

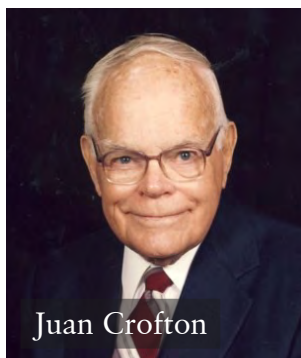


The end of World War II unleashed 15 million military personnel upon their homeland and briefly swamped the economy before the post-war boom, the G. I. Bill and all that war-toughened smarts produced the Greatest Generation, which then created the first middle class in world history. In the Hampton Roads area, this mass of men led civilian lives of quiet desperation in the service, as skilled laborers, deckhands or fishermen. Thousands advanced their lives by using their military skills to become shipyard craftsmen, captains and marine specialists, and many had successful businesses. About a half-dozen outfits of that era endure today, yet very few are still family owned.

Out of all that male ambition in the 1950s, one unique man – Juan Crofton – pioneered a profession, embodied value and professionalism in a heretofore gritty occupation, mentored generations of maritime careers, became a pillar in the harbor and defined a DNA that built the foundation of his company. Then he handed off the future to his children to remain family-owned and practice the values preached by the founder. After 72 years, Crofton is one of the oldest U. S. commercial dive companies and certainly one of the best, and expanded into marine construction and cranes & rigging. To say Juan was one-of-a-kind would be an understatement. Plus, he did it with class and humility and took time to enjoy life with his beloved wife Bernice (*Bunny*), his business partner for 41 years. Most amazing is that he came of age in the rough-and-tumble Depression era and was able to find three indomitable qualities that would define him and propel him forward – self-taught intelligence, determination and relationships, qualities that resonate inside the people at Crofton today, and clearly distinguishes them.

Maritime Icon Emerges from Virginia's Waters

His life began with a good omen as the first child at Newport News Hospital delivered by Cesarean section in August 1922. Juan's early life opens in Newport News, a recurring life setting, as the only child of an oddly mismatched couple. His father Frank was an auto mechanic while his mom, the former Swannanoa (*Swanie*) Diamond Davis, was an aspiring opera singer. Young Juan attended grade school and learned about car repair hanging around his dad and enjoyed working with his hands.



The 1920s were good times yet the 1930s were desperate years as his dad scrambled to make a buck. After losing his job in Newport News in 1931, they moved to Washington (D. C.) to find work. Amid it all, Juan attended school, maintained his studies and kept his mind and hands busy in his father's shop after his parents divorced. His father was quite talented and Juan learned invaluable lessons about mechanics and problem-solving. At age 13, he could make basic repairs and rebuild parts, and learned to drive when permits weren't required in certain areas. One night, Frank had him get a ride to pick up a car 14 miles way. On the way home, he could tell the car was in rough shape. A couple miles from home, the engine blew and failed right when a policeman was passing by. He thought the car was stolen and put Juan in a holding cell for the night. The boy was terrified by the experience. His father picked him up a few hours later.



While in D. C., Juan would frequently visit his father's parents in Williamston (NC) east of Raleigh, then return home. He knew his father was desperate for income and noticed him modifying the fuel intakes of 8-cylinder cars. It was the Prohibition era and moonshine was run out of the Appalachian Mountains for delivery. Dangerous men needed fast cars and Frank was the guy.

Behind Frank's shop, Juan found an abandoned 1933 Ford, clear and legal, and rebuilt the engine. In a moment that defined his smarts and his willpower the rest of his life, he got the old beater running. His hopes soared when the engine roared to life. At that point, Juan knew things were tough for his dad, and himself. So he asked to drive to Williamston. Frank nodded. Late the next day, Juan set out at age 14 with a small bag of possessions on paved Route 1 south and rural, two-lane dirt roads to make the 250 mile journey. When the generator failed, he showed his kid auto wits by turning off the headlights to save power since there were few cars. He also navigated that long, lonely night by the blessing of a brilliant full moon, another good omen during a tenuous passage. He pulled into his grandparents at 1:00 a. m. They tearfully greeted him like a long lost son.



