

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

“With no iPhone videos and few first-person accounts to refer to, DeYoung recreates with words the sickening cinematic loop of seven cars and a Greyhound bus falling 150 feet and plunking into the water, one after another.”

—**Connect Savannah**

“Bill DeYoung’s story of the construction of the original and second span of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, of the accident in 1980 that destroyed it, and of John Lerro, the harbor pilot steering the *Summit Venture* that struck the bridge, is spellbinding and reads like a mystery.”

—**Robert Kerstein**, author of *Key West on the Edge*

“Bill DeYoung’s meticulous reconstruction of how Florida’s mightiest bridge was built and then destroyed is a compelling read, full of telling details and tragic irony.”

—**Craig Pittman**, author of *The Scent of Scandal*



**For more information, contact Teal Amthor-Shaffer
(352) 392-1351 x 209 • tas@upf.com**

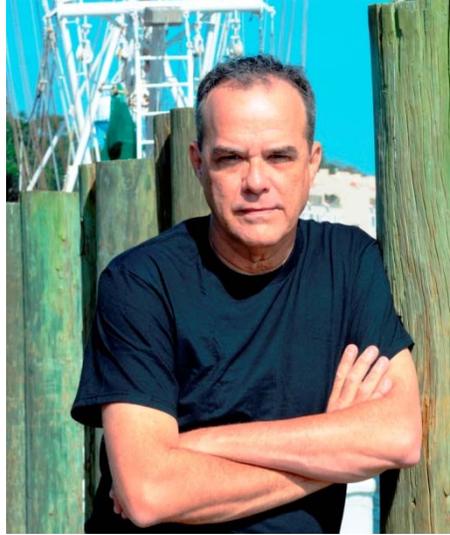
**Available for purchase from booksellers worldwide.
To order direct from the publisher, call the University Press of Florida:
1 (800) 226-3822**

SKYWAY: THE TRUE STORY OF TAMPA BAY'S SIGNATURE BRIDGE AND THE MAN WHO BROUGHT IT DOWN

By Bill DeYoung • ISBN: 978-0-8130-4491-0

Hardcover • 256 pages, 30 b/w photos

University Press of Florida, October 2013



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BILL DEYOUNG is a native of Pinellas County, Florida. He spent twenty-six years as a feature writer and editor with Florida newspapers. Since 2008 he has been an arts and entertainment writer/editor based in Savannah, Georgia. His music journalism has been published in hundreds of national and international magazines, and he has written the liner note essays for more than a hundred CDs.

Visit his website: www.billdeyoung.com

—**Bill DeYoung is available for interviews and appearances—**



University Press of Florida

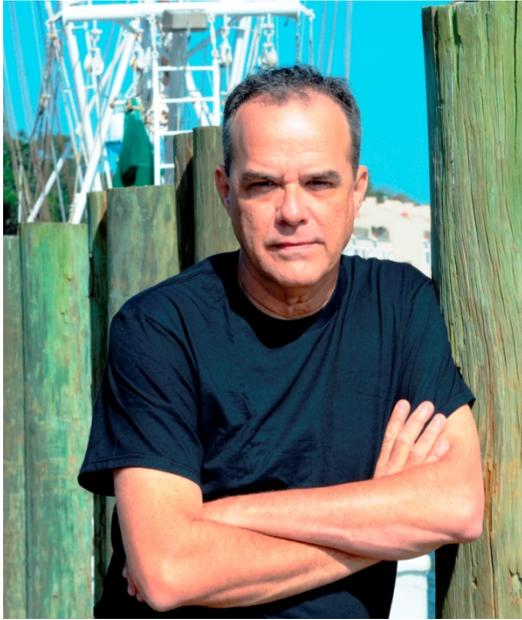
For more information, contact Teal Amthor-Shaffer: (352) 392-1351 x 209, tas@upf.com

SKYWAY: THE TRUE STORY OF TAMPA BAY'S SIGNATURE BRIDGE AND THE MAN WHO BROUGHT IT DOWN

By Bill DeYoung • ISBN: 978-0-8130-4491-0

Hardcover • 256 pages, 30 b/w photos

University Press of Florida, October 2013



Q&A with

BILL DEYOUNG

author of

***Skyway: The True Story
of Tampa Bay's Signature
Bridge and the Man Who
Brought It Down***

Overshadowed by the eruption of Mount St. Helen and the Cuban refugee crisis, the tragic collapse of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in 1980 is finally getting the attention it deserves. Bill DeYoung tells the story of the people whose lives were changed forever.

