I had been stranded at Provident Management Services Limited at Mixenden too long. Its development cycle was in place, and it had more computing power than you could shake a stick at. I had done one or two odd jobs in the UK, but was not enjoying not having anything real to do. Nothing for the troubleshooter, as I had become, was my impression. I made a real effort to seek a move within the company for the next challenge. It came from an unexpected direction. I had spoken to Peter Evans at the international division in London, and I had flagged a wish to move to Terry Duffy, by then the technical director in the UK.

The rescuing telephone call came direct from Al Harvey in Hong Kong. I had met Al four years earlier during the Bass Charrington project in Glasgow. At that time, he was the customer engineering manager for Scotland. Big Al had the reputation of being a bit of a hard man. Now, he was the Asia-Pacific technical director. His offer was immediately attractive. Was I prepared to accept a three-month assignment as a pre-sales technician in Singapore? The total package included the option for the family to join me in Singapore for Christmas and the New Year at the end of the assignment. Could I be in Singapore next week? It was a well thought out package, and I instinctively said ‘yes’.

As I travelled to Singapore for the first time in 1980, I pondered what I knew about the place. It was not much. I knew about the Federation of Malaysia, which originally included Singapore, and I knew about the conflict with the communists, as a Daily Mirror Group colleague had fought against the insurgents during his national service. Singapore had left the federation...
as a separate state and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had a burgeoning reputation as a statesman and a benign dictator of the city-state. The images from my stamp collection were the substantiation of my sparse knowledge of Singapore’s location and customs. It was exciting. I was not used to the constant heat, of course, and the clothes I had with me were unsuitable, but I became easily used to not having to wear a jacket and tie. Tailoring was cheap. I obtained lightweight trousers without difficulty.

The city was bustling. Everywhere were streams of people of mixed race, all seemingly with a purpose. Pedestrians created flows on the crowded pathways that spilled into roadways when necessary, around foodstalls and artisans, such as letter writers and shoe repairers, working on the pavements. My daily walk to the office was a delight. Before 8.00 am it was busy, with people breakfasting on the street, clustered on rickety stools around their food provider of choice. There were a few tables where the food was provided from a building. At lunchtime, and on the way home at night, I learned which stalls provided the food that took my fancy. Living and working in Singapore and Southeast Asia for almost five years would be a privilege.

I arrived in Singapore on Wednesday. I had a reservation at the Stamford Hotel on Orchard Road. The Sperry office was on the fifteenth floor of the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC) Building, Chulia Street, in the centre of the central business district. Located on the very edge of Chinatown, the office block is an icon of Singapore, designed after the fashion of a modern, newfangled calculator of its day. It stood very tall at 50 storeys and was the most modern building I had ever been in. After five days in the hotel, anticipating a three month stay, I leased an apartment within easy walking distance — through Chinatown — of the Sperry office. I moved into its spartan interior expecting to be the lone occupant, despite the fact it was a three-bedroom facility. It was not to be. Frank Dorrian, the local Sperry manager, moved in within days (in order to be able to lease out his own apartment), and we were shortly joined by Sandy McNeil. Sandy and I had been pals for a few years and enjoyed one another’s company when I managed the Bass Charrington account. At the weekend, Sandy and I regularly went to Sentosa Island to swim and jog. The more health-conscious Sandy also equipped the kitchen with tools such as a toaster and a toasted sandwich maker.
Figure 9.1: My walk through Chinatown to the office. The bustling, colourful atmosphere was not spoilt for me, even on a rainy day.

Source: Author’s collection.
My assignment was to assist a local salesman, Alfred Tong, in his endeavours to sell another Sperry 1100 system in Singapore. Our immediate team included two other super Singaporeans, both technicians, Tan How Choon and Nanette Westerhout, who, along with Alfred, could not have made me feel more welcome. Tan How Choon, whose habit was to introduce himself as ‘Tan How Choon, you can remember my name by thinking hot and cold’, was to become my ideal Singaporean. He was very bright, pragmatic, and eager to learn. Somewhat thickset, he knew he would have trouble every year in his role as a Singapore Army Reservist, as he had to prove he was in shape by running a kilometre in eight minutes. Nanette, a stunning looking Eurasian, had been providing ad hoc pre-sales assistance to Alfred, along with How Choon, while undertaking real support to our major customer in the island state, the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore (TAS). Alfred was outstanding. He was prepared to study any aspect of what it was we had to offer our prospective customers to find the key benefits we might have over our principal competitor, IBM. A business studies graduate of the National University of Singapore, and having completed two-and-a-half years of national service, Alfred did not need to be advised what to do — he just needed guidance on how to do it.

I was to learn what it was like to be a Singaporean from Alfred, How Choon, and Nanette, and could not have been happier with them as mentors and colleagues. I was submitted to an informal, but crucial, aptitude test my first lunchtime in the office. The four of us removed to Keppel Harbour for a local favourite, fish head curry. It was delicious, and I realised the honour and the challenge when How Choon expertly removed one of the eyes from the fish head in curry juices with his chopsticks and placed it reverently on my plate in a nest of rice. This was it. I was not sure. Fortunately, I had been given a fork and spoon as well as chopsticks, and picked up my treat. Was I supposed to chew or swallow? Did it really matter? It did. That test passed, I was one of the team.
Figure 9.2: Left to right: Alfred Tong, myself, and Gene Risso working late in the Singapore office.
Source: Author’s collection.

Figure 9.3: At the Sperry Singapore 1980 Christmas party. Left to right: Tan How Choon, Frank Dorrian behind Joseph the jaga (office odd-job man), and big Al Harvey from Hong Kong.
Source: Author’s collection.
My first two days went quickly. The weekend was to have a profound impact on the rest of my life. I wanted to walk the length of Orchard Road during the Saturday, and I had even been into a number of shops. At the southern end of Orchard Road was the Padang, a luxuriously green sports field, which at 4.00 pm was a hive of activity. Hockey was being played at the Singapore Recreational Club east end of the Padang, and rugby on the Singapore Cricket Club main pitch. Walking the footpath between the two pitches, local Singaporeans went resolutely and disinterestedly about their business. I was one of very few spectators who watched the conclusion of the rugby game. It was followed quickly by a second game, with players who were enormous. I had not seen 30 such big men before, except when watching very good rugby. This rugby was of a good standard and was played with a passion and a pattern. I watched and got into conversation with the players from the first game, who shortly emerged from showers, still hot and perspiring, and carrying cans of beer in ice in plastic bags to help support the first team, as I was to learn. The club was playing one of the New Zealand Infantry Regiment teams in the First Division of the Singapore League. I liked the look of this. I was offered a can of beer, and then another, and then another. I spent the evening with the Club Rugby Section, mostly expatriates, in the men’s bar of the club and elicited the invitation to play with them the next day if I fancied it. The invitation was to turn up at 3.00 pm with the expectation I would get a game: ‘Just bring along your own boots and jock strap.’ This I did,
and played against a visiting side from the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. The Thai side were a mixture of tough-as-teak Thais and expatriates and although it was very hot I enjoyed the game. The club and its members welcomed and somehow absorbed me. The club was to become the focal point of my life in Singapore.

I appreciated I was in Singapore for the technology transfer of whatever sales skills I could pass on to Alfred. Sperry Singapore was a small entity. The main customer was the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore, who had bought a Sperry 1100/60 to run the Swedish Telecommunications Company (Swedcom) software, which incorporated a database of installed copper circuits under the ground matched to a sophisticated mapping system. But first Sperry had to convert files from an IBM system to work with the new Sperry system. Alfred was the salesman to the Telecommunications Authority.

Before I had left the UK, Sperry was promoting its ‘we understand how important it is to listen’ advertising and promotional message. This message was included on letterheads and envelopes. The company distributed audio cassettes on learning how important it is to listen and training officers carried the message across the company. Thinking laterally, Alfred offered the course to TAS and it was very successful. One or two of the other state organisations also had the course.

At every TAS meeting, whatever the time of day or the length of the session, plates of green cake would appear with hot and cold soft drinks. The green cake took some getting used to, but became a part of the ritual of our meetings. Singaporeans can be very direct. Miss Lim Beng Choo was the systems and programming manager. Her main experience had been in using IBM equipment. She was not used to the Sperry 1100 hardware and software, and could be very aggressive in her approach: ‘This is not the way we did things with IBM.’ I should have listened. One day I went too far in defending the Sperry position, attacking ‘IBM monkeys and their limited abilities in doing much more than peel bananas’. This was a crude, attempted analogy to suggest that Sperry systems did some things better or differently to IBM systems. Beng Choo did not appear to be too put out by my response, but Raoul Fischer, the Hong Kong company regional vice president, received a letter of complaint from the CEO about my attitude. Raoul replied nicely and asked that I drop a note of apology for
any offence caused to Beng Choo. This done, I was well received during my next technical meeting and believe I was given an extra large piece of green cake. I am not sure if this was good or bad.

Alfred Tong was a delight to work with. He was prepared to tackle anything, and if that meant learning, for example, a new computer language, he would have set about that. As it was, the most significant business opportunity was that being pursued at the Housing and Development Board. In 1980, the board housed well over 80 per cent of the Singapore population and its policies were a strict implementation of Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party government policy. The board, known by its initials, HDB, was very visible everywhere in Singapore. Alfred had already developed an easy relationship with chief architect Dr Saw Boo Chan, who had the responsibility to take HDB computer policy into the 1980s. Dr Saw was open to any and all ideas of moving forward. We looked to Sperry to find application software that we might move into HDB, but at the time it had not been compiled into a directory we could easily use. We spent time following up on existing users of the Sperry Integrated Civil Engineering System (ICES) software package, but were not able to find another government authority using Sperry equipment with a cradle to grave responsibility. We were also restricted by government mandate, at the time, from being able to recommend an extension of the TAS database to encompass a property database for HDB, although the project team had every HDB property in their files. As a part of the bidding process, after submission of a full proposal we were invited to make a formal presentation of our recommendations to the HDB directors. I spent a number of weekends with Letraset and photographs putting together a 35 mm slide show to tell our story. Our presentation was very slick and professional looking. We brought the big guns in from Hong Kong and the US to participate in the presentation and to review our competencies. Working in pre-sales was back to basics for me, but it was a rewarding and a positive experience, which was why I was there. A tangible weakness in our story was a past local successful conversion from an IBM system. The work at TAS had not been completed and IBM made sure that HDB was aware that conversion was as much art as simple recompilation of the original IBM programs. We did not win the HDB business, but were in good shape to tackle the next big one.

The next big one was the Public Utilities Board, whose head office was opposite the Telecommunications Tower, and whose staff had the opportunity to mix in both work canteens and the hawker stalls at the back of Orchard Road. Once again, it would have made sense for us to sell
on the back of the geographic infrastructure of the telecommunications network, but again we ran up against the government restrictions placed upon us and the politics between the two organisations.

The government was discussing its options on the development of a service-based economy. The country’s recognised greatest asset was its well-educated, hard-working, and young population. Government wanted to discuss the viability of a national computer policy with the computer industry. Sperry worldwide had a large number of university users, but no real whole-of-government reference sites that we could identify and sell from. International Computers Limited (ICL) was in Singapore and saw a national policy incentive as a worthwhile investment on its part, and placed consultants in Ngee Ann Polytechnic, which was the designated lead establishment to look at the policy. Alfred, Frank, and I were able to develop a relationship with policy advisors, but we never got as close as the full-time ICL consultants.

In no time it was Christmas, and Audrey and the two boys joined me for their holiday. They found living at International Plaza rather spartan. I had to ask my two lodgers to find other lodgings in order to accommodate my family.

Figure 9.5: The view from my International Plaza apartment looking towards the OCBC Tower at back left.
Source: Author’s collection.
I was walking with Audrey and the boys along Shenton Way to the Esplanade, the first Saturday she was there, as I was to play rugby. I had an admission to make:

‘I have something to tell you. If you think that perhaps my approach to you has been less than aggressive, it is because, I have to admit … I have lost my front teeth. They were knocked out in a game against the Singapore Armed Forces side. I now have a bridge for the four missing teeth.’

Audrey almost guffawed in relief.

‘I am so pleased. I have been worrying about how I was going to tell you that I have had accidents in both of the cars at home.’

Such is life.

I also had to tell the family that Al Harvey had asked me to extend the assignment for a further three months, to the end of March 1981, with the expectation I would be home for Easter.

I was given another general administration task. The rate of movement of staff from one computer company to another was hurting the users and the suppliers. It seemed as if the Singaporean technicians, mainly young women, would change jobs for even the smallest of salary increases. Under the chairmanship of Robert Iau, the president of the Singapore Computer Society and a deputy secretary of one of the government departments, we met to discuss the problem. I represented Sperry. All the computer companies sent a representative. Mr Iau is a forceful personality. Under his direction, we formulated a policy of using the US Hays Grade to define tasks and levels of responsibility for computer-related activities and set an upper and lower salary band for that level, one we could all agree to. We met some months after setting the policy and agreed it was working: staff were doing less job-hopping and productivity was better.

Robert Iau ran the Singapore Computer Society with a firm hand. I thought him far too authoritarian, and wrote unsolicited, published articles for the local computer press about the meetings with the byline of Bee C–Y. Robert was also a member of the Singapore Cricket Club. I subsequently came to learn and appreciate Robert’s style. He was also very generous. We met on an aeroplane to Bangkok and he took me out on the town that night. I regretted I had ever written those articles, in ignorance of his competences.
During February in the New Year, I was working with Richard Hawkins in Kuala Lumpur when Sperry had a change of management for its Asia-Pacific region. I was in ignorance of the change, and had not seen Frank Dorrian when I got back to International Plaza on Friday night. I was sleeping in on the Saturday when the telephone rang. It was Frank.

‘We have a new boss and he wants to see you. We are all waiting for you at the office.’

I tried to sneak into the back of the conference room without making a fuss, perhaps 40 minutes later. The man in the dark brown suit at the front saw me come in.

‘Hello! Don’t I know you?’

‘Yes, Rom. I was working for John Woods at Remington House when you came in as UK managing director a few years ago now.’

‘Yes, I thought so. What are you doing here?’

‘Well, I’m sorry I am late, Rom. I was in Kuala Lumpur last week. I am working on assignment from the UK in pre-sales with the Singapore branch.’

Rom looked at me for a moment. He then looked up and wrote my name into an empty box on an organisation chart on the whiteboard.

‘That fills that gap. Chris will take up the role of technical director.’

Gulp!

‘Of what, Rom?’

‘We are creating a new Asia region of the company.’

I sat down and listened. I was probably still in shock even after a game of rugby that afternoon and an evening at the cricket club when I met up with Rom again on the Sunday.

It was a dynamic reorganisation, and by no means cast in concrete, which was a good thing. For a brief while, Al Harvey and his team worked for me, as did the other worthies in the Hong Kong office. Everyone took the change pretty much in their stride. It did mean that a new Southeast Asia region had been recognised, which consisted of Singapore, where we sold directly in to the market, and included six countries where we sold via a distributor network: India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand. These were perceived as being the hard countries.
Romuald A. Slimak was an American of Polish birth. Rom’s appointment was as a vice president, which was a role he took very seriously. He immediately tried to get additional floor space at the OCBC Centre, but none was to be had. That forced a move to the Octagon in Robinson Road, a building close to completion. Rom delighted in the chance to influence the style and decoration of the eighth floor — we took the whole floor. Rom’s *pièce de résistance* was the marble entrance foyer, which was re-laid three times before he was satisfied — but it did keep him occupied. He also took time to find a nice new Mercedes and a suitable residence for himself and Mrs Slimak. The house was a classic black-and-white mansion, after the style of an English Tudor house in huge grounds in Cornwall Gardens, very exclusive and at SGD$12,500 per month it needed to be good. Rom expanded the staff for the Singapore regional office and branch office.

![Sales Chart](image)

**Figure 9.6:** Rom was fine with me using his image in light-hearted fashion for internal meetings. On other occasions, I put Frank Dorrian’s head into the picture.

Source: Author’s collection.