Blessings, Challenges, Risk & a New Future

A stable home and school life in rural Carolina was exactly what an ambitious boy needed to develop, and in turn he excelled. In high school, Juan made the honor society, won the state baritone competition and his stocky but athletic 5 foot 8 inch frame made the football team as a lineman. Upon graduation in 1940, like a prayer come true everything blossomed when he earned a football scholarship to Duke. From his rough past, diamond-like qualities were being glimpsed. While in college in December 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and everything suddenly changed again – for the worse. Eligible for the draft, he tried to keep his scholarship and stay in school with the ROTC program, yet his luck-of-the-draw gene set saw him fail the eye exam. Almost overnight, the tough luck kid saw his scholarship and college degree vanish. Juan didn't mope for a minute. He heard about jobs at Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS), got a signed letter from the ROTC and boarded a Greyhound bus with nothing more than coins in his pocket and a small bag. The world, the country and he were descending into a maelstrom. Where it all would lead, no one knew. Yet he was unafraid and bolstered by his achievements and early maturity, and remembering his daring journey in his old Ford that brought him to a farther, more hopeful shore, which led to the shipyard.

After Juan stepped off the bus, he landed a job, met buddies from Carolina and found a bunk in a rooming house. He began in Shipwright work, then switched to Rigging where he saw a man surface from the dock waters wearing a commercial diving suit and steel helmet. *Who are those guys?* he asked. *Divers.* Right then and there, Juan said to himself, *That's what I want to do.* Persistence paid off as he soon found himself working with the chief diver named Hopkins who took the bright, hard working kid under his wing and taught him about diving, operating the hand pump for air supply and hand signal communications. Working with him, Juan cut his teeth learning the basics of diving from a real veteran while also getting a clear sense of the dangers. Diving equipment was not advanced, low visibility hampered all work and high pressure hoses used to clean railways, for example, could cause serious injury. While at NNS, he had a buddy who just so happened to have a fiancée that had a cute sister named Bernice (*Bunny*) Smith, a bookkeeper at a local bank. A first double date ensued and Juan and Bunny were like hand-in-glove and soon married in a double ceremony in June 1944. Back at NNS, the Navy soon



Juan Crofton 1956



came calling. He spent boot camp at Ft. Peary before a transfer to Gulfport (MS) and then to the Naval Shipyard in Bremerton (WA) as a dive instructor. Juan served admirably and after the war returned to Norfolk to work at NNS, yet things were slow. He found part-time dive work at Submarine Engineering Co. and, at one point, took a job at a gas station. The newlyweds lived in a series of apartments full of aspiring men with families. While doing dive work, he met Ernest (*Duke*) Morris, also a diver and maritime tradesman, and they spoke about their own dive firm. From scratch, they managed to borrow \$800 and acquired an old boat as a dive vessel and opened Crofton & Morris Diving in 1949, the name order determined by a coin toss, another good Juan omen. Before Juan left NNS, he'd catch the ferry to work weekdays then rush home to work on the boat each night late. To add to all that was going on, the Croftons had a baby girl named Camille in 1947. It was during this time that Juan remembers Bunny as a steady bedrock making ends meet and making life enjoyable.

Crofton Diving is Born on the Harbor

The two made a good team, were competent divers and complemented each others skills and style. What was clear is that Juan was a rare gentleman on the gritty waterfront. Dive work was sporadic at first then picked up as Crofton & Morris developed their expertise. Over 19 years working together, they wisely built the company on service contracts (such as periodic marine railway maintenance) for steady revenue and their 24/7 emergency service. Other mom & pop dive groups came and went; Juan and Duke remained constant, provided unique value and became respected. By 1951 they needed a better boat and Juan, bad vision or not, spotted a vessel in a boatyard. He dropped it in the water and she didn't leak a drop, so they converted it into a dive boat. Come to find out, this was no typical boat. It was a well-built Navy launch built at none other than the Navy Shipyard in Bremerton. To decide the name of the vessel, they once more flipped a coin. And again, Juan won. Yet another good omen. That meant the boat would use the prefix of Crofton with the suffix of Morris to make *Cromo*. They painted it gray to maintain a low harbor profile like any other nondescript Navy boat.

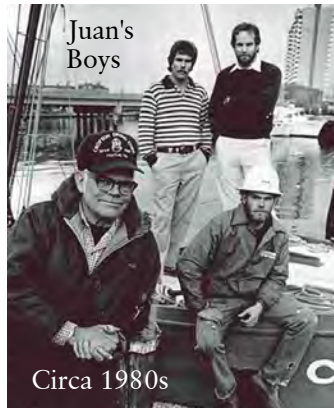


One of the keys to their success in the 1950s-60s was the support from other waterfront businesses on the Elizabeth River, such as Moon Engineering. They saw Juan and Duke as enterprising guys trying to grow their business and provided them with many favors. Whatever help they might need, others would lend a hand. Juan remembers them being no less than an absolute Godsend. It was a time when Hampton Roads was full of healthy, family-owned businesses all supporting each other. In 1968, Duke decided to leave the business and Juan plunged ahead as Crofton Diving, and had a sign made to mount on the *Cromo* wheelhouse. He'd carved out his niche and was optimistic.



