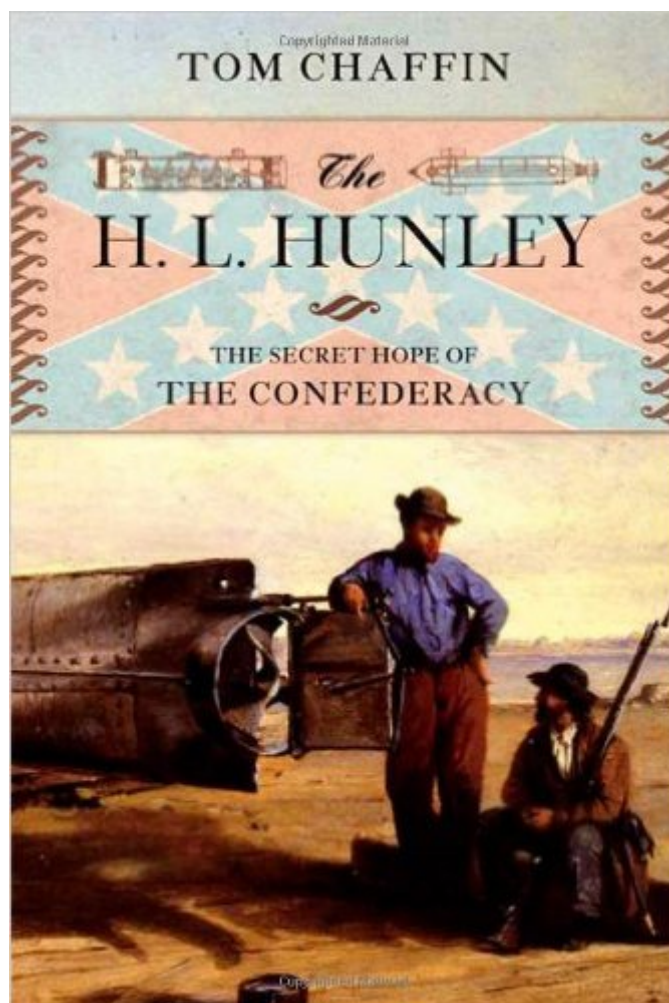


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The H. L. Hunley: The Secret Hope Of The Confederacy



Synopsis

On the evening of February 17, 1864, the Confederacy's H. L. Hunley sank the USS Housatonic and became the first submarine in world history to sink an enemy ship. Not until World War I half a century later would a submarine again accomplish such a feat. But also perishing that moonlit night, vanishing beneath the cold Atlantic waters off Charleston, South Carolina, was the Hunley and her entire crew of eight. For generations, searchers prowled Charleston's harbor, looking for the Hunley. And as they hunted, the legends surrounding the boat and its demise continued to grow. Even after the submarine was definitively located in 1995 and recovered five years later, those legends—those barnacles of misinformation—have only multiplied. Now, in a tour de force of document-sleuthing and insights gleaned from the excavation of this remarkable vessel, distinguished Civil War era historian Tom Chaffin presents the most thorough telling of the Hunley's story possible. Of panoramic breadth, this Civil War saga begins long before the submarine was even assembled and follows the tale into the boat's final hours and through its recovery in 2000. Beyond his thorough survey of period documents relating to the submarine, Chaffin also conducted extensive interviews with Maria Jacobsen, senior archaeologist at Clemson University's Warren Lasch Conservation Center, where the Hunley is now being excavated, to complete his portrait of this technological wonder. What emerges is a narrative that casts compelling doubts on many long-held assumptions, particularly those concerning the boat's final hours. Thoroughly engaging and utterly new, *The H. L. Hunley* provides the definitive account of a storied craft.