Rom was good at many facets of the job. He surprised us with his observation that he had been at the London School of Economics at the same time as the then Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Dr Goh Keng Swee. Rom took Frank Dorrian with him to meet Dr Goh. Rom’s approach to Dr Goh was to ask if the Singapore Government would find it of value to place one or several of its favoured sons with us to give them experience of working with a multinational company in a sales role. We recruited Henry
Lau through Dr Goh Keng Swee. Sperry being the company it was, we went through the process of asking Henry to complete an application form and interview. Frank and I separately interviewed Henry. At 23, Henry was a Presidential Scholar who had attended Bath University in the UK, was Secretary of the Department of Defence with responsibility for 300,000 staff, chairman of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and Dr Goh’s political advisor.

Frank and I recommended Henry for a sales job: ‘Very suitable.’ Here was someone of very high calibre and the government helped fulfil Henry’s promise. As a Sperry salesman he was credited with sales to the Ministry of Education, the Singapore Internal Security Organisation, and the Singapore External Security Organisation, and some other sales contributions to round out his credentials. Henry became the chairman of Amdahl Computers in Singapore before he was 30 years of age.

The government of Singapore, under founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, was totally pragmatic. Mr Lee’s National Day address in 1981 highlighted Singapore’s strengths as its educated population, who were blessed with a fierce work ethic, and Singapore’s key geographic position at the crossroads of Asia. The government made the decision to educate Singaporeans in the use of computers and, through the education minister, we were given every opportunity to be a part of and contributor to this policy. Henry had joined us by the time we were putting together some final thoughts to answer the opportunity. We proposed a European visit for ministry of education representatives. Another of the outstanding young Singaporeans, Tan Chin Nam, tall and confident, was appointed to lead the team. We expected Henry would accompany the team on this trip. Henry was hesitant and recommended that someone else might be more suitable — someone with more Sperry experience. I naively agreed to accompany the team. Selfishly, it made sense for me. I was due to spend Easter back with the family and discuss the extension of my tenure in Singapore with them, and maybe I’d be able to meet with Sperry UK.

The Singapore education study team and I did four or five excellent customer visits in Europe over 10 days, during which we saw Sperry computer systems involved in university and city infrastructure applications. We were not, however, able to show the visiting Singaporeans what they were hoping to see — another country developing a cadre of computer professionals upon whose skills an export market would be developed. I was able to brief Alan Stevens, ‘the Bishop’, now Birmingham branch manager, and Charles Pigden, still UK training
manager. Through a round-table conference, we started to develop with our visitors the nucleus of an idea based upon the UK National Computer Centre model — they were looking at standardisation and training as key elements of a UK policy. Tan Chin Nam was warming to the direction our discussions were taking, and the meeting concluded with a positive feeling. That evening, Alan, Charles, and I tried to work out ways and means from the Sperry perspective. It was going to be very difficult. The Singapore Government wanted a computer manufacturer to take responsibility for setting up a training centre, with a team of experienced lecturers in Singapore, at the manufacturer’s expense. We doubted that Sperry would buy that idea. (It did not. ICL did, providing nine senior lecturers for up to five years.) My trip with the team taught me a few things. When travelling with Singaporeans, expect to eat Chinese food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I understood and appreciated Henry Lau’s grasp on the politics of reality. There was no way he was going to accompany the team without knowing he would come back with the order.

Shopping in Singapore for consumer goods in the 1980s was cheap. It was not just rumour. We found that the Chinese shopkeeper expected you to try to barter with him. Whatever price he quoted, the experienced shopper would offer 50 per cent. After haggling a price, when both parties were satisfied, you paid 70 to 80 per cent of the original asking price. This was the custom and it became a way of interfacing with the shopkeeper. The only drawback to this process was that visitors seemed to want to spend all day haggling with several shopkeepers for the same article to save a few dollars. We knew how the pricing worked. For example, the Japanese camera manufacturers were offering the retailer 11 units for the price of 10, so it was stock turnover that was driving the price.

Everything in Singapore had a reason. The People’s Action Party Government under Lee Kuan Yew had been in power for 15 years and was pragmatic in its approach. It perhaps helped that all members of that parliament were from the People’s Action Party. When I arrived, public offices were still showing a government notice to the effect that ‘Males with long hair will be attended to last’.


As Singapore has four official languages — Chinese (Mandarin), English (sometimes referred to as Singlish), Malay (Bahasa), and Indian (Tamil) — most official signs carry the message in four languages, although not the ‘no long hair’ message. We lived through the process for the banning of betel nuts, chewed by Indians, colouring their teeth and mouths and spittle a bright red. I initially wondered what was adorning the pavements. Next came the ‘do not spit’ campaign. The ‘one is enough’ family planning policy was also current. This was partly rescinded, but it did have some unexpected consequences.

In the 1980s, Singaporean men were obliged to undertake National Service for two-and-a-half years, and serve on the National Reserve for a further 10 years. A dramatic result of this policy was fascinating and obvious as we went about doing business: young Singaporean women were the drivers of business and were entering the professions. Chinese culture prevented a young man from being able to work for a female his junior in years and status. All men effectively lost that two-and-a-half years of career opportunity. What was left for them? Becoming a salesman was one option.
Terry Thompson joined the office from the United States airlines group, where he had been working as financial controller, and was appointed director of distributor operations. These were the ‘difficult’ countries in which we sold through a local distributor. Rom endorsed the plan that I join Terry as technical director. From my perspective, this was six super jobs in one, concentrating on developing our business in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand. We basically handled the pre-sales effort with and for the distributor, who took a margin on the sale — as did Sperry, of course — and handled the post-sales activities as best we could. Each country was culturally different, which determined how business would be done. Each country was so different I shall talk about my experiences with each of them as a separate entity.

What do I mean by ‘difficult’? Another word might be ‘corrupt’ by the standards Sperry accepted. We sold through local distributors to isolate the company from any suggestion that our business practices were anything other than competitive. The distributor functioned independently and isolated Sperry from whatever business practices were prevalent in the country.

As a Sperry employee my contract forbade me from indulging in corrupt practice. Depending on the relationship I developed with each distributor, they might explain their business relationships with their customers or not. My role was to provide the technical interface. The Sperry relationship and contract to provide equipment and technical support was with the local distributor.

Terry appreciated the added value that the Singaporean office staff gave to our work, although he was never at ease with them. He invited the whole office to a Christmas party at his apartment, which was easily large enough to accommodate 50 party-goers. He called me on the telephone early the next morning in an agitated state and told me that the local engineers had thrown his barbells from the apartment balcony into the car park below, and the Singapore police were at his place. I must have enjoyed the party, within walking distance from where we lived, but I did not put the facts together as I should have: ‘So what if barbells had gone over the balcony?’ I was picturing a small stand with miniscule tinkling bells on it. It was only when I got to the Wing on Life Tower and saw the crater that Terry’s exercise weights had made in the concrete below that I appreciated his concern. The police suspected that it must have taken a team effort to lift the actual bar, as all the weights were on it. The customer engineers were suspected, but no action was taken.
Rom Slimak stayed with us long enough to effect the move to the Octagon and begin to enjoy his life in Singapore. He left Singapore in September 1983. I cannot remember that Rom did much travelling, and neither Terry Thompson nor I forgave him for one trip to India to meet the management of ORG Systems, our Indian distributor. Rom insisted that the meeting take place at Delhi Airport, so that he need not leave the airport before returning directly to Singapore. This example did not encourage our Singaporean-Chinese support staff, who had an aversion to going to India anyway. If they travelled there at all, they carried their own rice and water for the duration of their stay.

One story about Rom that I have told many times involves the visit of Gerry Probst, the (Mormon) CEO of Sperry Corporation, who had attended Harvard Business School at the same time as President Suharto of Indonesia. It was President Suharto’s turn to host an alumni gathering, which Mr Probst decided to attend. Sperry representatives were lining up to accompany Mr Probst to Jakarta as protocol demanded. I thought it really big of both Mr Probst and Rom Slimak to decide I should have that honour, as it was I who had the most interface with the Soedarpo Corporation, our Indonesian distributor.

I had spent the week in Taiwan. On the Friday morning I left the Taipei hotel very early, as getting through Taipei Customs could be very difficult. Taiwan at that time had no recognition of copyright, but its customs could be ruthless in removing the title pages of plagiarised books to maintain face to the outside world. If the day was a ‘search all luggage for locally printed books and tear out the title pages’ day, the queues in customs could cause one to miss the flight. It was not going to happen to me. It was a quiet day, and I was clear of customs and in the first-class lounge at 4.30 am awaiting the 6.30 am flight to Singapore. I mixed myself a couple of fiendish Bloody Marys and was in fine form when the champagne was distributed in first-class during the flight. I got back to Changi Airport about midday and went straight to the Octagon. The place was deserted. Rom was entertaining Mr Probst and the staff at lunch prior to a barbecue at his home in the evening. I did whatever work was instantly apparent and went for my own lunch in the Ship, an English-style pub in Robinson Road, where I met up with my banker pal, Euan Ansley. I stayed in the pub until I had an early evening call from Audrey reminding me that we were due at Rom’s.
Audrey brought a change of clothes for me and I changed at Rom’s house. It was a swinging party — I have to admit that I was swinging. I had been drinking, albeit slowly, for some 14 or 15 hours before getting to the party. It was obvious, even to me, that discretion was to be the better part of valour, and that it would not be appropriate for me to enter into conversation with Mr Probst. It must have been a bit obvious, because Mrs Probst managed to corner me to ask that I talk to her husband, as ‘Gerry is keen to meet you, as he wants to know what subjects will be raised in Jakarta’. Mr Probst did not drink at all, so I thought it better that we talk in the garden. I could not remember the conversation. My colleagues said that it was a long conversation that appeared animated from a distance. I learned later, when the company policy with regard to the cost of spare parts — which had always been a real problem for the distributors — was changed, that I had been able to make at least one point. The cost of spares was halved. Something else I learned later happened at the end of the evening. A few of us, including Audrey, myself, and Richard Hawkins, stripped down to our underwear to use Rom’s swimming pool. Messrs Slimak and Probst were apparently watching with binoculars from the house. I accompanied Mr and Mrs Probst to Jakarta and to the palace, where the Harvard class reunion was taking place, and got to shake the president’s hand before leaving.

Uruguayan-born Gus Sichero replaced Rom as vice president of the region. Gus had a successful sales and management career with Sperry in South America and the US. Gus was ready for the rough and tumble of the distributor world, and was a great support in deriving aggressive pricing strategies for targeted accounts. He and Terry Thompson would spend hours with their yellow accountant’s pads honing in on a winning number. Gus was an inspired user of 3M Post-it notes. He insisted on noting action items and dates for completion as a result of every discussion, writing these down on the yellow stickers. These were placed in his desk diary on the targeted completion date. You could be very sure that, come the day, Gus or Albina (Rom Slimak’s secretary) would telephone to ask for confirmation of the completed task. Gus never missed a deadline. It soon taught us the importance of getting his jobs done on time.

On the following pages I show a few photographs from the distributor conference we put on in 1984. It was the first such regional conference Sperry had initiated. It was a huge success.
Figure 9.8: We were able to publicise our conference on the front of the Hilton Hotel, the venue for our meeting. This excited our distributors and demonstrated our commitment to the business. This banner was photographed and shown in *The Straits Times*.
Source: Author’s collection.

Figure 9.9: What a good-looking lot. Gus Sichero in the centre sits between Terry Thompson and Mr Soedarpo. Richard Hawkins is the beanpole at the back.
Source: Author’s collection.
Figure 9.10: The leaders of a successful sales grouping, from eight different nations.
Source: Author’s collection.

Figure 9.11: The conference party at Terry’s apartment. Sumra Manning tries out the first Sperry PC in Southeast Asia (actually made by Mitsubishi), while Richard and Marion Hawkins watch from the back.
Source: Author’s collection.
Gus left Singapore after a gruelling session with Mr Soedarpo of the Soedarpo Corporation (recounted below), and was replaced by Tom Yam, another Sperry stalwart, from the US. Tom was Hong Kong Chinese and his appointment occurred at a most appropriate time. The Singaporean Government was beginning to question the continued employment of expatriates who had been encouraged to the island state to help effect a technology transfer. The government was asking if the transfer had been effective and if it was time for locals to take more responsibility. Tom was determined to be seen to make a difference. That determination led to Terry Thompson’s dismissal and my wish to look for a different challenge. The timing for my change was perfect. Our two boys had left Singapore for the UK (rather than having to serve two-and-a-half years of Singapore National Service), and Audrey was no longer keen to be alone for the 250 nights a year that my job demanded I be away from Singapore.

Although I have written positively about the timing of my completion of tasks in Singapore there were a few negative experiences.

I had a rugby accident in early 1985. The Singapore Cricket Club was playing the New Zealand Infantry Regiment at Sembawang Barracks and, as ever, it was a close game. I was playing hooker between two of the strongest men I have ever known, but we had been pinned down into a sequence of scrums under our own posts. On perhaps the sixth attempt, Andy Martin, a future New Zealand All Blacks manager, did not go down straight. I was badly bent. The problem was diagnosed some months later as an exploded disc. Part of the disc between the fourth and fifth vertebrae had disintegrated. Final diagnosis was made during an operation at Gleneagles Hospital, and kept me out of the office for two weeks. The surgeon wanted me to have three months bed rest, and I had to explain to him that, while working for an US company, three months leave was not an option. Only twice in my working life have I had cause not to be in the office, other than for an agreed vacation. Both times saw me needing to look for another job.

Who said business was easy?

On the following pages I recount my experiences working and travelling throughout Southeast Asia for the Sperry Corporation.
India

I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to work and travel extensively in India.

Our Indian distributor was ORG Systems of Baroda. ORG was originally the acronym for Operations Research Group, which described the origins of this division of the Ambalal Sarabhai Enterprises Limited, at the time one of the top 10 Indian family-owned and operated consortiums.

India was regarded by Sperry as a hardship posting and the company offered to pay a hardship allowance of US$30 per day for time spent there. I do not think it made any difference, but it was an anomaly. It also caused accounting problems with the payroll departments at home, as most of us were on assignments from a home country. The compromise offer was that, travelling from Singapore, we were encouraged to stay over in Bangkok for a day on the outward and return trips to recover. This was never a problem, as I always had tasks to do with Summit Computer Company there.

Figure 9.12: The street in which ORG Systems had its New Delhi office, ‘near the Priya Cinema’ as I learnt to ask the taxi driver.
Source: Author’s collection.

India is a fascinating, vibrant place. You know you are somewhere different when the aeroplane doors open and the air conditioning is replaced by a warm, moist, and spicy embrace. It is a mixture of people, animals and dust. Immediately leaving the aeroplane, you notice what appear to be piles of rubbish swept against the wall — these are people asleep in the
terminal. You cannot tell if they are staff or visitors in waiting. People are everywhere. Once outside of the confines of the terminal, there is the noise of living people, traffic and machinery. The roads are packed with people — so many people.

I worked most closely with Hari Dave (pronounced Dar-vay), the ORG sales manager, and V. K. Malhotra, the ORG software and support manager.

Hari was probably in his late 30s, running towards being plump. Hari’s safari suits never seemed quite full enough around his waist. He moved from one crisis to the next and was always in a hurry between assignments. He was a shrewd and skilled computer generalist, a good man to have around in the Indian marketplace that had been abandoned by IBM in 1977 when the Indian Government would not permit IBM to retain a controlling interest in its Indian subsidiary. V. K. M. Sharma was ORG executive director. A slender, small, slightly hunched man with grey hair, we would see him at the ORG office of an evening. His interjections were always insightful, and it was a pleasure to do business with him. I never got to the head office at Baroda, but Terry Thompson did, and was impressed with the top management of ORG.