To no one's surprise, the 1970s saw Crofton Diving become a harbor mainstay and – dive-by-dive – defined the value of its work. He was gaining a reputation as a pioneer known for his calm presence, tobacco pipe and firm handshake, which meant a lot in those days. Juan & Bunny made quite a team. The couple had settled into a home in east Norfolk on Huntsman Road in Elizabeth Park. Their kitchen had a two-way radio mounted prominently on a table turning it into mission control. Their call sign was KNHL599. *Juan to base?* Bunny: *I read you, over.* When a customer telephoned, Bunny took notes and coordinated with Juan. When he was on a job site at night and she needed him for an urgent message, she'd drive to the site and flash her headlights so he'd come ashore. Camille became her dad's assistant as a teen typing up his handwritten invoices and overhearing the radio and phone calls, and responding to them as well. Following her, Juan & Bunny had three sons in succession five years apart starting in 1950 – Juan (*Jay*), Robert (*Bob*) and Kenneth (*Kenny*).

One of Crofton & Morris' early hires was a special man named Clarence (C.C.) Lawrence who was Juan's right-hand man for decades. He was a WWII Navy veteran, a maritime jack-of-all-trades, became a diver for 25 years, a supervisor for 32 years, mentored scores of divers and could operate anything – boats, cranes and trucks. He went



on to work for the company for 57 years, and when his health failed the Crofton family stood by him, like family should. The Crofton boys saw their dad as an amazing man and in their preteens went along with him on jobs. When they reached their early teens, they donned the Navy dive suit and helmet to take their first short plunges. When Jay graduated high school in 1968, he became a full-time diver and worked alongside Juan and C. C. learning the ropes. Another key hire was Kenny's boyhood friend Terry Miltier who worked with Juan and is still with the company 35 years later as a dive superintendent. He's an invaluable man who proudly carries Juan's torch as a benchmark for doing things the right way – Juan's way.

Crofton Industries Evolves

Through the 1970s-1980s, Crofton became a very respected outfit with high standards, training their own personnel and delivering excellent results for clients. In 1984 as Jay began taking on more responsibility, the business finally left the Huntsman home and a small office was opened on the Norfolk waterfront. Two years later Crofton was forced to find a new spot. To the family's luck, they found a 10-acre site across the Elizabeth River on Scotts Creek and moved there in 1986 with room to grow. When Bob and Kenny came aboard in the mid to late 70s, they earned their stripes working as divers and in the field,



and eventually began to look for ways to diversify the Crofton enterprise. The company had an excellent reputation, relationships were strong and customers were asking for their expertise – if they had the right equipment. Company leadership knew that customer-driven project requests could ultimately be the driving force behind Crofton's evolving service and equipment offerings, thereby allowing growth to be controlled by long term planning and smart investments into a flexible portfolio of land, water and mobile assets.



Back in 1980, Juan had already shown his marine construction brains by designing and building a marine railway for Humphrey's in Weems. It was a logical next step for the company's service offering. By the mid-80s, an existing client needed pile driving help. The family's entrepreneurial spirit set up a crew and equipment was assembled to get the job done. To meet growing demand for this type of work, the second generation began to acquire more floating assets in the form of scaled tugboats large to small with their lead workhorse tug named in honor of their mother, the *Bunny C.* Crofton's dive operations led by Jay continued to remain top-notch as new personnel came on board and were mentored by Juan, C. C. and Jay. In the 1990s, Mike Bremus became a lead diver and mentored Roger Belch who became a manager and has served for 29 years along with Eric Mullen for 27 years, both carrying on the heritage of Crofton Diving, which includes Belch's son and diver Roger III. Also at this time, Juan & Bunny were in their early 60s and close to retiring.

