

UNIMAGINABLE DISASTER

FORGOTTEN TODAY, THIS 1987 COLLISION IS THE WORST PEACETIME MARITIME DISASTER
BY COLEMAN REED



Shortly after completion, the *Himeyuri Maru* is seen at sea.



Looking in poor condition, M/V *Dona Paz* was photographed at Tacloban during a port stop.

The thousands of islands that comprise the Philippines have an unenviable record of maritime disasters. Amongst these hundreds of shipwrecks, one really stands out. That incident involved the ferry *Dona Paz* and its collision and sinking left a record that stunned the maritime world. Could it happen again?

During 1963, the Japanese firm of Onomichi Zosen (located in Onomichi, Hiroshima, Japan), completed work on a new ship named the *Himeyuri Maru*. She was a working ship designed for the RKK Line to ply Japanese waters with a maximum passenger capacity of 608. Weighing in at 2324 gross tons, she was 305 feet long with a 45-foot beam and a draft of 26.4 feet. She could attain a maximum speed of 20.2 knots (with a cruise of 18 knots) courtesy of her Niigata Iron Works M8T54S four-stroke diesel engine of 4500-bhp and a single four-blade propeller.

During October 1975, she was sold to Sulpicio Lines, a Philippine company. The line was created by Sulpicio Go, a Chinese merchant who emigrated to the Philippines in 1919 with his siblings. With his brother, Go set up a shipping enterprise in eastern Visayas but in 1973 he established Sulpicio Lines with his sons and they were able to field a fleet of 17 vessels, one tugboat, and five barges. Sulpicio Lines catered to a niche market by opening tertiary and developmental passenger routes to isolated communities in Central and Eastern Visayas.

Sulpicio Lines quickly grew to be the largest domestic shipping company in the Philippines and by the mid-1980s they had a fleet of 22 passenger and cargo vessels along with a market share of 20% of the Philippines domestic sea traffic. However, Sulpicio Lines also rapidly developed a reputation for shoddy ships, poor schedules, deferred maintenance, and a lengthy list of safety violations.

It was into this rather questionable market that the *Himeyuri Maru* entered in 1975. Given a quick clean-up with some paint changes, the vessel was renamed *Don Sulpicio* and went into service with the Manila to Cebu sector being its primary route. *Don Sulpicio* became the flagship (along with *Dona Ana*, later renamed *Dona Marilyn*) of Sulpicio Lines and she was always