A dramatic sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and reflecting on the water. The sky is filled with dark, textured clouds. In the foreground, a large cargo ship is silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS IN MARITIME MANILA

BARISTA UNO

*A piercing look into the world's
ship manning capital
and Filipino society at large*

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS IN MARITIME MANILA

Barista Uno

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To protect the privacy of certain individuals
the names have been changed.

Thank you for purchasing this e-book.

Summary

Close Encounters in Maritime Manila is a first-hand account of life in the world's ship manning capital.

Rich in insights and factual information, it will take you on a journey through a maritime landscape peopled by interesting, hilarious and even strange characters.

This book also offers a unique and compelling analysis of the legacy of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and other factors that have helped shape the character of the Filipino maritime community and the society at large. It is a daring social commentary that should give readers entertainment as well as food for thought.

About the Author

Barista Uno is the pen name of a former shipping and ports journalist known to his fans worldwide as BU.

He is based in Manila and is the man behind Marine Café Blog (www.marine-cafe.com) and the author of the 2017 e-book, "Maritime Double Shots".

A Cautionary Preface

LET ME START with a friendly warning to the reader. If you're thin-skinned or believe that one should always look at the bright side of things, do not read any further. Close the book and drink Chinese tea or take a stroll in the garden.

There's no need to lose your peace of mind just because of certain things I wanted to get off my chest. This work not only offers a certain view of life and commerce in maritime Manila. It also paints a picture of Filipino society in general that could be upsetting at times. I have told it like it is.

I realise that there are some who think that to criticise one's country and fellow citizens is tantamount to “washing one's dirty linen in public”. Why, that's unseemly and unpatriotic! I have heard the same admonition expressed in other ways. “Do not be your own worst enemy as a people.” Or “Support your own countrymen.”

To those who hold such a fixed and narrow view, I have only one thing to say. A writer who is bothered by the

slightest possibility of displeasing his readers is betraying his soul. He should give up writing and practise public relations instead.

To be perfectly honest, I was occasionally stung by self-doubt whilst working on the initial drafts of this book. Who really cares what one man thinks and puts down in words? Life would go on merrily if he did something else, something practical like baking bread or taking photos for a living. One less book written and published could be good or bad for humanity. Who can say?

It is a perpetual risk faced by writers. But having chosen to write as a vocation, I hark back to the words of John Steinback, the distinguished American author and winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature. "The writer," he said, "must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true."

My resolve to hang on to that illusion was strengthened by what I had witnessed over the years in maritime Manila. I saw how seamen were commodified by the very people who sang paeans to them on the annual "Day of the Seafarer". I saw greed, one-upmanship and hypocrisy

pollute the air, especially in the ship manning and training sectors.

Behind it all was an impaired culture, one that seemed so outspread that it filled me with anxiety, unfocused but deep, about the general state of things.

You can probably call this feeling “angst”, a word people love to bandy around these days. In any case, I had to get rid of it or try to transform and sublimate it through some mode of expression.

And so here it is — the fruit of my dogged effort to be a serious author. In 2017 I put out **Maritime Double Shots**, an e-book containing selected aphorisms and reflections from my blog writings. I was testing the waters. I knew that I had to produce a more substantial volume, one which the reader would find somehow engaging and perhaps even learn to love.

This book is based on my experience as a young lad, as an international shipping and ports journalist, and, more recently, as a maritime commentator. Sprinkled here and there are anecdotes and vignettes — some dating back to the 1970s and 1980s and others occurring as recently as 2017. The direct quotes from some characters are exactly or

almost exactly as they were spoken (I have a highly retentive memory and some lines from the past are just not easy to forget).

I have deliberately left out certain details that would give away the real identities of the persons whose privacy I thought needed to be protected. In many cases, these individuals are identified only by a single initial.

I had a two-fold reason for doing this. First, in spite of my habit of calling a spade a spade, it has always been my policy to stick to the issue at hand and not soil anyone's reputation. I was not about to break this rule. Second, I felt that it was at times more effective to focus on the action rather than on the character.

In some cases, however, I have named the individuals described in the narrative to make the story-telling more interesting, present a more convincing portrait, or place the events told in a historical perspective. Naming them was, in a few instances, my way of paying tribute to what they had done or stood for.