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Customer Reviews

In biblical scholarship we speak of the search for the historical Jesus. We humans tend to create legends and myths around important people, places and events. Someone must have the keen scholarship, the healthy skepticism, and the painstaking research to carefully separate fact from fiction, legend from history. Dr. Tom Chaffin has marvelously demonstrated this ability in his new book on the Hunley. I feel indebted to Dr. Chaffin in helping me better understand Horace Hunley from a psychological perspective. This is very important to me as a blood relative of Horace. I am fascinated not only by the submarine but also by the man for whom the submarine is named. Not since the Ruth Duncan book, "The Captain and Submarine CSS H L Hunley" printed in 1965, has any author devoted as much research on Horace Hunley himself, including his sister Volumnia Hunley Barrow and her wealthy husband, Robert Ruffin Barrow. Their intimate connections with Horace Hunley are often overlooked in how they shaped him as a man. Dr. Chaffin's breadth of scholarship is applied like a sharp scalpel to every detail of the Hunley story, separating cherished myths from the raw facts. He does this not only with Horace Hunley, but also with George Dixon and Queenie Bennett, along with the story of the blue light said to have been seen from the shore. Having shared Hunley genealogy with Dr. Chaffin from my old Hunley family bible, I am grateful for the opportunity to get to know this historian on a personal level. I have deep respect for his intellect and self-discipline in overcoming a severe struggle with his health as he researched and wrote. As a Sherlock Holmes scrutinizing every detail of an investigation, Dr. Chaffin used a vast variety of resources in writing this fine book.

The past few decades have seen an unprecedented flourishing of exploration and retrieval of sunken vessels and their cargo. There are richer wrecks than that of the H. L. Hunley, but few of such technological and historical interest. The Hunley was a submarine serving the Confederate forces in the Civil War, and it was the first submarine to sink an enemy ship. It didn't last long thereafter, and it wasn't until World War I that submarines became practical machines of war, but the Hunley was an important step in submarine evolution. After it was raised in 2000, it was available for examination by engineers and historians, and has begun to divulge some of its secrets. In The H. L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy (Hill and Wang), historian Tom Chaffin has told about the raising of the vessel and its recent evaluation by experts, but has given a full history of its development, its creators, and its activity during the Civil War. Chaffin also wrote Sea of Gray, an exciting history of the Confederate raider Shenandoah, and has again presented a smoothly narrated and comprehensive story of a lost ship in a lost cause. This time, however, the

ship represented the best inventiveness and high-tech accomplishment of its age, and Chaffin has placed the ship, its inventors, and the doomed men who sailed on it within a military, technological, and historical context. There were submarines before; Leonardo da Vinci himself said he had designed one, but uncharacteristically did not show anyone else the design, he said, "because of the evil nature of men who would practice assassinations at the bottom of the sea..." Chaffin reviews the history of submarines, with the Hunley being far more advanced than any that had gone before.

I had a sinking feeling as I read Tom Chaffin's preface to his "The H.L. Hunley." He was explaining the lack of archival material that was available for his account of the first submarine in history to sink an enemy warship. From that I expected another fluffy history that would be full of conjecture, exaggeration, and writer-induced fantasy. It turns out that I was pleasantly surprised with a riveting and scholarly tale of enterprise and tragedy that didn't need embellishment. The "H.L. Hunley" was actually the third submarine constructed by a group of Southern patriots who wanted to produce underwater boats that could effectively break the Federal blockade of southern ports. The first two failed, eventually sinking, before actual engagement was made with Union ships. Fortunately the crew members escaped with their lives, but the mishaps raised questions about the idea and slowed the flow of additional funds for future attempts. The three developers of the "H.L. Hunley," and the two boats preceding her, were intrepid and strong-willed, never straying from their goal. Horace Hunley was probably the most tenacious and productive, continually pursuing financial backing and political support from a Confederate government that was always short of money. It was his single-mindedness that got his name attached to the last submarine boat manufactured by the group and the chance to command it during one of its trial voyages. It cost him his life. The "Hunley" had its share of misfortunes during its development. Five of the eight crewmen perished when the "Hunley" sank during a trial run in August 1863, apparently from an open hatch. The boat was raised, only to sink again in October 1863 because of operational error.

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