Figure 9.13: ORG representatives at the Sperry Singapore distributor conference. Left to right: Hari Dave, D. N. Jetley, and V. K. Malhotra.
Source: Author’s collection.
V. K. Malhotra was technically very competent, although somewhat academic in his approach. The Indians were gifted programmers whose education (and comparative lack of resources) made them most disciplined analysts and programmers — they actually read and understood the manuals. This did not happen anywhere else in my experience — and still does not. D. N. Jetley, the ORG marketing manager, was the political mover and shaker, and he used his role as president of one of the branches of the Indian Professional Engineering Association as a part of his selling technique. Bringhi Dev was a young, scholarly looking, energetic ORG salesman in Bangalore, the Garden City. He had reason for his enthusiasm, as we eventually had a number of installations along the main thoroughfare in prestigious organisations, including Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Hindustan Aeronautes Limited, the National Aeronautical Laboratory, and the Indian Space Research Organisation.

We did not meet many of the ORG workers. We only came across them on customer sites, when our focus was generally on talking to customers. ORG did a good job. Customer complaints, if they were raised and were not easily resolved by ORG, would need a Sperry intervention, which was my responsibility.

We never got really close to our Indian colleagues. They were work friends, but the social aspect was largely ignored. Delhi was dry at this time, although occasionally ORG senior management would meet us at the Maurya Sheraton in Delhi for a drink or two. But apart from Hari sometimes dropping me off at a hotel, we did not meet outside of working hours. D. N. Jetley was an exception. He invited Audrey and me to his house for dinner on one occasion that Audrey was in Delhi. We went to the family compound and met the extended family supported by D. N. We had a wonderful evening, and were particularly taken by the younger children, who seemed fascinated by our fair complexions and hair. We had received the invitation before leaving Singapore and asked if there was anything we could bring as a gift. We were asked to bring a foodmixer. We thought Mrs Jetley would want a big Kenwood Chef electric device but her ambition was much more modest. A battery-driven whisk would be wonderful. Her concern was the availability of spares should there ever be a problem. India in the early 1980s was without the extensive use of plastic utensils we were used to in Singapore, and even simple gifts of nesting plastic boxes were ideal gifts for our colleagues. Once they
knew we were OK to bring small items, we would receive long pleading requests for the most mundane of items, which would bring the promise of ‘everlasting gratitude and fulsome thanks for your kindness’.

A noteworthy problem in India was the availability of systems and programming manuals. Sperry did not generally expect to provide many copies of manuals for the 1100 systems, and these were subject to continual update. The US Government stipulated that Sperry only supply one copy of technical manuals to our Indian customers. At the same time, India had a ban upon the import of foreign copier machines, so it was not easy for the user to reproduce manuals for the large number of programmers who needed to consult them. The single copy of manuals we provided were copied by hand at desks under strict control. I suspect also that management tended to keep the printed set of the manuals in their offices as a status symbol. The manuals on the shop floor were in constant use and quickly became soiled and dog-eared. Despite all the material things that the Indians might have asked us for, we were always asked for extra copies of technical documentation. Paper is heavy, but we all did our best to meet these needs.

There were a number of significant installations in India which interested Terry and me. Air India in Bombay was the most prestigious, and was a reference site of world status. Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) had Sperry 1108 large computer system installations at Hardwar and at Bangalore. Indian Airlines, the government-owned domestic carrier, had indicated its wish to use the UNIVAC Standard Airline System, but never had enough clout to be able to convince government to allow them to budget and buy the system. We also had a large number of Varian installations from the Sperry takeover of Varian, who we saw as potential customers for upgrade to the current Sperry range of equipment. ORG Systems expected Sperry to help with the sale of the computer system and the inevitable negotiations about price and margins, but ORG would undertake the installation and all the post-sale support.

Indira Gandhi was enjoying a second term in office with its non-aligned government policy. The US Government was unhappy with this, as India’s ‘non-alignment’ was slanted towards Russia in order to gain access to military technology and weapons. Prior to the escalation of the Cold War in the 1970s, Russia had purchased an airline system for Aeroflot from Sperry UNIVAC. Before I ever got to India the rumour was rife, even back in the UK, that Aeroflot was being supplied with spare parts and
support through India. I never saw any indication of that. The Indian Government computer acquisition policies controlled by the Department of Electronics mandated spares holding for five years within the one-off purchase price, and ORG always bought the Sperry recommended spares. It was unlikely that any ORG customer would want to see his spares being re-exported. The Indian Government was not on the approved US list of favoured customers, and with each potential sale we had to make application to the US Department of Commerce for permission to sell a Sperry system. Terry and I used long aeroplane trips to put together the words to convince the US Department of Commerce that the sale of equipment to Indian Space Research Organisation did not infringe its rules about the uses US manufactured computers could be put to. We emphasised potential administrative functions — payroll, for example, or library inventory. As it was, the systems we were selling, other than to the airlines, were for manufacturing purposes and particularly for computer-aided design (CAD), and all our systems included advanced graphics terminals from a third-party supplier, usually Tektronix. BHEL told us privately that it manufactured electric transformers, under licence from Russia, and that they were so superior to the Russian equivalents that the Indian-built units were used in key installations. It told us a similar story about the MiG-23 fighter aircraft later manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.

Under ORG’s direction, a sale took a prescribed path. ORG waited for publication of the list of systems that the Department of Electronics was to purchase in the next year. We did not meet all the potential customers prior to tender submission. The department would issue its request for tender, with very specific requirements covering all elements of hardware and software. Memory size and speed, and the instruction set were specified, as were basic units such as card readers, card punches and software levels to prescribed standards. We met many of the department technicians, as they were assigned to a particular system requirement, but at all times were very aware of the overriding influence of Dr Seshegari, the head of the Department of Electronics in Bombay.

ORG collected the tender request from the Department of Electronics. I would draft the response if it was to be anything other than straightforward. Terry or I would derive a price to ORG, including the five year spares complement. The department would have specified its buy price, and more times than not Hari Dave would try and negotiate our price down. The hardware was often sold by ORG at very small
margins, as it had the capacity to make money through technical support, project management, program development, and the mandatory five-year maintenance agreement. In 1980–1984, Sperry was still providing software within the hardware price, with the exception of CAD software, which we onsold without margin.

The department’s tender request followed a proforma, with the first 12 pages listing the specific hardware and software components of what it wanted. The 12 pages were publicly exhibited at the department for a few days after the tender submission. ORG sent a suitably qualified engineer to make a written note of every response. The selection criteria was based upon how closely the vendor was able to match the stated requirement. Occasionally, a vendor would announce a new product to the Indian Government before it was announced elsewhere in the world, which was valuable market intelligence. Importantly, ORG would challenge the other vendor’s capability statements, verbally and in writing, and expect to win the tender through discrediting of another vendor’s solution. Burroughs always had problems as it did not have a standard 200 cards per minute card punch. This was a real Achilles heel for it, and often left the field clear for ORG and Sperry.

A typical week in India for Terry or me involved leaving Singapore late evening Sunday to meet with the Department of Electronics for a day and a half in Bombay. We presented the latest Sperry product slide sets as a precursor to a general discussion about our company’s latest and greatest developments. IBM had withdrawn from India. We expected some competition from Burroughs, and perhaps ICL, although occasionally IBM would bid direct to maintain a technical presence. Our visits to the department were not only to push the knowledge barriers. We were also asked to help with the drafting of the next set of requests for tender. If we did not state what we had to sell, the department would not know to ask for it. Wednesday and Thursday of the week would be spent in Bangalore, Ranchi, or Calcutta talking to customers. Friday would be spent in Delhi before catching the overnight flight back to Singapore. Terry would sometimes stop over to play golf, but I invariably had a game of rugby or cricket (or both) in which to participate in Singapore.

The US Department of Commerce had concerns about our selling technology that might be used for unfriendly applications. Sperry also had a concern about our selling the latest technology because of a fear that it would be copied. Our distributor, ORG Systems, also manufactured
hardware, which it barely disguised as a copy of a Sperry original when it was designated with the same type number. Six months after we delivered the first of the Uniservo VIC magnetic tape drives to India, ORG announced its own, similarly specified ORG 6C tape drive, which even looked the same as ours. Interestingly, there were no restrictions imposed upon our releasing the latest versions of software.

The Indian Department of Electronics prohibited our bidding of a programmable communications front-end processor, and we were left to bid an old but highly reliable hardware switch. It was our belief that the department wanted Indian manufacturers to develop their own communications solution, as it was obvious that communication networks were going to be a big thing in the future.

We did not always get it right, even if we had a good relationship with a prospective customer and an understanding of what was required to provide the application support he was looking for. D. N. Jetley was keen we should make a good showing at the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) Research and Development Centre at Bhilai. We were due to meet Dr Detna of SAIL in Delhi, after the submission of our formal proposal and presentation to the Department of Electronics. The day before we met him, he advised that the competition was fierce. Although the three tenderers were answering a request for a defined hardware capability and software, the situation was as appears below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical ranking by SAIL</th>
<th>Supplier’s response</th>
<th>Price to SAIL (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ORG/Sperry 1100/72</td>
<td>2.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ICL 2996/7</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Honeywell</td>
<td>2.2 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In such a situation, I was obligated to report to Sperry that price was a problem. Given time, we might have been able to challenge the Honeywell price, but not the relatively low ICL bid price. We never really knew if ICL had determined SAIL was a strategic account it had to have.

I got it into my head that I wanted to visit the BHEL installation in Hardwar, in the Uttar Pradesh province in the north-east. The name of the town was one that Sperry never spelt correctly (and Microsoft Word is still prompting me that it is typed wrongly). As a computer company, everyone added the extra ‘e’ and spelled it ‘Hardware’. I told Hari Dave that I wanted to make this visit. He had never been there, nor had anyone
from Sperry. Hari hired a taxi from the Delhi street for me and told the
driver I would need the car for three days. The drive to Hardwar was
long and dusty, going into the foothills of the Himalayas. Hardwar is an
important religious centre for Hindus, and is regarded as the birthplace of
Mother Ganga, being the first town on the Ganges River. It took perhaps
eight hours to drive there. Having arrived, photographs were taken by the
company sign to prove we had arrived at the BHEL enclave.

Figure 9.14: My picture of the taxi driver at our destination.
Source: Author’s collection.

We approached the factory down a long drive, and were conscious of
a crowd of people about the entrance area, but they showed no concern
when we drove up. I went in the main entrance to announce myself.
A manager came out to see me. I was expected. But I was not expected to
arrive in a taxi. Would I mind going back to the main gate and coming
back again? Nothing surprised me in India, so I did as I was bid. When we
drove back to the main entrance again, the crowds had been formed into
a group with musical instruments. As I got out of the taxi, I was greeted
by a discordant rendition of ‘Rule, Britannia’ — ‘Britons never will be
slaves’ — played by the BHEL Works Band. It was a lovely compliment
and still brings a smile. I wonder who warned them I was an Englishman.

Having made the trip, it was inevitable that I should be asked to look
around the computer room. This required removal of shoes and socks and
rolling trouser legs up to walk through a disinfectant pool at the entrance
and over a drying mat. The operations staff were wearing thongs in the centre. Presumably the pool was to remove the threat of dust. I recognised the Sperry 1108 hardware, but commented on the fact that two operators were writing down all the console messages on pads. I also saw that they were writing alternate lines. Exec 8, the 1100 operating system, could produce a lot of console messages. I asked why the console printer was not being used and learned another unforeseen obstacle to Indian use of the latest technology: the Indian Government prohibited the import of printer ribbons, expecting they could manufacture their own. This console requires a unique 13-inch-wide ribbon. BHEL staff had been copying the console messages in longhand, which had to be written out again in correct sequence for years. I did not say anything, but was able to find a Sperry source, and the next time one of us visited India he carried six of the correct ribbons destined for Hardwar. A used ribbon might again be impregnated with ink to extend its usefulness. (As Westerners we did not expect to be impeded by customs when entering India, but Indians returning home would be expected to empty every bit of baggage they were carrying and even empty their pockets. Some of the bags the locals carried back were huge and looked heavy. In observing activity in customs, you could see that people were indeed bringing in the consumer goods that were not available on the subcontinent.)

I stayed two nights in Hardwar at the BHEL company house, which was basic but very clean. After dinner with D. N. Sud, the BHEL deputy manager, I asked the taxi driver to take me into town and had a fascinating evening absorbing the spectacle. Hardwar is a religious centre, and the devout were bathing in the Ganges from constructed ghats along the banks on both sides of the river, seemingly from every available access point.

Sperry generally had success selling in India. The competitor we met the most frequently was the Burroughs Corporation. Burroughs’s reputation was based upon the banking and finance sectors, not the airline or engineering sectors where we were winning orders. In the four years that Terry Thompson and I were involved, we won most of the medium to large scale computer business in competition with them. We would also compete against ICL, CDC, Honeywell, and Data General. We were, however, concerned at ORG’s ‘wait and see’ approach to future orders, and we initiated a rapport with companies we thought significant. Terry put in several months of hard bargaining to convince S. K. Sengupta,
who was consulting to Indian Airlines as its deputy director of finance, that a submission to the Department of Electronics would be successful. It was. Sperry had been waiting for a number of years to fulfil that need.

Indian Rail was another organisation to whom we believed we could sell without ORG initiative. Indian Rail used IBM 1401 systems, some with magnetic tape storage, and with the withdrawal of IBM from India was maintaining its own equipment. As the rest of the world grew out of vintage IBM 1401 technologies, Indian Rail purchased them for additional installations and spare parts. We did not know whether to believe Indian Rail when it claimed to have over 100 IBM 1401s in service — it probably did. We knew that railway travel in India was not only a practical way to get about, but was also a recognised tourist attraction. We approached the rail company on the back of our UNIVAC Standard Airline System (USAS) reservation systems, and there was an immediate enthusiasm. The railway requirement was for a reservation system that would also record personal details of the purchaser. We had only to see the queues at the main Delhi stations to see the reason they needed a system. The queues were horrendous and people with money would employ professional queuers to wait in line for the hours it took to get to the head of the queue. Indian Railways wanted to stop this proxy purchasing by having the ticket carry a form of purchaser identity. Its argument was related to the value it perceived of the ticket. At this time we were working with the Malaysian Government’s Department of Roads for a licence with a portrait of the driver for the same reason: in Malaysia, the wealthy would employ test-takers to pass their mandatory on-road tests. This sort of photo-image technology was impractical and too expensive to consider for railway tickets. We opened a good dialogue with Indian Railways, but were not able to come up with an affordable solution.

The post and telegraphs organisation was also targeted. We knew post and telegraphs business first-hand through our work with Telecom in Singapore, and were able to talk sensible applications. I met N. T. Sinha, a posts and telegraphs director, half a dozen times in the hope that when the Department of Electronics worked with it to define its computing needs it would prejudice its requirements towards us. Indian Post and Telegraphs was huge, operating over 150,000 post offices.

I did a lot of work with the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), which was based in the Dehradun chemical engineering enclave. ONGC was looking for oil and petroleum application packages at the same time...
as PETRONAS, the Malaysian oil and exploration enterprise, so it was handy to be able to share information with both. IBM was fighting for the ONGC contract, looking for a way back into India that was not as the junior partner of an Indian joint venture, and was a formidable competitor. As it was flying in everybody who spoke to ONGC, it was able to bring in the real experts from its worldwide petroleum industry customer base. But flying people in is not as effective as being in-country, as ORG and Sperry were able to prove. There is no doubt that we did not have the applications portfolio of IBM, but the solutions we were putting forward to PETRONAS were equally applicable to ONGC. Another factor in Sperry’s advantage was that we were still mainly a bundled supplier. IBM had separate price lists for hardware, software and support, whereas we still provided a total inclusive price. However, this was about to change with a deal we were negotiating with Air India.

We won orders and the ongoing potential was high. Richard Hawkins, who had been our man in Malaysia, moved his family to Singapore and took prime sales responsibility for India. Richard commuted to India one week in two and was able to cement our good relationships with the Department of Electronics, ORG Systems, and our increasing customer base. Richard’s appointment reduced the need for Terry and me to travel there quite so much. Richard was a natural for India, and soon set up his sideline business based upon the barter of fake watches from Singapore for antique scientific instruments he would find in Indian antique shops, which he then sold to finance the purchase of vintage car parts from London or Melbourne for shipment to Singapore and his vintage car interests. Richard would later hone this business to the extent it threatened to overwhelm his real job.

