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MIDNIGHT DRAMA

SHIPWRECKED IN THE PACIFIC

On the Reef



The Wilcox family's vessel, *Vela*, underway

A cruising family's dream voyage becomes a nightmare when their boat is wrecked on a South Pacific reef

By Wendy Hinman

September 19, 1974, 0400.

The 40ft sloop *Vela* rocked gently, lines creaking with the steady motion of following seas. City lights glowed on the distant horizon like a beacon marking their destination: Suva, the capital of Fiji. After five days of sailing from the tiny island nation of Tonga with little but the change of watch to mark the passage of time, everyone in the Wilcox family eagerly anticipated landfall.

Fiji would be the fifth South Pacific island nation they visited

in the year since they'd sailed away from San Francisco's Bay Area, a year filled with fascinating cultures and geography so different from their home in California. With an overcast sky, getting star sights had been a challenge the last few days, but conservative calculations projected they'd arrive at the harbor entrance later in the day. Still, everyone slept fitfully the night before landfall.

Dawn Wilcox blinked away sleepiness as she began her watch duties. She made a careful scan of the horizon before settling into the cockpit with the woolen army blanket the four of them used

during night watches. One light stood out against the hazy glow on an otherwise featureless horizon. She found it hard to tell how far away it was since depth perception at night is a challenge, especially when a light is blinking on and off. Besides, she couldn't always trust her vision. She rubbed her eyes and adjusted her glasses, then decided to consult the charts.

Belowdecks, she fumbled for a flashlight, switched it on and rifled through the charts on the navigation table. Her husband, Chuck, heard an urgency in the rustling paper inches from where he lay. "What's wrong?" he asked, squinting into the light beam.

Dawn didn't answer immediately. She scoured first one chart of the area, then another. She flipped back to the first. Hmmm. Neither showed a lighthouse or a lighted buoy with those characteristics. What was she seeing? Feeling the weight of Chuck's eyes on her and the question that hung in the air, she felt her face flush. Prickles of sweat beaded up on her nose, and her glasses began to fog.

"There's a light on the horizon that I can't find on the chart." As she said those words, their implication became clear: They weren't where they thought they were. Just how big a danger that posed was uncertain, but she felt a rising anxiety and a quickening in her chest.

Chuck sat up and rubbed his eyes. "OK, I'll take a look." He climbed out of his bunk and bent over the chart as Dawn returned to the cockpit. With the commotion around him, fourteen-year-old Garth stirred. Something was happening. He might as well get up in case he could help. His younger sister, Linda, lay awake a few feet away in the quarterberth, feeling the alternating pull of gravity and buffeting waves, steady as ever.

What Dawn saw when she returned to the cockpit was far more serious than an uncharted light. An ominous line of froth stretched from one end of the horizon to the other. Whitecaps crashed where water piled against a rocky barrier that lurked beneath the surface. A roar filled her ears. Panic shot through her. Reef!

"Breakers!" she yelled through the open hatchway, her voice high and pinched as fear constricted her throat. "Turn the boat! Start the engine!" Chuck yelled back.

His words from a few days earlier mocked him. "This celestial-navigation stuff is a piece of cake," he'd said. So far on this cruise their navigation had been flawless, but in life there are no guarantees. He hoped they'd have time to alter course.

Dawn twisted the key to start the motor. It came on in gear, propelling the boat forward even faster. It fueled her sense of urgency and quickened her heart rate. She fumbled to release the self-steering wind vane to alter course, her dexterity slowed by rising panic. Time was critical, yet her hands betrayed her.

Garth and his father lunged for the companionway, leaving eleven-year-old Linda stirring below. "We need to get the sails down!" Chuck shouted as he pulled himself into the cockpit, Garth following. With the wind behind them and the boom all the way out, they'd been making good time all night. Now that same wind was hurtling them toward the reef. Rollers surged from behind, adding to their momentum.

Garth grabbed the wood frame around the hatch and pulled himself up. He'd just reached the top behind his father when *Vela* lurched violently, throwing him into the sharp edge of the hatch.

Too late.

In an instant, *Vela* smashed headfirst into fangs of coral. The boat paused for a millisecond. The bow dipped sharply, then ground forward with a groan. An abrupt halt to their forward momentum shoved Dawn into Chuck. Then, just as quickly, Chuck crashed back onto Dawn with the full force of his weight as *Vela* lurched again. Before they could scramble up, a line of waves lifted the hull and tossed it onto the reef as though it were a child's plastic toy. In a single motion the hull pivoted ninety-degrees, and *Vela* rolled on her side.

A wave swept the now-sideways *Vela* over dramatically, dipping the boom into the swirling froth and smashing it onto the reef. A crack like a shot rang through the air. The wooden boom ripped from the mast. White fabric billowed for a second on the water's surface. A wave cascaded over the hull and filled the submerged sail, adding to the force that drove them farther onto the reef.

