tedious apprenticeship necessary for them to pick up and master the skills of shipbuilding by the traditional way which has been handed down over many generations. In fact, if the trend continues unabated, the traditional shipbuilding industry on Pulau Duyung Besar may one day disappear completely.

My wife and I decided to get to the island by boat.

The one-way fare was only RM1.50 per person. From the landing, a short walk past some Malay houses led us to a shipyard where two men were busy working on a RM1 million yacht ordered by a German national now residing in Pulau Langkawi.

One of the men, a man in his 50s, was the owner of the shipyard and had acquired his skills from his father. The shipyard was started by his grandfather. According to him, it would take the two of them about one year to complete the yacht. Chengal wood was used for the hull and deck. No nails were used at all, only bolts and nuts and wooden dowels.

Next door, there was another shipyard. There, a larger boat was under construction using the same traditional method. It was the work of a group of students from UiTM under the direct guidance and supervision of Tuan Hj. Abdullah, the shipyard's owner. It was a project under the university's two-year shipbuilding course. When we were there, a large group of students from a secondary school in Selangor was also visiting.

It is not easy nowadays to find a craftsman who still takes great pride in his work and workmanship. I pray that Terengganu's traditional shipbuilding industry will thrive and prosper. ■

