



HL HUNLEY ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

A Brief History of the H.L. Hunley by Mark K. Ragan

On the cold winter night of February 17, 1864, the small Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley, departed from her mooring on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina and set course for the twinkling lights of the USS Housatonic then lying at anchor some three miles outside Charleston Harbor. At the helm of the forty foot vessel was a twenty-five-year-old army lieutenant named George E. Dixon, an engineering officer then on detached duty from Mobile, Alabama who had taken command of the submarine shortly after she had drowned two previous crews. The first incident occurred while it was moored six months before and the second took place during a practice dive only four months before.

As the submarine slowly rose to the surface and maneuvered near the moonlit wooden hull of the Housatonic, she was prematurely discovered by a union sailor on watch duty who later stated at the board of inquiry "I saw something on the water, which at first looked to me like a porpoise, coming to the surface to blow." Although the Hunley was greeted with a fierce barrage of small arms fire following her discovery, Lieutenant Dixon and his adventurous crew were able to attach the submarine's 135 pound torpedo beneath the Housatonic's water line. Hunley reversed and detonated the device with devastating consequences.

Within five minutes following the explosion, the Housatonic was on the bottom of the ocean floor with five of her crew and officers dead. In subsequent reports filed with Confederate military headquarters in the days that followed, it was revealed that a signal from the Hunley to light a beacon to guide the vessel back to shore had been both "Observed and answered" after the successful attack. Although the signal fire that was to guide the Hunley back to port burned into the early morning hours of February 18th, the little Hunley and her gallant crew were never seen or heard from again.

For more than 130 years, the puzzling riddle as to the strange disappearance of the H.L. Hunley remained unsolved, and many maritime historians felt that the fate and final resting place of the tiny vessel would remain a mystery forever. Fortunately, and thanks to the diligent search efforts conducted by adventure novelist Clive Cussler and his crew of Ralph Wilbanks, Wes Hall and Harry Pecorelli, the many questions as to the mysteries of this Confederate secret weapon may soon be revealed. For during early May 1995, Cussler's NUMA (National Underwater and Marine Agency) dive team located the intact, sealed hull of this maritime treasure, the world's first successful combat submarine.



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Story, cont.

The story of the first submarine to sink an enemy warship in combat starts not with the small submarine H.L. Hunley now lying buried with her nine-man crew beneath the shifting sands outside Charleston Harbor. Instead, it begins with the design and construction of a three-man prototype vessel known to historians as the Confederate privateering vessel, Pioneer.

Built by Louisiana merchants Horace Hunley, James McClintock, and Baxter Watson in 1861, this clumsy-looking submersible proved to both her inventors and military authorities that submarine navigation was feasible, and that attacking a surface vessel from a craft that remained hidden beneath the waves was both practical and deadly. Unfortunately for the three Louisiana inventors, New Orleans fell to the Union fleet of Admiral Farragut only weeks after the group had secured a privateering commission for their submarine from the Confederate government.

The three inventors hastily sank their underwater invention in the New Basin Canal when Union occupation forces under the command of General Benjamin Butler entered city. They fled New Orleans carrying blue prints, diagrams and drawings to Mobile, Alabama with hopes of building a larger, more formidable submarine boat. A second submarine vessel was under construction within months at a machine shop located near the harbor. After several failed attempts to propel their new submarine boat with an electric motor and a small, custom-built steam engine, a hand crank, designed to be turned by four men was installed.

Within weeks following the loss of the submarine, Horace Hunley, James McClintock, and Baxter Watson were joined by a group of Southern engineers who had close ties to the Confederate Secret Service. The group's leader was E.C. Singer, a burley Texan then holding a patent on the most widely used underwater contact mine being used in Southern waters. This team began work on a third submarine almost immediately.

This third submarine, which would later be named H.L. Hunley, was completed in early July of 1863. In August of that same year, the submarine was loaded onto two railroad flat cars and sent to Charleston, South Carolina. After sinking twice, and killing two crews, Hunley was salvaged and put under the command of Alabama engineering officer George E. Dixon. On the night of February 17, 1864, the Confederate submarine "Hunley" became the first submersible vessel in the history of the world to sink an enemy ship during wartime. It would remain a feat unrivaled until World War I, some fifty years later.



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Story, cont.

Since the publication of this article, there have been a few changes to what Mr. Ragan has written. First of all, the USS Housatonic was lying about 4 miles outside Charleston Harbor. Also, the men that were with Mr. Cussler on the search efforts were archeologists. There were only 8 men on board the first submarine that sunk. Horace Hunley, James McClintock and Baxter Watson were engineers that built the submersible. Finally, it was the second submarine that was lost when the builders were joined by a group of Southern engineers who had close ties to the Confederate Secret Service.