



HL HUNLEY ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

College Level H.L. Hunley Introduction

The following is an attempt to get students on the secondary and post-secondary level familiar with the Confederate submarine H. L. Hunley. In February of 1864, the Hunley was the first underwater vessel to sink an enemy ship in combat. In more recent times, a TNT movie has been made of the Hunley and, more importantly, the vessel has been raised from Charleston harbor and is currently undergoing excavation by trained professionals.

This exercise is also aimed at getting students to recognize, examine and understand primary historical documents. Teachers and professors can employ this material in a variety of ways, one of which can be an in-class discussion and debate of the events and importance surrounding the Confederate submarine.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The introduction familiarizes the reader with the Hunley and its historical context. The evidence section provides the reader with primary documents and a few secondary sources related to the Hunley. The discussion section poses certain questions to the reader, in which the answers may be complex and somewhat elusive. Finally, the conclusion discusses the legacy of the Hunley, and the recent events surrounding the locating, raising and excavating of the one hundred and thirty-seven year old artifact.



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The guns of war opened in Charleston harbor as the newly formed Confederate States of America bombarded Fort Sumter in the early morning hours of April 12th, 1861. The Union-held fort fell within three days, and the American Civil War officially began. Nearly three years later, after many thousands gone on both sides, Charleston was the scene of another, equally significant event in the history the United States, and the world. On February 17th, 1864 a tiny, "cigar shaped" underwater vessel lurked outside the harbor in a near full moon. The sea was calm, and the wind was moderate. With the Union naval blockade of the South in full force, the H. L. Hunley cautiously and silently moved through the dark water.

Since the beginning of the war, the Union had enforced such a naval blockade of the entire southern coast with the intention of choking the rebellion, by restricting the movement of goods and weapons. The presence of warships also aided in the Union's bombardment of southern coastal cities and as a means of launching invasions into the heart of the Confederacy. By 1864, the strategy of constricting the South was paying off as southern ports and waterways were effectively – but not entirely – blocked off by Union ships. South Carolina's major port city, Charleston, was of special significance to the North. It was where the rebellion began and was thus a prime target for military action. The city had been repeatedly fired upon, but as of yet, it had not been taken by Union forces. Nevertheless, the northern blockade had the desired effect - Charleston was continually threatened by invasion, bombardment, and scarcity of goods.

To defend the city, Charlestonians and their defenders employed numerous methods to counter the Union threat. Torpedoes were deployed throughout the harbor – so much so that Union vessels feared getting too close to the city. In addition, small, low-riding, semi-submersibles, named "Davids" cruised the waterways in search of unwary northern ships. In October of 1863, one of the Davids successfully attacked the blockading vessel *New Ironsides*. While mines, torpedoes and Davids had certain success defending the city, the Confederates in Charleston needed something more to break the blockade. They turned to the submarine.

Submarines were not a novel idea in 1864, since there was a long history of Europeans and Americans designing and constructing them, but the submarines had rarely been tested in battle and had never been successful in destroying an enemy ship. To the Confederacy, these underwater vessels provided some hope for countering northern naval power. After attempts to build submersible crafts succeeded in New Orleans and Mobile, commanding general of Charleston Pierre Gustav Toutant Beauregard ordered the Hunley be sent to him by train in 1863 in order to possibly break the Union blockade. The underwater vessel was put straight to work upon its arrival, but this hurried move cost the lives of two crews who sank to the bottom of the harbor during trial runs. After the Hunley was raised for the second time, the Confederate crew of volunteers decided to undergo extensive training with the vessel. Lieutenant George Dixon and his men became expert at handling the testy submarine. Finally, in February of 1864, the Hunley was ready for action.



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The United States blockading ship, Housatonic, was stationed about five-and-a-half miles east, southeast of Fort Sumter on that ill-fated night. The 23-gun ship with a crew of some 300 men knew to be on the lookout for Confederate "infernal machines" that roamed the harbor. The Hunley's commander, fearing that a bright moon could possibly alert the enemy to his approach, nevertheless decided to strike a blow at the Union warships. Just before 9 o'clock, Lieutenant Dixon's fears were realized as crewmembers of the Housatonic took notice of an unidentifiable object approaching their ship. To some, it had the appearance of a log or plank floating in the water. But as the Hunley drew nearer, the crew of the Union ship sounded the alarm and prepared to move. Before she could maneuver out of the way, however, an explosion rocked the ship and, within minutes, it sank to the bottom of the harbor. The scene was utter chaos as men shouted and scrambled to save themselves. Many clung to the rigging of the Housatonic which protruded above the waterline after its sinking. Only five Union men died in the blast, but the first successful sinking of a ship in battle by a submarine had taken place. The Hunley, however, never made it back to port. Dixon, and his crew of seven, were but another casualty in the bloodiest war in American history.

Examine the following evidence and try to formulate ideas concerning the success or failure of the Hunley, the occurrence of events on the night of February 17th, 1864, and the impact the Confederate submarine had on the Union blockade and the southern homefront, as well as naval history in general. In addition, try to figure out what happened to the Hunley following the attack on the Housatonic.