We had enough business and interest to hold an Indian user group meeting. The role of chairman of the group fell naturally to Mr Jayant of Air India, who was a legend within Sperry Corporation — as we were called at the time. Mr Jayant was assistant director of data processing at Air India in Bombay. Although the word ‘assistant’ featured in his job title, his was a government appointment, and Mr Jayant was definitely in charge of the department. Mr Jayant not only frightened Sperry staff, I have subsequently learned that even his senior staff would avoid walking past his open office door in dread of being seen and asked in to ‘explain’. I had heard that Jayant — we always pronounced it as ‘giant’ — delighted
in terrorising Sperry senior staff. I had met Jayant several times and quite liked the man. We did our technical work with K. K. Venkateswaran and S. Ranganathan, but it was Jayant who controlled the relationship.

Getting to the Air India Santacruz, Bombay, offices was pretty dreadful. The verge of the road on both sides was used as a public toilet by the residents of the shanty town — men in the morning and the ladies in the afternoon, and playing in the mess were children, white egrets, and hogs. Even the taxi driver would request that the car windows be closed as we approached or left the airport surrounds.

At the beginning of February 1983, Sperry and ORG participated in the three-day Electronics USA 1983 exhibition, held at the Maurya Sheraton in Delhi. We imported new terminal equipment from the US, and support staff to operate the equipment and demonstrate the Mapper product from the UK. We used the event for formal presentations to teams from Indian Railways and Indian Airlines. The UK people, Terry and I attended and enjoyed US Ambassador Hallock R. Lucius’s cocktail party, and I was pleased to meet a Singapore Cricket Club rugby-playing pal, who I normally found in Bangkok. Kevin Payne was representing Geophysical Sciences Incorporated at the exhibition.

Figure 9.15: People queuing to look at the ORG display at the Electronics USA 1983 exhibition in the Maurya Sheraton.
Source: Author’s collection.

We held the Sperry Users Association India meeting in Delhi on the Thursday and Friday of that week. Terry had left for a meeting with Air India and returned to Delhi with Mr Jayant. Most of the user meeting attendees had been able to see a new Sperry PC at the exhibition, and we
kept it for the extra two days for one-on-one demonstrations. The meeting went well. Mr Jayant vigorously pursued his theme of the developing country — India — being held back by the First World — Sperry — in refusing to provide adequate numbers of programming and systems manuals, or share design philosophies from the research laboratories. This was Jayant at his politicking best. To an extent, we agreed with him. But it was nothing new. We had invited Department of Electronics people to participate in the afternoon’s Mapper presentation and demonstration to the user group. This was successful. Jayant told the Department of Electronics, within the hearing range of Mr Sengupta of Indian Airlines, that, as the international carrier and experienced Sperry USAS user, Air India should be appointed to supervise the domestic airline’s use of computing. This was another theme we were used to, as was Sengupta.

After the Sperry users’ meeting, I took the ORG team to Bangalore to pursue more business there. Bangalore was the centre of computer and aerospace activity in India. Perhaps it was because I had ORG personnel away from their homes that on the Monday evening we all went out to the Talk of the Town nightclub. The atmosphere was more like a UK working man’s club than a nightclub. When young women came on to the stage to strip, I did wonder if the boys had brought me here because of a misguided idea it was what I wanted. That worry was soon dispelled. I believe I was the only foreigner present. The first young lady — who was quite slim — disrobed from her sari to stand before us in a formidable bikini. I suspect I was the only person to applaud, even politely. Ten ladies danced for us, one at a time. By the time the tenth lady disrobed, the audience was noisy, ecstatically enthusiastic, and calling for more. This last lady was enormous. This was a real culture shock.

Other orders for Sperry 1100/61 systems were taken from the Uttar Pradesh Government, and MECON in Ranchi, South India. MECON (Metallurgical Engineering Consultants) and Ranchi would come to haunt me. It took several months for ORG to install the equipment so that I could provide Sperry with a signed customer acceptance certificate. The problem was the uncertainty of the public power supply in Ranchi. Once we had the hardware installed, we needed to run extensive software tests on the individual hardware components before we set about installing the operating software. We needed something like 30 hours of uninterrupted running to tailor the software for the particular hardware set. Daily
brownouts prevented completion of the software installation. MECON had ordered a no-fail power backup system from an Indian supplier, but it was not yet available.

In early 1984, I forecasted that Air India would acquire the cargo reservation system of the UNIVAC Standard Airline System (USAS), along with message switching. These two items would just about complete the set of USAS software modules, which was seen as a tremendous opportunity. The timing was also such that Air India would be the first Southeast Asian Airline that would be expected to pay the real price for the software. Sperry was belatedly unbundling the hardware, software, and support charges. We were a market follower in this respect. The cargo proposal also included a substantial hardware element and would be by far the biggest order in our region for that fiscal year.

The big potential order attracted the attention of the new vice president of sales in the airline division, Pehr Leufven, a Swede who had been responsible for the sale of the Scandinavian Airlines System in the Nordic countries. We tried to put Pehr off wanting to visit India. Terry Thompson was very possessive of our relationship with Indian Airlines, the domestic carrier, and Air India, the international carrier. After several years of promising to do so, Indian Airlines had signed up for the USAS Passenger Reservation System hardware and software the previous year, and was in the process of implementation. Mr Jayant was politicking for a merger of the two airlines’ data processing activities. Pehr would not be put off. Terry agreed to convene a meeting with Mr Jayant on the basis that we accompany Pehr and get a three-day opportunity to brief him before we saw Mr Jayant.

Pehr Leufven was a couple of days late arriving at the first-class Ambassador hotel where we were staying in Bombay. When he arrived, he was tired and angry and not at all interested in the dire warnings we addressed to him to be very, very careful in his initial approach to Mr Jayant. He knew better, and was content to go through the technical aspects of our proposals, but not the personal relationship aspects.

At the appointed hour we piled into a taxi, which was too small for five people. As ‘locals’, we took our coats off and loosened our ties. Pehr did not. We dressed again at Air India’s reception from where we were shown into the visitor’s broom cupboard. There were not enough chairs for five people, so someone had to stand. It was very hot so we disrobed again, as much as was practical. Again, Pehr did not take the advantage.
we suggested. Eventually, we were ushered in to Mr Jayant’s presence. Another obvious sign of Mr Jayant’s status was the fact that he had a lady secretary who was very pretty. In Mr Jayant’s office the air conditioning units were performing at maximum capacity. We locals were better off, as we were able to put our jackets back on, but poor Pehr, whose suit was wet and hanging disconsolately from his shoulders by this time, had no such relief. In no time, he was shivering violently and looked most unhappy.

Mr Jayant was dressed in an elegant, pale blue safari suit and was quite at ease behind his big desk. He enquired about the health of the home team, one at a time, and showed his familiarity with us all. Terry was questioned about his wife’s piano lessons. Wayne answered questions about the large amount of travel that was his life. I discussed my wife’s and children’s activities in Singapore. Frank was asked if he was enjoying his transfer to Terry’s group, having relinquished the role of Singapore branch manager. Mr Jayant then turned to Pehr:

‘And you, Mr Leufven. Welcome to Air India. Any number of other senior Sperry people have visited me and sat where you are now. They only ever come the one time. Do you think it is because they lose interest in us after we have signed a new contract, or is it because as a Third World country we make more demands upon Sperry support than other users?’

This was a good Jayant leading question. We held our breath. We had warned Pehr.

‘Mr Jayant, thank you for your welcome. Of course, there is truth in both parts of your question.’

At this, Jayant leapt from his chair.

‘Mr Leufven, please leave. I do not think we can have a relationship if that is the preconceived attitude you bring to this meeting. Goodbye!’

Pehr had no option but to leave. He waited outside the office during the time that we spent with Mr Jayant. He was not a happy person, but did have the good grace to admit that we had tried to warn him. Pehr bought us a really good meal that evening. As Mr Jayant predicted, Pehr was never seen in Bombay again.

Frank Dorrian took over Richard Hawkins’s Indian territory, after Richard returned to Melbourne, in time to close the Air India upgrade order, which was far and away Sperry’s largest single order through its distributor
operations in 1984. The overall price was US$5.8 million, plus an ORG Systems service fee of 1,52,87,000 rupees. This included a software charge of US$781,000 — the first time we charged for software in India or the region. It was a difficult project for Frank to have to assume. He had to build a relationship with Mr Jayant and stick firmly to the agreed price schedule, which had been lodged 12 months earlier with the Department of Electronics. It was not an easy project from which to extricate myself, as this proposal was the culmination of 30 months of work with Jayant and his team. We had evaluated almost every word that was written in the business case section of the bid. It was undoubtedly a good order to get.

I was afforded the opportunity to say goodbye, after five years, to the friends I had made within the Department of Electronics, our customers, and ORG Systems. ORG was very gracious, and took me out for lunch at the Maurya Sheraton Hotel. During lunch, Hari Dave stood and said:

‘Thank you, Chris. You have been a very special friend to India.’

I had to interrupt.

‘Hari, I have done nothing special. As you know, I have enjoyed every visit.’

‘No, Chris. You have been very special. You are the only Westerner who has drunk the water.’

Whoops! My life flashed before my eyes. On my first morning in Delhi, I had almost gagged drinking a tea that had been brewing on the stove for days; it would have been pure tannin had a substantial amount of condensed milk not been added. It was as awful as Irish tea, also brewed constantly. After this, I always asked for water. I realised in that instant that the ORG guys had been going on to the street to stop a water carrier, using the handleless chipped cup to scoop the warmish water from the tin panniers either side of the back wheel. There was no running water in ORG’s office. That is what I had been enjoying. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I drank water at lunch rather than beer, as no one else would have joined me. What a mistake. I spent the next three days in bed in Bangkok on my way back to Singapore.

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1 I am perhaps showing off here in introducing a touch of local colour, but I have a copy of the formal proposal to Air India and these were the prices accepted. India has a different numbering system to the Arabic system, using commas every two figures for numbers above 9,999. The ORG service figure was the equivalent of another US$5 million.
Indonesia

The Soedarpo Corporation was our distributor in Indonesia. Mr Soedarpo Sastrosatomo, who, like many of his generation, used his given name, omitting the need for the family name, was an extremely well-respected businessman with a finger in any number of pies. In the computer business, he had the distribution rights for the Sperry computer systems. He was a founder and part-owner of Bank Niaga. He had a share in the Samudera Shipping Line, and was a major player in the timber business. His history had it that, in 1947, when General Sukarno expelled the Dutch from Indonesia and became president, he promoted a 23-year-old guerilla fighter, Soedarpo, as part of an envoy team to the United Nations to seek UN representation. He was not appointed the ambassador, and returned home. While in the US, Mr Soedarpo had recognised the impact that computers would have, and when he returned home he brought with him the sales rights to the UNIVAC, IBM, and Data General product lines, and — although IBM eventually opened its own office in Indonesia — the rest is history.

Like India, business in Indonesia is operated on family lines. The flagship of Soedarpo’s business empire was the Samudera Indonesia Shipping Group. In 1955, Mr Soedarpo set up Bank Niaga and at the time I worked with the bank it was the second-largest private bank in the country. The group also had insurance, engineering, and advertising interests. The boss, who was dark and tended to favour safari suits, was known to fall asleep in technical meetings and did so a few times at the bank when we were discussing hardware configurations. Mr Soedarpo’s daughter, Shanti Poesposoetjipto, was undoubtedly his confidante, although I did not initially have very much to do with her. Shanti became a major player in the Indonesian tech business.
Shanti’s husband, Usmawi Saleh, was the sales director of the Soedarpo Divisi Sistem Komputer (Computer System Division). He was not very interested in computers and was eventually relegated to the family chicken farm business. Pandji S. Choesin was the marketing and sales manager of the computer division. Pandji is the son of the ex-Indonesian ambassador to Russia and the United States. Pandji carried himself very well, and dressed in suits most of the time. He was dark, heavy jowled, and of average height. He spoke excellent English, as you would expect, having been schooled in the US. Both Pandji and Shanti undertook their higher level education in Germany and graduated in engineering. Pandji was always an excellent host in Jakarta, but our everyday entertainment became somewhat curtailed when he took on the role of principal interviewer and newsreader on the new Indonesian English-language television channel over weekends. He was recognised when we ate out in downtown Jakarta, which made being out and about difficult for him. He became quite adept at deflecting enthusiastic fans in my direction by stating I was a foreign television executive seeking talent.
The Soedarpo Corporation worked its diplomatic ties. When the time came for Pandji to marry, a wife was found for him from within the diplomatic tier of society. He now has two sons.

The Soedarpo staff were generally competent, but non-demonstrative. They did not contribute to discussions. It was obvious that the corporation had a social responsibility and employed a number of disabled staff, including an American, married to another Soedarpo employee, who was the office dogsbody, although his demeanour suggested a position of authority.

We had a reasonably large systems presence in Jakarta, with Sperry 1100s installed at two out of the five major military installations — the Department of Defence, army, navy, air force, and police — and eventually two System 80s. Government legislation during the period of my interest prevented the import of computer systems above the relatively small threshold of US$150K, which restricted what we could sell. This did mean, however, that Soedarpo staff became very competent in working the Sperry System 80s to their practical limit. From early 1982, Bank Niaga operated a two-processor System 80, providing full online counter services and achieving very creditable response times. I always felt that the Indonesian engineers were better at hardware than software, but they certainly combined these skills on this bank project.
As Sperry representatives, we got to meet the Indonesian customers and have a chance to develop a rapport with them. As was common at this stage in the life of the computer industry, the vendor was expected to have a mirror image computer system in their home office in the event of failure of the customer equipment. Soedarpo used its stand-by Sperry 1100 and 90-series equipment to provide a service bureau business, and its office always seemed to be busy.

Another company that came under the Soedarpo sphere of influence was P. T. Jasa Insuransi, who in 1982 also installed a System 80. Wahjono became the electronic data processing manager, promoted from head of the Planning and Statistics Division with the installation. I was keen to promote software written by Jasa Insuransi and Soedarpo for inclusion in a regional applications software directory, but it never happened quickly enough.

Pandji generally negotiated price with us. We were seldom asked for too much. I have details of one negotiation. Don Ramble or the regional boss had the final say in our pricings, but I had enough knowledge of the company’s requirements to be able to recommend a price to Don that I believed would be acceptable to us. One such agreement (for a police system 80 upgrade) is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of bid</th>
<th>Sperry list price</th>
<th>Soedarpo wish</th>
<th>Agreed bid price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System 80 hardware</td>
<td>US$150K</td>
<td>US$135K</td>
<td>US$150K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 x Uniservo 16 tape units (not standard)</td>
<td>US$50K</td>
<td>US$25K</td>
<td>US$10K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spare parts</td>
<td>US$6K</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>US$206K</td>
<td>US$160K</td>
<td>US$160K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this instance, when the order came in, we should be able to show a list price for the essential hardware component, which was what Sperry head office needed to see. The tape units and the spares were probably zero transfer cost items to the Singapore region, for which we should receive US$10K. You will note that software still played no part in the pricing algorithm. Sperry resisted charging for software for a long time after it became a part of other manufacturers’ price, following the lead set by IBM.
With the increased level of interest being shown in them from Singapore, who were a lot closer geographically than when the regional office had been located in Hong Kong, Soedarpo and Pandji raised the company’s sales profile. I worked with Toro Yudo and Ungang Prijadi on the practical sales campaigns that they hoped to put in practice.

Once a month, Mr Soedarpo organised a Friday afternoon golf round for the senior generals of the five defence organisations. Terry Thompson was brave enough to play golf with them. Occasionally, Terry was not available and I would volunteer my services as a caddy. I know that our direct involvement with these Soedarpo customers helped with the relationships, and we got to see some excellent golf courses where we were thoroughly spoiled. Mr Soedarpo quite liked the idea of a presentable and amenable caddy who was employed by a major US corporation.