(From left) Dawn, Linda, Chuck and Garth Wilcox in San Francisco upon their return in July 1978



Dawn grabbed for the now-useless wheel to pull herself up. "Hang on, Linda!" she yelled—a little late. Linda screamed from below.

Garth and Chuck rushed forward. They crabbed their way across the angled deck, grabbing for cleats, line or blocks—anything to pull themselves along the uneven and violently shifting surface. The deck was slick with water, flowing in a tumble of directions all at once. Garth moved at lightning speed, surging past his father to the bow. In a flash of adrenaline, he let go of the jib halyard and yanked sailcloth into the bow netting, riding the bowsprit like an out-of-control bronco. Then he crawled aft to help his father get the main down.

Crouched at the mast Chuck struggled to hang on as he untied the main halyard. He and Garth pulled against the force on the sail while the boat careened wildly. Deafening surf thundered over and

around them. Water rushed against their bare skin and tugged at their clothing, threatening to wash them into the churning mass of water that tumbled around them and the sharp coral hidden beneath. Garth blinked away blinding saltwater. Chuck gulped, then coughed briny water from his mouth and nose. His water-shriveled fingers tenuously grasped for purchase against the slick surface and the pull of gravity.

An army of waves marched relentlessly against the hull, picking up the boat and driving it farther onto the jagged coral. Each barrage sent menacing plumes of foam flying. *Vela* lay at a fifty-degree angle, shifting and shuddering with each successive wave and moaning in protest as the reef tore at her wooden planks. The twenty-ton vessel could not withstand the powerful, conflicting forces—immutable reef against a perpetual onslaught of waves.

Thirteen months into their long-planned circumnavigation, the world of the Wilcox family was ripping apart around them.

Shipwreck

Vela lay on the reef with her starboard side facing the sky. Waves crashed over the hull and deck, as though she were on the edge of a waterfall. Tons of water pushed against the hull, splintering the wood as it ground over raw coral. The boat shuddered and vibrated. The air was filled with the noise of cracking wood and the thundering sounds of cascading water.

Chuck's muscles screamed in agony as he gripped the wooden mast to brace himself against the violent motion. In the darkness he could barely see his clenched fingers. All around him white foamy water tugged at his body and clothes. Garth tightened his grip around the stay, trying to hang on. Surrounded by tumbling seas, he felt as though he were caught in a vortex of converging hydraulic forces. Suction held *Vela* onto the reef and trapped her in roller backwash in the path of a chain of breakers. Waves pummeled them one after another in rapid succession, crashing down in a tumult of foam and spray.

During a lull between waves, Garth and Chuck picked their



Vela in better days

way aft on all fours, water thrashing against their bodies. Garth's shriveled fingers seemed no match against the hard metal fittings he used to pull himself along the angled deck. For a brief moment a flash of the beacon lit the deck.

Dawn tried to slow her breathing. Movement from belowdecks reminded her of Linda's haunting scream. She loosened her grip on the wheel to crawl forward and see if Linda was all right.

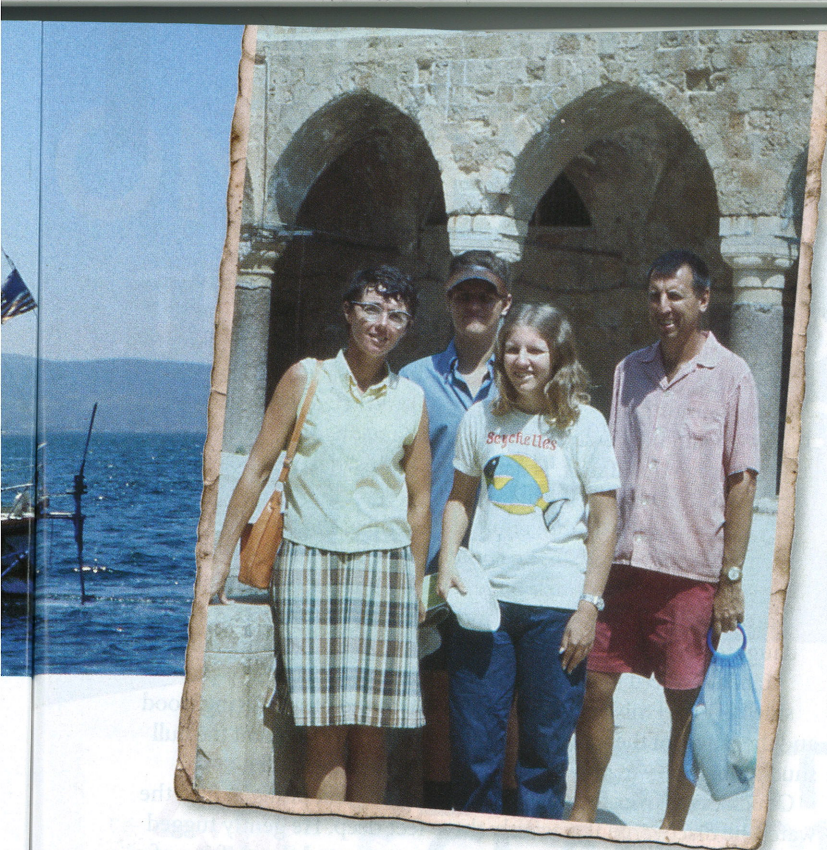
Belowdecks, Linda's world had turned sideways. The screech of grinding timber and the roar of surf outside were amplified in the cavernous interior. Would she be buried alive in this wooden tomb?