Bob & Kenny then sensed opportunity in the mobile crane market, went to an auction to purchase one and ended up buying two – 50 and 100 tons – in response to an existing client's need. In no time, they were busy with dive projects and marine construction. As crane work increased, Crofton developed expertise in rigging and hired experienced operators, and acquired even more cranes. By the early 2000s, Crofton had evolved into a triple threat – diving, marine construction and cranes & rigging. Although there were bigger firms doing more complex projects, few could match their combination of flexible services and their



nimble, assured approach to challenging projects. The four children, still mostly in their 40s and 50s, enabled by their brilliant father and amazing mom, had laid a solid new foundation for future growth for decades. Camille had married after high school, moved north then returned to Norfolk in 1981 to join the company and manage the office and administrative operations, eventually becoming the treasurer. It was a golden time as she worked with Juan, Bunny and her brothers and felt the excitement of a bright future. Like her siblings, she was at the office before dawn and worked late, just like their parents. Their employees, many who knew Juan and the Croftons personally, noticed the family work ethic from day one and made the same commitment to the family-owned company they felt such deep loyalty towards. In 1999, Crofton celebrated its 50th anniversary and Juan made a speech. It was a triumphant and emotional moment for him. He was so incredibly proud, and so very beloved. As expected, he was humble and grateful. In the back of his mind, he had to think to himself, *Boy, I've come a long, long way since I stepped off that bus at the shipyard.*



Bunny & Juan Crofton

The end of the 1990s was unfortunately also a sad time as Bunny suffered from Alzheimer's disease and Juan devoted more time to caring for her. She had served the company for 41 years and been her husband's better half. In October 2003 surrounded by family at home, the matriarch went home to meet the Lord at age 79. Sorrowful weeks and months unfolded as the family came to grips with their huge loss. Ultimately, they found strength from the unending love and support she had given them. Juan and Bunny owned English bulldogs, his favorite and a metaphor for his mindset. Two of them – *Brutus* and *Bertha* – are remembered by tug names, both tough vessels. Crofton respects history and honors it at every chance, like naming a tug the *Hunstman* for their old home street.



600 ton Manitowoc 4600 crane delivers a 280 ship loader to marine terminal.

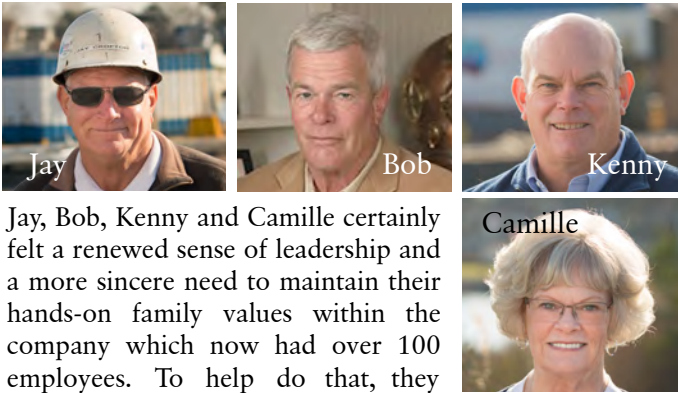
An Era Begins, Another Comes to a Close

Growth and hiring at Crofton remained steady in the 2000s, took a hiccup during the 2008 Recession, then picked up speed in the 2010s as everyone hustled to keep up with demand and add quality people and the right assets, and make sure customers were satisfied. They were highly sensitive to sacrificing quality work for growth's sake. Juan remained active by stopping by newly built offices to interact with staff and feel the energy buzzing around the yard. However by the late 2000s, his health began to deteriorate. Next to Bunny, those were as difficult years as any for the family. Their cherished dad – their everlasting hero, greatest man they'd ever met, a titan in Hampton Roads, a Diving Hall of Fame inductee, one of the last Tidewater gentlemen on the harbor and the source for everything in their world – was slowly fading.



Crofton diver enters the water to provide underwater rigging of concrete piles.

Perhaps the greatest compliment to him was that he personified the post-war Greatest Generation. On top of that, he was a multi-dimensional man who was a Christian church-goer, loved to dance to big band music with Bunny and learned to fly a plane and build and operate remote planes. And true to Juan's astrology sign, he became a (quiet) lion who inspired and helped countless others in his life. His greatest legacy is how his DNA was imprinted upon his family, who then brought their work ethic to bear to lead the company for almost four decades and establish a maritime family juggernaut. Right before Thanksgiving in 2011, Juan like Bunny was surrounded by family at home. Immersed among his loved ones, he took his last breath. He was 89. The super human patriarch was gone. His family was comforted by knowing that their admiration and love for him was unparalleled – forever. Having experienced the pain of his parents' divorce, Juan vowed he would raise a loving family if he ever got the chance. He far, far exceeded his expectations and his family was his greatest joy. An understandable sadness hung over the company for a few weeks as everyone processed their emotions and a new future without their founder. Once the adjustment had been made, the months ahead saw Crofton's hardworking employees get focused and more determined. Clear in their minds was the fact that they themselves would now carry forth Juan's legacy. They were as busier as ever with new cranes, new hires and bigger, more complex jobs both in and out-of-state, and teamwork, communication and safety were more critical than ever.



