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PMI's battles

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[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#)

9:21 pm | Monday, November 7th, 2011

The story of PMI Colleges (formerly Philippine Maritime Institute), conceded to be the biggest (in terms of enrolment) maritime training institute in the country, actually begins with one man, its founder Adm. Tomas Cloma.

From the stories shared by his granddaughter and current president of PMI Colleges, Riz Cloma-Santos, the admiral was quite a character. He is acknowledged as the “Father of Maritime Education” in the Philippines since he founded PMI in 1948, beginning with 54 students. But founding the country’s first private maritime school despite the fact that he was not a trained mariner is only part of Cloma’s remarkable life story.

Although a lawyer by training, Cloma made his money in fishing. And it was during one such fishing expedition in 1947 that Cloma and his crew “discovered” a group of islands near Palawan that didn’t seem to belong to anyone or any country. Nine years later, on May 11, 1956, Cloma, together with his brother Filemon and 40 crew members, touched down on the islands and declared that he was claiming the isles as his own “Freedomland.” **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** are now better known as the Spratlys.

Cloma’s “Freedomland” seems to have been treated as a mere comic footnote to history although the lawyer-fishing magnate seemed serious enough about his claim, to the extent of naming the various isles after family members and issuing his own currency and designing his own flag. Riz recalls the grandchildren playing with Freedomland money in her grandfather’s home and thinking they must have been extremely wealthy.

President Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s decided he had better lay formal claim to the islands, especially after other governments began making noises. To void Cloma’s claim, Marcos had him arrested and detained on charges of “usurpation of public authority.” Eventually Cloma would cede his claim to the islands for one peso.

There is a happy footnote to this story, though. Long before and after his detention, Cloma had always been known as “Admiral,” and it was as such that then President Fidel Ramos greeted him in one public event. When Cloma, then 94, muttered that he wasn’t “officially” an admiral, Ramos decided to award him in 1995 with a Legion of Honor with the honorary title of admiral. The Admiral passed away a year later, with no need for quotation marks to decorate his title.

TODAY, Cloma’s legacy on in PMI Colleges, the biggest maritime training institution in the country that boasted of an enrolment of 25,000 at its peak. It has three campuses in Manila, Quezon City and Tagbilaran, Bohol, where Cloma hails from.

But a new challenge faces PMI Colleges, with the recent closure order of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) on two courses offered by the college: BS Marine Transportation (BSMT) and BS Marine Engineering (BSMarE). In its own, PMI Colleges lists the two among its “flagship courses,” and it would seem that if it could no longer offer these courses, it would lose its reason for being.

Cloma-Santos says the college is protesting the CHED order which is to take effect next school year for lack of due process. The CHED, for its part, says the order was handed down due to the school’s “consistent failure to comply with the standards” of the programs. If upheld, the CHED order would mean that PMI Colleges would be prohibited from taking in new students to the two programs. “Students who have been previously enrolled ... will be transferred to ‘compliant and recognized’ programs,” CHED said.

As Cloma-Santos recalls, the school’s troubles began in 2006 when representatives of the European Maritime Safety Agency (Emsa) conducted an inspection audit of several maritime schools in the country. In a report, the authority cited three deficiencies found in PMI: insufficient labeling in a laboratory; failure to start a generator “because it was low-bat at the time,” says Cloma-Santos; and the absence of a water drum in one training facility (an apparent violation of safety guidelines). In 2008, the CHED informed PMI Colleges that its performance was “not up to par,” saying PMI and other that had been audited were in violation of the “Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention.” Aware that these observations could be easily rectified, Cloma-Santos and the college’s board appealed the commission’s decision. A subsequent audit was conducted last March, but in May CHED issued the first closure order.

CLOMA-SANTOS admits to being befuddled by CHED’s harsh treatment (“Are we being made an example?” she asks), especially given the performance of its graduates in its 63 years’ existence.

The Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) gives exams for deck officers and marine engineers three times a year, she says, and each time, PMI racks up an almost 100 percent passing rate. “In every single exam, at least one PMI graduate has landed in the Top 10, if not topped the exam,” she says.

The stakes go far beyond just the loss of accreditation for two “flagship courses” of PMI. For one, says Cloma-Santos, the alumni are incensed at what is being done to their alma mater, and by extension their own reputations. Considering PMI’s dominance in the field, the alumni are among the cream of the world’s seafarers, with Filipinos making up fully 30 percent of the world’s merchant marine force. It’s not just PMI alumni’s reputation at stake, but also that of all Filipinos at sea.

And there is the matter of Tomas Cloma’s legacy. “How can we allow the school founded by the ‘Father of Maritime Education’ to be closed down? We will fight this to the end,” declares the Admiral’s granddaughter.

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Link to this article is courtesy of Capt. Nestor Vargas, PR Manager, Amigos-Marino Inc.