



HL HUNLEY ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

Who Found the Hunley? By Mark Ragan

Many people would like to claim the prize of the legendary Hunley, the first submarine to sink a warship in combat. But after much in-depth research and assessment by the National Park Service, Naval Historical Center and the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, it was determined the H.L. Hunley remained deeply buried in the sediment until its 1995 discovery. Once covered with sediment, it was never again exposed until a partial excavation by a search and dive team led by Ralph Wilbanks for author Clive Cussler. After considerable evaluation of all available evidence, the Hunley Commission concluded that Clive Cussler and his survey team were the actual discoverers of the Hunley. This finding respects the contributions of others who, through their search efforts, kept alive the hope that Hunley would be located and brought home.

Since 1977, Cussler has discovered more than 60 shipwrecks with the help of the non-profit National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA), which he heads. The agency is dedicated to preserving maritime heritage, and is financed by the royalties from Cussler's adventure novels.

In the case of the Hunley, NUMA first applied for a permit from the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) before beginning their initial search for the vessel in 1980. They tried again in 1981 after an unsuccessful mission, expanding the 1980 search area that was centered closely around the perimeter of the sunken Housatonic. This time, SCIAA not only offered a permit, but a "top-of-the-line archaeological dive team and a first rate boat," Cussler recalls. During the 1981 search, 19 magnetic anomalies were found, but eight were dismissed as being too small. Seven anomalies had the magnetic intensity to be associated with the Hunley, but weren't identified at the end of the 1981 season.

The search didn't resume until August 1994. Of the 13 year lapse, Cussler says in his book *The Sea Hunters*, "Perhaps I'd developed a mental block or just wasn't in the mood. For various reasons some shipwrecks can never be located. I did not believe this to be the case with Hunley."

So again they trekked on. The 1994 search consisted of a 9-day collaborative project between NUMA and SCIAA to relocate the seven unidentified anomalies found in 1981. This time, the two parties decided to make the search a joint venture. NUMA was given the responsibility of relocating the magnetic anomalies, and SCIAA was to dive down and identify the targets. Unfortunately, SCIAA was able to positively identify only one target as the remains of a wooden vessel due to a number of factors including lack of visibility, strong currents and loose sands.



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Story, cont.

After much frustration in being still unable to locate the Hunley, underwater archaeologists Ralph Wilbanks and Wes Hall, under the direction of Cussler, resumed searching through the fall of 1994 and the spring of 1995. They finally decided to relocate and identify the anomalies that had been discounted in 1981 before proceeding to search in a different, less likely, direction. The men agreed that they would recheck the targets in order of highest intensity.

The first of these sites that Wilbanks and Hall, along with Harry Pecorelli, investigated was the Hunley. After years of searching, the lost submarine was found on May 3, 1995.

The men exposed the side of the vessel down to the dive plane for confirmation of the findings, and documented the site with underwater video. The Hunley was buried more than three feet below the bottom surface, lying on its starboard side at approximately 45 degrees. With the news of the discovery the State of South Carolina created the Hunley Commission to recover and preserve this genesis of the modern submarine. The Hunley Commission and the Naval Historical Center forged a partnership to proceed and fund an exploratory expedition.

The Naval Historical Center and the South Carolina Hunley Commission with the assistance of the National Park Service (who lists the vessel on the National Register of Historic Places) and the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) conducted an assessment of the vessel believed to be Hunley. The National Park Service reported that the Hunley Commission's and the Naval Historical Center's objectives were to determine first if NUMA's coordinates were in fact the Hunley, and second to observe if the submarine was well enough intact to be safely raised for conservation and display. Fieldwork in May and June of 1996 determined that the vessel was indeed the Hunley, and that raising and conserving the sub was not only feasible, but recommended. The Hunley Commission decided to proceed with the raising and conservation of the vessel and created the Friends of the Hunley, a 501(c)(3) corporation, to assist in the task. Senator Glenn McConnell, Chairman of the Hunley Commission, announced that the Commission's goal was to complete for the Hunley what she tried that fatal night but could not do - to complete the journey home. Warren Lasch, a successful businessman, assumed the Chairmanship of the friends of the Hunley and dedicated the Friends to doing just that by the year 2001, bringing the Hunley home.



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Story, cont.

Careful investigation of upper hull surfaces and hatches during the site assessment revealed no evidence that the Hunley had ever been snagged. The area where the ship lies is a great source for shrimp, and has been fished heavily since the 1920's. Had the Hunley been above the sediment since that time, it would more than likely have been repeatedly snagged by the many fishermen who frequent the area. The fact that the Hunley has always been buried contradicts reports that the vessel was located where fishing equipment entangled it.

Although many written descriptions and sketches are recorded historically, the investigation of the Hunley revealed that none of the previous accounts were precisely accurate. The Hunley is completely intact with visible damage only to the forward hatch eyepiece, which perhaps happened during the attack on the Housatonic and a gash on the starboard topside of the stern from an anchor possibly over a century ago. The sub is completely filled with silt. This silt along with the marine encrustation that covers its exterior protects the hull and the artifacts inside. These natural encasings are the reason that the Hunley has been so protected and preserved since its loss in 1864, but they may also be cause for potential problems when the encrustation has to be removed for conservation.

Some of the Hunley's other principal features that were exposed during the 1996 survey and assessment study include a snorkel box located four inches from the forward hatch, an aft hatch, a surprisingly long dive plane (6'10"), and five pairs of glass ports called "dead lights" found between the snorkel box and the aft hatch.

Hunley is presently under twenty-four-hour surveillance by the US Naval Weapons Station and US Coast Guard and will remain so until its recovery. It is also monitored by sensors, as well as infrared devices and has a protective coating system installed. The South Carolina Department of Wildlife and Natural Resources also maintains a security vigil.

As we look forward to the monumental day when the pioneer of submarine warfare is raised from its bed of silt deep in the ocean floor, we should also remember all who made it happen. In the words of Cussler when asked if all the money, time, and effort put into the search for the Hunley were worth it, we can all proudly say, "Worth it? Hell yes, it was worth it! There are some things that can't be measured in time and money. The search of Hunley was one of them." And, as Warren Lasch, Chairman of Friends of the Hunley, said, "We have only once chance and that is to do it right." Because of the financial support of the General Assembly of South Carolina and the U.S. Congress and the coordination of a recovery plan by the Hunley Commission, the Friends of Hunley, Inc., and the Naval Historical Center and some private businesses and individuals, the Hunley will finish what she could not otherwise do - complete the journey home.



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Since the publication of this article, there have been a few things that were found to be different than what Mr. Ragan has written. First of all, the Hunley was not completely intact when it was raised. Three holes were found in the submarine, a grapefruit-sized hole in the forward conning tower, a 12 inch in diameter hole in the forward ballast tank, and a three foot long to foot wide hole in the aft ballast tank. Also, the Hunley is currently in a tank in the Warren Lasch Conservation Center. The Hunley has since been raised, the date was August 8th, 2000. Finally, the funding for the project has come from Federal, State and private sources.