University Press of Florida (UPF): When did you know that you wanted to write this book? What led you to this subject?

Bill DeYoung (BD): Everything I read about the incident was either incomplete or somehow contradictory, and led to more questions: Who were these people? What did it feel like to live through this? Most importantly, *what really happened?* For a journalist, that's the process: You become immersed in a story, and obsessed with every angle. Once I began to piece together the post-accident lives of John Lerro and Wesley MacIntire, I knew I was looking at a great narrative, full of irony and pathos. I wasn't interested in writing an historical book about bridge safety or the shipping industry – I saw it as a very human story, about people who went through a lot. That's why I did it. There was also a very simple desire to *set the record straight*.

UPF: How is your day structured when you write? What's your writing routine?

BD: I've tried disciplining myself – get up early, brew a pot of coffee, write for four hours, that sort of thing. Doesn't work for me. I write in spurts, whenever I feel compelled to, any time of the day (or night). I would find myself thinking about *Skyway* in the middle of dinner.

Mount St. Helens erupted on May 18, 1980, resulting in 57 deaths and over \$1.1 billion in property damage in Washington, after a two-month series of earthquakes generated increasing concern about the stability of the volcano. Buried under that ash was another unimaginable tragedy, occurring across the country, in Tampa, FL, just 9 days earlier.

UPF: Do you think that the collapse of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge would be remembered differently in the national consciousness if the media had not been focused on the eruption of Mount St. Helen?

BD: Between the Cuban refugee crisis, the Liberty City riots, the *Blackthorn* incident and Skyway, it was a banner year for bad news in Florida. And the Mount St. Helens eruption certainly replaced Skyway on the nation's front pages. I think if the media had given as much play to Lerro's exoneration, and the established fact that the weather and other factors had actually caused the collision, he wouldn't have lived the remainder of his life like a pariah. Historically, people remembered the banner headlines of the first weeks, and not what was quietly revealed afterwards.

UPF: Where were you when you first heard the news?

BD: Working in a record shop in a mall that's no longer there. I remember the terrible rain that morning; when we heard about what had happened to the Skyway, we went down to JC Penney's and watched the gut-wrenching local coverage on the wall of demo TVs.

UPF: Describe what you remember seeing at the scene of the accident.

BD: I'll never forget driving over the remaining span and looking over at the gaping hole 100 feet away. It stood that way for seven years, until the new Skyway opened. My heart stopped every single time as I imagined the horrible free-fall those vehicles took in 1980. It was like a crime scene, with the body still lying there, exposed.

UPF: You talk about the red flags that were being raised about the bridge in the 1970s, the decade before it collapsed. Do you think if it hadn't been this particular accident, that another accident would have been inevitable?

BD: It's important to remember that, although premature cracking and stress wear had been found in the concrete bridge supports, it was the direct impact from a 20,000-ton ship that knocked the Skyway down. And this happened because the support piers were not protected by some sort of barrier, and never had been, since the first span was erected in 1954. Considering the ship traffic in and out of the Port of Tampa, I think it was something of a miracle that it hadn't happened before 1980.

UPF: If this accident were to happen now, what, if anything, would be different in how it was handled by the media and the courts?

BD: I think the courts, all things considered, handled it well. Because it was such a complex web of cases, it just took a long time to resolve. More to the point, the bridge is now fully protected – at great cost – and pilots have an extraordinary arsenal of sophisticated detection equipment that did not exist in 1980, with built-in redundancies. Hopefully it won't happen again.

UPF: What do you hope readers will enjoy the most about your book?

BD: I put readers in the wheelhouse of *Summit Venture* with John Lerro and Bruce Atkins, and on the bridge with Wes MacIntire and the other drivers who narrowly avoided death. And from that point, we stay with them. I hope readers will feel as if they're right there.

People who really liked *The Perfect Storm* should enjoy this book.

UPF: Who are your favorite authors, and how have they influenced or informed your own work?

