

The Curse of the Tablas Strait: An Interrogation of Maritime Accidents from 1902-2008

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When the M.T. *Princess Empress* sank off the northeast coast of Mindoro in the early morning of February 28, 2023, she became yet another addition to the list of vessels that have met their fate along the treacherous Tablas Strait. The unusually large number of disasters that have taken place in that vicinity, including one of the worst maritime tragedies in history, has created a contemporary narrative about the existence of the so-called "Romblon Triangle," which has become the watery grave of thousands of souls since the beginning of the twentieth century. While the death toll from the sinkings and collisions that have taken place in that area is irrefutable, there are logical explanations that could dispel the myth about the Tablas Strait being cursed. Hence, this article revisits official accounts of tragic events that took place in that waterway to provide analysis that could dispel the myth about the Tablas Strait being cursed. Regardless, no amount of fact-based historical accounts or even scientific analysis may be enough to dispel the mysteries and lore about this waterway, which is among the most heavily traversed in the archipelago.

Keywords: *interisland shipping, maritime disasters, Tablas Strait, Dona Paz, Romblon Triangle*

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Introduction

As an archipelagic nation, interisland shipping is a primary mode for transporting goods and passengers across the Philippines. However, despite its cruciality to the country's development, the domestic shipping industry has been plagued by inefficiencies in route management, high prices, and poor service (Jusi, et al., 2020). The mere mention of interisland shipping in the Philippines may bring about memories of the numerous maritime disasters that have taken place in recent years. Aside from the sinking of the recent M.T. *Princess Empress* off Naujan, Oriental Mindoro in 2023, which created an oil spill that spread as far as Antique, the image of the capsized M.V. *Princess of the Stars* off the coast of Sibuyan Island, Romblon (see Figure 1) on her voyage from Manila to Cebu at the height of Typhoon Frank on 21 June 2008, is probably still etched in the consciousness of many Filipinos today as she capsized off the coast of Sibuyan Island resulting in 227 deaths and 592 missing.



Figure 1. The Capsized Princess of the Stars

To older generations, however, it is probably the collision involving the M.V. *Doña Paz* and the M.V. *Vector* on 20 December 1987, which is listed as the deadliest civilian maritime disaster in history (Ray, n.d.), has embedded a negative

impression about the Philippine maritime industry on a global scale. Additionally, that tragic event also reinforced the lore surrounding the Tablas Strait curse. These incidents involving the *Princess of the Stars* and the *Doña Paz* took place in what has recently been referred to as the "Romblon Triangle." As seen in Figure 2, it is an imaginary area bound by Sibale Island as its tip, with the Tablas Strait and Sibuyan Sea as its base (Evora, 2014). The discovery on 2 March 2015 of the 73,000-ton *Musashi*, which was one of the largest battleships ever built, may have added further credence to that site.¹ While that English language term seems to be construct

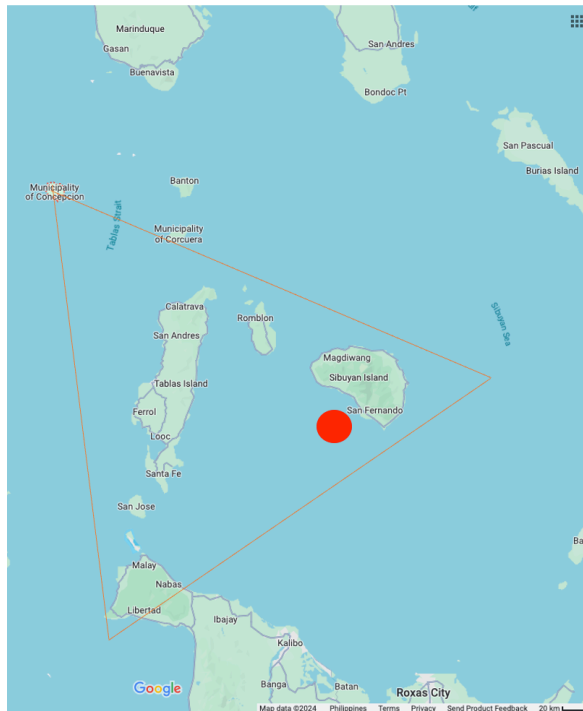


Figure 2. A Map of the "Romblon Triangle" Showing the Site of the Capsized *Princess of the Stars*. Note: The map was plotted based on the description in Evora, R. (2014, February 3). *The curse of the Romblon Triangle*. *Manila Standard Today*, B6. The vicinity where the *Princess of the Stars* capsized was taken from MV *Princess of the Stars*. (2024, August 4). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MV_Princess_of_the_Stars

