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K.P. WARAN: Answering the call of changing tides

[By : K.P. Waran](#) , New Straits Times



Mike Thein would love to go into semi-retirement in 10 years and move into a home by the sea.

Beyond the sea, beyond the sea;
My heart is gone, far, far from me;
And ever on its track will flee;
My thoughts, my dreams, beyond the sea.

THIS 1931 poem by Thomas Love Peacock epitomises Mike Thein.

Watching him leap from the rocks onto a boat, jump into the sea and hold his breath while undoing an entangled rope from a propeller or accelerating on his jet ski past jutting pillars in the sea, you realise he is one with the sea.

For those of you who have gone out to sea and experienced the wind on your face, felt invigorated by the smell of salt water, enjoyed the pelting of raindrops on your skin and balanced yourself as the boat rocks and rolls, you will know what I mean.

The adrenalin rush is exhilarating when huge waves smash against the boat and turn into foam before drifting away, the flash of lightning highlights the silhouette of a huge rock jutting out of the sea or when you are huddled in the galley charting the next destination amid claps of thunder during stormy weather.

Mike, who is enjoying all these now, grew up in a farm. His grandfather and his father grew padi and vegetables in Pulau Gadong (which is not an island), about 3km from Klebang in Malacca.

Those were hard times when Mike and his siblings were required to run home from school to help on the farm. They lived from hand to mouth.

Once a month, the harvest was loaded onto bullock carts and sent to Negri Sembilan, returning with new clothes, food and sweets for the children.

"One day, while working on the farm, I was hungry and I cut a turnip, ate half of it and left the remainder on the ground. My dad knew it could not have been an animal because of the neat slice. He lined up my brothers and I and interrogated us.

"When I confessed, he took out a thick rotan ... I couldn't sleep on my back for three days. Kids nowadays would have made a police report but I was thankful because I realised I had done wrong and learnt not to do anything without the elder folks' knowledge or permission.

"I am appreciative of my father. He made me what I am today. He insisted on hard work, commitment and that his children chase their own dreams," he says.

During his schooldays, he and his brothers enjoyed fishing and every leisure hour was spent walking to the river or sea, sinking the hook and bait and waiting for a tug.

That was when he realised he was bewitched by the call of the sea.

"Come, come, come away!" it cried and he recognised that it was not just the vast blue sea, the rolling waves, the picturesque scene while negotiating a kyle, the magical effect of the horizon during a sunset or the pleasure watching boats skimming through the waters. No, it was more than that.

It was the inner voice that beckoned him to share the splendours of the sea -- may it be drifting along calm waters, fighting it out with a marlin or embarking on journeys fraught with danger.

During these experiences, the thought foremost on his mind was to respect the sea. He always remembers Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* where the aging Santiago knew he must respect the sea and work with her in order to catch a fish and survive.

In 1981, after completing his Form Five, Mike decided to take up an architecture course in Kuala Lumpur to escape the clutches of poverty and also to revel in the bright lights of the city.

But his heart was always in Malacca and he often returned home to help his brothers establish a boat building "shack" in Pulau Gadong. It began with zinc sheets over timber pillars where wooden boats were built for fishermen.

"One day in November 1984, I woke up at 4am and asked myself why was I struggling to earn RM450 a month to draw architectural plans and RM5 a night as a waiter.

"I returned to establish a shop selling boat accessories.

"One month later, the shop was razed. We had commissioned a local guy to rewire the shop and there was a short circuit. It was the blackest day of my life. I was disheartened and was just about to throw in the towel and return to KL.

"My brothers coaxed me to stay. 'We work with our hands and everything else we can replace,' they said. So I decided to give it another shot. Friends provided timber to rebuild the shop. I had to borrow money from friends and others. I went through hell," he says.

The family business of building motorboat engines and boats began to pick up pace and Mike went on "road shows" selling them to fishermen around the country.

