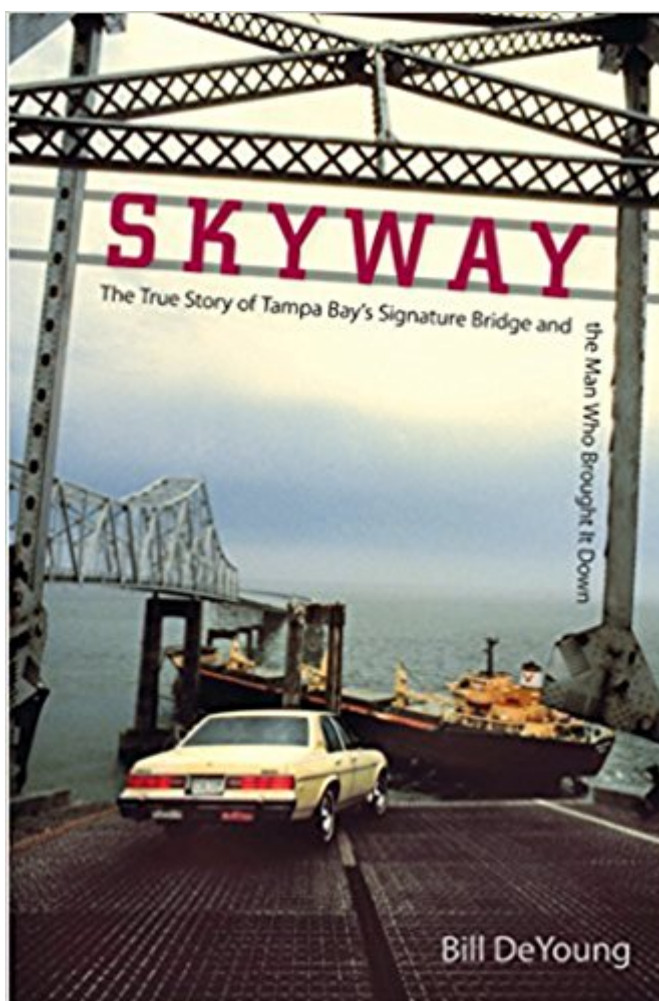


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# Skyway: The True Story Of Tampa Bay's Signature Bridge And The Man Who Brought It Down



## Synopsis

“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*

On the morning of May 9, 1980, harbor pilot John Lerro was guiding a 600-foot freighter, the Summit Venture, into Tampa Bay. Directly in the ship’s path was the Sunshine Skyway Bridge—two ribbons of concrete, steel, and asphalt that crossed fifteen miles of open bay. Suddenly, a violent weather cell reduced visibility to zero at the precise moment when Lerro attempted to direct the 20,000-ton vessel underneath the bridge. Unable to stop or see where he was going, Lerro drove the ship into a support pier; the main span splintered and collapsed 150 feet into the bay. Seven cars and a Greyhound bus fell over the broken edge and into the churning water below. Thirty-five people died. *Skyway* tells the entire story of this horrific event, from the circumstances that led up to it through the years-long legal proceedings that followed. Through personal interviews and extensive research, Bill DeYoung pieces together the harrowing moments of the collision, including the first-person accounts of witnesses and survivors. Among those whose lives were changed forever was Wesley MacIntire, the motorist whose truck ricocheted off the hull of the Summit Venture and sank. Although he was the lone survivor, MacIntire, like Lerro, was emotionally scarred and remained haunted by the tragedy for the rest of his life. Similarly, DeYoung details the downward spiral of Lerro’s life, his vilification in the days and weeks that followed the accident, and his obsession with the tragedy well into his painful last years. DeYoung also offers a history of the ill-fated bridge, from its construction in 1954, through the addition of a second parallel span in 1971, to its eventual replacement. He discusses the sinking of a Coast Guard cutter a mere three months before *Skyway* collapsed and the Department of Transportation’s dire warnings about the bridge’s condition. The result is a vividly detailed portrait of the rise and fall of a Florida landmark.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A well-paced narrative that parses history from tragedy.” —Connect Savannah  
“An intimately detailed account of this disaster, its victims and the survivors, the legal aftermath, as well as a complete history of the bridge, old and new. . . . Reads like a novel.” —Florida Times-Union  
“Takes us . . . into the thoughts and emotions of the principal players as the unfolding calamity is perceived too late in the fury of a sudden, blinding rainstorm.” —Florida Weekly  
“Weaves together personal interviews and extensive research to reconstruct how Florida’s mightiest bridge was built then destroyed, and how the horrendous accident effectively cast a pall over the life of harbor pilot John Lerro.” —Ocala Star Banner  
“DeYoung uses electrifying details to illustrate the importance of the bridge and its significance in connecting Pinellas County to Manatee County and points south.” —Tampa Bay Magazine  
“DeYoung’s account of the accident from the perspective of the victims traveling on the bridge is riveting. . . . A fresh and vivid retelling of the disaster.” —Florida Historical Quarterly  
“Entranc[ing]. . . . While DeYoung explains the events that precipitated that tragic morning, he does more than that: He makes the pilot of the boat, the late Capt. John Lerro, into a real person. He allows readers to peek into the world of commercial boat captains. . . and empathize with the unreasonable challenges these men undertake as regularly as most of us boot up our computers in the morning.” —Creative Loafing Tampa

