

HUNLEY

AFTER FIVE GENERATIONS, THE ATLANTIC SURRENDERS A NATIONAL TREASURE



PHOTO CREDIT TO COME

H.L. Hunley, suspended in a freshwater preservation tank after almost 140 years on the sea floor, seems eerily on the prowl, much as it would have appeared on its calamitous Civil War outings.

BY MARGARET N. O'SHEA

There was surely a time when the crewmen on the *H.L. Hunley* would have given anything for a breath of fresh air. Their mission accomplished, they had briefly resurfaced and shone a blue magnesium lantern to alert Confederate compatriots on shore that they had succeeded. They had rammed their spar torpedo into the *Housatonic*, sinking it, striking a blow to the Yankee blockade of Charleston Harbor at the height of the Civil War—and proving submarines could be a deadly force in future warfare. Then something happened. They were sinking themselves. They couldn't breathe. *Oh, for air!*

Today, the air once so desperately longed for is an enemy. Uncontrolled exposure to oxygen after more than a century pickled in the ocean's brine would further corrode the historic vessel that has been lifted from its grave at the bottom of the ocean, and it could damage the artifacts inside. So the *Hunley* rests in a vat of water with temperature and currents carefully controlled in a conservation laboratory at the old Charleston Navy Base, while archaeologists attempt to recover the secrets that went down with it in 1864.

The pervasive question is why the first submarine ever to sink an enemy ship disappeared. But it is only one of the myriad mysteries locked in the sub and in the remains of the eight men for whom it became a metal coffin. There are so many mysteries to solve that chief archaeologist Maria Jacobsen has come to



realize she may live the rest of her days in South Carolina. The Danish scientist is part of the crack team assembled to discover whatever can be discovered about the legendary submarine that was miraculously raised intact on August 8, 2000. The team is committed to restoring some measure of the lives lost in Charleston Bay (now called Charleston Harbor), even for the four whose names remain unknown.

“Their biographies are in their bones,” Jacobsen says. And in a stray eyelash, a hair, a shoe, a medicine bottle, a button. Pencil stubs raise the exciting possibility there might be a logbook onboard, yet to be recovered. There’s a pipe that one crewman clearly switched from the left side of his mouth to the right because he had an abscessed tooth.

After 136 years at the bottom of the ocean, the crew were found at their duty stations in the 42-inch-wide space where they had hand-cranked the *Hunley’s* propeller. A silent testament to the cramped quarters is a half-moon carved in the handle of the rear ballast pump, suggesting someone kept banging his knuckles and solved the problem by whittling a niche for them.

Some findings are common sense. Stalactites hanging from the roof of the interior show there was no water in the submarine for a long time after it

sank. Thus, the hull was not breached in the *Housatonic* explosion—a common theory about what could have happened. Stalactites are formed over many years by dripping water, and water doesn’t drip underwater. Also, the men’s bones were not commingled, as they would have been if their bodies had floated before they decayed.

Others are jigsaw puzzles solved by committee. Doug Owsley, a physical anthropologist with the Smithsonian Institution, is reading clues from the crew’s remains. Linda Abrams is a genealogist looking into archives around the country to flesh out what is known about the men with full or partial names and hoping to find somewhere records that will help identify the others. Together they determined that a Union medallion around the neck of one crewman, an ID, must have been a trophy of some sort. In another case, when Owsley noticed an old injury to one crewman’s bone, Abrams was able to say it was probably from lifting heavy sacks of flour, since the man worked in his family’s bakery before going to war. They know that Lt. George E. Dixon, who commanded the sub, walked with a limp and had a deviated septum that probably made breathing on a submarine hellish. They know when they are finally able to open his watch and see the inscription, it probably will be

Archaeologist Harry Pecorelli looks down the interior of the hull during excavation. This page, from top: Ever so slowly, the legendary craft rises from the sea to be greeted by a fleet of onlookers.

a Masonic emblem. And they have found the gold coin he carried, the one that saved his life at Shiloh when it deflected a bullet but couldn't help him on the *Hunley* when the air gave out. They have found the blue lamp.

