

The moment I heard the news that the MV Princess of the Stars of Sulpicio Lines had sunk off the coast of Sibuyan Island, Romblon, carrying over 800 passengers, I knew right away that through the PCGA somehow I would be involved. The strong typhoon "Frank" caused the 24,000-ton ferry to sink last June 21, 2008. The vessel was believed to have several hundred people still trapped inside. Surely the ones to be called in would have to be the Coast Guard divers.

After my Super Ferry 14 experience 4 years ago and being part of the first team of civilian divers to inspect the wreck of the still burning ship last February 27, 2004, I couldn't take my mind of this unfortunate recent tragedy. Would I see the same fate of the hundreds that perished? I was about to find out.

Through my mother Commodore Emmy Garon PCGA, we received a call on June 23, Tuesday, to be on standby since the Coast Guard was in need of additional divers to assist in the retrieval operations. Right away I called Cdr Matthew Caldwell PCGA, my dive instructor, technical diver, and instructor trainer himself to be a part of our dive team. My sister Ensign Alexandra Garon PCGA also would be coming along. We readied all our gear and would catch the 8am flight the next day aboard a Philippine Air Force Fokker plane.

The moment we landed in Romblon, three bodies were being unloaded from a Sikorsky chopper. I readied myself as I knew that this would be a common sight in the next few days.

We were then flown aboard an air force chopper and landed on the 003 Coast Guard Vessel. By the time we got there it was late afternoon. We were then briefed by the coast guard about the situation. It seemed more like a search and recovery mission now rather than a search and rescue. Finding survivors seemed very slim since they had seen many bodies trapped inside. Most of the bodies were wearing life vests making it even more difficult for the divers to retrieve them. Cdr Caldwell, being the more experience and qualified diver thought it was best he dive first to inspect the area.

We then boarded the rubber boat to the turned over vessel. Nearing the vessel I was not really prepared for what I saw. A bloated body of a man floated on the surface. I thought to myself he could be someone's father or husband. The stench of decomposing bodies made me feel like throwing up. I braced myself of what was to come.

LCdr Rosario PCG (Philippine Coast Guard) accompanied Cdr Caldwell on his first dive. LCdr Rosario was the first on the scene and the first to dive into the wreck last June 22. He also had to make the difficult decision of going out to look for the passenger ferry at the height of the typhoon. He put his life and that of his men at risk in the path of the storm, in the hopes of maybe finding some survivors.

Before going into the water, I asked LCdr Rosario about the blue rosary that hung on his neck. He told me he found it on the floor inside a cabin of the wreck on his first dive. It must have been really meant for him to keep him safe. With that both he and Cdr Caldwell back rolled into the ocean beneath us.

When they finally came up, the first words of Cdr Caldwell was “Oh my God! It’s something I have never experienced before. In one area we saw about 12 bodies.” The sun was setting as our rubber boat headed back to the 003. I then said a silent prayer for all the dead.

The next morning we got up early and received a briefing from LCdr Rosario. He showed us the outline of the vessel and emphasized the safety factor so that we would not end up another casualty. When the mission started there were only about 20 divers. Reinforcements from the Navy Special Operations Group, the Philippine National Police, the Philippine Air force and more divers from the Coast Guard’s Special Operations group composed a 66-member dive team including the 3 of us volunteers from the Auxiliary.

On our first dive it was very eerie. Visibility wasn’t very good at only about 3 meters. I took my underwater camera and started shooting videos. Some windows were already broken in order to make retrieving the bodies easier. We descended on the starboard side and made our way to the port side where there was an opening in the dining area. That area was said to have a lot of bodies. As Cdr Caldwell and LCdr Rosario entered the dining room tons of debris was in their way. All we could do was flash our underwater lights to help them see better. Personal belongings scattered everywhere. The ceiling had given way and twisted metal was all over. We all had to be very careful. As the 2 divers made their way to the bodies, we waited at the opening as earlier instructed. The plan was they would hand the bodies to us and we’d have to unload the weights attached to the body to be floated to the surface. The bodies had become so buoyant and bloated to almost 3 to 4 times their normal size, thus making the retrieval operations more difficult.

We did two dives that day. Though we were not successful in retrieving the bodies since they were too difficult to move out of the wreck. The next day, we sectioned the vessel diving the group into 4 dive teams. We each had our assigned areas as we were to do a body count. But then all of a sudden the dive operations was called off. The PCG received reports that the MV Princess of the Stars was carrying 10,000 kilos of the toxic pesticide Endosulfan. All of us divers were ordered to be airlifted immediately to Manila to be given a battery of medical tests since the effects of this chemical was deadly.

At first I was having trouble believing was happening. I was more concerned about the toxic effects of the oil and decomposing bodies in the water. But possible contamination from a deadly chemical was the farthest thing on my mind.

As we flew towards Manila, I said a silent prayer and put my whole trust in God. I truly felt that all of us divers would be kept safe, and free from the effects of the pesticide, since we were there to do good. I knew that somehow those who perished were watching over us since we were on a mission to help them and their families.

From Villamore air base, we were transported to the V. Luna Medical Center (a military hospital), where we were quarantined. The next morning we transferred to the East Ave. Medical Center where they took blood samples, and more tests were conducted.

In spite of all the risks involved I can truly say I have no regrets and that I'm proud to have done it. My sister and I were the two lone females who served along side the 64 other dedicated men who dove the wreck. Not once did we ever feel like we were not a member of the team. We truly grew in admiration for their spirit of selflessness and team work. I saw first hand how the PCG divers and personnel risked their lives in order to save that of others. At the end of each tiring and emotionally draining day, they kept themselves going because they knew the families of the dead were counting on them.

Two weeks after, all of us divers, both from the PCG and the PCGA were awarded for our bravery. The PCG awarded us three volunteers the highest award that could be given to a civilian... the gold star medal for Outstanding Achievement. But to me, what meant more was the warm welcome I got from my school students, when I reported back to school. When many of them told me, "Teacher Vanessa, I want to be like you when I grow up. I also want to help save lives".

This is why the PCGA means so much to me. It helps keep the spirit of volunteerism alive. It gives a sense of purpose and meaning to life. Many people have asked me why I did it? I just say "For those who are bountifully blessed, much is required when it comes to giving back".

By LCdr Vanessa Garon
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