

Tragedy at Sea

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“Cadet, you take good care of yourself okay?” the Captain said, as he adjusted and straightened my collar. I met him on the way back to my cabin after the 8-12 morning watch, just as he was leaving the ship. His bags were already packed and deposited on the wharf side. And also, some people were waiting there.....

It was my second trip out from Singapore, and my first to Japan. Barely a month since I joined the 29,138 GT tanker “s/s Esso Cristobal” as an engineering cadet, and the ordeal over for the past week had already etched itself deep in my memory.

The bad weather warning came late in the afternoon, and the storm was already brewing as dark clouds raced towards the unseen gathering far in the horizon. The skies around were shades of gloomy grey while the sea was awash with the whites of the foaming waves that breaks around us. The winds had started their howling some time back..... It’s the month of August and typhoons were known to be common during that time of the year.

It was already 7pm and I was in my cabin, trying to complete the second lesson in the correspondence material that was handed to us before we embarked on this required 9 months sea-time attachment. The groaning outside was hard to make out against the incessant humming from the engine-room but it finally caught our attention. My cabin mate went out to investigate and came back saying that it was the Chief Officer, lying injured outside. By the time I went out, the Third Officer and the few others had carried the injured man into the Officer’s Mess. In a barely audible whisper, he told us that the Pump-man had been washed overboard! They were both out on deck taking a final set of soundings and temperatures and also securing the tank covers in preparation of the approaching storm, when a supposedly strong wave hit the ship abeam. Chief Officer was badly injured with several broken ribs while Pump-man was washed overboard, - gone.....

Alarm was raised and the ship circled back, several times, searching. The winds howled as we peered into the pitch darkness, trying to make out if there were any silhouette between the mounting waves that seems to be challenging each other, rising higher and higher..... The searchlight’s beam was useless against the blackened sea. Finally, we had to sail on,... to continue our journey, leaving behind..... and we wondered if the Pump-man’s final moments were swift, or was it in hopeless despair seeing the ship’s lights fading away into the distance but this, we will never find out, never know....

As we entered the path of the typhoon, the raging seas took its toll on me. I fell terribly sea-sick. The memory of that bitter aftertaste from the gall juices that was thrown up, when nothing else could be regurgitated still remains till today. I lost track of time in the days that followed, and later learnt that the Chief Officer died during the night. It was some three days later that the fury of the typhoon subsided and on the fourth day, we reached Okinawa, Japan, Land of the Rising Sun.

Chief Officer's body was wrapped up and taken away in the morning when we berthed alongside the oil terminal..

As I bid farewell to the Captain, I caught a glimpse of the heavy responsibilities, sacrifices, and hardships that the sea-farers had to shoulder. My love-hate relationship with the sea now has an added dimension, one of fear and respect for its might. An awareness, that the sea, which oft times is a picture of calm and serenity, actually belies a power that can unleash such untameable fury and might that no man can master.... no, not even mariners, who may be called, Masters of the sea.....

The year was 1975....

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