

A Noble Profession Called Seafaring: the Making of an Officer

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to determine the perceptions of the managers in the shipping and manning companies in the Philippines and the seafarers regarding the nobility of the seafaring profession in the light of the shortage of competent officers. It utilized the interview approach in gathering data. It was found out that in other countries especially in OECD or highly industrialized countries, the youth today are no longer interested in the seafaring profession. Working on board ships is becoming less attractive for students coming out of the schools and colleges. In the past, seafarers were paid better than their peers on shore, and they had the opportunity to travel across the world. In the Philippines, it is still preferred by some students whose fathers or relatives are seafarers. They have seen that the profession is financially rewarding and it is perhaps the best, if not the only way to improve their quality of life. This study also looked into the perceptions and opinions of the practitioners, the master mariners themselves who once also struggled in order to realize their dreams and aspirations in life. Most of the officers interviewed believed that it takes determination and focus in the job in order to be successful. Thus, students aspiring to become officers and ultimately captains or master mariners must study hard, persevere and be disciplined to be able to overcome any problem along the way.

1 INTRODUCTION

Working on board ships is becoming less attractive for students coming out of the schools and colleges. In the past, seafarers were paid better than their peers on shore, and they had the opportunity to travel across the world. However, both of these have changed. The salary gap between seafarers and those working on shore is minimal. With ports and terminals located away from the city, and ships not staying at the port for a longer period, seafarers do not have an opportunity to explore various countries according to Mr. S. Hajara (<http://www.businessline.in/>).

Several studies indicate that there is currently a world-wide shortage of officers, corresponding to 4 percent of the total officers (16,000) and the prediction is that by 2012, the shortfall will rise to 46,000 (Kumar, 2007).

The shortfall of seafarers has negative impacts on the shipping industry as a whole whereas both the on-board and on-shore maritime related work posts face manning problems that may directly threaten the existence of shipping activity and the sustenance of maritime know-how (Chaterjee, in Kumar, 2007).

Japanese shipping companies plan to hire 10,000 seafarers from the Philippines between 2008 and 2010. (<http://www.gma.news.tv/>). This was stated by the president of the Philippine-Japan Manning Consultative Council, Mr. Eduardo Manese. He further said that Japan will increase its merchant fleet of 2,223 as of 2006 to 3,000 by the end of 2010, and further to 4,000 by 2015.

The same opinion was shared by Ambassador Stale Torstein Risa of Norway during the two-day International Maritime Conference hosted by JBLFMU on January 29, 2008. He encouraged maritime schools in the country to give importance to quality-based maritime education and training to meet the demands of the global shipping industry. Risa noted that most of the world's global trade is by sea and that globalization has entirely changed the world's trading patterns with new emerging markets requiring more transport services than ever before. Aside from the expanding off-shore explorations of petroleum resources, the cruise industry also continues to grow. This entails a growing demand for maritime workers. He further stressed: "I believe schools should even seek to follow up and evaluate their graduates' employment experiences. They should keep track of their graduates and to get feedbacks after spending some time at sea and it would

be a valuable input in determining if the level of training is adequate, and even offer advice on job satisfaction.”

Given the shortage of maritime officers for international vessels, the manning industry is turning to re-packaging what its players say is a “wimpy” image of the Filipino seafaring career according to Stene (in Alzona, 2008). It is on this premise that this study was conducted.

2 THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to determine the actions and measures taken by the different stakeholders in order to entice the youth of today in pursuing a career at sea. The perceptions of the various managers of the shipping and manning companies in the Philippines and other stakeholders, especially the seafarers, regarding the nobility of the seafaring profession in the light of the shortage of seafarers was also looked into.

3 METHOD

This study utilized the descriptive-qualitative method of research. It utilized the phenomenological approach, using an in-depth interview of the key informants. The participants in this study were the managers of the manning companies and the various representatives of the owners of the shipping companies in the Philippines, deck cadets who recently disembarked after completing a one-year training program on board and active seafarers occupying management level positions on board.