I shall not claim that this book is objective as the term is normally understood. I am neither a historian nor a sociologist. What I describe here is my personal journey

through a maritime landscape that is as captivating as it is sometimes surreal. I have recorded my thoughts as one would write a personal journal: sincerely and without equivocation.

Even so, I have not veered from reality. I have kept close to its shores. At the end of this book is an annex containing some facts and figures that should serve as a kind of anchor to what I have written.

From the winding stream of past events and the menagerie of figures living and dead, I have put together a kaleidoscope. The pieces of coloured glass and mirrors inside reveal certain aspects of reality that may perturb or even shock the reader. I offer no apologies for this. My hope and immediate aim is to describe the underlying culture that makes Filipinos and Manila's maritime community so peculiar and so interesting.

Come, take a look.

B.U.

April 2018

I dedicate this book to Captain Michael B. Cuanzon, a dear friend and guide.

Table of Contents

<u>Summary</u>	i
<u>A Cautionary Preface</u>	ii
<u>Table of Contents</u>	vii
<u>Annex: Facts & Figures</u>	ix
<u>Chapter 1: The Great Money Chase</u>	1
<u>Chapter 2: At the Yacht Club</u>	12
<u>Chapter 3: Seamen in the Park</u>	21
<u>Chapter 4: The Maritime Flunkys</u>	34
<u>Chapter 5: Facing the Chieftain</u>	47
<u>Chapter 6: Legacy of the Dictator</u>	54
<u>Chapter 7: Culture of Thievery</u>	70
<u>Chapter 8: An Afternoon of Billiards</u>	87
<u>Chapter 9: Illusion and Reality</u>	92
<u>Chapter 10: Language as Mirror</u>	103
<u>Chapter 11: Noontime Epiphanies</u>	109
<u>Chapter 12: The Maritime Circus</u>	118
<u>Chapter 13: A Perplexing Race</u>	128
<u>Chapter 14: A Perceptive Japanese</u>	135
<u>Chapter 15: Foreigners and Natives</u>	140
<u>Chapter 16: Tips for Expats</u>	148
<u>Chapter 17: Regulators and Reporters</u>	155
<u>Chapter 18: The Power Potion</u>	164

<u>Chapter 19: The Female Zone</u>	173
<u>Chapter 20: In Search of Marine Art</u>	182
<u>Chapter 21: Slivers of Light</u>	191
<u>Epilogue</u>	201

CHAPTER 1

The Great Money Chase



A GERMAN NATIONAL once made a remark I have not quite forgotten about Filipinos involved in ship manning and crew training. "They all seem driven by money," he said.

He did not elaborate, perhaps assuming that I would take his statement at face value. I thought he was being diplomatic by not saying more. But the few words that he let loose were like German lager poured into a beer stein, rising to the top to make a mound of white froth, the way an ocean wave would whip up an enormous foam as it rushes to the shore.

What could I say in response? The man was stating a fact. Rather, he was understating it. Those who run the crewing agencies and training centres not only seem but *are* driven by money. They bustle about, always scurrying

and sniffing out new opportunities to put more cash in the till. In this line of business, making a pile, legitimately or otherwise, can be a breeze because of the sheer number of Filipino mariners.

The Philippines is the biggest single source of manpower for the world merchant fleet. On average, it deploys more than a third of a million seamen and other sea workers annually. This is not counting those who are on vacation, undergoing training, applying for shipboard jobs and enrolled in maritime colleges. China also has a legion of seamen. But Chinese sailors are not as ubiquitous as the Filipinos, who serve on almost all types of ships and under a myriad flags of registry.

If the Filipinos currently working on board the world merchant fleet were soldiers, they would outnumber the active national armies of Japan, Saudi Arabia or France. This does not give them or their country any leverage with the shipowners. It only means that they constitute a vast army of cash cows for enterprising characters in Manila.

The manning agencies (a total of 405 as of April 2018) are raking it in. So are the training centres (135 nationwide in 2017), whose owners are helped along in their money chase by the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

This specialised agency of the United Nations never seems to run out of new training requirements. Who cares if the merchant marine profession has become overregulated and seamen are buckling under the stress and heavy cost of training? It's all good for business.