¹ The *Musashi* was discovered by a team led by the late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen at approximately 3,280 feet beneath the Sibuyan Sea. More than half of its 2,399-man crew perished when it was sunk by Allied forces in what was possibly the largest naval battle in history, the Battle of Leyte Gulf (Romey, 2018).

patterned from the "Bermuda Triangle," it reinforces the narrative about the curse that seems to have befallen many ships that have sailed around this region and has become embedded among the many superstitions that are part of the indigenous folklore of Romblon.

In a chapter of a book about the province published by the Provincial Government of Romblon, local resident Francis Prado (2018) wrote about the "Golden Ship" which journeyed from Calatong² to various ports around the country. Aside from being made of gold, it was also filled with splendid-looking passengers in a constant state of jubilation. According to noted anthropologist, Alicia P. Magos, similar tales about "Barko nga Bulawan" also exist in the provinces of Panay Island (Santiago 2023, p. 338). Hence, despite Romblon's insularity, the proliferation of this narrative around the region may have provided a quick explanation for incomprehensible events that took place in the waters surrounding the island. In that regard, This was the same "ghost ship" that was supposedly cited by the captain of the *Don Juan* minutes before she collided with the oil tanker *Tacloban* in 1980. Her captain supposedly tried to avoid the mysterious vessel but crashed into the tanker instead (Evora, 2014).

Given how much folk narratives accompanied actual events, a historical interrogation of maritime tragedies that have been taking place since the American colonial era could provide a more factual interpretation of the lore surrounding the curse of the Tablas Strait. These stories generated a similar hype among the public due to the extensive media coverage of the era. Hence, by showing how similar circumstances were also prevalent in the past, a more convincing explanation as to why maritime accidents have been a frequent historical occurrence could be established. Hopefully, by demonstrating that conditions behind the disasters along the Tablas Strait have been going on for over a century, a greater sense of urgency to rectify what has turned out to be a deadly historical pattern could be realized, and perhaps even change the perception about the interisland shipping industry in general.

² Interestingly, Mt. Calatong, located on the southeastern tip of Tablas Island, is still believed to be enchanted and inhabited by supernatural beings who should not be disturbed (Tablas island, Romblon PH, 2019).

An Overview of Maritime Disasters Along the Tablas Strait

With the use of primary sources, a list of tragic maritime accidents that took place along the Tablas Strait as well as sites located in the vicinity of the so-called Romblon Triangle was constructed in Table 1 below. Starting with the recorded wreck of an American customs steamer in 1902, the conditions surrounding the disasters that took place until 2008 will be examined to explain what makes traversing the Tablas Strait so dangerous. Noticeably, traversing the Tablas Strait during a typhoon was a typical condition during which sinkings took place. Early twentieth-century steamers (which were actually built in the nineteenth century) such as the *Barongan* (185 tons) and *Negros* (280 tons) were of low tonnage and were more unstable in stormy weather. On the other hand, the *Quantico* was one of the biggest coastwise steamers in the Philippines at the time, weighing in at 2,676 tons (Bennet, 2011, p. 28). It just so happened that the Christmas Day typhoon of 1918 (which came to be known as the Quantico Typhoon) through which she sailed straight into had actually had its signals lowered, only to curve back with a stronger force in its tail that even the Pennsylvania-built steamer didn't have a chance (Coronas, 1919). Among the twenty-one who perished in that tragedy were firemen and engineers, several Americans, a district court judge, and a passenger whose dog also jumped overboard and stayed with his master's hunched body after the latter fell off the ship ("Recount Fight With Storm", 1919).