Jay, Bob, Kenny and Camille certainly felt a renewed sense of leadership and a more sincere need to maintain their hands-on family values within the company which now had over 100 employees. To help do that, they had hired and groomed key managers – many who worked with Crofton at other companies – who symbolized and articulated their values, and acted as family extensions in the company. The total staff is a mixture of industry leading professionals, long serving employees with 10, 20 to 30 plus years experience, mid-level managers being mentored and young staff being trained the Crofton way. There are also four members of the third Crofton generation and an important in-law coming up through the ranks. Interactions with Crofton staff reveal their people to have three things in common: character, the ability to get the job done right and to develop successful relationships.

Veteran Crofton Leadership

In 2021, Crofton is a medium-sized enterprise with 195 employees offering individual or complementary commercial diving, marine construction and crane & rigging rental. Dive operations are the best in the business and remain the soul of the company with an impressive roster of 45 divers and dive managers ranging from veterans (several who worked with Juan) to sharp, mid-level project managers to trainees out of dive school.

None of the Crofton brothers went to college though they earned their *applied* MBAs long ago in the maritime industry. Jay has been president of the dive division for many years and works closely with his staff of highly competent veterans in charge, namely dive department manager Roger Belch, an old school Crofton employee who has very high standards and a strong bench of talent. One of Jay's crowning achievements among many was securing a contract in 1985 to perform underwater inspections along the length of the Chesapeake Bay-Bridge Tunnel (CBBT), a contract that continues today. One diver emblematic of their staff is project manager Brad Atkin. Only 37, he's been at Crofton for 15 years right out of dive school. He's been trained by the best, learns every day and now mentors younger divers.

Bob and Kenny have led marine construction in tandem for several decades as they expanded into cranes & rigging rental and tackled a diversity of projects that built their diverse project portfolio. Since they began at the company until today, the brothers have worked both independently and together on jobs utilizing parts of or all their services. For example, in recent years Bob has directly served NNS to serve their urgent diving, crane & rigging and marine

marine construction needs. The name Crofton has certainly come full circle at NNS since Juan first dove there in 1942. *Incredible*. Bob has two children at Crofton, both in project management. Kevin has a Business Management degree, earned his stripes in the field for five years and is a nine year employee. Erica is an East Carolina graduate in Construction Management, at work on a long-term hydro-power assignment and has four years tenure.

Bob and Kenny continue to dynamically lead the growth of their marine construction business. They exude the Tidewater gentleman qualities of Juan by being exceedingly respectful, genuine and caring, especially with their staff. What sets them apart at Crofton and with customers is a blue collar ethic of united teamwork and a can-do attitude. Kenny's daughter Camille has performed various roles at Crofton for 11 years and is now the marketing director. An MBA graduate of William & Mary, she's played a vital role in promoting Crofton's array of services and projects, attended company trade shows, developed their website and is known for being on top of all the details. Juan's daughter Camille, now the matriarch of the Crofton clan, still serves as company treasurer and takes immense pride by walking in Bunny's shoes. Her daughter Sara Albin is a Business Administration graduate from East Carolina who was recruited into BB&T's management training program. She's served Crofton for 20 years in the accounting department and acts as the accounts receivable manager. Sara's husband Shawn has also been at the company for 20 years and is the chief estimator for the marine construction division. A former Army paratrooper at Ft. Bragg (NC), he worked for another marine construction company before joining Crofton. He had the honor of knowing Juan whom treated him like a son.

As for marine construction, one thing separates it from any industrial work – the water. It is a constant, potentially dangerous element always in play affecting everything. Tides, currents, storms and the effects of salt water create endless challenges. When it comes to diving, the dangers are ever-present. As one diver put it, "We're not supposed to be down there." The physical rigors and weight of diving are extraordinary. Plus visibility can be as little as six inches so divers must have patience and poise while relying on safe procedures. They also have to improvise. Given low visibility, they use their anatomy as a ruler to measure, such as a finger length, a hand width or an arm length.

