THE RESCUE OF THE CREW OF MV FOXHOUND

On 17th October, 2015, MV Foxhound - a Philippines-registered cargo vessel sailing with a full Filipino crew – sank quickly and unexpectedly in the Bismarck Sea, about 15 nautical miles north-west of Lae, Papua New Guinea. The Master of the Foxhound, Captain Jonathan Montel, sent a distress signal at 1633 hrs before he and his crew boarded their lifeboat and abandoned ship.

In their rush to escape the stricken ship, the crew had left all their possessions behind. Thankfully, Captain Montel had managed to retrieve their passports from the ship’s safe. One seafarer told our Chaplain George Gayagay how, when he looked back to the ship soon after the lifeboat had been launched, he was stunned to see that it had already disappeared. The crew sustained no physical injuries but had been traumatised by the sudden loss of the vessel and had suffered severe nausea and dizziness during their time in the lifeboat.

Their SOS was received by MV COSCO Shanghai, which immediately notified The Australian Maritime Safety Authority and changed course towards the signal’s location. At 1954 hrs the lifeboat was located and by 2033 hrs all 21 Filipino seafarers were safely on board COSCO Shanghai.

Capt. Montel told our Chaplains how appreciative was to Capt. Shen and his crew, who had gone out of their way to accommodate them. This was not simply in terms of sleeping areas but in terms of personal tastes such as food. Despite the extra work involved, the cooks (and all the crew)
were keen to show camaraderie, support and kindness to the Foxhound crew.

The Mission to Seafarers, Sydney learned of the sinking and rescue from HWL Ebsworth, who acted for the Insurers of MV Foxhound. They informed us of the situation and requested the presence of a Filipino Chaplain to minister to the seafarers upon their arrival in Sydney. HWL Ebsworth also arranged for the crew to be examined by Filipino-Australian doctors and a psychologist and for the Philippines Consul General Marford Angeles and Assistance-to-Nationals (ATN) Officer Erlinda Albay to visit them to ascertain their needs.

On 22nd October, MV COSCO Shanghai berthed in Port Botany and our Mission to Seafarers Chaplains (The Rev.s) George Gayagay, David Davies and Un Tay were able to play key roles in the care of the crew of MV Foxhound, especially in assisting in translating Chinese / English and Tagalog / English, where clear understanding of English legal terminology was required.

During the initial meeting between the solicitors/ immigration / crews / Masters HWL Ebsworth, on behalf of the Philippines Government, thanked Captain Shen and his crew for their rescue of, and kindnesses to, the Filipino crew.

Chaplains George, Davo and Un met with the seafarers at the cramped gym on the lower deck, were they had been sleeping since their rescue. The Filipino crew were very keen to access SIM and Re-charge cards, which Un delivered when he arrived and then spent some considerable time activating the SIM cards so the seafarers might be able to call their respective families.
One seafarer shared with George his inability to sleep since the sinking and asked George to get him some sleeping pills. A Filipino doctor was scheduled to arrive at p.m. but didn’t arrive. Consequently, George offered to purchase over-the-counter sleeping pills form a local chemist. He also gave the seafarer his own mobile phone to call home but the seafarer declined, fearing that the call might increase his family’s anxiety.

The seafarers’ first concern was ‘What will I wear when I go home?’ The only clothes they had were those they were wearing when the ship sank. Some had only shorts and t-shirts, others were in pyjamas, and others were in ‘bits and pieces’. HWL Ebsworth had provided each seafarer with small pack of travel items such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, t-shirt, shorts, etc., but this was only an interim provision and they were embarrassed to fly home in such basic attire.

As a Filipino pastor, George knows many Filipinos and contacted them to ask if they might spare some clothes, shoes etc. to donate to the seafarers. George himself had clothing set aside to donate to charity and he distributed those items to the seafarers. He also called on Sister Mary Leahy of the Apostleship of the Sea, located at The Sydney Seafarers Centre. She had collections of clothing that she was setting aside for Christmas, but felt that, for these seafarers at least, their Christmas could come early this year! She also had the interesting task of shopping for 21 pairs of male underwear! At least they would have some clean clothes and undies for their flight home!

Captain Monsel had asked if he and his crew could be transferred to a local hotel and be given some financial assistance, but he was informed that visa difficulties made this impossible. Immigration officers had issued the crew with visas, but these visas only authorised the seafarers to leave the ship for the
purpose of boarding a bus that would take them directly to the airport to board their flight home on Saturday, 24th October.

He also asked George if, before they left for their flight, he would hold a church service for the Filipino crew. George arranged for a Thanksgiving service to be held at 10 am the next day, and continued to spend time with the crew, who enjoyed a time of group prayer with him.

So it was that, the next morning, George, the Filipino crew, and others met together in the ship’s gym to sing, to pray and to reflect on the Gospel reading of Luke 8.22-25. It was an emotional time for some of them as they prepared to part company and return home. As George bade them farewell, he assured them of our prayers.

As he returned to our Mission bus to continue our shuttle run into the city, he smiled to see that many of the Chinese crew of COSCO Shanghai were going ashore and would be waiting for him to ‘rescue’ them and to transport them into the City. Thankfully, for these seafarers, life goes on.