I never saw any hint of corruption in my dealings with Soedarpo Corporation. I did avail myself of the Soedarpo influence on one occasion. When the government restricted the number of entries to the country on an Indonesian visitor visa, I left my passport with Soedarpo Corporation and was rewarded with a multiple entry visa. I did not do much travel within Indonesia — it was only a one-hour flight from Singapore, although getting through customs and immigration at Jakarta could take another hour, and the cab into town just as long. Through rugby at the Singapore Cricket Club, I had access to the International Sports Club of Indonesia (ISCI). I knew where to find the boys after their training sessions on a Tuesday and Thursday evening, and so was never at a loss for activity when staying over during the week. Blok M (a shopping quarter with expatriate bars) was an ISCI favourite haunt and was not that far from the Jakarta Hilton where I stayed, reputedly one of the finest hotels in the world.

It became a tradition that Soedarpo Corporation and Sperry would present a vendor profile on an annual basis to the Department of Defence. I think it was 1983 when we met at defence headquarters. The five generals and 20 colonels who comprised the computing cadre arrived in full dress uniforms, with medals, swords, and spurs on boots. This was the day that President Suharto was to be confirmed in the presidency for the third time. I shall never forget the tinkling of the medals and scrape of spurs as our customers made themselves comfortable. Mr Soedarpo made his introduction in Bahasa. Pandji stood and also spoke in the local language. I was aware that it was my turn.
Good morning, gentlemen. It is my pleasure to conduct this annual review. I am sorry that I am still unable to speak in Bahasa. If I start to speak too quickly, do please stop me and ask me to, at least, slow down.’

At this point, Colonel Hardijono stood up.

‘Come on, Chris, you must have learned some Bahasa?’

I looked at him, stumped. I could not even remember ‘selamat datang’ — good day. This was embarrassing. Suddenly, words came to me. I spoke them, to great effect and much laughter. I had invited our customers to join me in another drink — using the most crude of Javanese dialect. So much for Blok M, but it did break the ice that particular morning.

Mr Soedarpo had a reputation for falling asleep during long meetings or meetings with which he was bored. It was accepted, and we worked around it. But we had one long session where we experienced him at his fiercest. The Sperry 1100 equipment installed at the Ministry of Defence was coming to the end of its useful life and the army was insisting that Soedarpo again provide a back-up system if it replaced its installed system. We were discussing the purchase of two systems at the one time, which would have been a good order for Sperry. Soedarpo had negotiated an extension to the legislated value of imported equipment that might be allowed in this case, but the monies available were well below what would be acceptable to Sperry — the number was around US$2 million. Mr Soedarpo asked for a meeting in Singapore and brought Usmawi Saleh out of (computer business) retirement to the meeting, along with Pandji Choesin. We met in a suite at the new Pan Pacific Hotel on the reclaimed land at Marina Bay. Sperry was represented by vice president and regional general manager Gus Sichero; Don Ramble, the financial controller; Terry Thompson; and myself. We knew the figures every which way, and talked around them with Pandji and Usmawi in the lounge area of a suite, while Mr Soedarpo attended to The Times crossword. I watched Mr Soedarpo work carefully through the main crossword, something I never was able to achieve. He then turned to the back page to the small crossword, which he also completed.

Having carefully folded his newspaper, and consulted his watch — Usmawi, Pandji, Don, Terry, and I had been talking for about three hours — Mr Soedarpo announced he was leaving in 15 minutes and hoped that a resolution would be found in that time. He succinctly summarised the financial position and listed the discounts and final price that would be
acceptable to him. At the end of the 15 minutes, he stood up and made to leave the suite, summoning Usmawi and Pandji to join him. I never saw Gus Sichero move so fast. He took Mr Soedarpo by the arm and led him into a bedroom. They emerged 10 minutes later and, rather like Neville Chamberlain before him, Gus was waving a piece of paper that he declared was a mutually beneficial solution to the meeting. Our Indonesian friends left the meeting after handshakes all round. Gus was exultant.

The Sperry people who were left had a coffee and relaxed for a moment. But Don Ramble could not contain himself.

‘Well, Gus. What have you agreed with Mr Soedarpo?’

‘We have sold the 1100/70, the middle configuration of the three, for US$1.92 million. I do not see what the problem was. Soedarpo is a reasonable man.’

Don was concerned.

‘Gus, how many systems does he get for $1.92 million — one or two?’

‘Merde’, was Gus’s explosive response. He hurled a chair at the wall — I do not think it broke — and swept papers and utensils from the coffee table at which we were sitting before collapsing in a heap on a chair. Don and I left the room. Gus had sold the two systems for a reasonable price for one. Don and I went after the Soedarpo delegation but they were unmovable. Mr Soedarpo had cajoled Gus into signing the price agreement they had agreed in the other room, and he was not going to negotiate any further. Gus did not stay regional vice president for long after that event. He just disappeared. I do not know if the Soedarpo mistake was a contributing factor.

The Soedarpo Corporation managed to survive the demise of President Suharto. I met Shanti in Melbourne during President Habibie’s tenure when she was leading the Indonesian delegation at an ASEAN trade conference in 1998. We greeted one another with an embrace, much to the delight of Shanti’s entourage and the consternation of other people waiting to meet her at the Indonesian Embassy display area. Shanti was later the Indonesian representative at the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, where Hillary Clinton gave a famous speech. She was an influential lady. Paul Kimberley, who worked
with Sperry in Australia, has subsequently become quite a good friend and through my introduction he has met with Shanti under the Megawati regime, where she was still exerting considerable influence in the IT sector.

More recently, Shanti told me that the family had moved Pandji into the role of CEO of the Indonesian Internet Association to give him exposure at a national level. He is currently the non-executive chairman of the Indonesian Chamber of Trade.

**Malaysia**

Malaysia is Singapore’s nearest neighbour, but it is a world apart. Kuala Lumpur, known as KL, was an hour away by aeroplane, and Johor Bahru (JB) was the same time away by car across the causeway. The expatriate community in Singapore readily professed to island sickness, and the need to escape on a regular basis from the normality, discipline, and cleanliness of Singapore. Malaysia generally provided that escape. As Singapore green card work permits were sometimes difficult to obtain, many an expatriate visited JB on a monthly basis to be able to return to Singapore on a visitor’s visa. JB also provided sex and casino gambling opportunities not available on the island. For a while during our stay, the currencies were in step, but the Singapore dollar spat ahead, so trips were made to JB for petrol and to buy cheaper coin currencies which were worth more in the banks of Singapore.

When I arrived in Southeast Asia, Sperry had a permanent representative in Kuala Lumpur. I had met Richard Hawkins in the UK during my stint with Bass Charrington. He was dating the very classy receptionist at the Midlands regional office in Birmingham. At that time, Richard was working with the international division and had an expansive background that had included overseas humanitarian work. Richard is very tall and the ladies tell me he is good looking. He dresses very fashionably except when indulging in his passion: the restoration, racing, and showing of vintage sports cars. Richard was allocated full-time to support the sales and management activities of the Malaysian distributor. Richard was recently married to a tall, attractive Australian girl, Marion, who was the daughter of a New South Wales doctor. They lived fashionably in KL and had two boys. They led an active social life. In addition to his vintage cars, Richard exercised a passion for windsurfing.
Our distributor in Malaysia was Pernas Trading Sendirian Berhad Limited, the trading arm of the Malaysian Government. The Malaysian Government had implemented its Bumiputra philosophy, which favoured the indigenous Malay race, and we worked with a Malaysian manager and Malay management. The real bread and butter work was done by Chinese workers, who understood the system and appeared not to want to rebel against that status quo. Our competition for medium to large scale systems, which were our priority, was IBM and Burroughs. Richard had considerable success as sales director in KL and at one time was able to boast that he had won nine out of the 11 medium to large scale system orders that had been placed during his two year assignment. Richard was fastidious in his notetaking of dates and events, which he can still recite today, but was not willing to overtly display a technical interest or a need to be involved in the tedium of proposal writing. He relished my role in a pre-sales position and later technical operations because it let him allocate these responsibilities to me. Richard perceived himself as a salesman first and foremost. Richard had a very good rapport with the government-appointed executive director of Pernas, Tuan Syed Tamin. Syed was not computer trained but very receptive to being given a semi-technical description of what we were trying to achieve with the systems we were selling on his behalf. His interface with the management of the various government departments, through his membership and seniority in the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation, opened the doors we needed to enter.

One story about Richard that I enjoy telling involves his contribution to the management of the 1982 South-East Asian Regional Computer Conference, which was held in Port Dickson, a seaside resort on the east coast of Malaysia. Richard had played a part on the local organising committee and it was his responsibility to introduce a senior IBM research fellow who was visiting from the US to give one of the keynote addresses. Richard stood up to introduce the speaker and read, in very great detail, the IBM employee’s work history and background, which would substantiate what he was about to tell us of his vision for computing in the future. The speaker stood and moved towards the podium — but Richard was not finished:
'In anticipating our speaker’s thoughts on the future I believe it appropriate to look back at where we have come from …
'I well remember when I joined the industry, the future was still very much hardware oriented and we were looking forward to disk technology that would allow us to consider substantial databases … and today when we consider the implications of end-user computing, as typified by Sperry’s fourth generation language, Mapper, we are looking at enabling the end-user to …'

He rambled on in this vein, as those who knew him had started to giggle, and then laugh, as we watched the IBM man beginning to panic as his allotted 30 minutes were diminished, as Richard continued on and on. It was very funny.

It was at the 1982 South-East Asian Regional Computer Conference that I met Professor Colin Leakey of Cambridge University, who was presenting his computer model to determine the best mix of crops to be grown by Malaysian smallholders — this was also applicable to other Asian rural economies. Small isolated stands of rubber trees and bananas were becoming uneconomical, compared to the huge plantations that covered most of Malaysia, and some of these were being replaced by palm oil horticulture. Professor Leakey presented a most comprehensive model that included soil analysis and prevailing weather patterns. (Colin Leakey was the son of Professor Louis S. B. Leakey, famous for his archaeological and anthropological findings in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. His academic protégées included Dian Fossey, whose work inspired the film Gorillas in the Mist, and Jane Goodall, who became famous for her studies of the behaviour of chimpanzees. A third disciple was Biruté Galdikas, who studied the orangutans in the Tanjung Puting National Park in Kalimantan.) I relished the thought of being able to help the economy through the development of Professor Leakey’s work and assumed a personal mission to work with the Malaysian Department of Agriculture and Sperry to take this further. I also took copies of his presentation into the Department of Agriculture in Thailand. I am still amazed at the lack of interest for the project. I sustained a correspondence with Professor Leakey after I left Asia, but have not heard of the project in Malaysia since.

Richard’s sales team (for it was he who led Pernas) consisted of six or so relatively inexperienced salespeople. Mohamed Haron was a small, dark man who was both lazy and political. On Friday he wore the Malay songkok, a black velvet hat, as a symbol of his Islamic faith. One of his
accounts was United Malayan Banking Corporation (UMBC), which was owned by the governing political party, the United Malays National Organisation. UMBC was a Sperry 1100 customer, implementing a full online in-house banking operation. ATMs were to be the next challenge during 1982–1983.

The other salespeople were Chinese. Eddie Y. P. Low was probably my favourite. In his early 30s, bespectacled and looking as though he was going to put on a lot of weight, Eddie was desperate to learn, although his grasp of written English made it difficult for him to keep pace with his colleagues.

Figure 9.18: Two of the Pernas team at the distributor conference. On the left is K. C. Koh, Mohamed Haron in the centre, looking dapper with, on the right, Thomas Teo, the Sperry Singapore HR manager. The Pernas boss, Syad Tamin, did not attend the technical sessions.
Source: Author’s collection.

Eddie was the salesman responsible for Banque Indosuez. Both the KL and Singapore branches of the bank had Sperry 90/30 computer systems. In both locations, the system was the wrong one to achieve the online banking activities the bank wished to implement. The original sale had been made in Paris for installations worldwide. The KL branch of the bank was larger than Singapore, and we believed we were in a good position to sell them a large Sperry 1100 system. The KL data processing manager
was an IBM aficionado who was always looking for reasons to convert back to an IBM system, as used in the Paris headquarters. It was our most difficult customer situation.

As the trading arm of government, Pernas had access to other related business opportunities in town. Petroliam Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS), the national petroleum franchise, was a Sperry customer, with its computer centre at Menara Dayabumi. PETRONAS had a Sperry 1100/60 system installed. After Richard had left KL, PETRONAS was investigating how it might increase its competencies in the exploration area prior to releasing an invitation to bid to the general market. The invitation to bid had both an administrative and a scientific requirement. PETRONAS had franchised out the seismological exploration of Malaysia to reputable US and European petroleum companies, but had no facility to make its own value judgments about mineral opportunities. The petroleum companies provided their own seismic studies and analysis to PETRONAS, but it wished to have a more fundamental capacity. Mohd Sulaiman Yahya, manager of the computer services department, asked Sperry to investigate how we might jointly promote PETRONAS ambitions. He agreed to travel to the US with Sperry if we were able to make firm representations to meet his needs. At the time, Sperry published a catalogue of scientific application software for the 1100 series of equipment, and buried deep in that document I found a mention of a company called GeoQuest Systems of Houston, Texas. I contacted Sperry in Texas and developed a rapport (via telex) with Rosa Yang, manager, marketing support, worldwide scientific/energy marketing, who was confident that we would be able to provide a meaningful program of activities for PETRONAS’s guests if they were willing to travel to the US.

Five PETRONAS people travelled. Sulaiman headed the team that otherwise consisted of three Chinese analysts and an Indian analyst. We all got on famously and the technicians proved their worth in discussions in Texas, evaluating mapping and contouring systems as recommended by Rosa Yang. It had been almost 20 years since I had last been in San Antonio and during a weekend excursion there I twice drove our car past the Alamo. In the 1960s, the Alamo was a building standing alone from the town. In the 1980s it was dwarfed and overwhelmed by modern buildings encroaching on this most famous of tourist entities. No new exhibits inside either, I noticed.
The PETRONAS team and myself met and spent three training days with GeoQuest Systems and were very well looked after by president Rex Ross and his team. GeoQuest showed us a specialised workstation that it had developed for the analysis of seismic records and was selling to the big players in the exploration market. The GeoQuest Interactive Exploration System used the very modern Intel 20286 processor, and incorporated an array processor and magnetic tape units capable of reading the 28 channel tapes used for seismic recording. The PETRONAS systems people, who had competencies in geology and geophysics, after a day and a half were able to drive the workstation and reduce the accumulated data into meaningful maps, and to assume the role of seismic interpreter. The software we were using was from Zycor Inc., whose president, Jim Downing, was present at the GeoQuest office for our briefing. Mohd Sulaiman slept, but the rest of the team became very animated at the opportunity being presented. We also met Peter Dennett, who owned a one-man computer consulting, software, and integration shop called Padsoft (named after his initials). Peter’s interest was in (being paid for) the integration of the GeoQuest workstation into a Sperry environment for PETRONAS. The net result of the trip was a formal request from Sulaiman for inclusion in the planned invitation to bid on a full proposal and implementation plan for the introduction of the new hardware and software.

This was easier said than done, and I had several months of detailed discussion and risk analysis with Sperry before we were allowed to submit a detailed proposal. The proposal for a two-data-centre approach included the use of modern (for Malaysia) switching protocols and database synchronisation techniques. But I was confident in putting this forward after my work with Bass Charrington and Provident Management Services Limited. By this time, Sperry had at Pernas’s request assigned a full-time customer services manager, Dr Bill Siple, who took over the project after my submission of the tender documents. Bill Siple, a slow to action American, took over the Pernas customer services function after a destructive power play by two longstanding Pernas employees, K. C. Koh and K. C. Low, both of whom missed out on the position in the end.