Table 1. Maritime Accidents Along the Tablas Strait, 1902-2008

Vessel Name	Operator	Date	Cause	Dead + Missing
<i>USS Shearwater</i>	US Customs	1902-07-14	typhoon	19
<i>Barongan</i>	Tabacalera	1905-09-25	typhoon	0
<i>Quantico</i>	Robert Dollar Co.	1912-12-25	typhoon	21
<i>Negros</i>	Yangco Steamship Co.	1927-05-28	typhoon	81
<i>Nuria of Manila</i>		1939-07-04	broken propeller	
<i>Mindoro*</i>	Compania Maritima	1967-11-02	typhoon	unknown
<i>Don Juan</i>	Negros Navigation	1980-04-22	collission	178
<i>Tacloban City</i>	PNOC			
<i>Doña Paz</i>	Sulpicio Lines	1987-12-20	collission	4000+?
<i>Vector</i>	Vector Shipping			
<i>Jem II</i>	Alfredo Martinez	1989-01-02	overloading	61
<i>Princess of the Stars</i>	Sulpicio Lines	2008-06-21	typhoon	819

*accident took place in the Sibuyan Sea

While the sinking of smaller vessels during the early twentieth century at the height of a typhoon might have been explainable, it is harder to comprehend how such incidents could continue to occur in the twenty-first century. One reason for that is that the Tablas Strait is a passage where currents from the South China Sea converge with waters from the western Pacific which flows through the Sibuyan Sea. This convergence makes predicting local currents very challenging (Weiqing et. al., 2009), thereby making voyages along that waterway dangerous even under normal conditions. Notwithstanding the nature of these currents and the disasters that took place due to extreme weather conditions, one reason why these maritime accidents had taken such a huge toll on lives is a practice in the industry that had been going on for decades - overcrowding.

It is not unusual for vessels of all sizes in the Philippines to be loaded with passengers beyond their capacity, especially during peak travel periods around the Christmas and school holidays. The M.B. *Jem II*, for example, was mostly carrying students returning to school from their Christmas holidays on its voyage from Romblon to Caticlan, Aklan, on January 3, 1989. That might have actually been an accident waiting to happen because she was merely a 14.9-ton wooden motorboat allowed to carry thirty-one passengers. She had a passenger load of 174 on the day she sank (Evangelista and Santos, 1989).

A similar case of overcrowding took place in the sinking of the *Negros* on 28 May 1927, on its voyage from Aklan to Manila (with a stop in Romblon). However, the conditions in which the tragedy occurred were exacerbated by misjudgment on the part of her captain. He received a typhoon warning by telegraph and his Chief Officer tried to dissuade him from departing. The captain persisted and only realized his mistake two hours later when he realized that it was too late for him to return to port. He shot himself in his cabin while the ship was sinking (The *Negros* Disaster, 1927). As for the rest of his crew, they completely disregarded the passengers and tried to save themselves as best they could. Making the matter worse was the fact that a lot of the cargo belonged to the officers themselves (The Official Story, 1927).

Fifty passengers and twenty crew who survived the ordeal landed in the barrio of Bondoc, Southern Tayabas after about 45 hours on fragile rafts. The exact number of passengers who boarded in Capiz and Romblon was unknown due to a “sifting of some facts.” One thing that was certainly reflected on the manifest was that the officers and crew packed the decks with personal consignments of bananas and marble dust, plus an unspecified amount of firewood consigned to the

manager's daughter (The Official Story, 1927). Two weeks after the *Negros* sunk, an authentic list had yet been furnished by the agents of the ports from which passengers embarked. An incomplete list was merely based on the recollection of survivors and served as the only basis for a list which showed that there about 120 passengers were aboard (The Negros Disaster, 1927). This type of anomaly would be a similar factor in the case of the M.V. *Mindoro* which would also sink during a typhoon forty years later.

The *Mindoro* was a former U.S. Army Freight and Supply (FS) ship operated by the largest shipping operator in the Philippines at the time, Compañía Marítima. After setting sail from Manila North Harbor on 2 November 1967, bound for New Washington, Aklan, she encountered typhoon 'Welming' on the Sibuyan Sea off Aklan at about 5:00 in the morning of November 4. According to testimonies from among her 136 survivors, there were about 200 passengers on the second deck of the vessel, thereby forcing others to squeeze onto the third deck or first deck. Some passengers were not included in the manifest because they only purchased their tickets upon boarding. Based on a certified true copy of the Special Permit issued by the Bureau of Customs, the *Mindoro* was limited to only 193 passengers (*Heirs of A. Delos Santos, et al. v. C. A. and C. Marítima*, 1990).

