

Life on the open sea is filled with daily challenges—no phone calls home, weather that changes without notice, and hours and nights spent confined to a steel vessel. But seafarers who travel through Port Everglades are the reason we have clothes, medical equipment, wine, beer, and ... the list goes on. Shortly after the tragic sinking of the vessel El Faro, we look at how one maritime non-profit gives seafarers strength, stability and hope when they need it most.

BY BEN WOLFORD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON NUTTLE

THE SOULS OF THE SEA



MAR ANTHONY DUNGGANON is a seafarer, and he's the son of a seafarer.

He's the kind of guy who offers you a cigarette before you ask for it. He's 28, short, with an old red T-shirt, track pants and closed sandals. Black hair, indelicately sheared, juts out the back of his baseball cap. Right now he is trying to unwind, smoking a Marlboro and watching the rain fall on a parking lot in Fort Lauderdale. It's just nice to hear noise that's not a hum, to sit on a chair that's not vibrating.

Dungganon is a long way from home.

"Sometimes I think it'd be a lot better to work on land," he says.

He doesn't know what he'd do, though. And besides, you make half as much money in the Philippines as you do inside a container ship. "We sacrifice here because the salary is much bigger, but the work is twice as much. The loneliness, worry, risk."

"The weather," he says.

It's the middle of September: that time of year. When you run the Caribbean routes, you know you're going to have to contend with a hurricane sooner or later. Part of Dungganon's job as an officer on the Vega Sagittarius is to choose the shortest, safest course.

He draws a picture in my notepad to explain. He places a dot near Jacksonville. That's his boat. Down by the Dominican Republic he draws a hurricane. It's heading northwest up the Old Bahama Channel. So he draws a westward arrow from his boat; instead of chugging down the Florida coast, he'd take his ship the long way around, through the Northeast Providence Channel.

But it's not always so simple, and safety isn't assured. You can't predict the weather. You can't guarantee your engine won't fail. A ship as big as the Vega Sagittarius—460 feet long—is a bathtub toy in the face of waves the size of city office buildings.

Ships don't often sink. But everyone knows they can.

As Dungganon and I spoke near the docks of Port Everglades, the vessel El Faro had just left Jacksonville on one of its final voyages. It would sail just five more times. On Oct. 1, the U.S. flagged ship—330 feet longer than the Sagittarius—charged at 19 knots into Hurricane Joaquin, a Category 4 storm.

Some people said it might not have

(Above) Stacks of shipping containers line the shipping yard at Port Everglades.

(Right) Mar Anthony Dungganon, middle, plays pool with other mariners inside the Seafarers' House while taking a break from their work aboard a cargo ship.

gone down if the captain had just gone the long way around, through the Northeast Providence Channel. But he didn't. Or maybe if the engine hadn't failed. But it did. And, as is often the case at sea, we will likely never know why.

In the moments before El Faro's final distress call, one of the crew members emailed her mother: "Not sure if you've been following the weather at all, but there is a hurricane out here and we are heading straight into it."

THE ENGLISH POET SAMUEL Johnson said it's better to be in prison than to work on a ship. "For being in a ship is being in jail, with the chance of being drowned," he said.

Drowning is hardly the main concern, however. Cargo ships are enormous, moving warehouses. They contain hazardous materials and parts that break; engine rooms as hospitable as oil refineries. And the workday doesn't end with a change of scenery and a welcome home. The groaning steel vessel is home. Whatever stress builds up in this dangerous job has nowhere to go; so it bounces off the walls.

Anxiety is a source of danger in itself. Fatigue and frustration cause mistakes. Mistakes cost lives. It's been reported that people who work at sea are 12 times more likely to die because of their job than people who work on land.

In May 2008, a stevedore—a person who loads and unloads docked ships—was investigating a possible argon gas leak at Port Everglades. When he collapsed, a colleague wrapped a shirt around his face and went to help. He, too, went down, as did a third. The argon had sucked the oxygen out of the air, and the three men suffocated almost immediately.



A crane moves a shipping container at Port Everglades. Cranes can load and unload a ship in two hours.

“Not sure if you’ve been following the weather at all, but there is a hurricane out here and we are heading straight into it.”

A scissor lift toppled over in 2013 and killed two Broward County employees. Once, a crew member was decapitated by a flying cable before the eyes of his colleague.