In the dark, Linda picked her way across the cabin, which now sat at a disturbing angle and was littered with their belongings. Disoriented, she couldn't find the steps to the cockpit. In a panic, she grabbed the edge of the companionway and pulled herself through the opening, sliding into the cockpit next to Garth as a wave cascaded over them and smacked her in the face. She screamed.

Dawn fished for the lifejackets and made everyone put one on. With the deck slick with water and surfaces they normally used to brace themselves now vertical, at any moment one of them could be hurled overboard or become injured if they lost their grip and went flying. Waves slammed at the hull and splashed onto their faces. Fortunately they were together and uninjured—at least for the moment. The periodic strobe of the beacon—now closer—flashed on their frightened, strained faces. The useless engine throbbed softly. Chuck reached down and turned it off.

Vela lies forlornly on the reef





The Wilcox family in Akko, Israel

tered it against the coral.

With flare gun in hand, Chuck climbed back on deck. Bracing himself against the dodger, he loaded the cartridge and shot off first one flare, then another. In the pre-dawn light, a rocket of light zoomed high into the sky, arched and hung in the air then returned to Earth. Their eyes traced the trajectory of each flare until its flame sputtered out in the water. Once it disappeared, darkness enveloped them again. Would anyone see their signal?

The more urgent question was how much longer could *Vela* withstand the pressure of the waves before she sank. Or would the hull roll, trapping them underneath? Prudent advice suggested staying with the ship for as long as it seemed safe. But how much time did they have?

The grinding, cracking, and crunching continued unabated.

A sudden flash of the beacon blinded them. Its steady insistence seemed obnoxious, tormenting them with its impassive regularity. How could they have missed seeing this aid to navigation sooner? Their folly mocked them in the form of that blasted beacon, every sixty seconds. Chuck set down the flare gun, and they sat numbly, pondering their fate.

Then an ominous groan of the hull sparked a discussion of options.

"If we get pushed over the reef, the boat will probably sink in the lagoon." Chuck had to shout to be heard over the noise of the thundering water. "I think we need to be ready to abandon ship." Nodded Garth.

Dawn shouted, "Maybe we should wait until it gets light. It's only a couple of hours."

"Let's at least get ready," Chuck said. "In case we have to go before then."

"I'll fetch the passports, money and documents." Dawn said, heading below.

"Garth," Chuck shouted over his shoulder, moving toward the cabin top where the hard dinghy and life raft were lashed. His son was right behind him. Linda shivered in the cockpit. In her waterlogged clothing, the oppressive heat and humidity of the cabin was forgotten.

Chuck had two options: the hard dinghy or the liferaft. He chose the sure thing. Garth and Chuck untied the dinghy that Garth had sailed around the cerulean lagoon in Bora Bora only two months earlier. He could never have imagined using it to abandon ship. He and his father carefully lowered it into the water. Chuck

The incoming waves threw up steep mounds of water, which shoved them this way and that. In the battle of powerful opposing forces, something had to give. Either *Vela* would tear open on the reef or skip over it and sink in deeper water on the other side. Likely both. Either option would put them at great peril. How long would it be until they were dashed to pieces?

In that moment, Chuck felt the full weight of his responsibility as captain and instigator of this doomed voyage. He prided himself on being self-sufficient, but he had few options at this point. He, his wife, fourteen-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter clung to a boat filling with water and grinding into shards atop a reef in the South Pacific. An ache reached up through the base of his skull.

Chuck went below. He turned on the radio and reached for the microphone. He spoke words no sailor imagines ever having to say aloud.

"Mayday, Mayday." He took a deep breath. "This is the sailing vessel *Vela*. We are hard aground, southeast of Suva." It was a bitter pill to swallow. He waited. No reply.

He repeated his distress call. Again, no reply. The only sounds were radio static and the protesting hull as waves bat-



Dawn Wilcox enjoyed locals wherever *Vela* sailed

grabbed the painter and pulled the boat aft toward the cockpit. The next breaker ripped the line out of his hands. In an instant, the dinghy was gone.