An anomalous passenger list was also a factor in the collision between the M.V. *Don Juan* operated by Negros Navigation and the M.T. *Tacloban* of the Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC). The disaster took place at about 10:30 in the evening on the former's voyage from Manila to Bacolod. She sank within ten to fifteen minutes. According to the Certificate of Inspection issued by the Philippine Coast Guard Commander at Iloilo City, the *Don Juan* was only allowed to carry 810 passengers and 54 crew. However, there were 1,004 onboard the vessel when she sank. (*Negros Navigation v. C.A., et al.*, 1997).

While the overcrowding of the *Don Juan* in itself is an unacceptable act of negligence, a more disturbing revelation was exposed after an ensuing investigation revealed that the *Don Juan's* captain and other crew members were playing mahjong on the vessel. Negros Navigation assumed full responsibility for all claims arising out of the collision after reaching an agreement with PNOC in 1986. Nonetheless, they still tried to appeal this verdict until the case was finally closed in 1997 after the Supreme Court concluded "that Capt. Santisteban and Negros Navigation are properly held liable for gross negligence . . . leading to the death of hundreds of passengers" (*Negros Navigation v. C.A.*, 1997).

A far greater casualty count resulted from another collision involving a vessel operated by a major liner company and an oil tanker when the 2,215-ton M.V. *Doña Paz* of Sulpicio Lines collided with the 629-ton tanker *Vector* on the former's voyage from Tacloban to Manila on the evening of 20 December 1987. As in the case of *Don Juan*, there were also anomalies regarding her actual passenger count. The manifest of the *Doña Paz* listed 1,493 passengers and a 53-member crew and had a declared capacity of 1,518 passengers and 60 crew members (Gabieta, 2012). However, those figures may be well below the actual number of passengers on board because the names of as many as 1,000 children may not have been included on the manifest, as well as those of the passengers who only purchased tickets after boarding (Chua-Eoan, 1988). The highest unverified estimate placed the total deaths at 4,386 people, making it the deadliest peacetime maritime disaster in history (Ballesteros, 2016).

Another factor surrounding the collisions involving both the *Don Juan* and the *Doña Paz* was that they took place late in the evening. In the case of the *Doña Paz*, the collision also took place at around 10:00 p.m. The 8,800 bbl. of petroleum products carried by the *Vector* immediately ignited and created a sea of flames that engulfed both ships, after which dozens of passengers leaped into the water, diving deep to avoid getting burned. Passengers who crowded the decks in beds that were occupied by up to four people were anticipating the Christmas holidays, many of whom were children who screamed for their parents as the burning vessels disappeared within four hours of the collision (Chua-Eoan, 1988). Only twenty-six people survived that horrific event when they were rescued by the *Don Claudio* of Negros Navigation (Mariano, 1987).

As in the case of the *Don Juan*, there was also a disturbing account of negligence on the part of the captain of the *Doña Paz*. Based on the Coast Guard's initial inquiry, some of her officers were watching T.V. or drinking beer when the collision took place. Moreover, an apprentice officer was left on the bridge alone as it made its way through the treacherous Tablas Strait off Mindoro (AP, 1987). While that narrative remains embedded in the popular consciousness, the Supreme Court had determined that it was the *Vector* who was entirely at fault in that collision, as shown in the following statement

"All evidence points to the fact that it was MT *Vector's* negligent officers and crew which caused it to ram into MV *Doña Paz*. More so, MT *Vector* was

found to be carrying expired coastwise license and permits and was not properly manned. As the records would also disclose, there is a defect in the ignition system of the vessel, and it was not convincingly shown whether the necessitated repairs were in fact undertaken before the said ship had set to sea. In short, MT *Vector* was unseaworthy at the time of the mishap. That the said vessel was allowed to set sail when it was, to everyone in the group's knowledge, not fit to do so translates into rashness and imprudence" (*Vector v. Macasa, et al., 2008*).

