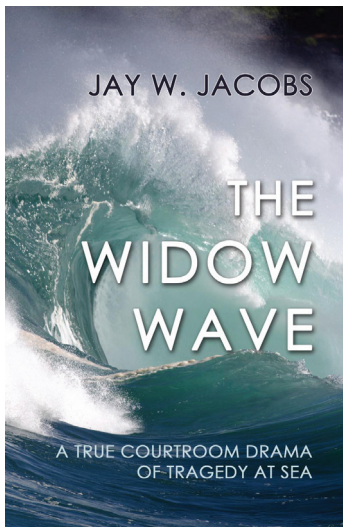


Captain's Bookshelf BY MILT BAKER

WIDOW WAVE

A maritime enigma wrapped in a courtroom page-turner



No one will ever know exactly what happened to the 34-foot Chris Craft cruiser *Aloha* on March 9, 1984, the day she and her crew of five disappeared on a fishing trip somewhere west of San Francisco's Golden Gate. Lost on her final passage were the yacht's owner/captain Fran Dowd, his 19-year old son, and three friends who were Dowd's business associates. Despite an extensive sea and air search of the area over several days by the Coast Guard and civil-

ian aircraft, no trace was found of *Aloha* or her crew—there were no witnesses to her loss and no physical evidence was found.

The 11-year-old boat was built of fiberglass, had twin gasoline engines, and by all accounts was well equipped and well maintained by a conscientious owner. On the day of her loss she was reported to be fully functional with all necessary equipment, including a VHF radio, on board and working. GPS hadn't been developed at the time, she had no loran-C and, to the author's knowledge, no depth sounder.

At least 15 fishing boats left their moorings in San Francisco Bay in the early morning darkness that day, bound for the Duxbury Reef area, popular for salmon fishing. *Aloha* was the only one that did not return. Her loss marked the worst recreational fishing boat accident in San Francisco's long maritime history.

When a lawsuit blaming Dowd's negligence was filed by the widow of one of *Aloha's* crew members, a young maritime attorney and former merchant seaman, Jay Jacobs, was drawn into the case to represent Dowd's widow. He spent two years coming to understand *Aloha's* loss, and his new book, *The Widow Wave: A True Courtroom Drama of Tragedy at Sea*, looks back at the tragedy, taking readers step by step through the loss of *Aloha* and the trial.

Though it deals with events of 30 years ago, it's as fresh as tomorrow—a fast-moving, compelling story that kept me on the edge of my seat. *The Widow Wave* is a maritime enigma wrapped in a courtroom page-turner packed with lots of lessons for captains everywhere.

With attorney Jacobs telling the story, Fran Dowd is shown as a solid, prudent, responsible man who rose to petty officer first class in the U.S. Navy's submarine service in a single four-year enlistment, a meteoric rise almost unheard of. After graduating from college he joined Raytheon and advanced through the ranks over 30 years, becoming the vice president in charge of the multinational company's West Coast operations, including its 1,500-person facility at the head of San Francisco Bay. Dowd was the kind of man who, if he had more than single drink at a party, would ask his wife to drive him home. An experienced fisherman, he'd taken his boat out to fish outside the Golden Gate many times.

A man of integrity like Dowd negligent? It didn't wash with Jacobs. But as the attorney defending the case he had to have an alternative theory, one that would convince a jury that no negligence was involved.

He came up with a doozy: a giant, boat-swallowing wave. Not only that, he mustered a band of credible expert witnesses to support his contention that the boat was sunk by a group of waves which came together to form a single three-story monster that suddenly overwhelmed *Aloha* and sent her to the bottom. A storyteller par excellence with a fine sense of pacing, Jacobs walks readers through the fast-paced trial and the tragedy it centered on.

Just as Sebastian Junger did in *The Perfect Storm*, Jacobs puts readers right on board, looking over the captain's shoulder. It's easy to argue that it's all speculation, but as Junger did, Jacobs makes it real, makes you feel as though you're right there.

The deck began slanting downward, telling him the Aloha was heading over the crest. He gave one more scan, this time sweeping the entire horizon from his port beam, to dead ahead, and then his starboard beam, the whole horizon . . . with no sign of the light. After the third or fourth time not seeing the buoy, Fran Dowd was worried. He knew the light flashed every four seconds, and he had been at least that long on top of the wave and seen nothing. A quick look at the compass indicated he was maintaining the course he had set. This should have meant the Aloha was safely within the boundaries of the channel. But where was that damned green light? The bow suddenly lurched downward. He instantly checked the helm to determine the direction of his rudders. They were where they should be, amidships. He then looked out the window straining to see downward. The off-balance position of his body told him the Aloha was racing out of control down the front of the wave he had just crested. Straining his eyes in the dimness, he could barely make out the steepening gray outline of the wave. At that moment he saw it: the nothingness.

PASSAGEMAKER BOOK REVIEW RATINGS

★★★★★ Highly recommended ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★ Worth reading ★★ Just OK ★ Don't waste your time

USCG Findings

Investigating officer's note from the official USCG investigation of the loss of the 34-foot Chris Craft cruiser *Aloha* on March 9, 1984

Based on the apparent departure time of the *Aloha* and the suggested destination at Duxbury Reef the vessel would have been passing through Bonita Channel during the time period specified above. This means the vessel would have been broadside to waves breaking over Four Fathom Bank and also subject to those same waves when reflected from the steep banks on the mainland side of Bonita Channel. For these reasons it is concluded that the *Aloha* encountered waves of sufficient size and intensity to capsize and destroy the vessel.

Different from any experience he'd had on the *Aloha*, or in the Navy, Fran was staring in disbelief into what could only be described as a hole in the ocean. Instead of a trough at the bottom of the wave where it should have been, there was a gaping, bottomless maw. In the next few picture frames of time, measured in split seconds, the bottom of the hole abruptly became visible . . . with the *Aloha* hurtling into it in a nearly vertical fall.

The bottom was rushing up like a punch being thrown in the ring . . . you could see the blow coming, try moving to avoid being hit, but you know it's going to land, and pray you don't get knocked out. There was not going to be enough time to avoid hitting the bottom in a staggering blow.

Yet no other boat out that morning saw a wave like the one Jacobs was selling.

How could he and his expert witnesses explain that? Would the jury buy it?

The trial was all about defending Fran Dowd's honor. The trial phase of the book, as Jacobs tells the story, pits him and his expert witnesses against the bad guys, the attorneys trying to sully Fran Dowd's name and bring home a big-dollar verdict for the woman suing Dowd's widow. If you like courtroom drama, you'll love it—it moves fast, has more twists and turns than the *Snake River*.

The Widow Wave was so fast-paced, so compelling, I plowed through it in a single sitting. If you enjoy reading about maritime disaster and the courtroom battles that follow, it's my guess you will too.

The Widow Wave, a True Courtroom Drama of Tragedy at Sea by Jay W. Jacobs, list price \$17.99, <http://www.thewidow-wave.com>



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