On the morning of May 9, 1980, harbor pilot John Lerro was guiding a 600-foot freighter, the

"Summit Venture," into Tampa Bay. Directly in the ship's path was the Sunshine Skyway Bridge—two ribbons of concrete, steel, and asphalt that crossed fifteen miles of open bay. Suddenly, a violent weather cell reduced visibility to zero at the precise moment when Lerro attempted to direct the 20,000-ton vessel underneath the bridge. Unable to stop or see where he was going, Lerro drove the ship into a support pier; the main span splintered and collapsed 150 feet into the bay. Seven cars and a Greyhound bus fell over the broken edge and into the churning water below. Thirty-five people died. "Skyway" tells the entire story of this horrific event, from the circumstances that led up to it through the years-long legal proceedings that followed. Through personal interviews and extensive research, Bill DeYoung pieces together the harrowing moments of the collision, including the first-person accounts of witnesses and survivors. Among those whose lives were changed forever was Wesley MacIntire, the motorist whose truck ricocheted off the hull of the "Summit Venture" and sank. Although he was the lone survivor, MacIntire, like Lerro, was emotionally scarred and remained haunted by the tragedy for the rest of his life. Similarly, DeYoung details the downward spiral of Lerro's life, his vilification in the days and weeks that followed the accident, and his obsession with the tragedy well into his painful last years. DeYoung also offers a history of the ill-fated bridge, from its construction in 1954, through the addition of a second parallel span in 1971, to its eventual replacement. He discusses the sinking of a Coast Guard cutter a mere three months before Skyway collapsed and the Department of Transportation's dire warnings about the bridge's condition. The result is a vividly detailed portrait of the rise and fall of a Florida landmark. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The horrible disaster was news to me, a new resident of the Tampa area. It happened just before Mt. St. Helens blew and during a presidential primary season, so that may account for why it didn't stay longer in the national news. The book itself is billed as creative nonfiction. It's easily readable, though a bit dry in a few places. But it is generally well told and compelling. I recommend it, especially to people who live or spend time in Florida.

I live in the St Pete area of Florida and have driven over Skyway Bridges many times in the last 30 years. And I had a vague knowledge of the history of both bridges. But through Mr. De Young's vast amount of research and his intricate accounting of so many details it really enlightened me and gave me a new respect for all those involved, including the ill-fated Harbor pilot John Lerro. I could not put the book down and may read it again. Because it was difficult to absorb all the details in one read. I would highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in Florida, bridges or the

subject of ships and harbor pilots.

As a Floridian, I remember this day, as well as the weather. Such tragedy!! Bill DeYoung has certainly done his homework. This is a poignant story of the disaster that befell the Victims, Families, Captain John Lerro, Crew Members, and the Sunshine Sky Bridge. I use to travel from St. Pete to Sanibel every year for vacation. Driving across the one remaining span, seeing the mangled steel super structure that was once the opposite span was so heart wrenching, as you knew the tragedy that had occurred. Even to this day, when I travel across the new, modern, beautiful bridge, I still think back to that awful day that took so many lives, and destroyed so many others.

Living so close to the the bridge and having only a cursory knowledge of the tragedy that befell its predecessor I decided to pick up this book. It is very well written and thoroughly researched.

I do not read a lot of non-fiction but this book kept me up late. It is that well written. Not only a story about America's worst bridge disaster, it is a documented case study of the harbor pilot who became the fall guy for the bridge's collapse. If you have an interest in the maritime industry or in engineering you will probably like this book. If you live in Florida, you may love it as many of the people and places will be familiar.

I bought this for my boyfriend as he was a diver on scene that day and was very interested in reading it!! He read it really quick and was totally into it and read it non stop until it was done!!

I saw Bill DeYoung's book on the Sunshine Skyway previewed in the Tampa Bay Times and downloaded it the day it was published. This is a fascinating story on so many levels. Part of it was the nail-biting retelling of the harrowing events on May 9, 1980 that led to the collapse of the southbound bridge. The author leaves us with the question as to whether the pilot John Lerro could have prevented the collision. Mr. DeYoung, as a St. Petersburg native, is very cognizant of Pinellas County geography and the (often questionable) vicissitudes of Florida politics and these are woven skillfully into Skyway. With a second home in St. Petersburg I have literally been at many locations DeYoung describes (e.g. the lighthouse on Egmont Key, the fishing pier in Ft. DeSoto Park). Skyway relates the post-World War II land boom and explosion of population in the Tampa Bay area, building of the initial bridge in 1954 and the role of Disney in inducing the second bridge in 1971. You feel the anxiety of road engineers regarding the "accident waiting to happen" and hope

that as you cross the existing magnificent Sunshine Skyway that sufficient monies were spent to engineer out design deficiencies. Skyway captures beautifully the subsequent personal impacts on Lerro and some of the survivors. You'll find Skyway difficult to put down once you begin even if you've never seen the causeway and bridge. I read the Kindle version and it includes many photographs that enrich the portrayal of the event.

As a little kid growing up in Fla, many is the time my family drove over the Sunshine Skyway. Very steep in the middle and rather scary to a child. The horror of driving off a missing chunk of road at the top is scary to an adult! This is a cool history of the bridge. I used to follow the writer in my local newspaper years back.

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