In the two tragedies involving the *Don Juan* and the *Doña Paz*, human agency was a major factor that led to the loss of lives which could have been avoided. There is, however, another factor at play that makes navigating the Tablas Strait more treacherous. By looking at the image from an online ship tracking site in Figure 3, the Tablas Strait seems to be a point where vessels to and from Manila are forced into a bottleneck where they encounter vessels from the opposite direction. To prevent collisions at sea, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has had regulations set in place since 1972 (COLREG, 2019). In the Philippines, however, this convention was only ratified in 2013 (MARINA, 2022). Had these guidelines been implemented much earlier, there still wouldn't have been any certainty that the captain of the *Don Juan* would have decided to stay on the bridge instead of play mahjong when his ship collided with an oil tanker in 1980, or that the *Doña Paz* would not have exceeded its legal passenger capacity.

The aftermath of these tragic maritime disasters always ends up exposing what is probably the biggest curse that besets travelers within Philippine waters - the inability of the government to improve the state of domestic shipping in the country. In the aftermath of the 1927 sinking of the *Negros*, for example, Acting Governor-General Eugene Allen Gilmore created an advisory committee on interisland shipping to recommend tighter safety regulations and to prevent monopolies by allowing more competitors to operate in the market. Among the politicians who got involved in the deliberations that followed were Sen. Juan Sumulong, Speaker Manuel Roxas, and Ramon Fernandez. Yet what followed was a bill that merely gave the freedom for existing operators to stay in business (Poblador, 2022). Fast forward to the *Doña Paz* tragedy. One thing that has been forgotten in history is that less than a year after her sinking, another vessel owned by the same operator, Sulpicio Lines, the 2,855-ton *Doña Marilyn*, sank near Maripipi island, located between Masbate and Biliran when she ran into engine

trouble as she encountered rough seas at the height of typhoon Ruby on October 24, 1988 (Echeminada, 1988). Ten days after the sinking, it was established that at least 63 people died, and 191 were still missing ("Sulpicio banned", 1988).



Figure 3. Typical Traffic Along the Tablas Strait

Despite the seemingly criminal negligence involving Sulpicio Lines and its role in the tragedies involving the *Doña Paz* and *Doña Marilyn* which took place less than a year apart, they were still allowed to operate and eventually became responsible for the second-worst sinking in the country's history involving the *Princess of the Stars* in which 819 lives were lost on 21 June 2008. While a typhoon was also a factor in that disaster, human error was a bigger factor at play. According to the report prepared by the Board of Marine Inquiry (BMI), "The immediate cause of the capsizing of MV *Princess of the Stars* was the failure of the Master to exercise extraordinary diligence and good seamanship thereby committing an error of judgment . . ." (The Maritime Executive, 2019). The BMI report was referring to the captain's miscalculation of the risk of continuing with the trip to Cebu

despite the stormy weather. According to former officials from the Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA), however, the *Princess of the Stars* could have easily hurdled the storm, and in all likelihood, the improper stowage of cargo was what led her to the capsizes (G. Cabañez and B. Adil, personal interview, April 2, 2019).

Despite the different factors discussed so far to explain the maritime disasters that took place along the Tablas Strait, and in the case of the *Mindoro* and *Princess of the Stars*, the adjacent Sibuyan Sea, the lack of an acceptable explanation for these tragedies paved the way for an indigenous narrative about a curse along the Tablas Strait. Additionally, the unverified count of over 4,000 casualties in the *Doña Paz* tragedy by the Supreme Court (*Caltex, et al. v. Singzon, et al.*, 2016) adds an element of infallibility to the folk narrative, thereby enhancing its embeddedness into the national consciousness. However, experts and insiders within the shipping industry do not believe in the existence of the so-called Romblon Triangle. In fact, they have always refuted the staggering number of casualties from that incident. Hence, this article also includes a brief discussion that would consider the possibility that the casualty count of the *Doña Paz* might have been inflated. While it may do little to dispel the myth of the Romblon Triangle, it will still offer a better understanding of Philippine maritime culture in the modern era.