3.1 *Modes of analysis*

3.1.1 *Filipinos are excellent seafarers*

The Philippines is number one (1) in the world as far as seafaring is concerned. There is no other industry or profession the country that can boast of being number one. There are some personalities who are number one in the world like Manny Pacquiao or Lea Salonga, but in an industry or profession, no one individual can claim being number one in the world. Thus, in the office, the seafarers wear necktie because they feel that they are real professionals. So there are reasons to promote seafaring profession as a better paying professional job. It is better than most of the professions we know. These were the inspiring words of Mr. Erickson Marquez, president of several manning companies owned by his family and a legacy left to him by his father, the founder of the company. His appeal to the students: “Study! Have an ambition! Don’t be satisfied to be able to go on

board ships only. Aim to be a captain or chief engineer; your life will not be fulfilled if you don’t become one. And you can only do that if you study. And let’s get rid of the notion: ‘pag mahina, mag-seaman ka na lang; pag magaling ibang profession(“if the intelligence is below average, go for the seafaring profession, if above average go for other professions).”

He added: “So how come we are not doing our best to improve the quality of our students? Without the seafarers our economy would probably suffer more than what we are suffering now. Seafarers are not given attention, despite the fact that this is the profession that the Filipinos will dominate in the years to come.”

Let us therefore change or re-direct our mindset, let us treat seafaring as a very old and a noble profession.

3.1.2 *A very old but noble profession*

The statements by Mr. Ericson Marquez are the same words shared by Mrs. Carla S. Limcaoco, Vice-Chairman of the Philippine Transmarine Carriers, Inc. She said: “to enter this career is a special calling. Seafarers should not just do it to see the world free or just earn dollars. They must do it because they believe in the value of the course. They should remember that without ships where would the world economy be? When you find something imported in the supermarket, don’t you start to think how it got there? It got there because of ships. How do the cars of Japan go to Europe? How did the gold from China get to the United States? Without ships, the world economy would collapse. So when somebody (sic) decides to be a mariner you become part of a very old but noble profession. It is much more sophisticated now because the level of education required is amazing. I sit here and listen to the competence requirements and berthing requirements; port state control and flag state requirements. And I sit there and tell my senior officer (she is referring to senior deck officers in their company), you cannot imagine how proud I am of you because one day, if you decide to work ashore you can probably sit and do what I am doing. I can never do what you are doing, I have a great respect for what is it they have to (sic) know. And so to me, it’s a profession that requires a high level of education and it is a profession that if you conduct yourself properly will give you a very fruitful life.

According to Capt. Jessie Martinez, the president of Global Training Systems Phils., Inc. “Students should do everything, including motivating themselves.” He further adds: “They have to give it their best shot. Don’t settle for the second best. Try to be the best always. If you will do all these things, this profession becomes easy. In this profession, there is

no glorious moment than the first day that you assume the position of the master.”

Capt. Rainier Salcedo, 1986 graduate of JBLFMU-Arevalo said that his profession as a seafarer earned him the respect of people both at sea and on land. People in his community appreciated a lot his little contributions that he shared to them.

3.1.3 *A lonely but a challenging job*

Any seafarer will find it difficult to work on board. First of all we are far from our family. The feeling of being away from your family and loved ones is the hardest part according to Capt. Lopez, even harder than the work on board ships. “But life is in itself a sacrifice. So in order for me to provide for my family...I have to work on board but I have no choice because I love my family.” Capt. Lopez added: “Being away from my loved ones is the biggest challenge that I have been confronted with. It is a challenge to me as a human being for I have biological needs and must have a biological fulfillment. Thus, when I am in port surrounded by beautiful women, sometimes I can surpass it but at times I cannot.”

This was also shared by Capt. Genona who considers that being away from family requires a large amount of patience to work efficiently. “It was difficult but because of training and motivation, I was able to surpass such difficulties”. He overcomes homesickness by concentrating in his work.

Capt. Rainier Salcedo, feels the same way. It is not the work on board that he considers difficult but rather, it is the feeling of being away from his family. For him work becomes routine on board the moment that you (sic) have mastered it. He looks at his work as a passion or an art. It is fun working on board because he enjoys it and he doesn't find it boring. He always looks forward that each day is a different day from the previous days. The challenges that he encounters on board makes him a stronger and better person.