Many other parties feed off those who work at sea or aspire to: state regulatory agencies, training centres, review centres, suppliers of training manuals and software, medical clinics, maritime lawyers, money-lending outfits, travel agencies and, not least of all, the seamen's unions. Last time I checked, there were five maritime unions registered with the Department of Labor and Employment. Foreigners may wonder, why so many when one would suffice? But why not?

There is money to be made by those who profess to fight for seamen's rights. For every vessel covered by the collective wage agreement, the union is paid by the shipowner a certain agreed sum. Some unions are known to also collect individual membership dues. It is easy money, if you ask me.

Even the medical profession is cashing in. Not too long ago, I met a young man who was preparing to sail again and work on board a cruise ship. He lamented the fact that

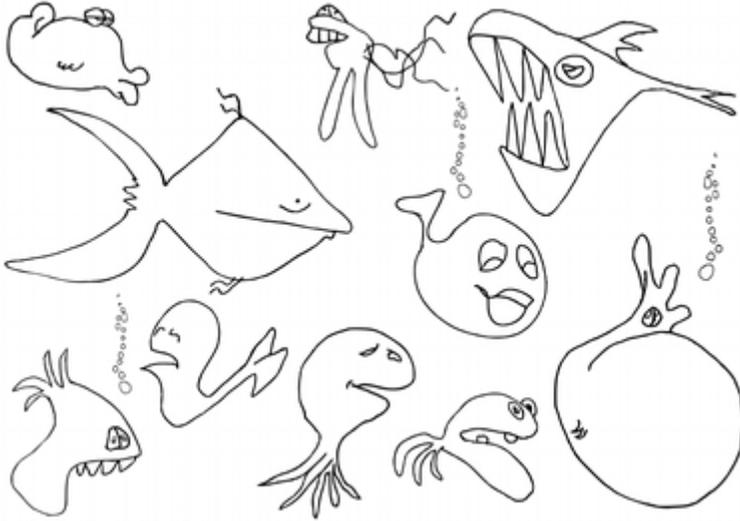
he recently had to undergo gall bladder surgery at the behest of his manning agency's doctor. He raised his shirt to show me the large scar on his belly.

"Did you seek a second medical opinion?" I asked.

He just shrugged his shoulder. Many seamen tend to do anything they are told so they can sail at the soonest time possible.

In this particular case, I happened to know the manning agency, which is one of the country's largest, and its senior management. Many years ago, a seaman had sent an e-mail to his union to complain that the agency in question required him and other Filipino cruise ship personnel to undergo medical examinations thrice in a two-year period. For other nationalities employed by the company's foreign principal, it was the standard annual check-up.

When I look at all the players, I don't see a bustling market. I see a mega aquarium populated by a multitude of fishes and other water creatures swirling round and round — the big ones preying on the smaller ones and occasionally on each other. In this enclosed space, to feed oneself is the main point. Ethical considerations are like underwater bubbles that are gone as quickly as they appear.



It is an open secret in Manila that many training centres give kickbacks to crewing managers so they can secure more enrollees. People try to gloss over this illicit practice by calling the pay-offs "rebates". It's ludicrous. A rebate by definition is a discount given to the person who is paying.

One training centre executive told me that foreign shipowners know what's going on but they turn a blind eye. They see the practice as augmenting the salaries of the crewing managers and encouraging them to better service their foreign principals. Small wonder then that most shipowners don't bother to vet the local training centres, at

least to make sure that they adhere to certain ethical standards.

In the world of Philippine manning and training, even ties of blood can mean little. Filipinos are family-centred and they would do anything to help kith and kin. But it has actually happened: daughter turning against mother, children against father, brother against brother, and nephew against uncle.

Perhaps I should not complain too much about the situation. Somebody once said, half in jest and half in earnest, that my middle name was "Quixote". Another who was very close to me described me to her friends, in an endearing way, as a man of high ideals and low income.

But how can anyone not see? In Manila, money is the supreme deity. It colours everyday conversations and often defines the way people relate to one another. The hankering for cash removes all class distinctions. It puts doctors and car mechanics, legislators and wet market vendors, the haves and the have-nots, together in one big camp. It is the ultimate leveller.

