

Coast Guard Remembers *Blackthorn*

Story and photos by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen, PADET, St. Petersburg, Fla.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Coast Guardsmen from units throughout Florida gather every year on Jan. 28 at the *Blackthorn* Memorial in St. Petersburg, Fla., to pay their respects to the 23 Coast Guardsmen who perished when the Coast Guard Cutter *Blackthorn* sank Jan. 28, 1980.

The *Blackthorn*, a 180-foot buoy tender, then home ported in Galveston, Texas, had just completed an extensive maintenance period in the Tampa Bay area, when, at about 7:20 p.m., *Blackthorn* and the 605-foot oil tanker *Capricorn* collided approximately two miles south of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. *Capricorn*'s seven-ton anchor became embedded in *Blackthorn*'s hull and when the 990-foot anchor chain became taut, *Capricorn* pulled *Blackthorn* through the water causing it to capsize. The *Blackthorn* sank in less than five minutes in 40-feet of water. Twenty-seven of *Blackthorn*'s 50 crewmembers were able to escape the Coast Guard's worst peacetime disaster.



A Coast Guardsman salutes the Coast Guard Cutter *Blackthorn*'s memorial during a service honoring *Blackthorn*'s crew and their ultimate sacrifice. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen.

The Florida Legislature named the wayside parks at each end of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge "*Blackthorn* Memorial Park" in June 1980. The monument commemorating both the sinking and the loss of 23 Coast Guardsmen was dedicated Jan. 28, 1981, and is located at the bridge's north-end rest area, two miles north of the site of the accident. Coast Guard Sector Field Office Galveston displays a permanently-lit buoy and commemorative plaque honoring the *Blackthorn* crewmembers.

This year's ceremony consisted of an aerial salute by Coast Guard aircraft, a wreath laying, posting of the Colors, reading of the names of the lost crewmembers, and remarks by Rear Adm. David W. Kunkel, Coast Guard Seventh District Commander.

As a result of the *Blackthorn* tragedy, the Coast Guard developed new training requirements and made changes to navigational aids in and around Tampa Bay.

"The lights on some buoys and markers in the channel have been brightened and range lights have been added to help incoming and outgoing traffic stay in the channel," said Warren W. Weedon, Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg planning specialist. "In addition, inbound and outbound vessels must report their location to the Tampa Port Authority as they move through the channel."

The *Blackthorn* tragedy provided the motivation for the establishment of new training requirements designed to prevent similar accidents and to help keep Coast Guardsmen safe.

The Command and Operations School was established in 1986 at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., and is designed to instruct every Coast Guard officer who will be directly responsible for the navigation of a ship.

The two-week curriculum focuses on saving lives by teaching critical decision-making skills for avoiding collisions at sea while highlighting the proper application of the Nautical Rules of the Road and Operational Risk Management.

The backbone of the course is the Ship's Control and Navigation

Training System (SCANTS). SCANTS is a multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art, visual bridge simulator, where prospective Commanding Officers and Executive Officers will spend many intense hours demonstrating their ability to correctly interpret risks while underway. The simulator recreates the unique operational characteristics of any class of Coast Guard cutter, incorporating waves, sounds, bridge whistles, fog signals and water noises. These "cutters" are programmed to operate in many real and imaginary ports in all weather conditions.

Since the school's establishment, no lives have been lost due to a Coast Guard cutter colliding with another vessel. The *Blackthorn* tragedy illustrated that even an organization based on safety at sea has a responsibility to improve its operating procedures to ensure the future safety of lives at sea.



Coast Guardsmen from units throughout the state of Florida gathered together at the Blackthorn Memorial in St. Petersburg, Fla., to pay respect to the 23 Coast Guardsmen lost in the sinking of Coast Guard Cutter Blackthorn Jan. 28, 1980. A rose was placed at the foot of the memorial stone in honor of each lost crewmember. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Sondra-Kay Kneen, PADET St. Petersburg.

USCG