Difficulty is a state of mind. Physically it is difficult; mentally it is very difficult, if you are not prepared. But if you are physically and mentally prepared and you know how to sort things out, then everything is easy, and fun according to C/M Arsenal. This is something that a deck cadet must endure and must fully understand in this profession. He must carry on his shoulder a big responsibility when he is on board especially when he becomes an officer. There are instances when he does not get enough sleep in a 24- hour period because of emergencies on board requiring everybody to be alert all the time. He has to deal with the indifference of his senior officers, and if he is not emotionally prepared he will end up crying. But all these are part of being a cadet aspiring to be an officer someday.

3.1.4 *Adjustment with other nationalities*

Most of the key informants interviewed admitted they find it difficult to adjust with other nationalities primarily because of language barrier, not to mention the cultural differences. As a Chief Officer, Capt. Lopez has to adjust to the culture of the Indonesians who are Muslims. He found it difficult at first because, in some instances, Muslim crew members disappeared on the deck in the middle of the work for they must go back to their cabin to pray.

Despite the fact that he was a senior officer on board, Capt. Philip Genona still felt a certain level of discrimination, because Europeans are feeling and thinking superior. But he was not intimidated at all. He simply told them that they were on board to work, that their responsibility, which was to keep the shipboard organization work, and being the officer on board, it was his job to implement company regulations.

For Capt. Rainier Salcedo, he never found it difficult to adjust with Japanese officers even when he was still a deck cadet. Japanese are just like Filipinos or other nationalities; some are arrogant, some are good. Japanese people are polite people. It pays to be courteous and respectful to everybody on board, especially to the officers.

“What the hell is this company in the Philippines It sends me a 51 year old ordinary sailor and a 20 year old third officer. What is this? A joke!” These were the words that C/M Arsenal had to bear when he was first assigned as a Third Officer. So he told the chief officer that it is something that is not within his hands and added: “I will do my job as much as I can and I will prove to you I can do it.” Little did he know then, that he was to face the biggest challenge in his career when the captain told him while they were on the bridge: “You know, son I asked from the company to send me a man; they send me a boy. What do you think about this?” C/M Arsenal who was third mate then replied: “Sir, I will prove to you that this boy can do a man's job. And if this boy can do the job better, then shame for the man. And then his captain said: “Yeah, yeah I have a third officer. The boy was able to meet the challenge of his chief officer and captain because he was mentally and emotionally ready even at a very young age.”

Capt. Derwin Limpiado never finds it difficult sailing with other nationalities because he can always adjust. “While it is true that European officers think superior over their Asian counterparts, they cannot do otherwise (sic). If you are a Filipino officer and you have Europeans as junior officers or if you are a Master and you have a European Chief officer, there is no problem dealing with them. All that you have to do is prove to them your true worth and that you completely know your job, then there is no problem. Just stand your ground, and later on they

will just say sorry. And that is what is good with Europeans, they know how to apologize when they know they are wrong. Sometimes there are Filipinos who will not even admit their mistakes. They will never say sorry.

3.1.5 *What does it take to be a cadet on board?*

“Any ship officer before assuming the position of a third mate must be a deck cadet first. As a deck cadet aspiring to become an officer someday, he must be mentally and spiritually mature. Mentally, because he has to cope up with his studies and physically because he must be prepared for any challenges that would require his physical strength and also the spirituality to always have faith in GOD that HE will never leave him behind and will support him in whatever he does that is right.” These were the words of Deck Cadet Lamasan when asked: “what does it take to be a deck cadet on board?”

According to Cadet Lamasan, there were many challenges that he had to face while he was on board- one of them, the environment. “The first time I experienced big waves at sea and the swaying of the vessel whenever we encountered storms at sea are some experiences I will never forget (sic). It is difficult to get up and do my work... so that’s one factor that makes the life of cadet difficult. Another difficulty that a cadet will likely experience on board is the challenge that the other crew member poses against young deck cadets like us. But the training that we had in the dormitory had really prepared us for shipboard practice. In the dormitory we were trained how to get along with other people because anywhere we go later on, we will be encountering people with different personalities, attitudes, character, culture, beliefs and values. The training we had prepared us physically, mentally and emotionally. He wants students to study hard, persevere because there is nothing easy. There is no goal that is easy to reach. A student must believe that he is capable of doing it, of becoming an officer, he could do anything including the impossible if he has the determination.