Three other opportunities stand out that became my responsibility after Richard had left KL to look after the Indian subcontinent for the company: the Department of Main Roads and Transport, Malaysian Airline System, and the Signals Directorate within the Department of Defence.
The Department of Main Roads and Transport requirement was looking to push the limit of point-of-sale technology for 1983–1984. The problem that the department was looking to resolve was the issue of driving licences. Face was important in Malaysia. Malaysians would lose face by failing a driving test, so they did not risk it. They hired a professional driving test–taker instead. Transport wanted to prevent this, as it was losing face, and it certainly did not help with the standard of driving, which seemed to be hazardous everywhere. With today’s technologies, we are familiar with the inclusion of a photograph on a plastic card as a means of identity verification. In the mid-1980s, we did not have this facility, and instead researched the Sperry worldwide user and application database, and came up blank. We did some serious study on the use of coded descriptions of the person taking the driving test, as well as the incorporation of fingerprints into the licence, but did not achieve resolution in my time.

We put a great deal of effort into selling to Malaysian Airline System. Richard Hawkins and Wayne Bisbee had opened the path to senior Malaysian Airline System management, although IBM was the incumbent supplier, with whom it was happy. Terry Thompson and Ken Short Jr were experienced airline people. Terry and I met with Malaysian Airline System in several departments. We really tried. Going in our favour, we thought, was a contract we had won with Singapore Airlines, for which we had imported airline experts to look at the current range of boarding-pass readers for integration into standard Sperry and IBM software. Our crucial decision centred upon finding the person we believed might be our champion within Malaysian Airline System. We chose badly. We decided to ignore the financial director, Tun Daim Zainuddin, and concentrate upon a technical sale. Big mistake. Zainuddin became the Finance Minister in the Mahathir Mohamad Government during 1984–1991.

The Ministry of Defence was a Sperry 1100 customer. It used a Sperry 1100/60 for a variety of administrative applications — nothing very exciting. The ministry was constrained by the armed forces strategy to rotate its favoured (Malay) sons through the range of disciplines on a two year cycle. This meant our contact would take six months to understand his new job, and maybe 12 months doing the job before he removed himself from making any decision that might jeopardise the next appointment.

We were invited to meet Colonel Idris, the officer commanding the Signals Directorate, who had a very precise concept of what the role of the directorate was to the defence forces. He expected to provide all the
communication facilities and foresaw the effect of data communications as a strategic key to future conflict. He wanted to ensure that this element of warfare stayed within both signals and intelligence — another communications-dependent facet of the military. Colonel Idris outlined his thoughts to Terry Thompson and me, and asked that Sperry produce a needs analysis, which we would then answer. It was an ideal situation for us. Terry recruited Ken Short Jr from the airlines group to help us with the definition. Ken was another Sperry ex–financial controller, who had a background in Vietnam and the military.

Ken, Terry and I met regularly with Colonel Idris and it became apparent that his budget for hardware and software and implementation was US$20 million. Terry asked me, as the technician, to be responsible for specifying products and services that would cost defence that US$20 million. Try as I might, that figure bought a lot of hardware, and we did not have that many software specialists or analysts that we could allocate to the project. We had an innovative approach to the provision of telecommunications switches, which was to use the Distributed Communications Processor 40 front end to an 1100 system as a remote switch within a countrywide network. We also looked at satellite and microwave technologies. In the end, the decision was to bundle as many Sperry products and services as we could possibly justify into a proposal and charge the budgeted US$20 million. Some money was to find its way back to Colonel Idris through the Pernas organisation. This was going to be difficult to achieve, as defence wanted to keep Pernas at arm's length on this project.

The timing became a problem. Gus Sichero was replaced by Tom Yam as regional vice president. Tom Yam, a Hong Kong Chinese with a long career in the Sperry international division, was initially very insecure in his new position. He was keen to close some big business, and the potential business of the Malaysian Defence Department was big. He sent for me very early in his new role. His questioning was very direct. Did I know the details of the deal with Colonel Idris? I assured him that I did. He cautioned me not to know. I was probably wrong in attempting to explain to our new vice president that I had to know. The way that Terry and I worked together was only effective if we had no secrets. Tom again cautioned me not to know. Terry Thompson was fired by Tom Yam. Terry tried to find suitable employment back in the US and did the rounds of former associates in the company, but was not successful.
I always enjoyed Malaysia. I did not have as much activity there as I might have liked, but with permanent Sperry representatives based in KL — Richard Hawkins and then Bill Siple — I was not needed.

Terry Thompson later returned to Singapore as director of distributor sales for the Burroughs Corporation, at the time the third-largest computer services company in the world. (Sperry was the second largest.) I heard through the grapevine that Terry was again pursuing the Malay Signal Directorate. In 1986, Michael Blumenthall, the CEO of Burroughs, initiated a successful takeover of Sperry. The merged company was named Unisys. Depending on which part of the world was being considered, it was most times the incumbent boss of the largest subsidiary who got the top job. Tom Yam was successful in retaining his position and became the Southeast Asia boss of Unisys. One of his first actions was to fire Terry Thompson a second time.

Terry did call me in 1988, when I was in New Zealand, to ask me to work with him again. This time it was to set up a US company’s PC business in Singapore to cover the Asia-Pacific region. Terry was a shareholder in the company. I declined the offer. I’d already been there and done that, but I had certainly enjoyed his confidence and a freedom to pursue my own agenda to achieve and better the targets that Sperry had allocated over a four-year period. I do have a real regret to have lost contact with Terry. Even Ken Short Jr has lost contact with him. Terry and I had worked well together.

Party time: The Philippines

As with our other computer distributorships, the Uniphil Corporation in the Philippines was a developing business with a few prestigious accounts and mindful of the support it needed from us to support them in order to win success with new (hopefully large) customers. Carlos B. ‘Bobby’ Palacios and Sergio J. ‘Serge’ de la Fuente were the joint managing directors of Uniphil. I quickly learned that Filipino businessmen are keen to use their nicknames in business as well as privately. Bobby was the aggressive salesman, complemented by the quieter, dark and studious Serge. Bobby and Chito Beltran, Uniphil’s sales manager, attended sales meetings with me. Serge would remain in the office, but he was ready to join us if our meeting extended into lunchtime or the early evening.
Family is important in the Philippines, as it was in most of the Southeast Asian countries, but this was the only Catholic state in which I worked. As soon as it was realised that I was English, I was told:

‘We wish we had been a British colony, not Spanish and American. The British only ever took money away from their colonies — they did not impose their religion and customs on the indigenous peoples. The corruption here is as a direct result of our past.’

I thought it best to evaluate that sentiment before entering into an in-depth discussion.

Chito Beltran was the son of a friend of both Bobby and Serge. He looked and acted like a playboy. I did not feel that he contributed much to Uniphil business, a sentiment I shared with Terry Thompson. We kept our own counsel. Chito terrified me when he first picked me up from Manila Airport the first time I went there and we travelled into town. His driving posture and approach was that of a racing car driver, and he used the full range of gears as he nipped in and out of the traffic streams trying to gain advantage. He pointed out to me the telegraph poles that should have been carrying the data traffic from the airport to the Philippine Airlines computer centre in town. He said almost boastingly that a section of the copper wire would be stolen every night, but that the telecommunications authority was so used to this that it had a crew ready to make the necessary repairs each day. The drive into Manila took us through shanty towns constructed of corrugated iron, cardboard, and string. There was a strong odour and the place was seemingly teeming with children. My trips to the Philippines were obviously going to be a wild ride if Chito was to be my guide. A huge advantage was that everyone spoke English, with a melodic sing-song intonation that is unique and which I still find very beguiling.

Having spent some time with the Uniphil staff and visited a few customers, it was obvious that Uniphil was good with the hardware and very keen to learn more about the application software it expected us to have. Uniphil was looking for technology transfer and the very best deal it could get from Sperry. The days were long. We would spend hours in the office discussing how we might approach a particular customer and construct a deal. Deals were important. They had to be seen to be done, but the real manipulation was covert.
When we were bidding a major online system to a bank, Bobby and Serge wanted the lowest possible cost for the system we had decided upon. I asked why.

‘We have to pay a certain percentage as an incentive to purchase to the deciding company officer.’

I tried to put a different perspective on that statement:

‘Why not charge more than the published list price so that the percentage is worth more to the deciding company officer? You also make more money.’

‘Chris, you do not understand. Our customers are aware of and consult the US General Services Agreement, and will not pay more than the US Government.’

He wrote a table of numbers on the whiteboard.

‘For Central Bank of the Philippines, we need to pay five per cent to the secretary of the evaluation committee — and he will tell us about all the other bids and what we need to do to win the business. We need to pay five per cent to the chairman of the committee. We need to pay five per cent to the head of the National Computer Board. We need to pay five per cent to Mrs Marcos’s doctor. We need to pay eight per cent to Mrs Marcos’s hairdresser.’
This was 28 per cent — the same number as the profit margin I needed to get the business approved.

Answering my query on the latter recipients, I was told that Mrs Marcos was not only the president’s wife, she was also the Governor of Metropolitan Manila, which had a major shareholding in the bank.

Naïvely, I pursued the argument.

‘I can just about understand that a gratuity be paid to the business recommenders — but why to Mrs Marcos’s doctor and hairdresser?’

‘Because they are the only people who can talk to her most days. The hairdresser she definitely sees every day.’

I talked to Bobby some more when we had another drink later that evening. The truth was that the full 28 per cent would end up in Mrs Marcos’s hands, and she would be aware of all deals on and off the table. More than that, Bobby assured me that the bank appointees would already be paying a part of their salaries to keep their jobs.

Understanding some of the underlying realities made the Philippines easier to live in. I was coming back to Metro Manila late one evening from Ermita, a bar area, when the cab I was in was flagged down by a policeman. I was sitting next to the driver. The policeman asked me for my passport. I was not carrying it, or any other identity document. The policeman quickly had me out of the cab with my hands on the roof of the car, legs splayed out, when he advised me that he was going to arrest me for not carrying any proof of identity. The passenger window was open. I asked the driver for advice:

‘What do I do?’

‘Give him some money. That’s what he wants.’

I did so, and was allowed to continue my journey.

When I discussed this experience with Bobby and Chito the next day, they laughed.

‘That is an old scam, and quite common. The cab drivers know where to drive. They share any money with the policeman.’
Later that day, Chito showed me how graft was handled by the locals. He deliberately double parked on a double yellow line outside the office where we had our next meeting. Sure enough, when we finished the meeting and came out on to the street there was a policeman waiting for him. Money changed hands and no parking infringement was noted.

Whenever Terry or I were in Manila, Uniphil arranged a social event for us. Terry had his golf interest and usually carried his clubs to Manila. My task was to participate with Uniphil in the activities of the Philippine Computer Society. The society met fortnightly, however, I was asked to think in monthly terms, and I would quite often be called upon to make a presentation or participate in a panel discussion after a dinner in a good hotel. The society was another wonderful excuse for a party. Bobby and Serge were leading lights in the society and could manipulate activities to Uniphil’s advantage. IBM was our main competitor in Manila, and I was primed to attack IBM at every opportunity. IBM’s failure to win the Singapore National Computing Centre and its system replacement by Sperry at Telecom was well known, and questions from society members were a great opportunity to express a personal opinion with company authority. I was really surprised that IBM representatives never argued, but that could have been because they were local and non-confrontational, or perhaps just polite.

The Philippine Computer Society was a fun organisation. Every year it held a Miss Philippine Computer Society competition — a beauty contest with entrants from the real and the fringe elements of the computer industry — and every year the winner of Miss Philippine Computer Society was recruited by Uniphil as an account manager to one of its major customers. In any other environment this would have been seen as suspect, but not in Manila. It did occasionally cause a problem. At one crucial meeting with the Ministry of Defence in the Uniphil office, I was trying to make a point when I was completely stunned to be asked by a colonel if I was ‘sleeping with Carmelita, the defence account manager?’ How was this going to help me learn the defence thoughts about database structures? I looked at ‘Millie’, who was quite unconcerned. There were a number of very pretty girls in the office to flirt with.

One computer society event was more embarrassing. A one-day conference was arranged in Cebu, one of the Philippine islands, in September 1982. There were perhaps eight overseas speakers. The night before the conference we were at dinner and being entertained by the Governor of
the Cebu province. His speech was both gushing and chauvinistic, which was unfortunate, as one of the speakers was a Hong Kong businesswoman, Ms Emma Li. Ms Li became increasingly angry as the speech developed:

‘In welcoming you as guest speakers to Cebu, I would ask you to not to leave until you have all tasted the fruits of Cebu.’

I think we all understood the inference of his remark, but he made it worse:

‘I want you to understand that the fruits of Cebu are our women.’

After dinner, the male speakers were gathered and taken out on the town by our computer society hosts. The first place we stopped was called the Lewd Bar. We were left in absolutely no doubt that we were each expected to select a companion from the gorgeous, scantily clad girls cavorting on the bar and stage. It was too much. The IBM representative was a young Swiss fellow. He and I determined that neither of us had any intention of a public indiscretion whilst representing our companies. We pretended that we were more interested in one another, in order to dissuade our hosts, and managed to get back to the hotel at a reasonable hour. We then spoiled it all by sitting talking and drinking until the small hours. Ms Li, the owner of a prestigious software house specialising in database software, was still angry the next day, and made sure that our hosts knew it. But it had no effect. The speakers were presented with a beautiful plaque to recognise our contributions to the conference. I cannot remember the conference at all, so much else was happening.

We did do some work and pursued some interesting business opportunities. Wayne Bisbee, Terry, and I invested a great deal of time in selling to Philippine Airlines. The airline world at the time was divided up between the users of IBM hardware and software and the Sperry solution based upon the Sperry 1100 systems with the USAS (Standard Airline System) software. Philippine Airlines was in the IBM camp for its passenger reservation system, so we concentrated on selling to Avelino Zapanta, who was the officer in charge of the Philippine Airlines international cargo division. ‘Lino’ was based at the airport in probably the only quiet area, surrounded by the melee that was the prevailing situation in the terminal. Cargo was perceived as a real growth area and to fulfil its potential needed to be viewed as a product in its own right, rather than being seen as an adjunct to passenger business. Wayne worked very hard to establish a cargo business plan for Philippine Airlines and other airlines in the region in more of a consultative role than as a pure salesman.
Banks were also potential customers for Sperry medium to large scale computers. The Philippines did not disappoint and had many banks for us to explore business relationships with. Lino Reglo, a vice president of the Republic Planters Bank, also became a friend through work and the computer society. I still wear a Coconut Planters Bank t-shirt, although I understand the bank was swept away after the downfall of the Marcos regime. We put a great deal of effort into the Central Bank of the Philippines’ request for tender, but this was also suspended because of political changes at the highest level.

The Home Development Mutual Fund, locally known as Pag-IBIG, was the government housing authority. It was a Sperry 1100/61 user. Vic Raventar, the data processing manager, had a deep knowledge and interest in databases, and had implemented a system using the hierarchical database DMS 1100 software. He recognised the value of user-defined computing as represented by the Mapper 1100 relational database. Pag-IBIG was most helpful to us in defining the interface it wanted to see between DMS 1100 and Mapper. Pag-IBIG was a sophisticated user.

It was around 1983 that Uniphil prevailed upon us to place a permanent Sperry representative in Manila, in a similar management and sales role to that which Richard Hawkins had held in Kuala Lumpur. Ken Short Jr had been helping out in this position. Sumra Manning — slight and neat, with a thin blond moustache and a receding hairline — transferred from the Sperry Airlines Group, where Terry Thompson knew him. He moved his family from the US to Manila, where they lived in a guarded enclave. They seemed to settle in easily, but we learned that Mrs Manning was not happy and did not stay very long, my guess is less than one year. A permanent representative implied that Wayne Bisbee, Terry Thompson, and I had less reason to visit Manila, and we very much left Sumra to his own devices. We received the most positive reports from Bobby Palacios and Sergio de la Fuente as to Sumra’s worth to them, and our sales prospects looked very good. Sumra became, to all intents and purposes, a Filipino.

