

FROM THE DEEP

S.C. panel plans to have Confederate sub hoisted by July

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Well beyond the dunes and legions of sunbathers on Sullivans Island, S.C., this summer divers will descend 30 feet with a steel cage that will cradle one of the world's great underwater relics and raise it from a protective cocoon of sand and silt after 136 years.

By mid-July, they hope to haul the Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley out of the Atlantic Ocean, where in February 1864 it mysteriously sank moments after it became the first submersible boat to sink an enemy ship.

Scientists feel certain the hand-propelled, iron-plated vessel – found in 1995 by divers hired by best-selling author Clive Cussler – is intact and should survive the upheaval. Inside, they say remains of its nine sailors may be unusually well preserved.

"We think we will find an amazingly hydro-dynamic piece of equipment, and the remains of nine sailors who are remarkably preserved, at least with clothing and – because they've been in this mummified state – there could be parts

of flesh and hair there, too," said S.C. Sen. Ernest Passalunghi, D-Charleston. He is a member of the Hunley Commission, the nine-member committee appointed to represent South Carolina's interests in the recovery.

"We think when people grasp the significance of this, they will be astounded. It will capture the imagination of the world."

In 1864, the Hunley carried the hopes of Charlestonians, under siege by Union blockade ships. Now, 136 years later, the U.S. Naval Historical Center thinks the artifact is so important that it loaned Robert Neyland, its chief underwater archaeologist, to South Carolina to oversee the project.

"This is an exceedingly significant underwater relic," said Neyland, who put it at the top of the recoveries he has worked on. "The hull is 99.9 percent intact and the hatches are sealed, so everything that went down 136 years ago is still there. Usually when ships sink they begin to break apart and split open. In this case the whole story is inside."

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IMPORTANT DATES:

AUGUST 1863

A Confederate torpedo boat sinks twice during training missions, killing most of its crew members. After the second sinking, the boat is named for Horace L. Hunley, its main financier who was killed with the second crew.

FEB. 17, 1864

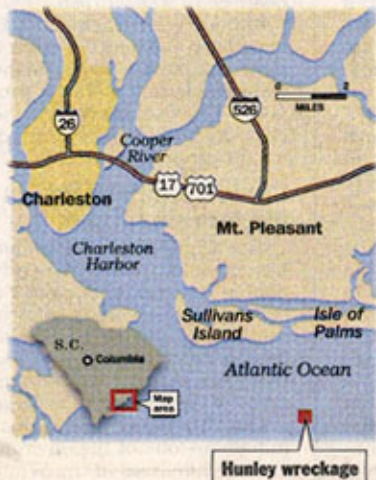
The H.L. Hunley sinks the USS Housatonic, the first time a submersible boat sank an enemy ship. The Hunley never returns to port.

MAY 3, 1995

Divers hired by best-selling author Clive Cussler find remains of the Hunley four miles off Sullivans Island near Charleston.

FEB. 10, 2000

The Hunley Commission recommends plan by Ocean Engineering International Inc. to recover the Hunley and its final nine-member crew.



Author Clive Cussler financed the dive that discovered the Hunley on the ocean floor in 1995.



The Hunley is shown in this painting, courtesy of the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Va.

