

# “SKYWAY DOWN! SKYWAY DOWN!”

Numerous factors combined to send a bulk cargo carrier smashing into a pylon supporting one of America's most famous bridges

BY MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT

To Florida residents, the Sunshine Skyway Bridge is a symbol of the state's forward vision. The original bridge was opened to traffic on 6 September 1954, and offered a huge travel improvement between Bradenton and Saint Petersburg; replacing the venerable Bee Line ferry service. Originally, it was a two-lane structure but in 1969 a similar bridge was built parallel and just west of the original. However, opening of the newer span was delayed until 1971 for extra reinforcing of the bridge's south main pier, which had cracked due to insufficient supporting pile depth (this was just one of the many problems that would plague the structure). The original span was converted to carry northbound traffic while the new bridge was utilized for all southbound vehicles. Due to its distinctive appearance, the Sunshine Skyway, as the structure was named, was featured in numerous television programs and movies. It also became an extremely popular route for everyday drivers and tourists, who were thrilled to see the large cargo vessels passing under them as they made their way in and out of Tampa Bay.

The Skyway crossed 15 miles of open water but for many drivers (and accompanying children) the bridge's zenith at 150 feet over Tampa Bay was a particularly stressful section of roadway.

Some 41 years ago on 9 May 1980, the harbor pilot of the freighter *Summit Venture* knew he was in trouble as an intense, sudden storm lashed his ship and visibility dropped to almost nothing as he neared the famed Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Sadly, just 108 days earlier another nautical disaster had struck the area when the US Coast Guard Cutter *Blackthorn* collided head-on with an oil tanker on 28 January 1980. The 180-foot buoy tender had just completed a major overhaul in Tampa and was departing Tampa Bay on its first voyage when it smashed into the *Capricorn* as the 605-foot tanker was entering the bay.

*Blackthorn* survived the initial impact with limited damage but the *Capricorn's* anchor was ready

to be let go. It became embedded in *Blackthorn's* hull and ripped open the port side above the water line. Then as the two ships backed away from each other, the chain became taut. The force of the much larger ship pulling on it caused the *Blackthorn* to tip on her side and she quickly capsized and went under in four minutes.

The ship sank in 40 feet of water and although 27 crewmen survived, 23 USCG personnel were trapped below decks and

This dramatic photo illustrates Paul Hornbuckle's car on the very brink of the shattered bridge with M/V *Summit Venture* at anchor. Hornbuckle and his three passengers exited the car and crawled on hands and knees, their fingers grasping the hole in the steel grating, until they reached safety on a more level section of the bridge. The vehicles ahead of Hornbuckle all plunged into the water.