A Re-Analysis of the *Doña Paz* Casualty Count

Although the figure 4,000 deaths in the *Doña Paz* disaster is etched in practically all written accounts about that tragedy including records of the Supreme Court (*Caltex v. Sulpicio Lines*, 1999), industry experts and insiders have never believed that figure to be accurate. Survivors of the tragedy overheard some of the crew mention that there were more than 3,000 people on board the *Doña Paz* when she departed from Catbalogan (Chua-Eoan, 1988). That was already about double its declared capacity, which in itself is already an extremely high figure but still within the norm of overcrowding which regularly took place during peak travel periods such as the Christmas season. What made the casualty figure balloon to over 4,000 was the claim made by Northern Samar Representative Raul Daza just over a week after the deadly collision took place, that a list of over 2,000 missing passengers was produced by their relatives and friends and compiled by local media outlets (Hitosis, 2023). There are two compelling reasons why the veracity of these additional claims should be re-examined: 1) an analysis of the General

Arrangement Plan of the *Doña Paz* based on her net register tonnage (NRT)³ would reveal that it was physically impossible to fit over 4,000 passengers in her available space, and 2) a socio-geographical analysis of transportation services out of northern Samar may cast doubt on the rationality of boarding the crowded *Doña Paz* in Catbalogan to travel to Manila.

When the passenger cargo vessel *Himeyuri Maru* was launched in 1963 in the Onomichi Zosen shipyard in Japan, her gross register tonnage was 2,602 GRT⁴ (Dona Paz, 2016). She was purchased by Sulpicio Lines in 1975 and named the *Don Sulpicio*, and renamed the *Doña Paz* in 1981. Having undergone refitting in the Philippines to accommodate more passengers, local databases indicate that her tonnage went down to 2,324 GRT (Wrecksite, 2016). Obviously, it would have been impossible for her tonnage to decrease if retrofitting was done to add more revenue-generating space. (According to industry insiders, tonnage is usually undervalued in order for the operator to minimize port duties). Hence, to calculate the volume of space that could have been occupied by revenue passengers in the *Doña Paz*, industry experts from the Philippine Ship Spotters Society / PSSS (personal communication, November 21, 2023) used the exaggerated figure of 2,000 Net Register Tons (NRT).

According to the Steamship Manual (2010), the capacity available for cargo and passengers could be measured in cubic feet by the net register tonnage by 100, i.e. 1 net ton = 100 cubic feet (or 2.83 cubic meters). Thus, the available passenger space in the *Doña Paz* could be calculated as follows:

$$2,000 \text{ NRT} \times 100 = 200,000 \text{ cubic feet} = 5,663 \text{ cubic meters}$$

$$5,663 - 1,770 \text{ (the two cargo holds of the Doña Paz)} = 3,893 \text{ cubic meters} \\ \text{of usable passenger space}$$

$$3,893 \text{ cubic meters} / 4,386 \text{ (highest passenger estimate)} = 0.88 \text{ cubic meters} \\ \text{passenger}$$

³ Net Register Tonnage (NRT) was a measure of the capacity available for the carriage of cargo and passengers. Deductions from GRT included: Master and crew accommodation, safety and storage spaces, water ballast tanks, allowance for propelling machinery. is a measure in tons of the inside of a ship for carrying goods, which does not include space used for fuel, the engine, etc. (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

⁴ Gross Register Tonnage (GRT) was a measure of the total internal capacity of the ship consisting of: under-deck volume excluding double-bottoms, volume of tween deck spaces, volume of superstructures, volume of deck-houses etc. Exemptions included: navigational spaces, galleys, stairways, light and air spaces. (Steamship Manual, 2010).

It was assumed in the above calculation that passengers were allowed to occupy the passageways, the roof, the restaurant, and even the crew quarters. The claims from survivors that three to four passengers were occupying a single bunk were also considered true, but they definitely did not occupy her cargo holds due to the heat and lack of ventilation in those spaces. Thus, the allotted space of 0.88 cubic meters per passenger will be taken into account. As a point of reference, that is just about the size of a casket, meaning the 4,386 passengers that were claimed to have boarded the *Doña Paz* would fill up all available space from floor to ceiling, not just the passageways and bunks. Assuming that her maximum passenger carriage of 1,583 was reached, PSSS estimates that an additional that about 600 passengers could have been accommodated in the available bunks, about 360 on the passageways of her three main decks, plus additional passengers in the economy class restaurant. No matter how creative you are in stretching that number, fitting over 4,000 passengers into the *Doña Paz* seems unimaginable. And if you were to ask any industry expert what the excess passenger ceiling would have been on a vessel such as the *Doña Paz*, the typical reply would have been "3,000 tops" (PSSS, personal communication, November 21, 2023).