Sumra took me out one afternoon to the most dreadful bar I have ever seen, worse even than the Lewd Bar in Cebu. The place was difficult to access. We went through a deserted cinema, across a fire-escape and through a controlled doorway, behind which young women were anxious to perform any deviant sexual act for 10 peso notes, rolled into a cylinder and stuck in the neck of a beer bottle — 10 peso was worth less than one...
US cent. I found it disgusting, but my pal was quite at home. I would not stay long and tried to counsel Sumra when we had got back to the hygienic environment of my hotel. I told him he was in grave danger of going troppo. To his credit, he did not do so, partly because of the government changes that were imposed with the downfall of the Marcos regime. Sumra later transferred to Sperry International in London, where the family were keen to be reunited, and he found a niche situation again with the airline group.

Another story which requires a certain discretion concerns a consultancy we sought from another Sperry country, outside of our region. The Sperry 1100 systems were big, and we boasted ministry of defence installations in most countries. We learnt from the other subsidiary that a senior IT representative would be keen to visit Singapore to assist with a potential sale to the Singapore Department of Defence. We asked, via telex, if Jan Dickie (not his real name, for reasons that will soon become obvious) could extend his trip to include the Philippines, where we were also keen to sell the (fourth generation) Mapper software to the five defence elements — defence, army, navy, air force, and police. Jan agreed.

He had a good stopover in Singapore, where I met him for the first time, and we travelled to Manila. Jan told his prepared Sperry good news story twice on that first day, and on his first evening in Manila we were taken by Philippine Army representatives and Uniphil to a private function room in a high-class nightclub. The Filipinos were out for a riotous night. Jan was quieter. His reception from defence had been aggressive. It initially did not enjoy being lectured to, but the sessions had generally been positive. Jan was removed from the core of the party. I felt responsible and joined him. He had his nose pressed hard against the glass of the window of the function room overlooking the main club area. A young, bikini clad woman was working hard to gain any recognition or interest in her gyrations. Jan was spellbound: ‘I have never seen anyone like that before.’ I told him that, if he wished, we could leave the party and I would take him to the bar district, where we could get a lot closer to the girls. He was keen. We made our excuses and we took a taxi to Ermita, the infamous bar area.

One advantage of playing regular rugby matches around the Asia-Pacific, for various inter-port trophies, was that I knew Ermita quite well, as it was where the Manila Rugby Football Club entertained us right royally, especially on the night before a game. (Their team would stay sober and
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be early to bed, of course.) In Ermita, we visited at least six bars where young bar dancers were teasing the largely European audience in the hope of plying their (keen, but amateurish) ambitions. It is a sad place. Jan was entranced. He was not so naïve, however, as to not understand what was going on. He wanted to know if the girls were available, and, if so, he would really like to meet Beryl, a girl he had spoken to at bar number three. He asked me to go back to bar number three and bring the girl to the bar we were then at. I did so, paying the Mama-San the requisite ‘bar fine’, and formally introducing the two of them, pantomime fashion. Jan and the girl left together and I hightailed it back in to the party, which was just getting going.

The next morning, Jan was waiting for me to join him for breakfast. He had had a wonderful evening. He and Beryl had gone to a motel.

‘She even took my shoes and socks off. She massaged my feet. I have never known anyone so gentle.’

I was not really interested, except for the necessity to be seen as an attendant host.

‘How did you get back here to the hotel?’
‘I took a cab back. In fact, I changed cabs twice.’

I enquired further.

‘Why was that?’
‘You have to realise, I am a one-star general in the intelligence service, and I dare not get caught in a compromising situation.’

Fair enough.

The next evening we were free to follow our own agenda. I asked Jan what he wanted to do.

‘I’d really like to see Beryl again, but I cannot afford another motel charge. Would you mind fetching her back to your hotel room and I’ll come and see her there?’

I did so and left them together for what seemed like a very few moments before Jan, replete with satisfaction, was back in the hotel bar, asking me to escort the girl from the hotel.

‘Surely you can see her out?’
He again tried to explain:

‘You have to realise, I am a one-star general in the intelligence service, and I dare not get caught in a compromising situation.’

The third evening, I had persuaded Jan that we might do a pub crawl in Manila. We were leaving the Mandarin Hotel when a girl approached him and asked: ‘Do you want a good time?’ ‘Sure’, says our intrepid one-star general, takes the girl by the arm, and marches her back into the hotel. I did not see Jan again. He left early next morning to fly back home. As a courtesy, I wrote to him at his office to thank him for the help he had afforded to us during his three days of talks with the Philippine Defence Forces.

Some six months later he wrote to me to tell me that he had been promoted and that:

‘I have told my wife about what happened in Manila. We are getting divorced. What a wonderful three days. What is the chance that you might want another consultancy?’

We did not use Jan again, but he and I maintained a Christmas card relationship until his retirement.

Asia can be a seductive place for the unwary. It has also gone through my mind that this episode might have been a test for me, although I cannot think that anyone would be that bothered.

When the end of the Marcos regime occurred, as a US company we could only be interested observers. Foreign currency was a huge problem. US dollars were strictly controlled, and were the only currency acceptable to Sperry. Terry and I carried illicit amounts of dollars in and out of Manila as the only way of sustaining our business there. After work, in the evenings, the excitement would mount as people power swept the streets. I never felt myself to be in any danger in the midst of the crowds, but did accept I should probably not be there. Bobby and Serge were obviously constrained from being participants by their business interests. They were also a part of the Marcos way of doing things. Uniphil staff members provided me with two yellow ‘Support Benigno Aquino’ t-shirts following Mr Aquino’s shooting at Manila International Airport. I took these back to my two lads in Singapore, but they would not wear them. Such was the
pervasiveness of the Singapore Government that even expatriate school kids knew not to confront the political stability of the system in which they were living.

I was also put under additional pressure during this time by this sort of thing. One of the colonels I had met from the Army computer centre asked for me at the reception of the Sperry office in the Octagon in Singapore. He wanted US$50,000 that day. I was not able to contact either Bobby or Serge. All I could do was to talk to Don Ramble, the financial controller. It was a most difficult discussion, but Don made the money available to me against a personal IOU. It all worked out well and legitimately, but it was a risk at the time.

Taiwan

I always enjoyed visiting Taipei. Just looking out of the aeroplane windows at Taipei Airport, I was struck by the fact that the engineers attending the aircraft were dressed in quilted Chinese pyjama suits rather than the ubiquitous blue overalls of every other airport. It seemed to me that the security policemen were taller than elsewhere. The journey into Taipei was dramatic, with Chinese palaces comparing favourably against the consistent, predictable grey of the newer office buildings. The hotels were also of a high standard, certainly as good as those in Singapore.

Computer activity in Taiwan was reaching a peak in the early 1980s. Taiwan was about to manufacture, through the Acer Computer Company, its own PCs. The technical economy was on a high, with a large percentage of the world’s shipbuilding undertaken in the country. There was as much building construction taking place in Taipei as in Singapore.

Mr C. C. Lee was my contact in Taiwan. He was a founder and vice president of EDP Taiwan Inc. Gilbert Mar was a formidable American who had returned home to set up EDP(T) and was the president of the company. Mr C. K Yang was vice president, and was responsible for the Datapoint equipment for which EDP(T) was also the distributor. EDP(T) did not have a large base of customers for Sperry equipment, although it could boast a most impressive large Sperry 1100 dual-processor system installed at Taipei Airport, which was running the UNIVAC Standard Airline System Flight and Departure Control software suite. EDP(T) also had two of the old Sperry 9000 systems installed.
Mr Lee was small, dapper, precise and very bald. He was always impeccably dressed in a well-cut suit and looked after me with a high degree of attention. Sometimes I would be embarrassed at the time it would take the two of us to have lunch. Mr Lee would personally select the live fish we were to eat, and he was fastidious at the table. At one restaurant he asked to see the chef, and the chef’s wasabi roots. He grated several of the roots, mixing them with olive oil, before declaring which was the best to enhance the flavour of the sushi he had ordered. I seem to think that EDP(T) staff were always tolerant if we were late back in to the office for meetings. Mr Lee’s English was not perfect and in the office we worked with Dick Lin, the director of marketing development, and later with James Wang, the marketing manager, who both had experience of working in the US and possessed a formidable grasp of English. Work in the Taipei office meant my taking a teaching role to explore opportunities. Taiwan was not noted for its software competencies, and the lack of viable software application programs again held us back. Sperry had a perceived problem in dealing with Taiwan: copyright of hardware and software. The EDP(T) office was a revelation. It was new, with the option of distinct piped music in each area. Mr Lee preferred the classics, but Gilbert Mar’s office reverberated to hard rock.

The Datapoint side of the EDP(T) business was larger than the Sperry component. The Datapoint business included a large share of the credit union finance sector. Mr Lee was always interested to learn what we were doing for the two Banque Indosuez installations in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Bank Niaga, and P. T. Jasa Asurani in Jakarta, United Malayan Banking Corporation in Kuala Lumpur, and the Bank of Thailand in Bangkok as reference sites for the financial market in Taiwan.

Taiwan needed a Chinese character set for terminals that would be in everyday use by non-English-literate operators. The Summit Computer Company in Thailand had done a lot of work in converting Sperry terminals to work with the Thai character set, and I served as a conduit to Les Hales, who I had known as an operations specialist at British Petroleum in London during 1967. Les had joined Sperry International and was now based in Hong Kong, coordinating the non-English language requirements for the corporation.
Mr Lee was keen for the two of us to visit Japan to look for Japanese software that EDP(T) might acquire and convert for its local use. Sperry had been an early licenser of computer technology to Japan, and Nippon UNIVAC Kaisha (NUK) had a significant 30 per cent of the computer business in Japan, including a number of financial institutions. Through the Sperry International Visits Organisation, we were able to put together a program that would introduce Mr Lee and myself to half a dozen likely candidates. Our trip was to take about 10 days.

Our days were long and difficult. We were met at the NUK office or a customer office by about six company representatives, which would include one senior person and at least one interpreter. Mr Lee had been university educated in Tokyo, on a scholarship, and had some Japanese, but he did not sound fluent. As a courtesy to me, all discussions were translated into English and vice versa. It would only be at the end of the day, when farewells were taking place, that we would discover that the senior Japanese representative had a very good grasp of colloquial English. In the evening, Mr Lee and I joined the businessman's trek to the Ginza, where we would watch the nightly spectacle of the Tokyo office workers drinking themselves into oblivion. Mr Lee twice tried to talk us into a nightclub, but as foreigners we were not welcome. I suspect that he was trying to relive former student days. He was embarrassed that he was not able to entertain me to the extent he did in Taipei. He told me not to worry: 'When we get back to Taipei, I will take you to a Japanese cardshow evening.' We found basic software that we were keen to look at further, and took the Japanese character set specifications for Katakana implementation back to Taipei for further engineering and software examination. The software prices we were looking at were considerably higher than those Sperry was used to.

Back in Taipei we had a debrief session with Dick Lin and James Wong. Mr Lee and I had worked out the basics of a financial services package we could assemble. EDP(T) had the dominant supplier position in the credit unions through its sale of Datapoint systems. The strategic decision for EDP(T) was whether it should make a concerted effort to replace the established Datapoint systems with Sperry. Mr Lee asked Dick Lin to write a board paper.
Mr Lee advised that he would take us to the promised Japanese cardshow the next evening. When Dick and James feigned an ignorance of what was planned, I asked Mr Lee to spell out, on the whiteboard, the word he had been using. ‘C. U. L. T. …’ Of course: ‘cultural’. I still did not really know what to expect, and our evening did not start particularly well. We were at the restaurant by 6.30 pm but were not really wanted there until 8.30 pm. We sat in the bar and watched the restaurant come to life around us. Eventually we were shown into a large function room. One quarter of the room was dominated by a round table, with a lazy Susan in the centre, and seemingly very many chairs. The men sat equidistant from one another, with four empty seats between each of us. These were filled with 16 of the most beautiful and carefully coiffured ladies I had ever seen as a group. The lady on the near right of each gentleman was responsible for keeping his rice wine glass topped up. Beyond this functionary, the
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...next lady was cracking sunflower seeds in her teeth and placing the nuts in a small bowl in front of me. To the left, the responsibilities were to keep the beer glass full and to feed the guest with food with a pair of very long chopsticks. The girls were permitted to drink the rice wine, but not the beer, and were not permitted to take any food. Conversation was encouraged within the group. The ladies introduced themselves — fortunately, they used anglicised names for my benefit. During the meal, eye contact and the raising of a wine glass towards one of the ladies was the excuse for her to join you in a drink, taken in a single swallow to the exclamation ‘Kampai!’

I eventually realised that this was a game with consequences, and took Mr Lee’s lead in slowing the toasts down, otherwise it might have been a short evening. As it was, the ladies circulated, and a new group of 16 joined us, then a third. Suffice to say that the food, the wine and the company were excellent. When the desserts and the coffee came to the table, all the girls came back to join us. They came back to entertain and from memory were very good. They performed by singing, playing instrument solos and then performing in groups. We also danced to the music. The final challenge was who from the four of us could remember the most girls’ names. I quietly asked ‘Jennifer’ what each of the girls would have earned that evening — the figure was US$25. Thanks, Mr Lee. Even without the food and drink, EDP(T) had spent US$1,200. In closing the party, Mr Lee reminded us that ‘these are good girls’. Well done, Mr Lee. It was a fun and memorable evening.

The distributor conference gave me the opportunity to reciprocate some of Mr Lee’s generosity. He enjoyed eating at my home, with my family, and also in the most upmarket restaurant of the Singapore Cricket Club, for which I donned the business suit and tie he might not have realised I owned. Mr Lee was looking forward to retirement. He had grown-up children in San Francisco and was going to retire there. We exchanged Christmas cards for several years but have subsequently lost touch.

Taipei trips were not all wining and dining. EDP(T) was our smallest distributor in terms of the volume of annual business, but we did manage to sell a few major systems. Because of the language constraints, Terry and I were used less in a direct selling role than we were used to in the other distributors, but we both put in long hours of discussion and consultation back in the office.
Way back in 1973, Sperry Rand took over the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) computer services business. As well as gaining trained engineers and programmers, there was the expectation that we would eventually replace some of the RCA-built systems. RCA Taiwan was one such win, and acquired a Sperry 1100/61 system. The Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau took an 1100/61 using the same statistical software package as the Bank of Thailand. We were delighted to win the Civil Aviation Authority upgrade from 1110 hardware to an 1100/72 (two processor) system, also upgrading the USAS+FDC software set. EDP(T) did not haggle over Sperry prices. In my book that made for good business.

Taiwan became one of the Asian business tigers and I could understand how and why. EDP(T) was an early adopter of technology, ahead of its time in recognising that multi-vendor solutions were possible, and indeed preferable, in building the best computer solutions.

**Thailand**

It is a surprise that I come to Thailand, the distributor and country I most enjoyed visiting, as the last distributor country here. Logically, it comes last in the alphabetical order of distributor countries, but I have written my notes about later events before looking back to Thailand. Local policy allowed for a stopover in Bangkok for those travelling between Singapore and India in lieu of claiming the hardship allowance. A contributing factor was that flight arrivals and departures in and out of India travelling East–West were in the early morning around 3.00–4.00 am. So I was in Bangkok more often than the logical sequence of a seven week rotation of the six distributor countries, with a week doing expenses back in Singapore. Mind you, the two- or three-hour hassle travelling from Bangkok Airport into town was also a hardship, tolerated but never enjoyed.

Amorn Tavornmard was the managing director of Summit Computer Company, our distributor in Thailand. Amorn was small, with a florid round face. He struck me as a heavy drinker at the time and a most engaging personality. I found my way to the Silom Road office the first time on my own. I knocked on the door before entering into a very large, open-plan area. There was a small reception desk that was not manned. What impressed me was that as I went into the office everyone stood at their desks, clasped their hands in front of them and bowed in my direction. A
lady left her desk and I asked to see Mr Amorn. The office staff remained standing while the lady went to talk to another girl, who approached me and introduced herself as Nuttawee Ruchiwararat, Amorn's secretary. She guided me to Amorn's office and opened the door. Amorn bowed to me and asked me to sit down. We spoke for a few moments before he asked members of his staff to join us. We sat around Amorn's desk while I introduced myself, and many had the opportunity to tell me their roles with Summit. We talked for a few hours before four of us went for lunch in a small café on the ground floor of the Silom Building. We were joined by Somchai Srileernop, who I took to be Amorn's deputy, and Surachai Siriluekopas, whose card showed him to be a marketing executive. Somchai was a conscientious supporter of Amorn's ambitions, and his English was excellent. Surachai was more hesitant.

