

The H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy

Steven Ramold

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ramold, Steven (2009) "The H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss2/4>

Review

Ramold, Steven

Spring 2009

Chaffin, Tom *The H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy*. Hill and Wang, \$26.00 hardcover ISBN 9780809095124

The Confederacy and Innovation in Naval Warfare

In August 2000, the recovery of the Confederate vessel *H.L. Hunley*, the first submarine to successfully sink an enemy vessel in combat, revived interest in the innovative craft. Of the numerous books to appear in recent years, Tom Chaffin's *H.L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy* emerges as the best. Chaffin provides a clear and well-written account of the conceptualization, construction, testing, use, and eventual recovery of the *Hunley*. The book centers on the personalities that devised the submarine and how Confederate citizens, aware of the development of this "top secret" weapon, placed their hopes on the tiny craft to break the Union blockade.

The driving force behind the craft was its namesake, Horace Lawson Hunley. Born in Tennessee and raised in New Orleans, Hunley was an ambitious man on the make. He possessed a law degree, served briefly in the state legislature, clerked at the customs house, brokered cotton, and owned a sugar plantation. In the freewheeling economy of antebellum New Orleans, Hunley pursued any opportunity to improve his personal wealth and social standing. Therefore, when Hunley heard of a prize offered by the Confederate government to anyone who could devise a craft capable of defeating the Union blockade he jumped at the idea, despite his total lack of experience in naval design and construction. In conjunction with his partners, James McClintock and Baxter Watson, Hunley produced a first test submarine, *Pioneer*, in 1862. The Union capture of New Orleans ended their experiments, however, and the group relocated to Mobile. Their first craft, *American Diver*, failed because the designers could not find a suitable propulsion system, and the craft sank in a storm in 1863. The next design, *Fish Boat*, relied on a hand-cranked propeller, but by then the Confederate Navy's interest in the craft was waning. General

P.G.T. Beauregard, charged with the defense of Charleston, was interested in the vessel and confiscated it to protect the local harbor. Hunley refused to abandon his investment, and accompanied *Fish Boat* on its trip to Charleston, where the craft was rechristened *H.L. Hunley* in honor of its origins.

Testing the craft proved dangerous. In August 1863, an operational error caused *Hunley* to sink, killing five of the eight men on board. Two months later, a recovered and repaired *Hunley* entered the harbor for another exercise, but failed to recover from a dive. This time all eight men aboard, including Hunley himself, died in the disaster. Despite diminished optimism in the submarine concept, Beauregard continued to support the program. Beauregard had *Hunley* recovered and repaired, and, under the command of Lieutenant George Dixon, resumed testing the vessel. Finally, in February 1864, Beauregard authorized Dixon to attempt a real attack. Dixon managed to attach the craft's spar torpedo to the U.S.S. *Housatonic* and back away before the explosion sank the Union vessel, killing five Union sailors. But *Hunley* itself failed to return, claiming the lives of yet another crew. Decades later, *Hunley* found itself in its final battle as rivals fought over the bragging rights for discovering its final resting place and arguments broke out over the ownership of the historic relic. Thankfully, these battles proved easier to resolve than the Civil War, and *Hunley's* remains found their way to a preservation facility.

Some interesting and relevant discussions emerge from Chaffin's retelling of *Hunley's* career. One important discussion in the book is the expectation attached to Hunley. The author clearly demonstrates that *Hunley* was far from a secret weapon, as citizens in New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston knew much about the development of the craft and its intended purpose. For citizens of all three cities, the odd vessel promised relief from the Union blockade, and public hopes for the craft spurred along development and testing as citizens placed their hopes on the new weapon. The level of public awareness and hope created a backlash when *Hunley* failed. The loss of *Hunley*, made especially worse by the large amount of public interest in the vessel, doomed what seemed a promising technological answer to the blockade. The lack of success, paid for in a number of lives, translated into only a single victory, and the demise of the *Hunley* chilled enthusiasm for submarine construction projects.

This situation, in turn, contributes to the reevaluation of *Hunley's* effectiveness. The traditional assessment on the Confederate submarine effort is one of slap-dashed efforts that barely succeeded in sinking a Union ship more by

audacity than by design. But Chaffin presents a different picture. After noting all of the time, effort, and that went into *Hunley*, a reader comes away expecting the craft to have accomplished more. Neither *Hunley* nor its predecessors were the crude devices that other accounts tend to suggest. Chaffin demonstrates the clear thought process that went into the design and development of *Pioneer*, *American Diver*, and *Fish Boat/H.L. Hunley*. In its final form, *Hunley* sported many features found on modern submarines: a conning tower, diving planes, and ballast tanks. The sophisticated features of these early craft helped to generate the public hope mentioned in the subtitle, leading to expectations that submarines could amount to much more. McCormick in particular had plans for advanced craft, and Beauregard steadfastly supported the submarine program even after the loss of two crews. After the lengthy account of the design, development, and relative sophistication of the craft, its untimely sinking seems almost anticlimactic.

Chaffin, a professor of history at the University of Tennessee, has produced a fine account of *Hunley's* birth, development, and untimely death. He adeptly combines the technical features of the inanimate device with the very human motivations behind those who created and promoted the vessel. His discussion of the public hope attached to the vessel by Confederate citizens who saw the submarine as their economic savior adds an important dimension to the history of the ship. In short, this is an excellently written and well-documented account of a piece of Civil War history that survived the decades and can be seen today.

Steven Ramold is an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. He is the author of Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy (2002) and Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army, with will be published in Fall 2009.