I remember one afternoon when I had coffee with Ms. K. in the lobby of a large hotel in Manila. She was a journalist who had previously worked in Hong Kong.

Given her background and evident interest in culture, I started hoping that we could become good friends. I even entertained the idea that we were kindred spirits whose paths were fated to cross.

After coffee, we walked together toward the block of flats where she lived, which was some distance away. The sun was almost setting by the time we reached the narrow road leading to her place, so I offered to treat her to an early dinner at a restaurant.

It did not take long for our orders to be laid on the table. We did not talk much as we partook of our meal. After we stepped out of the eatery, I was walking two steps ahead of her when she suddenly quickened her pace and tugged at my arm.

“Do you know how much tip you gave the waiter?” she asked. I thought it strange that she would bring up the matter.

“I think I gave 50 pesos,” I replied, a little embarrassed.

The amount was equivalent to a little less than one U.S. dollar and about ten per cent of our bill. It seemed to me quite reasonable. But after seeing the expression on her face, a look that said I had tipped excessively, I muttered

something about the food being excellent and the waiter giving commendable service. That calmed her down, but it was silly that I had to explain a trivial matter involving money.

I felt like the protagonist in the novel *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) by the French author and philosopher, Albert Camus: an outsider, a cultural misfit, a spiritual expatriate in my own country. At that moment, I saw Ms. K. gradually recede, the gulf that separated us widening and widening until she shrank to a dot on the horizon, like a ship that had departed. It was a friendship that was never meant to be.

I hate to use a colourful Filipino term but it describes many Filipinos, rich and poor alike: *patay-gutom*. The expression, a combination of *patay* (dead) and *gutom* (hungry), literally means a greedy person who acts as though he or she is close to starvation. Its connotes a strong craving for money or material gain coupled with a strong fear of being deprived.

The word is offensive and grating to the native ear, but it would cross my mind after I was invited by Captain F. to the blessing of his manning company's new offices.

Captain F. had as one of two guests of honour Mr. H, a manning executive known to all and sundry. Office

blessings are usually stodgy affairs, but this one had a fascinating twist. After the priest sprinkled holy water in the rooms upstairs, company staff and guests trailing behind him with lighted candles, everyone walked back down to the lobby for the traditional tossing of the coins.

Lo and behold, Mr. H. was the first to dash for it. He was down on all fours, grinning as he picked up the coins scattered on the floor and put them in the pocket of his elegantly tailored business suit.



The popular belief is that the more coins you catch during the blessing ceremony, the greater the fortune in store for you. But surely, I thought, one need not appear so undignified when seeking prosperity and good luck from the gods. The sight of Mr. H. gathering up the coins like a starved capuchin monkey was forever etched on my mind.

Our host, Captain F., was busy attending to his guests so I never got the chance to speak to him that evening. It was not until many years later that we would meet again. I remember it was during an out-of-town fellowship dinner of the Coast Guard auxiliary.

Captain F. told me he had moved to America but occasionally returned to the country to visit. He was now into flying. He described the joy of flying a Cessna, all alone thousands of feet above land and sea, from Manila all the way to Davao City on the southern island of Mindanao.

"You can come along with me one of these days," Captain F. said.

I smiled merely. I didn't want to tell him that plane rides sometimes made me queasy. As we were on the subject of flying, I suggested that he check out *Wind, Sand and Stars* (original French title: *Terre des hommes*), a memoir by the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who also wrote the acclaimed novella, *The Little Prince* (*Le Petit Prince*).

Saint-Exupéry was a French writer, aristocrat and pioneering aviator who delivered mail on postal air routes across Europe, Africa and South America. In the book, he dwells on the meaning of life and other philosophical

themes as he recounts his 1935 plane crash in the Sahara Desert.

Captain F. was all ears. He then pulled a paper napkin from the table, took out his pen and asked me to spell out the author's complete name. That struck me. I did not expect him, a former ship captain, to be interested in a book that only college English majors and literature geeks would likely buy and read.

I felt genuinely happy for Captain F. He used to sit behind a large desk, a glorified clerk making plenty of money by signing papers and sending men and women off to sea. He was now above it all — far from the maritime rat race where some amble along and others, like the coin-grabbing Mr. H., gallop and become rich until old age, sickness or death catches up with them.

End of Preview

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