

Secrets of a Civil War Submarine:Solving the Mysteries of the H.L. Hunley

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Review

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Walker, Sally M. *Secrets of a Civil War Submarine:Solving the Mysteries of the H.L. Hunley*. Carolrhoda Books, Inc., \$18.95 hardcover ISBN 1575059308

Resurrecting a sunken sub

A multi-faceted study for adolescents

Few authors have the ability to present an historical work that enlivens the central theme with a hands-on appreciation for a number of related subjects and disciplines. In **Secrets of a Civil War Submarine**, Sally M. Walker fascinates all readers, especially young adults, not only with an emphasis on a very special matter related to the Civil War but garnishes the work with aspects of investigative sciences necessary to understand a more complete picture of a unique phenomenon from the past.

Recognition of the *H.L. Hunley* name was re-enforced in the mid 1990s when the vessel was recovered. Prior to that, it rested on the ocean floor for 130 years and was known to few, other than people who studied the Civil War and naval history. The *H.L. Hunley* was a captivating concept during a time when the thought of an underwater--functioning--craft was foreign to both military and civilian minds. In a logical, well written manner, complimented with effective illustrations and photographs, Ms. Walker places the reader inside this marvel of 19th century creativity. From that position, an incredible desire to read on and learn more evolves.

The book begins with an understanding of the general and particular conditions in the South in 1863. The resources needed for the Confederate States of America to continue the struggle against the North were precious and limited. The blockade that sealed Southern ports and prevented seagoing trade was strangling the area. Two gentlemen from New Orleans, one a financier, the other a machinist recognized the need to assist in alleviating the economic hold Union ships placed on the South. They began their work in familiar environs but

relocated to Mobile when Union forces presented themselves in Louisiana. Once there, the men accelerated their work and, through Ms. Walker's excellent presentation, the reader is involved with not only the building of the new secret weapon but witnesses the many trials and challenges necessary to prove the seaworthiness of the peculiar fish boat.

The reader is not left alone to contemplate the know-how necessary to successfully make a vessel float, submerge, sustain life and resurface. In clear language, the physical laws concerning, for example, negative, neutral and positive buoyancy are explained. The design of the craft is explained including the steps necessary to propel, steer, and have it function both above and below the water line. The technology required for the delivery of the torpedo to an enemy ship is fascinating, especially in relation to both the detonation of the package and the safety of the submarine crew. James McClintock, the machinist and builder of the boat honored his financier partner, Horace Lawson Hunley, by naming the final product the *H.L. Hunley*.

By the time this new package was brought to Charleston, South Carolina, it had captured the attention of the Southern military. Perhaps this strange new weapon would help ease the conditions hurting the Southern war effort. The new location required additional testing. Currents in Charleston Harbor were new to the craft. Effective trials now required a trained crew and the call for volunteers was soundly answered. On page 21, Walker writes: No one could doubt the crew's courage as they attempted feats that no sailor had ever accomplished.

Unfortunately, two tragic mishaps caused the loss of life, including the death of Mr. Hunley. The result of these accidents forced General Beauregard to reconsider the entire project. George Dixon, who was a member of James McClintock's team, took it upon himself to analyze the cause of the mishaps. His research found human error the source and was able to convince Beauregard that the craft could be used. The general agreed but issued a directive stating there would be no more diving to deliver a torpedo.

On February 17, 1864, the *H.L. Hunley*, refitted with a spar that would carry a torpedo into an enemy ship and a crew of eight men, led by Lt. George E. Dixon, was ready. Just after 7:00pm, the men cranked the propeller shaft and the ship moved out into the calm, moonlit harbor. At approximately 8:45pm, the USS *Housatonic*, a Union steam sloop anchored a few miles out, experienced the result of Lt. Dixon pulling a lanyard from within the submarine. The torpedo that

had pierced the *Housatonic's* hull exploded. The *Housatonic* sank, and the *Hunley* earned its place in history, but did not return from the depths. The heroism of the *Hunley's* crew did not ultimately alter the course of the war but certainly initiated a new chapter in naval history.

Thankfully, Ms. Walker does not end the story at this point. The next five chapters are dedicated to the search, discovery, and reclamation of the *Hunley*. Through writing that can only be described as absorbing, the reader is taken underwater to see the *Hunley* on the ocean floor and to learn all the archological and engineering challenges facing the dedicated people who recover the vessel: the application of modern technology to map the submarine and interpret as much as possible before it is raised; the investigative techniques to hypothesize why the *Hunley* sank; the sensitive understanding that not only is the find a mechanical marvel but the final resting place of eight heroic men; the ownership hurdles incumbent with such an historical find; the chemical preservation issues that arise once the submarine is recovered and the painstaking work to slowly unveil the contents without violation to the integrity of the human and artifact remains.

The cooperative merging of numerous scientific disciplines and work ethic is spellbinding. Each page reveals more technical discoveries and accounts as well as an equal number of human stories. Initially, **Secrets of a Civil War Submarine** is an objective study of a machine. As the reader moves through the work, the story turns human. By the end of the volume, the *H.L. Hunley* speaks to the scientists and the reader. The ship and the artifacts found, especially a watch and gold coin, give real clues about the men and exactly what happened after it attacked the Union sloop.

As if everything above is not enough, the reader is finally blessed with a description of the work done to identify the crew of the *Hunley* and a forensic reconstruction that results in the faces of eight hero's looking out from the pages of this wonderful work. Their proper burial in 2004 is also documented.

Sally M. Walker has given us a work, based on history, that has not only brought science to life--a quote on the back flap of the book about her consistent themes in the 20 books she has written--but given an in-depth study in story form. The author also poses questions that remain unanswered and encourages the reader to continue a personal study by visiting listed websites particular to the *Hunley*.

The inside flap of **Secrets of a Civil War Submarine** notes that the book is A Junior Library Guild Selection. As true as that statement is, I may add that it should be a selection for everyone, adult readers included.

George McNamara is involved in the work to rehabilitate the name and reputation of Doctor Samuel A. Mudd. He lectures and has written numerous articles on the subject. His writing has also included subjects, for children, related to the Civil War.