After a quick lunch, we returned to the office and went into the boardroom, where there were as many as 20 people. We talked in that office until well after normal business hours, and everyone had an equal opportunity to have his say. I presumed that Amorn worked in a consensus management style, until I learned more about the Buddhism practised in Thailand. It was sometimes a real frustration to me that I could not talk to Amorn one-on-one in order for us to make a decision. Our meetings nearly always involved a group. The one exception to that rule — not one of which I was particularly proud — was that on subsequent visits I would carry a bottle of duty-free brandy into Bangkok at Amorn's insistence and leave it in the hotel, knowing that after lunch Amorn would want to come back to the hotel where we would drink the bottle. He would then call the office to be collected by his chauffeur. He would be fine the next day. I also learned, quickly, not to open the hotel room minibar after the brandy.

Amorn's people were totally loyal to him. He was a very well-respected boss. The team struck me as being very young. Somchai was the administration and financial manager who negotiated the selling price with us, always with a reasoned logic for stating the price he wanted. Patharin Kanjanawadee, bespectacled and slightly fuller in the face, was the salesman assigned to look after the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, EGAT. Surachai Siriluekopas, neat and tidy, was the salesman for the Bank of Thailand. Vichai Kraisingkom was the systems and programming manager, who had a narrow face and looked like an academic behind his rimless spectacles. Kosa Pongsupath looked the youngest of the management team, with his round face and longer
hairstyle. He was a real worker, always first in the office and last to leave. Kosa was the Mapper programming expert in the team. Kosal Areekul was the elder statesman — he was possibly in his early 40s. Kosal managed the customer engineering team and the in-house computer bureau. I later met Mr C. K. Chung, who was the owner of Summit Computers, just one of the technical companies in the Summit group. He was an older Chinese businessman with limited English who exhibited affection for Amorn.

![Summit Computer Company management at the 1984 Sperry distributor conference.](image)

Source: Author’s collection.

Thailand was not unlike India in that notifications of forthcoming government computer tenders were published in a calendarised list. The basic proforma response to hardware and software specifications from suppliers responding to the tender request was publicly displayed and was a secondary source of market intelligence as to the technical attributes of a competitor’s equipment. But unlike India, in Thailand we sold the benefits of our proposals positively. In India, we concentrated on invalidating the competitor’s stated facts.

Thai technicians understood both hardware and software. All computer acquisition proposals were scrutinised for approval by the National Computer Centre before a government order could be placed. Amorn had an ally in the National Computer Centre, Dr Vallobh Vimolvanich, who became a friend of mine.

The Summit Computer Company staff were all professional. Their presentations to me were always very competent. I was confident discussing any problem with them. The terminals around the office were showing mixed English and Thai character sets, which was good, as I knew that local language requirements were something we would need to confront at some time for Taiwan, China and maybe India some time. Mapper was an accepted tool by Summit, although some of the other distributors
had not yet embraced it. Summit discussed its prospective customers in terms of application solutions rather than hardware specifications. Lack of application software was still a Sperry weakness, although we were circulating a thick three-ring binder as an index of available software. The directory was rather superficial, but it was a reasonable starting point for further research.

I became fond of Mrs Nongluck Vangsirirungruang, the deputy managing director of Summit Computer Company. Mrs Nongluck was an extremely smart lady in her late 30s who would join the group when we were finalising a proposal. Mrs Nongluck had worked in the US and was a very controlled person. I travelled with her in a Singapore taxi from Changi Airport into town one evening. The Chinese taxi driver asked her directly if she was a Thai. His next question was very Singaporean, and the most embarrassing I have ever heard. He accused her of being a hooker. ‘That is the only reason you Thai women come to my country,’ Mrs Nongluck was not overtly upset by the confrontation. She explained she was a computer businesswoman. Thankfully, that ended that conversation. When I was paying the taxi driver at our destination, Nongluck commented, ‘I do not think he deserves a tip’. Neither did I. Most times, Singaporean taxi drivers’ philosophies are forthright and interesting. This was the only time I might have wished that they just drive.

Summit already had a couple of good Sperry 1100 large system installations at the Bank of Thailand and EGAT and operated a successful service bureau business on its in-house 1100 system, which was also the immediate back-up, stand-by system for the bank and EGAT. Summit had also sold System 80s. Its first such was to the Prime Minister’s office. Summit had to buy its own System 80 again as back-up to the system it had sold, and this was also used for service bureau tasks, which put pressure on the bureau manager in terms of the sale of two quite different systems capabilities and the need to cross-train the operations staff.

The Bank of Thailand was using a proprietary statistical software package from the UK. EGAT was using Mapper. Thailand was an early adopter of Mapper’s user-defined software development tool. The EGAT CEO used Mapper every morning to conduct a survey of the volumes of water in the country’s reservoirs, prior to making the decision about which generating plants to use that day. Summit had written the associated software with the CEO’s input and it was seen as an essential tool. It was, however,
putting constraints upon use of the hardware by other users when it was operating in Mapper mode. I knew some comparative figures (for an airline reservation system, standard airline booking):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Assembler language</th>
<th>Mapper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of instructions</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of disk accesses</td>
<td>4½</td>
<td>12½</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, Mapper used a lot more resources than a system’s native language. This was not something that we wanted to publicise. As ever, compromise was required.

During that first evening session it was decided that I should visit EGAT at Nonthaburi, a two-hour drive from Bangkok, to meet Mr Somkiet Phaloprakarn, director of the system planning department of EGAT. Amorn made it clear that he would not accompany me. The EGAT visit was something to look forward to on my next visit.

During my visit to Bangkok, Somchai explained the wai — the Thai greeting which consists of a slight bow, with palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion — and the Buddhist philosophy of karma as he practised it: ‘It is my responsibility not to disturb your karma. So I will smile and not raise my voice. I shall help if I can.’ (Except when enveloped in steel, attempting to drive a car in a traffic jam in Bangkok. Then I shall sound my horn continuously. Your karma can take care of itself.) Back in Singapore Airport, I stopped off at The Times Bookshop and purchased my own copy of Culture Shock! Thailand – and how to survive it. There were other titles in the series and eventually I would own a set for the countries I was visiting regularly. Some are fun, especially Culture Shock! Ireland. I wish I had found it seven years earlier.

I went to EGAT my next trip. On the way there, Patharin explained that Amorn and Somkiet did not get on. ‘Khun Somkiet is a most difficult man.’ Mr Somkiet was indeed a difficult man. His business card showed that he had received his higher education at Oregon State University. My guess was that this had been 20 years earlier, as he looked to be in his early 40s, tall with iron-grey hair. Mr Somkiet was brusque and forthright:

‘Your equipment works well enough, but it is very slow in the mornings. I want someone to come in and do a performance audit. You did one five years ago and that helped.’
The Nonthaburi Generating Plant was enormous; it covered a huge acreage. I was taken on a tour of the plant, by jeep, by deputy director Danai Manophars, a very gentle Thai. In his soft-speaking voice, he counselled me:

‘Do not worry too much about Mr Somkiet. In time you will find that he is a kind man.’

That was some consolation. Back at the home office, Somchai expanded upon the feud between Amorn and Somkiet and the fact that Summit people, apart from programmers and the resident engineers, did not care to visit the site. EGAT was also behind in its payments to Summit. It is always easier to establish a rapport, any rapport, with a customer who is able to articulate his feelings. Somkiet told me why he was unhappy and demonstrated his frustrations by not paying Summit. I needed to fix the problem.

The next time I went to Nonthaburi, I went with Somchai, who explained the accounts payable problems to Somkiet, who certainly listened. We had also decided that I would conduct a site audit, but that Summit would charge EGAT for the job at Thai consulting rates rather than the excessive fees Sperry might have charged. Somkiet agreed to seek a budget approval for the audit. Talking to Somchai on the drive back to Bangkok, we also decided to ask Terry Thompson to visit Somkiet to emphasise our support commitments to EGAT.

On our return to the office, I was able to have a talk to Kosa Pongsupath and as many as a dozen other software people to discuss the Mapper constraints at EGAT. Kosa had attended all the sessions we had enjoyed at Summit. His opinions had been well respected by his peers when he contributed to the discussions. Kosa had written the Mapper application, written it quickly, but it so uniquely met an EGAT need it was in daily use and EGAT was not keen to have him optimise the code — if it ain’t broke, why fix it? Kosa was enthusiastic and looking more like a student than the very experienced systems analyst that he was.

The Bank of Thailand was a contented customer. Director of systems engineering, Dr Vallobh Vimolvanich, was a personal friend of Amorn’s, so my first and subsequent visits to the bank were primarily courtesy calls. Dr Vallobh was on the consent panel of the National Computer Centre, which authorised all computer acquisitions, and was very technically aware. The Sperry 1100 did not break down and had the capacity to handle
the tasks assigned. We also had a good relationship with Mr Sumatarat Sitabut, who was the manager of the data centre. The Bank of Thailand was a prospect for the upgrade of the central processing unit of its system, which would also include the upgrade of some peripheral units to the latest technologies. I became a confidante of Dr Vallobh. I suggested he might like to accompany me as a referee on a trip to Manila when we were selling to the Central Bank of the Philippines. It was not a success. The Filipinos took offence at the thought of being advised by a Thai, something I had not reckoned with prior to the visit, and a salutary cultural lesson.

Summit was keen to win the Ministry of Agriculture account. We were hoping to build upon the installation success we had with the Prime Minister’s Office, and were selling hard to provide a computer to the King’s Office, as there was a commonality of interest in agricultural projects. We bid a Sperry 1100/61 to the ministry and were successful. We were aware that a project for the next year was the Ministry of Education. I was able to help with the pre-sales effort to the Ministry of Education because of the work that I had been doing with the Singapore Government and the Malaysian Department of Education, which had won us two university orders. I met with Dr Narong Boonme at the ministry in Bangkok and took him out to Nonthaburi on a site visit to EGAT.

Audrey came with me on one trip during school holidays — she was teaching at the Tanglin Primary School in Singapore. The Bangkok shops were good and the visit to Patpong was predictably fun. The bargirls were interested to talk to Audrey about her way of life, but not for long. They were working. We really enjoyed doing the tourist trip to the north of the country. Amorn’s secretary, Nuttawee, had been distraught that she had been unable to get first class sleeper reservations on the overnight Bangkok to Chiang Mai train. We assured her that we would be fine with second class reservations and, in fact, that trip was a real highlight of that Asia stay. We befriended two Chiang Mai farmers returning home, who took responsibility for buying delicious food to share with us from the hawkers who passed through the train at every stop. Audrey and I bought the beer, and in the small hours the Thai whiskey. We pulled the bunks down in time to grab a few hours of sleep before arriving at Chiang Mai at about 8.00 am. It had been a super trip. In Chiang Mai we engaged a tourist guide, a very pleasant lady called Porntip, and enjoyed a wonderful few days in the country. I bought a carved teak bar that
would later cause all sorts of customs and quarantine problems when it arrived in Singapore. It remains a treasured possession, although not in everyday use in Canberra.

On another occasion I took Audrey and our younger boy, Jason, into the office. We went out for lunch as a group, and later Amorn and I slipped away for our customary brandy session. Nuttawee took Jason in hand and showed him Bangkok while Audrey was taken out to the Jim Thompson Silk Shop by one of the other girls. We met up again for the evening at the Montien Hotel at the north end of Patpong. The Thais were always the most gracious of hosts.

Summit Computer Company was keen to see and sell the Sperry range of PCs. Sperry was late into the market with PCs, but embraced the new technology more readily than IBM had initially done. The trouble was getting hold of demonstration models for the distributors. There were three models of the Sperry PC that we rebadged after manufacture. The smallest and largest capability PCs were manufactured by Mitsubishi Systems, and the mid-range PC was manufactured by Acer of Taiwan. The prices were acceptable to Sperry. Somchai was a keen user of the Harvard Graphics package and he and Pandji from Soedarpo installed it on my home PC on the occasion of the 1984 Sperry distributor conference.

One interesting aspect of technical support occurred when the Sperry London Support Centre, which provided worldwide technical support, sent round a request to the regional offices for a three-month secondment of a Mapper expert. I discussed this with Amorn and Somchai. To my mind this was a wonderful opportunity to give Kosa exposure at the highest level, and we knew he would still be available for Summit work if needed. He was that sort of person. So I recommended Kosa, who undertook the secondment and was very successful. My only fear was that Sperry might want to seduce him permanently. It did, but he didn’t accept. What was better was that Sperry paid commercial rates to Summit for Kosa’s work, US$600 per day plus expenses. It also gave Sperry exposure to the skill base we were developing in Southeast Asia.

Somkiet received budget approval for an audit of the computer system at EGAT. I conducted the audit, which involved running software alongside everyday work called the System Instrumentation Package (SIP). SIP analysed the number of disk accesses the software wanted to make to the disk drive control unit, for example. If more requests were being
made per second than the hardware could control, the net effect was that application software would appear to run slowly. With SIP, I could look at several aspects of the system at the same time — almost like an x-ray — to diagnose bottlenecks. Once these were known, they could be rectified. At some installations, SIP was a regularly used tool by operations management. At EGAT it was not. Khun Somkiet, I fear, regarded SIP as a tool for Sperry and Summit to induce him to spend more money. This was a shrewd observation and one I had anticipated. We did have a competitor at EGAT, Digital Equipment Corporation, who had a toehold with process control applications and was keen to develop an EGAT interest in scientific applications on its platforms. This was another occasion when a real Sperry applications catalogue would have been of considerable assistance. As it was, both Sperry and Digital coexisted at EGAT, each stimulated by potential competition.

Mr Amorn was a senior officer in the Thailand Computer Society and I was invited to speak at semi-technical functions a few times. The Thailand Computer Society’s national conference in 1983 was great fun. Khun Amorn had arranged that I be the keynote speaker — with a general topic of ‘futures’ — at the conference, which was to be held in Pattaya, a seaside resort some three hours drive from Bangkok. Audrey was also invited by Summit to attend. I paid for Audrey’s travel, but the hotel room was paid for by the computer society. Somchai picked us up at Don Muang Airport and drove us to Pattaya for the conference opening on the Wednesday evening. I was scheduled to speak on the Friday afternoon. Summit invited any of its staff who wanted to attend the Friday session to Pattaya. Perhaps 40 young people came in total. It was the first time Audrey had heard me address a technical conference.

That evening we hit the tourist strip. Most of the large open-air bars and restaurants had the most sumptuous floorshows and we looked into most of them as a group. We were waiting for the group to reassemble before moving on to the next bar, when I commented to Audrey that the ladies’ shoes in the shoe shop window looked huge. Somchai picked up my comment, and he and Audrey had a huge laugh. Here I was, the man-of-the-world salesman, having spent the best part of a long evening in the transvestite capital of Thailand, in complete ignorance of that fact. I looked at the showgirls much more intently as we moved on. Later, well after midnight, we all moved to Kosa’s family home, where we sat in the garden for a banquet. All the Summit people were staying at Kosa’s, boys
on the ground floor and the girls upstairs. It was assumed that Audrey and I would stay over with them, but we opted to walk back to the hotel. Somchai again kindly drove us back to Bangkok Airport.

Figure 9.22: Thailand’s Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who attended the Summit programmer training courses.
Source: Author’s collection.
The order for a System 80 system for the King’s Office had caused great excitement for Summit. The King’s daughter, the very much admired Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, attended the programming course conducted by Summit personnel so that she might contribute to the planning and monitoring of the King’s projects, for which the system was being designed.

I have the feeling that we did as well as we could have expected in Thailand. Visitors to our region naturally gravitated towards Bangkok as a part of their Asian experience and we tried not to make too many demands on Summit for its time and hospitality.

This has been a long chapter, but I believe it appropriate that I comment on doing business in the seven Asian countries I so much enjoyed.
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