Cranes & rigging require an immense grasp of the physics of steel, cables, weight, torque, lifting and transport. It all depends on detailed, coordinated planning and wise, seasoned operators, of which Crofton has some of the best. Men like Lennon (*Smitty*) Smith, who is also lead mechanic, and Duane (*Shaggy*) Shepherd with 24 and 13



years respectively at Crofton. They've also been great mentors to younger, up-and-coming operators. With their motto *Nothing Out of Reach*, Crofton's cranes are well known on sea and land, and increasingly mobile to increase responsiveness and site access, hence their growing fleet of hydraulic cranes. Even the company's dive operations are 90% mobile for rapid 24/7 response. Rigging is a unique discipline all its own and critical to a successful lift. Crofton also specializes in two crane (tandem) lifts for more sophisticated jobs.

Crofton's People Power

One of the most important additions to Crofton's senior management in 2014 was Lewis (*Curly*) Collier, the senior superintendent over the largest, most challenging projects. He started at the bottom after high school and made his mark working on the second HRBT tunnel. Moving up the ladder, he was totally dedicated and built a reputation for his strong work ethic and getting the job done – no matter what. For years, he never missed a day and often worked seven days a week putting in very long hours. That led to management jobs for the biggest marine construction projects on the east coast such as the 17 mile-long Poplar Island (MD) and the pivoting York River Bridge (VA). Eager to be closer to home, he had worked with Bob and Kenny and they knew his resume and value would pay huge dividends, plus he's hired some of his own trusted people into Crofton to strengthen their team.

Curly



The vanguard of management below the family are exceptional industry veterans each with singular and interrelated expertise, and a rock solid staff backing them up. Dive director Roger Belch dates to Juan's days and is vigilant in maintaining diving operations excellence. A no nonsense guy with a huge work ethic, he oversees all divers, safety and equipment. Leading the hyper busy crane & rigging group is Mike Frohnapfel, a 45 year crane and construction pro whose calm, friendly manner belies his intimate knowledge of intricate crane operations and keeps him cool under pressure. He spent 20 years at Tidewater Construction where he worked with Bob and Kenny. He joined the crane rental & rigging division in 2002 to run day-to-day operations. It is not uncommon for him to field dozens of weekend calls from crane rental customers. Given Crofton's excellent people reputation, Kurt Fearheller is the caliber of person you'd expect to find in a project manager – former Navy diver, intelligent, astute, engaging, master of details and comfortable amid the rigors of the field or the technology and collaboration of an office. Not to mention 24 years at Crofton as a diver and one of their best project guys.

The diversity of Crofton's work is broad and deep, complex and challenging, and they are often sought out for the toughest jobs. When giant concrete pilings spilled off a barge near Cape Charles, they got the call to bring the full force of their talent and assets, conducted thorough planning, made exploratory dives, brought in two floating cranes with their tugs and handled piling demolition. *Done.* The roster of important projects, many essential to public life, is staggering. Highlights include their emergency response to the Lynchburg (VA) dam, Bonner Bridge (OBX) demolition & construction, laying subaqueous cables, transport and placement of a 280 ton ship loader via their Samson barge crane, removing obstructions from props, demolition & construction of the James River fishing piers, coal ash pond repair, transmission tower piling repairs over a river and countless on-call responses for tricky salvage and dive jobs at all hours of the day.

But the best cranes, equipment, vessels and technology alone will not get the job done, nor navigate unforeseen issues. It takes high quality people, their minds, eyes, hands and strength. The Crofton family speaks of how lucky they are to have the people they do. This is not a cliché, they practice it every day. The staff speaks endearingly of how the Croftons have treated them as family, not employees with story after story – time off to care for an aging parent, extended leave for a wife battling illness, giving a young ambitious diver (much like Juan) a promotion or a promised hire to a dive school graduate.

At Crofton's 10 acre location in Portsmouth at Port Norfolk in Portsmouth, the property itself has recently been a construction site adding new offices, facilities and conference rooms to handle staff and training. They are primed for further growth. To remind staff and visitors of their history, inside Crofton's cozy lobby the famous photo of Juan & Bunny in their golden years sitting on a seawall with the *Cromo* in the background hangs for all to see. Bunny's memory remains memorialized by the tug that bears her name and is so well known on the harbor. In memory of Juan, the *Cromo* is seaworthy and participates in Harborfest though no longer active. It's also showcased in a masterful scale model in a sealed glass case.

*For all the public infrastructure work Crofton does and all the dangers it entails, and for putting people first as the right way to run a company, we salute you all and wish **Godspeed** to the divers, captains, crane operators and personnel in the course of their daily work as they extend Juan's legacy.*



Bunny C.



Cromo