South Florida, with its tourism and beaches, isn't known for this kind of workplace. Even if you've been to Port Everglades, perhaps as one of the four million embarkations and debarkations in 2014, you wouldn't have noticed the people cleaning the pistons and the dishes.

But seafarers are the reason you have T-shirts, pullovers and tank tops (\$1.8 billion worth were imported to Port Everglades last year); medical instruments (\$780 mil-

lion); foreign liquor, wine and beer (\$600 million); yachts and other boats (\$309 million); and almost anything else you can think of. As the name of Rose George's book, *Ninety Percent of Everything*, suggests, almost all of the things we buy arrive on boats docking in the ports.

South Florida is gas-guzzling country. With little public transit to speak of (most of which is gas powered), we rely on our cars for everything—and the cars rely on Port Everglades. Every drop of gasoline and jet fuel in South Florida (\$3.4 billion of liquid per year) is unloaded from tanker ships in Fort Lauderdale.

There's not a workforce in the world more important to our daily lives and more invisible to most of us.

But not to all of us. There's a non-profit called Seafarers' House here at Port Everglades. It exists so that when workers like Dungganon arrive on our shores (many of them foreigners) they won't feel quite so invisible.

"They're very proud," says Eugene Sweeney, a former Texaco tanker captain who is now the president of the Seafarers' House board. "I don't think we have to feel sorry for them, but we have to recognize what they sacrifice."



DUNGGANON WAS IN COLOMBIA on Aug. 12 this year. His wife was back in Manila telling him that she was going to the hospital soon.

"It's coming," she said.

And then Dungganon had to get off the phone and back on the boat. Thanks to the intermodal containers that revolutionized freight in the 1960s, ships don't stay at port very long. Cranes can load and unload a ship in an hour or two. So, back onto the ship he went, where for three days he'd be without cell phone service, and virtually any way to contact his wife.

Ever since the Philippines invested heavily in seafarer training, at least 35 percent of the world's seafarers—400,000 workers—are Filipino. Dungganon's father is a captain, and when Dungganon met his wife, at 19, they both knew the kind of life he was going to live.

At 20, he started his first contract—a

10-month deployment to the other side of the world. Eight years later, in 2013, they married and had a daughter. She was born during one of Dungganon's contracts. "It's my career," he says. "I've already accepted that."

Dungganon arrived at Port Everglades on Aug. 15, after three days sailing up the Caribbean and between the Greater Antilles. He stepped off the Vega Sagittarius onto the docks and hurried toward the van that shuttles crew members to the Seafarers' House. It was a familiar process because his ship calls at Port Everglades all the time.

Non-U.S. citizens aren't allowed to leave the sealed port grounds without a visa—so there's no chance of grabbing a Starbucks and checking their email during precious hours ashore.

That's why the Seafarers' House has a convenience store and snack counter. It has a

(Above) The Seafarers' House at Port Everglades provides a friendly place where mariners can connect with their communities and families, relax, seek guidance and get emergency help if needed.

(Right) Eugene Sweeney, president of the board of directors at the Seafarers' House in Port Everglades, says mariners sacrifice being with family and daily comforts to work on the sea. "I don't think we have to feel sorry for them, but we have to recognize what they sacrifice," he says.



(Right) The Seafarers' House offers pastoral care from 18 chaplains who represent faiths from all over the world.

Moneygram office so crew can wire home their remittances. It has a chapel in the corner, with the emblems of every major religion. It has a billiard table. It also has a lending library and a wall of small pamphlets with titles such as, "Dealing with anger," "Handling grief as a man," "Overcoming everyday anxiety," and "When you feel you have failed as a parent."

Most importantly, Seafarers' House has free Wi-Fi. And that's the first thing Dungganon did: get online and log into Facebook. There were photos waiting in his messages. Here was his wife, with a tired, loving smile. And here was a tiny boy, bundled in a hospital blanket, his tongue curled into a newborn's wail.

They named him Mar Anthony Jr.

THE SEA IS A STRANGE PLACE—OR NON-PLACE, AS THE CASE MAY BE.

For instance, if a crew member—or a stowaway or anyone—dies on the high seas and foul play is suspected, you can't simply dial 911. Plus, rules about ship registration complicate the matter of jurisdiction because companies are allowed to register their vessels in countries other than the one where their company is based. Popular flags of convenience, as they're known, include Liberia, Malta and the Bahamas. Technically, a vessel is beholden to the laws of the country from which it has purchased its flag.