BD: I am a big fan of James Swanson's Civil War narratives, *Manhunt* and *Bloody Crimes*. They are breathless, true narratives, and certainly Swanson's style has been an influence on me. Mostly, though, I think it's my work as a journalist that informs *Skyway*; I tried to keep it conversational, fast-moving and not overly technical. I wanted readers to identify with the characters.

UPF: What are you working on next?

BD: Because of my music background, I'm hoping to write the authorized biography of the pop group the 5th Dimension.

UPF: Do you have one sentence of advice for new authors?

BD: Always trust your instincts.

—Bill DeYoung is available for interviews and appearances—



University Press of Florida

For more information, contact Teal Amthor-Shaffer: (352) 392-1351 x 209, tas@upf.com

SKYWAY: THE TRUE STORY OF TAMPA BAY'S SIGNATURE BRIDGE
AND THE MAN WHO BROUGHT IT DOWN
By Bill DeYoung • ISBN: 978-0-8130-4491-0
Hardcover • 256 pages, 30 b/w photos
University Press of Florida, October 2013

Skyway

The True Story of Tampa Bay's Signature Bridge and the Man Who Brought It Down
Bill DeYoung

Contents

List of Figures

Preface

1. Ambush
2. Hands across the Bay
3. Warning Signs
4. The Combat Zone
5. Captain Lerro
6. Shoot for the Hole
7. Tough Old Bird
8. The Abyss
9. The Only Fool Who Went in the Water
10. Red Alpha Zulu
11. The Court of Public Opinion
12. Guilty, Guilty, Guilty
13. A Pound of Flesh
14. Do You Know Who I Am?
15. Back to the Sky
16. That Stinking Bridge
17. The Last Victim

Postscript

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

Excerpt from Chapter 9, The Only Fool Who Went in the Water

Nobody was ever reviewed. He should have been. Everybody knew what he was. Kind of pitiful, really. But he just kept going, and going, and going, and he kept getting worse, not better. As you progress up the line, you handle bigger and deeper ships. God knows what would've happened if he'd got up to full pilot.

—Robert Park

Wesley MacIntire woke up suddenly, as if jolted from a nightmare, with a pounding headache, blood running down his face and a terrifying sense of claustrophobia. The air was close. He was cold and soaking wet. It took him a few seconds to remember that he'd just been looking straight into the unforgiving steel hull of a massive ship. Had he dreamed it? Where the hell was he?

Then he noticed the green water pouring in through the space where his windshield had been, and bubbles rising in steady streams from the battered hood of his little truck, which seemed to be parked at a curious angle. The headlights were still on.

He was at the bottom of the shipping channel, the truck's rear end planted in the silt 40 feet beneath the surface of Tampa Bay.

His little truck's fall had been broken by the port bow of *Summit Venture*.

Frantically, MacIntire forced open the top part of the damaged driver's side door until he'd made enough room to wiggle through. The water stung and the escape route was tight.

His Navy survival training, from 40 years ago, came rushing back.

Filling his lungs one last time, MacIntire pushed his 220-pound frame out of the truck and kicked for the surface. He could see a vague light, but he didn't really know if he could make it all the way through the blackness.

By the time he broke through—"like a bullet coming out of the water," he later described it—he'd swallowed a stomachful of seawater, and the first thing he did was vomit. Blood was streaming down his face from the gash on his forehead. His legs ached.

He was treading water under the intact north-bound span of the Skyway, sick and scared and gasping for weak, wet breath. A few feet away, just sticking out of the swirling green water, he saw a large segment of silver steel superstructure, so big that one end was on the bay bottom, the other poking through the waves. He managed to grab it and hold himself steady.

Through the cold drizzle, MacIntire managed to focus on the broken bridge a thousand feet away and 150 feet up. He fixated on a pair of bright headlights—Dick Hornbuckle's Buick—right at the dangling edge.

So that's what happened, he thought.

He tried to mute the sound of his pounding heart to listen for splashes. Or screams. He was, after all, a Navy swimmer, and surely he could help anyone else who might have fallen.

But there were no sounds. *I'm the only fool who went in the water*, he thought.