For deck cadet Borja, a cadet, especially a scholar of the Norwegian Shipowners’ Association, must sacrifice a lot. “To whom much is given, much is expected” he further stressed. “The company is giving a scholarship grant and it is also expecting a good output from the scholars. To be an NSA cadet aspiring to be an officer, you really have to sacrifice and love the profession because if you love what you are doing, then it will be easy as though you are not working at all. There are a lot of challenges on board that I have to hurdle; for instance, the company pressure, second is trying to overcome fatigue because there is this big issue about commercial challenge whereby the company is expecting more so the peo-

ple on board are pressured. However, these are normal activities on board. As a cadet, I have to work for 12 hours and it is part of the commercial pressure imposed upon by the company on the crew... that’s the least that I have to work sometimes even 16 hours to 24 hours.”(sic) There are a lot of pressures and I was thinking about giving up, but then if I am going to let myself be carried away by my way of thinking, but then it is mind over matter.(sic) It’s how you condition your mind. Although there are a lot of challenges you will still be able to overcome it with prayers and as much as possible, find somebody to talk to. And after that, the problem is gone.

According to Capt. Derwin Limpiado, a master mariner in command of one of the many vessels of the Norwegian Gas Company, a cadet must have the mind-set or focus of really becoming an officer, not just because he want to be an officer but to know what the job is of a rating. “How can a cadet become an officer if he has never been exposed to the job of a rating?” he ask? “How can one supervise the ratings later on?” A cadet aspiring to become an officer must know the rudiments of the job, the routine job on deck, not just how to navigate. These things are easily learned with the advent of computer technology today. It will be difficult for a chief officer to supervise later on if he himself does not know how to tie knots or how to splice a rope.

An able-bodied seaman must be a good steering man or helmsman, and a good look-out. It is not a matter of memorizing the rules of the road, it will always be there. (sic) There are books on board that he can review from time to time. There are officers who are always on the radar. They have become technology dependent. The best way to navigate a vessel is not through the radar or any other electronic gadgets on board; it is done through visual observation through look-outs. See for yourself the situation, go to the bridge window, or if necessary, the bridge wings to assess the situation. There are new and young officers today who cannot even identify the characteristics of lighthouses, bouys, etc. The basics of piloting are still very helpful. A good steering man does not only look at the compass; he should look at the ship’s head and then look at the compass only to check the heading of the vessel. It must be remembered that the compass reading is dependent upon the ship’s heading. So a good helmsman looks at the ship’s head and then looks at the compass to check the direction that the OOW or the Master orders to be steered.

3.1.6 *What does it take to be an officer on board a vessel?*

As the bars on your shoulder board increase, the responsibility also increases according to Capt. Angelo Lopez. “Since the position is already a man-

agement level, the chief officer is in-charge of the deck department, and all the work in this department is his responsibility. It is difficult to handle people—more difficult than any task assigned to a chief officer. You have to consider people’s moods and deal with their problems at home because it affects the performance on board. You still have to deal with individual differences. No two persons have the same principles in life, the same work ethics, and as a Chief Officer I have to understand all this. It is really a matter of accepting people as they are and making the most of what they can contribute to the organization on board the vessel.”

To be an officer, you must have the courage, the knowledge, intelligence and the skills and most of all you must have faith in GOD according to Capt. Rainier Salcedo. “The three stripes on my shoulder board representing my position as Chief Officer really is (sic) a big load or responsibility that an officer (sic) must carry. As the cargo of the vessel is the chief officer’s responsibility, stability and trim of the vessel must be properly attended to. The life of everyone on board is dependent upon the hands of the cargo officer, that of the chief officer.(sic) An officer, 2nd officer or 3rd officer on board must always be alert especially during the time of his watch.” Rainier also believed that the knowledge, virtues and values that he had learned in school is a big part of his being a captain today. He further stressed that a student aspiring to become an officer must have the courage and determination. He should aim to become an officer, not just an ordinary or able-bodied seaman. “When I took command as master of the vessel, my fear was when I gave the order “Let go all lines”. It was a controlled fear within me and a temporary one. It was the signal that I am in full control of the vessel. There is no turning back, the ship will be at my complete disposition. It was temporary fear because I know I have enough training and everything went smoothly after that. I was able to conquer my fear. Capt. Limpiado considers it as his most frightening experience in his career as a master mariner. After that brief moment of fear, everything was normal and the feeling just subsided. He had worked in a gas carrier since he was a second officer until he assumed the position as chief officer at age 32, and a master mariner at age 39.