They heard Dawn's muffled cry from below.

Inside, cabinets had flown open and disgorged canisters of rice and flour, T-shirts, sea boots and books into the saltwater sloshing across the cabin sole. Dawn's beloved clarinet had lodged itself against the wooden mast that rose from the settee, where the family had spent tropical evenings drinking tea. The kerosene lamp hung at an odd angle. Dawn had worked her way across the debris to retrieve her purse that held their money and passports, which they would need—if they survived.

Without thinking, she opened the hanging locker door, forgetting that, being above her head, it was likely to disgorge its entire contents on top of her. Pinned beneath two forty-pound scuba tanks, and two tailor-made wet suits—never used—and a closetful of clothing, she lost her calm. "Help! Help!" she cried. She tried to rein in her panic, but she was trapped inside a boat smashing against a reef and rapidly taking on water. Garth rushed below to free her. Fueled by adrenaline, he bent the door to pull her from under the pile. He checked to make sure she had the purse.

"Maybe we should take the plastic French sandals," Garth said, collecting a pair for each of them from the forward berth. "We'll need them so we don't cut our feet on the reef."

While Garth rescued Dawn, Chuck moved toward the liferaft canister for attempt number two. He was glad he'd tested the life raft before they'd left, but having found two liferafts with problems didn't bring him much confidence that the third would be any better. Either it worked or it didn't. This time their lives depended on it.

Chuck unbuckled the straps that held the liferaft on deck. He opened the lid and tied the painter to the boat. He sucked in a breath, then pulled the cord to launch the CO² cartridges, hoping this set actually had CO² in them. To his relief, he heard a rush of air and a wrinkled mass of orange and yellow rubber billowed out of the canister, unfolding like a lumbering giant awakening. It grew to epic proportions in moments. To Chuck's relief it didn't immediately deflate like the second liferaft they'd tested. Except...

As it inflated the raft hit the water upside down. Just as it settled alongside the boat, a wave surged under *Vela* and lifted the hull. In a

split second, the liferaft was sucked under the boat, trapped between their sinking vessel and the sharp spikes of the reef below. It was hardly in a position to save them now. The raft seemed more likely to puncture on the sharp edges than keep them afloat until help arrived.

Waves continued to pummel the hull. Worried the boat would turn over and they would be trapped, Chuck had no choice but to try to salvage the liferaft. He strapped on his plastic sandals and tightened the strap on his life vest.

By now it was 0530 and, enough light filled the horizon that, when he looked up again, he could see the outline of an island. The silhouette gave Chuck hope. Finally a break. They might be able to swim for it, though he worried about his eleven-year-old daughter.

Linda shivered in the cockpit with fear, overwhelmed by the smell of diesel mixed with saltwater, the sound of splintering wood and the power of the waves that crashed over them and sent the hull shuddering. She was only eleven; she was too young to die.

Chuck eased over the side, feet first. As his feet plunged into the water, he discovered it was only three feet deep. He gently tugged on the line for the liferaft, watching the waves and the shifting of *Vela's* hull for the best moment to give it a yank. He got timing right and the liferaft slid out easily from under the hull. He flipped it over and examined the raft. It looked intact except for a small tear in the canopy.

"Come on, Linda," he said nodding at the liferaft.

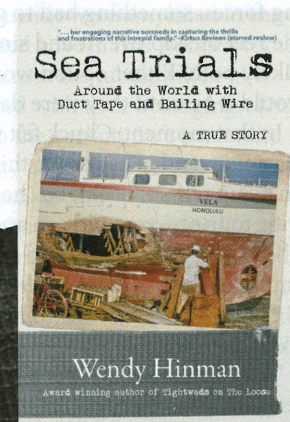
"There might be sharks!" she cried, her face contorted in fear. A wave smacked against the hull.

"COME ON!" he yelled.

Still trembling, Linda climbed into the liferaft as her father steadied it.

Dawn and Garth put on their reef shoes and Dawn handed the last pair to Linda. Garth tossed the abandon-ship bag, a bucket and the old cockpit army blanket into the life raft. Then they stepped gingerly onto the reef. **S**

Wendy Hinman is the author of *Tightwads on the Loose*, about her seven-year, 34,000-mile voyage aboard a 31ft boat with her husband, Garth Wilcox, the teenage hero of *Sea Trials*. Contact her at wendyhinman.com.



This article was excerpted from Wendy Hinman's new book *Sea Trials: Around the World with Duct Tape and Bailing Wire*. Shipwreck might bring an end to a dream of circumnavigating the globe. Not for the Wilcox family. Not only do they rebuild the boat, but finish sailing around the world despite daunting obstacles, from wild weather to threats from pirates, gun boats, mines and thieves, broken rig, scurvy and starvation. (Salsa Press 2017, Paperback \$20, eBook \$5.99)