

ODD FATE OF THE SARAH-JOE

LOST NEARLY 45-YEARS-AGO, THE STRANGE STORY OF THIS LITTLE BOAT AND THE FIVE MEN ABOARD STILL HAUNTS AN HAWAIIAN VILLAGE

BY FRED ROBERTS



This is how the *Sarah-Joe* was discovered. Note how the interior color would have blended with the sea, perhaps making the search even more difficult for rescuers.



The grave was found several hundred feet from the *Sarah-Joe*.

During September 1988, the US Coast Guard made known that one of their vessels had found an abandoned beat-up boat on an isolated atoll in the Marshall Islands. That was really no big deal. The USCG finds abandoned boats every year. That is part of their job and they are very, very good at it. However, it was not just an abandoned boat they found. The Coasties that went ashore to examine the small fiberglass vessel discovered something else that changed their find of a small boat into a much grimmer situation.

"Sir, look at this!" called one of the enlisted men to a lieutenant that had also come ashore. He was pointing at a small mound of sand and stone, atop of which sat a crude cross made of driftwood.

Both men looked at each other, not liking the implication of what they were seeing.

A closer examination showed what appeared to be a human jawbone jutting from a pile of coral rocks atop the mound. They had found a grave on the remote and uninhabited Sibylla Island.

The men spread out to see what else they could find. With them was John Naughton, a National Marine Fisheries Service researcher who was studying the movement of green sea turtles. He had come along to do research on Taongi Atoll in the northern part of the Marshalls. First, they pulled the 17-foot Boston Whaler to a safer position and then, using sticks, began to scour the nearby area in search of anything that might give more information about the little vessel and the lone occupant of the grave.

Nearby was an object that appeared to be a blank pad of notepaper that



The five men enjoyed fishing from the little 17-foot vessel.

had been interleaved with pieces of aluminum foil.

"It was one of those things that sort of sent a strange shiver up your spine," one of the men would recall years later. The initial search found nothing further so the men returned to their ship and radioed in the discovery. They noted the boat's registration number and also the serial number that was still very present on the engine. Photographs were taken of the vessel, the grave, and the general area before the cutter headed back home to Pearl Harbor.

An investigation of the registration and serial would produce a modern mystery.

The USCG was astounded to find that the Boston Whaler's registration matched that of a similar vessel that had disappeared nine years earlier. The really strange part is that the *Sarah-Joe*, which was the vessel's name, had departed Hana, Maui, for a one-day fishing trip on 11 February 1979.

Hana is some 2054 miles distant from Sibylla Island!

Broadening their search, the USCG found that five good friends had decided to enjoy a day of fishing after deciding to skip out on a construction job. Ralph Malaiakini (27), Benjamin Kalama (38), Peter Hanchett (31), Scott Mooreman (27), and Patrick Woessner (26) were all from the area. Ralph's twin brother, Robert Malaiakini, owned *Sarah-Joe*, which he named after his parents and Ralph borrowed it from his brother for their day outing on the water. It was an event that would change the lives of five families forever.

Sarah-Joe was only a year-and-a-half old. A local store owner



Map of the very remote Taongi Atoll.

remembers the men coming in to buy a few supplies. "They were all laughing and joking. They bought a bunch of six-packs of beer, some soda, and a few snacks," the owner recalled. "The also picked up some ice and a styrofoam cooler in which to keep the fish they hoped to catch. One was even kidding about 1980 arriving soon and that hopefully disco would be finally dead. They were in a great mood." They also figured the engine needed new spark plugs so they purchased a set for installation.

They loaded their supplies into *Sarah-Joe* and got the 85-horsepower engine going, which was pretty powerful for the small vessel. By mid-morning, the set out from the boat ramp at Hana Bay, waving to a few friends on shore. All of the men had lived around the water and were good swimmers, surfers, and divers.

The sun was relatively bright but there was a high overcast building. The sea was calm and almost glowing with reflected light. In other words, it appeared to be a perfect day to skip out from their construction job. However, the situation would change.

By 1 pm, the wind picked up to gale force. John Hanchett Sr. was concerned about the wind and he and several others went to the shoreline to try and spot the boat and wave the



After DNA and dental testing, the bones were determined to be that of Scott Mooreman.

fishermen back in. They were not able to see *Sarah-Joe*. By that evening, a squall was ripping through the area and creating chaos.

The Alenuihaha Channel between the Big Island and Maui is perhaps the roughest and most dangerous stretch of water in Hawaii. Flowing next to Mauna Loa, the world's largest volcano, the water is up to 17,000 feet deep and has strong surface currents that move swiftly to the southwest. On this ill-fated day, a low-pressure system had formed near the islands and intensified as it approached the Alenuihaha Channel.