Then he heard a sickening mechanical groan from behind him, and the silver piece he held onto began to move. Swiveling his head, MacIntire beheld the massive, black-and-green hull of *Summit Venture*, not 20 feet away; the ship was moving, almost imperceptibly, trying in vain to respond to the pilot's last orders: *Full astern*. It swayed back and forth beneath the shattered bridge, straining against the anchor chain pinned by tons of wreckage. A section of intact asphalt roadway and steel guardrail, still connected, was strewn horizontally across the

gargantuan bow, broken edges trailing over the side like beaten, defeated limbs. They mocked him.

I'm hanging on and I'm throwing up, MacIntire thought, and now this ship is going to run me over.

“Jesus, someone help me,” he managed to scream, and almost instantaneously Lok Lin Ming, *Summit Venture's* carpenter, appeared on the deck, peering down at the tiny, bleeding man in the choppy water 40 feet below.

Lok shouted something, left for an instant and returned. He threw down a long rope with a loop in it, which McIntire put around under his arms. Then the carpenter, and bosun Sit, tossed a second lifeline: the very same pilot ladder that Lerro and Atkins had used for their climb aboard the ship a little over an hour earlier.

It took several attempts to get him to hold tightly; MacIntire had little strength in his legs. Finally, desperately, he swung himself back and forth in the froth until the ropes tangled around his body. The crewmen grunted and hauled him out of the churning bay and over the side, like a bluefin tuna worn down, glass-eyed and inert, at the end of a longline.

It was 7:55 a.m. He'd been in the water for 20 minutes.

The lookouts carried MacIntire's limp, bleeding body down the endless length of deck towards the stern. Blood streamed down his pale face, turning his white moustache red. His eyeglasses were long gone. After assuring his rescuers that he was essentially undamaged, he was delivered to Sick Bay, where he would remain for the better part of two hours. His wound was cleaned, and a primitive dressing applied.

His rescue encouraged the remaining crewmen, who'd received the pilot's orders to line the deck and search for survivors.

As the grey waves licked the stationary Skyway supports in a steady rhythm, the channel water would give up no more secrets. The sailors never saw another person.

Tampa Bay Pilots Association manager B. F. Wiltshire was on his three weeks off and attending a convention in Texas, so the dispatcher's frantic call went through to his emergency number—daughter Judy Nunez's house in Brandon, across the bay in Hillsborough County.

Nunez contacted her father, who began making phone calls from his hotel room (it was not yet 6 a.m. in Dallas).

Because he lived on nearby St. Petersburg Beach, pilot Robert Park was the closest member of the association to the Skyway. Park, Wiltshire knew, was also on his 21-day “vacation,” and therefore likely to be at home.

It didn’t matter that Park was perhaps Lerro’s most vocal critic.

Within minutes of receiving the order, Park was on a pilot boat out of Mullet Key and bee-lining through the chop for *Summit Venture*. He was to stabilize the ship, assume control and assess the damage.

Park also knew Captain Liu, and had a nodding acquaintance with Bruce Atkins.

His priority, Park was told in no uncertain terms, was Lerro.

“We knew what his personality was, and we didn’t know what he would do or say,” Park recalled. He thought the much-younger pilot talked too much. Privately, he considered Lerro a complainer. A whiner.

“In a situation like that,” Park said, “the last thing you need to be doing is talking, where somebody could ask you five years later ‘Did you say this, did you say that?’”

Park’s assignment was to confer with Lerro, calm him down, and convince him to button up until the pilots’ attorney arrived. And/or the Coast Guard investigators, who were already on the way.

Park was delivered to *Summit Venture* at 10 a.m. and ascended the gangway, the collapsible aluminum staircase the crew kept stored in the stern, behind the superstructure. The gangway, extended over the side to connect with pilot boats, was used for non-pilot visitors—those who couldn’t, or shouldn’t, be expected to rappel up the freeboard hanging onto a length of rope.

The senior pilot raced up the five short flights of stairs and found Lerro standing motionless, silent, staring through the rear wheelhouse portholes, as if wishing he could will time to move in reverse. Park delivered his message, exchanged a few words of solemn solidarity with Liu and Atkins, then radioed for a pair of tugboats to maneuver themselves on either side of the ship and hold it in place, to keep it from knocking into the *other* Skyway span, to which its creeping bow had come perilously close.