So the dead do tell tales, but in their own time. Nor is there instant gratification in discoveries that require sifting through hundreds of gallons of silt or studying minuscule squares of metal, removing thick "concretion" speck by speck. A year after the *Hunley* was raised and moved to the lab on a barge past hundreds of cheering spectators, its interior was still clogged with sediment, its inner workings mostly still hidden. The excavation has been purposefully slow and careful, inch by inch, with long periods of respite while skeletons are assembled, artifacts analyzed and next steps pondered. Some of them have taken immense forethought.

Modern equipment that would not have been available had the *Hunley* been raised in the century it sank is helping guide decisions and form conclusions. X-rays and computers are prime examples. Scientists have been weighing whether the best conservation method for the submarine is cold hydrogen plasma reduction, which has been used successfully to conserve small, contaminated metal artifacts—but never something as large as the *Hunley*.

There is so much to do, so much to learn, that it will be years before the famous submarine will be ready for display. Rushing is not in the cards.

"There is only one *Hunley*. We want to get this right the first time because there will never be another chance," says state Sen. Glenn McConnell, who chairs the *Hunley* Commission, created by the legislature to acquire, recover and preserve the sub.

As Jacobsen observes, "There were no models, no blueprints, no books out there on how to raise a unique antique." The commission and the crack team of professionals it was assembling from various fields publicly floated their own ideas and sought others' opinions. "You can't just say 'oops' if you are dealing with a national treasure," says Jacobsen, "or what some would call an international treasure. It is a vessel that changed world history. . . . It's such a rare opportunity to have the vehicle that literally changed the map of the world. When the *Hunley* sank the *Housatonic*, regardless of whether it also sank itself, it changed the future view of what could be done."

Only after its recovery was it known that the *Hunley* was no tin can, either, but a fairly sophisti-



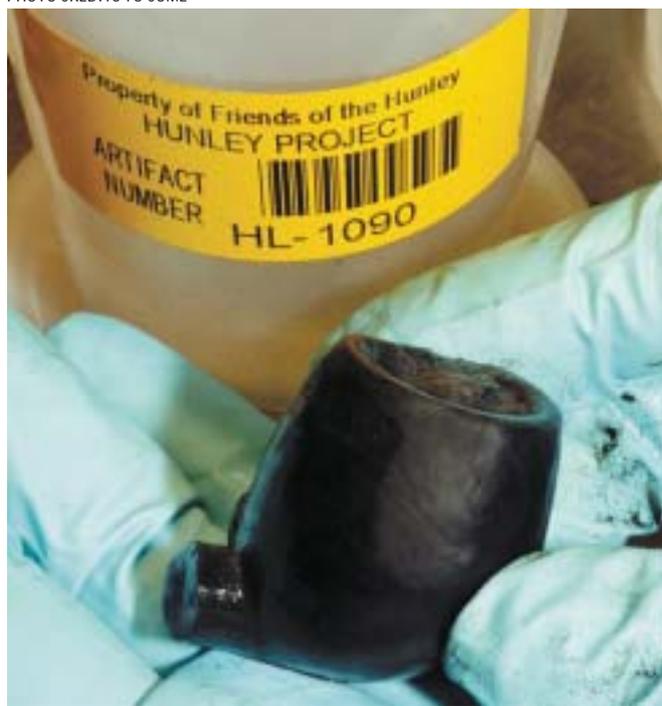
cated prototype of modern submarines with features it would take half a century to be re-invented. Named for the man who paid for its construction, the *Hunley* would have been a template for underwater craft to come after it, had it only come home.

Although usually called a Confederate submarine, what's special about the *Hunley* transcends the leanings of the men who died in it. It was a complex period of history with a slew of different drummers. What the *Hunley* accomplished is a key piece of naval history, politics aside, and the bravery it took to sign on that risky voyage was phenomenal. Thirteen men had died on trial runs.

McConnell, a Civil War re-enactor who owns the state's largest gallery for art, literature and historical memorabilia, most of it concerning that era, sees the *Hunley* as a national icon, not a relic of the Lost Cause. "The story of America is a story of freedom-loving people, from the Revolution to the Civil War and every other conflict the people of this nation have engaged in. It is the story of a people who answered the call of duty to pursue freedom as they understood it, putting aside the element of fear. They made the same sacrifices, and some gave the greatest gift anyone can give another. . . . The *Hunley* reminds us freedom has not come easily for any generation of Americans and it will not come easily in the future."