But many of these countries have not ratified important trade and labor conventions, or they're so small they couldn't possibly police all the vessels under their jurisdiction. Others, such as Mongolia, are landlocked.

People I spoke with at Seafarers' House said instances of mistreatment are very rare, but they acknowledged that crews are in a vulnerable position. What are their rights? To whom should they complain if they are abused?

Once, a crew member sneaked into the Seafarers' House and without anyone noticing, hid inside a closet. His

agent (a person with the staffing company hired by the ship operator) came into the building looking for him. "The agent came in in a complete tizzy because he's responsible for that person," remembers Lesley War-rick, executive director of the Seafarers' House.

For a long time no one could find him. So they searched Seafarers' House again and discovered him among the mops and brooms. The man said his boss was abusing him and refused to go back to sea. A priest who worked at the Seafarers' House at the time mediated between the seaman and the agent, and the agent agreed to put him on a plane back to his home country.

Drama from the sea has a way of finding its way to the picnic tables inside the Seafarers' House cafe. On a Monday night many years ago, just as the staff was about to head home, a Honduran man in California called in and said his brother went overboard off the coast of Grand Cayman en route to Port Everglades.

The Rev. Ronald Perkins, the Seafarers' House chaplain, made phone calls. He talked to the U.S. Coast Guard and the authorities in the Cayman Is-





Lesley Warrick, executive director of the Seafarers' House, reads aloud the crew members of the El Faro as Capt. Austin Gould rings the bell to honor each of the ship's crew members who was lost at sea.

lands. The sea was too rough to search in a small boat, and it was too far for a helicopter. The man was gone.

When the ship called at Port Everglades, the distraught crew came to the Seafarers' House. A handful of them sat there, wondering if one of them had pushed their colleague. Nobody knew. "Everyone sat with their back to the wall," Perkins says.

The ship wasn't flagged in the U.S., meaning the FBI had no jurisdiction. So the company hired a private investigator, who arrived at Seafarers' House and interviewed each of them. In the end, the P.I. determined he wasn't pushed but didn't know if he jumped or fell. The crew was

still disconcerted by the death.

"They were a faithful bunch, and they asked for a prayer," Perkins says.

But most of what the Seafarers' House does is much less newsworthy. They offer routine religious services from a roster of priests, rabbis, an imam and other clergy. They hand out shoe boxes filled with toiletries and other practical items around Christmastime. Warrick calls her work "a ministry of small gestures."

Once, a young man was handed a pair of socks and broke into tears. "Socks!" he cried.

"Doesn't mean a hell of a lot to you or me, but you're giving something to someone who rarely, if ever, gets a gift," says Sweeney, the board president.

It's no exaggeration to say that small kindnesses can take the edge off just enough to save somebody's life. Tension builds easily on ships, where there may only be a couple dozen crew members and no place to blow off steam. "A peaceful ship is a safe ship," Sweeney says. "It's a difficult environment to be peaceful."

ON OCT. 2, ONE DAY after El Faro's last transmission, Perkins was at the airport in Montreal. He'd been attending a conference for maritime ministers entitled "Refueling and Retool-



(Above) The Rev. Ronald Perkins leads the laying of a wreath at Port Everglades to honor the crew members of the El Faro ship that was lost at sea in late September. Charles A. Murdock, national secretary-treasurer of American Maritime Offices, left, and Kris Hopkins, port agent for Seafarers International Union United Industrial Workers, carry the wreath.

(Left) Rabbi Larry Schual, Lesley Warrick and Eugene Sweeney pledge allegiance during the opening ceremony to honor the crew members of the El Faro cargo ship.

ing for Care of Seafarers and Their Families," and he was heading home when he heard the news.

He got on the phone with the Coast Guard and spoke with trade union representatives. But there was very little to learn beyond what was already public. The ship was lost, and only one corpse was found. One crew member, Howard Schoenly, was from Broward County.

The families, the unions, the investigators and the shipping executives gathered in Jacksonville and elsewhere. Everyone was asking why it happened, but nobody had any answers.

"In pastoral care, you don't give answers," Perkins says. So he just listens, and, if they wish, he prays.

He's praying now, at Port Everglades Terminal 26. It's



Eugene Sweeney, right, wipes away tears during the service for the El Faro crew members.

whose 33 chimes released 33 souls to heaven. With a prayer: "I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." With a wreath, "our last farewell," set upon the water, now drifting across the lanes of commerce. ■