Since even the figure of 3,000 persons was already obscenely high, there wouldn't have been any point in bloating it any further. However, as with all events in the past that become part of recorded history, human agency plays a significant role. During the 12th Philippine Congress, Samar was divided into three districts: Northern Samar, Eastern Samar, and Samar, which had two legislative districts. Catbalogan was part of the 2nd District of Samar, and its port was where the *Doña Paz* made a stop on 20 December 1987 to pick up an additional 908 passengers. From there, she departed for Manila with the declared headcount of 1,583 passengers and 58 crew. It could be easily surmised that passengers who boarded at that port were residents of the city itself, or of the residents of neighboring municipalities for whom it was the most practical port of disembarkation for a voyage to Manila, and that might have included residents of Eastern Samar as well. On the other hand, the fastest, most practical, and least expensive way for residents of Northern Samar to travel to Manila would have been to take land transportation to the Port of Allen, and take one of the big double-decker motorboats across the San Bernardino Strait to Matnog, Sorsogon, where buses to Manila with a daily schedule would be waiting for passengers. This was obviously the best way to travel to Manila, as opposed to backtracking, let's say, from Catarman (the capital of Northern Samar) on a journey of over 100 kilometers that could take up to three hours to board a slow-moving ship from Catbalogan that leaves once a week, and

would have been already packed after it left Tacloban.

Despite this logic, it was the representative from Northern Samar (not the districts that were adjacent to Catbalogan) who put forward a list of about 2,000 names to add to the casualty count of the unfortunate tragedy. From there, the matter of compensating the relatives of the victims turned into a legal conundrum in which a group called Bulig-Bulig Kita cooperated with the Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG) in seeking compensation for the relatives of the victims. A P30,000 settlement from Sulpicio Lines was rejected in 1991, but a class action suit made it all the way to the Supreme Court of Louisiana where the main office of Caltex was located (Ballesteros, 2016). On March 6, 2017, heirs of the victims of the *Doña Paz* tragedy each received claims amounting to over P200,000 (Recuerdo, 2017).

Conclusion

Based on a socio-geographic analysis of the mode of travel from North Samar to Manila and the net register tonnage of the *Doña Paz*, there may actually be a basis to cast some doubt on her casualty count estimate from the 1987 tragedy. Nonetheless, regardless of whether or not the number of deaths from the *Doña Paz* tragedy was inflated, the lowest possible casualty count based on its "suspicious" manifest listing 1,493 passengers and 53 crew members will still make it one of the most tragic maritime disasters of all time. The other disasters that took place along the Tablas Strait and the Sibuyan Sea throughout the twentieth century may have had lower casualty figures, but they are by no means less significant as they all form part of a longer history that reinforces the lore surrounding that waterway, and for that matter, the more current reference to a Romblon Triangle.

A historical inquiry into the maritime disasters that took place in that vicinity has provided more informed explanations behind them. Based on the accident history in Table 1, most sinkings took place during typhoons, with at least six vessels sunk with the loss of human lives since 1902. Moreover, better judgment on the part of the ship's captains, or in the case of the *Princess of the Stars*, the officer in charge of loading cargo, could have prevented the loss of lives altogether. However, despite those explanations based on historical accounts, folk narratives about the inherent danger of traversing the Tablas Strait will continue to persist as long as the disturbing pattern of events that have taken place in the past continues to this day. Indeed, according to MARINA, 782 maritime accidents were recorded from 2018 to 2022 (PortCalls, 2023).

Although both the natural and human factors surrounding the curse along the Tablas Strait continue to persist, fortunately, one historical pattern that seems to have taken a break is the incidence of heavy casualties in maritime accidents. Thanks to the introduction of budget air travel and roll-on/roll-off (ROPAX) passenger service, the public now has the option of taking faster and safer modalities to travel across the archipelago. Unfortunately, maritime accidents continue to be reported in other parts of the country at around the time of this writing. Aside from the oil spill caused by the sinking of the M.T. *Princess Empress* in February 2023, other more recent incidents are 1) the tilting of the M.V. *Maria Helena* in Banton during the month of July, and the capsizing of the M.B. *King Sto. Niño 7* in the municipality of Corcuera in August (Ombay, 2023). Notably, both of these incidents took place in the province of Romblon right inside the Romblon Triangle. Apparently, the curse continues to persist until this day, and as long as the state of interisland shipping remains the same, the safety of human lives as well as our marine environment will continue to be at risk of being a victim of this curse.

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