They branched into building fibreglass boats and organised "demo days" to convince the fishermen the vessels were safe and could withstand storms.

The hard work and perseverance of Mike and his brothers resulted in the factory producing 35 models ranging from 12 to 50-foot commercial and leisure vessels.

Boat Explorer Sdn Bhd is at 1320, Klebang Besar, Malacca, and his webpage is www.boatexplorer.com.my. He is contactable at mike@explorer.com.my, 06-3152693 or 012-61608990.

In 1988, following a joint venture with an American owner, they built a catamaran sailboat from 100 per cent composite materials, which then sailed around the world and is currently berthed in California.

They built six fishing boats which were shipped to Sao Tome island off the west African coast where the 17-foot boats were found to be capable of handling high and treacherous waves.

Building boats under the brand name Explorer ("A boat for everyone" is their theme) and bigger passenger craft called Voyager, with moulds that they design and produce themselves, Mike and his brothers have made a name for themselves in the boat- building business.

Their 10,000-sq-metre boat factory has a capacity to build 600 boats a year and they are producing 180 to 200 boats of all sizes annually.

Mike believes the reluctance of banks and finance companies to offer loans is one of the reasons the industry's potential for growth has been stifled.

"Can you imagine, people have to pay cash to buy boats? The banks and finance companies have this weird thinking that if they give out loans to boat owners, they will sail away into the horizon and not repay their loans.

"They don't seem to have such reservations for those who buy cars or aeroplanes," he says, bursting into laughter.

After the Dec 26, 2004 tsunami, Mike worked with a non-governmental organisation called "Waves of Mercy" to send three fibreglass boats, three engines and fishing equipment to Aceh to help some of the fishermen start afresh.

During the delivery of two boats from Pulau Way to Aceh, they were hit by a thunderstorm with five-metre high waves with visibility reduced to just several metres.

The half-hour journey took close to two hours and Mike, an eternal optimist who says "he left it to God and the elements" to see him through the journey, was happy to reach his destination unscathed.

Mike, who is also the chairman of the Technical and Water Rescue Section of the Civil Defence Department with the honorary rank of Lt Col, has always been in the thick of rescue operations, including one during the floods that devastated parts of Johor last year.

His Seafarer restaurant at Klebang serves Baba Nyonya food and is surrounded by 50 boats, many berthed there by owners who take them out on weekends.

His wife, Cassie Koh, runs the restaurant and ensures Mike does not end up spending too much money entertaining friends.

Mike behaves like a beach bum, friendly and always with a smile, cracking jokes loudly and breaking into guffaws. He breaks into colloquial Malay, reflecting his Baba ancestry.

The rough exterior belies his generous warm-hearted spirit that offers hospitality to visitors far and wide. The world is his oyster and all its citizens are his friends.

He has a knack of forging deep and meaningful relationships even upon the first meeting.

His personality leaves a lasting impression and he makes no bones about the fact that he is a simple man from farming stock who has found his niche in an industry linked to his passion -- the sea.

Yet, he has a shrewd business sense, building a family business from a shack to an enterprise with business links with foreign countries.

His seaside restaurant is his playground, boardroom and showroom all in one. It is rare to see a man who shows so much passion for his vocation and lives a carefree lifestyle day after day with business meetings interspersed with jet ski lessons and karaoke sessions.

The city slicker corporate types can learn a thing or two from him by ditching the suit and tie for a pair of beach bum shorts and tatty T-shirt to talk business in a casual environment.

Mike is always surrounded by his children -- Wendy, 19, Calvin, 12, Florence, 10, Trisha, 7 -- and countless nephews and nieces, who have an easy yet respectful relationship with him.

At 45, he is living his dream and says: "I am happy that 90 per cent of my fantasy has become reality. I want to go into semi-retirement in 10 years, move into a home by the sea and take a sailboat out every day and indulge in fishing and diving."

Wouldn't many of us want to be in the same boat?