The submarine's history embodies "elements that transcend causes—courage, bravery, the call to duty, the drive to win, the will to succeed," says Warren Lasch, who chairs the Friends of the *Hunley* corporation. The *Hunley* Commission created Friends of the *Hunley* to raise money for the recovery, study and conservation of the submarine, which eventually will be the centerpiece of a maritime museum. The federal and state government each has given \$8.5 million for the project—one of the most complex conservation efforts in history. Public donations have topped \$8.5 million. No one involved believes \$17 million will cover the ultimate tab, and raising more is a high priority. The state and federal governments expect to recover their investments when the legendary submarine goes on view. There even looms the possibility that South Carolina will become the "cutting edge" site for conserving nautical artifacts.

Raising funds is a task made easier by the global attention the project has garnered and public enthusiasm for it. The sub has so captured fancy around the world that last year, as Lasch checked into a hotel in Australia, he saw a man checking out who was wearing a "Friends of the *Hunley*" cap. When the conservatory was opened for tours, the Web site handling tickets got 4 million hits in such rapid succession that it crashed.



Artifacts include a sailor's pipe and the coin that once saved the commander's life.

Opposite: Conservation intern Ebba Samuelsson carefully cleans a fragile leather shoe; senior archaeologist Maria Jacobsen works in the background.

Lasch was recruited mainly for his business sense after he "retired" in South Carolina, which to him meant running only four companies. He originally was asked to give a few hours a week to the cause but quickly was "Hunleytized," as McConnell calls it. It is a reference to the magic and intriguing mystery the *Hunley* works on those who learn a little about it and find themselves fascinated by its legend and drawn to the men who died inside. Those few hours have become between 40 and 60, and Lasch has donated some \$2 million to the conservation fund. The conservation lab is named for him, but he says his real reward will be finishing the mission the *Hunley* crew began, seeing that they are buried with faces and names and known histories beside the previous *Hunley* crews in Charleston's Magnolia Cemetery.

At the helm of Friends of the *Hunley*, Lasch has resisted potential moneymaking schemes, such as bottling the sifted sediment from the submarine and selling it, because that would seem too much like desecrating a grave. He is not alone in a determination to respect the dead. When remains are laid out, that area of the lab is off-limits to outsiders, and no pictures are allowed for public voyeurism.



From the moment the *Housatonic* went down, there has been widespread awe and admiration for the naval pioneers who made it happen. The *Hunley* was one of the most sought-after artifacts in naval history. P.T. Barnum offered \$100,000 for its recovery, and it figured in Jules Verne's science fiction. The lost sub became a goal for scores of divers; last fall two were locked in a federal court battle over which actually found its resting place, although official credit goes to Clive Cussler, the man who found the *Titanic*. The craft is such a rare find that the one-of-a-kind laboratory where it is being studied was custom-built, as was the freshwater tank in which the *Hunley* now is submerged. National Geographic documented the recovery in its television program. The reconstruction of the faces of the crew also will be filmed, as will ultimately their burial near the 13 other men who died in earlier trial runs of the sub that failed. The *Hunley* has been the subject of a movie and several books.

While the tourism potential of the *Hunley* is

mind-boggling, another stroke of good luck promises to make South Carolina the definitive site to learn about a little-attended aspect of the Civil War as it was fought not on land but at sea by blockade runners and Confederate sailors. The state is acquiring for \$3 million (less than half its value) the complete collection of rare southern maritime artifacts amassed by Charleston physician Charles Peery. The 10,000-item collection includes books, maps, models, art, photographs, Confederate Navy uniforms, swords and other swatches from an often-ignored fabric. Like the *Hunley*, these treasures can be seen nowhere else.

It's not necessary to like your history as steeped as your tea to see that South Carolina is the custodian of something priceless and unique. To catch that undercurrent of excitement and ride the wave is what it means to be Hunleytized. ❖

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Columbia journalist Margaret N. O'Shea covered the Town of Conway and Clio's "I Have a Dream" program in the Autumn 2002 Sandlapper.