3.1.7 *The profession is financially rewarding*

“You will earn well. The higher you go up, the more money you will earn. Why? This is because captains are paid 7,000 or even 8,000 US dollars according to Mrs. Carla S. Limcaoco. While they are on leave, they are paid and the pay is more when they return on board.” She adds: “I mean money is being thrown to them like it is grown on trees. And if you are done with your work at sea, you can come ashore and there will be 10,000 jobs waiting for you,

here or abroad as superintendent, port captains, fleet managers, general operations managers, crewing managers, take your pick. So it is something that will start from your position as a deck cadet to the being a captain on board or ashore. It is a very special career in that sense, but very noble. It is enduring(sic) but very financially rewarding.”

The profession is indeed financially rewarding, enabling the seafarers to help their families. According to one master mariner who had been to sea for 13 years in this profession, he was able to help his family financially, and he also provided some revenue for the country.” Capt. Angelo Lopez also said that it is also his ambition to see the world and, being a graduate of a government maritime school, he has an obligation to return something to his country. He disclosed that his family was financially hard-up and when he started sailing on an overseas vessel; he was able to help his mother who was raising the family alone for his father had long been deceased.

Capt. Philip G. Genona, who just passed the board examinations for master belongs to the new breed of officers. He belongs to the 2nd batch of the NIS Class Project sponsored by the Norwegian Ship owners’ Association. He chose this profession because of the background or his environment tells him to. Living in a town with many seafarers who are financially stable, he found himself drawn to the seafaring career. Of course he considers that besides the financial rewards the profession is giving him personally, he sees himself as a contributor to the worldwide progress of the trade.

C/M Arsenal believes that the job of a ship officer is fulfilling and also financially rewarding. Filipino seafarers today are well compensated especially at a time when there is a world-wide shortage of competent officers.

3.1.8 *On what students should do in order to realize their dreams*

“No influence from other people, your parents or anybody else, could help you but yourself. You need to have the determination, the focus if you want to become an officer, and eventually a captain like me. You have to become an officer by taking one step at a time.” This is what a student must keep in mind in choosing this profession according to Capt. Limpiado.

Capt. Lopez said: “If you believe that you can survive the difficulties in this profession, by all means go for it. The seafaring profession is a noble profession, and if you decide to take this course, you must take pride to preserve the integrity of the profession, of the Ilonggo in particular and as a Filipino in general.”

Capt. Philip Genona strongly advises students to enhance their knowledge and skill in computers and in both spoken and written English. "They have to know where to source the prevailing maritime regulations from and to get updates especially from the internet because they have the responsibility to be well informed. They have to be disciplined and to take their studies seriously and must do well in class.

Cadet Lamasan believed that there is nothing easy in this profession. "There is no goal that is easy (sic) to reach but it is on (sic) oneself to do including the impossible. One can make the impossible possible if one has the determination."

Cadet Borja says that there is a bright future in the maritime profession. "I know that there are many students out there who dream of becoming captains in the future or perhaps presidents of a shipping company and I want to tell them this: "Yesterday is just but a dream; and tomorrow a vision, but today well lived makes yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope. So look to this day. If you want to have a bright future later on, you must start right now. Anything that is started right will end right. If you do good while you are in school, you will also land a good job later on. If you do good in academics, in reacting or inter-acting with people, make yourselves ready to face the challenges, I am sure you can achieve a lot in the seafaring profession which has become a very lucrative profession."

4 FINDINGS

From the discussion, the following are the findings of this investigation:

- 1 There is indeed a need to build the image of the profession among the youth of today.
- 2 Some shipping companies are already doing their part to build the image of the profession

by requiring their seafarers to be as presentable as possible when reporting to the office. They go through a process of orientation where they are encouraged to become captains or chief engineers not just mere crew members.

- 3 This is a profession where Filipinos excel in and the chances are good for the country to its position in the world as the number one supplier of competent and qualified officers and crew.
- 4 The seafaring career is a noble and a challenging profession.
- 5 It is a lonely profession having to be away from loved ones, but it is at the same time a very challenging profession.
- 6 The profession is financially more rewarding than any other profession.

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