

A SUBMARINE TORPEDO BOAT: SOUTH CAROLINA,
OCTOBER 1863–FEBRUARY 1864

James H. Tomb:
Notes on the H. L. Hunley

In 1863 a group of engineers in Mobile designed and built a forty-foot-long submarine that was named for Horace L. Hunley, a Louisiana lawyer and merchant who helped finance the project. Driven by a hand-cranked propeller, the *H. L. Hunley* was equipped with diving planes, hand-pumped ballast tanks, and a primitive snorkel device, and could remain underwater for two hours. Sent to Charleston by rail, the submarine sank during a test on August 29, drowning five of its crew. After being raised from the harbor, she sank again on October 15, killing Hunley and seven other men. The second sinking was witnessed by James H. Tomb, an engineer who served on the *David*, a small steam-driven boat with a low silhouette designed for making night attacks on Union warships. Like the *David*, the *Hunley* was armed with a spar torpedo intended to be rammed into an enemy hull and then detonated from a distance. On February 17, 1864, the *Hunley* sank the wooden steam sloop *Housatonic* off Charleston and then disappeared. In 1995 the submarine was located four miles off the coast and one hundred yards from the wreck of her target. The *Hunley* was raised in 2000, and in 2004 the remains of Lieutenant George E. Dixon and his seven crew members were buried in Charleston.

CHARLESTON, S. C., *January, 1865*

There was a submarine torpedo boat, not under the orders of the Navy, and I was ordered to tow her down the harbor three or four times by Flag-Officer Tucker, who also gave me orders to report as to her efficiency as well as safety. In my report to him I stated, “The only way to use a torpedo was on the same plan as the ‘David’—that is, a spar torpedo—and to strike with his boat on the surface, the torpedo being lowered to 8 feet. Should she attempt to use a torpedo as Lieutenant Dixon intended, by submerging the boat and striking from below, the level of the torpedo would be above his own boat, and as she had little buoyancy and no power, the chances were

the suction caused by the water passing into the sinking ship would prevent her rising to the surface, besides the possibility of his own boat being disabled." Lieutenant Dixon was a very brave and cool-headed man, and had every confidence in his boat, but had great trouble when under the water from lack of air and light. At the time she made the attempt to dive under the receiving ship in Charleston Harbor, Lieutenant Dixon, James A. Eason, and myself stood on the wharf as she passed out and saw her dive, but she did not rise again, and after a week's effort she was brought to the surface and the crew of 7 men were found in a bunch near the manhole. Lieutenant Dixon said they had failed to close the after valve.

The last night the "David" towed him down the harbor his torpedo got foul of us and came near blowing up both boats before we got it clear of the bottom, where it had drifted. I let him go after passing Fort Sumter, and on my making report of this, Flag-Officer Tucker refused to have the "David" tow him again. The power for driving this boat came from 7 or 8 men turning cranks attached to the propeller shaft, and when working at their best would make about 3 knots. She was very slow in turning, but would sink at a moment's notice and at times without it. The understanding was that from the time of her construction at Mobile up to the time when she struck *Housatonic* not less than 33 men had lost their lives in her. She was a veritable coffin to this brave officer and his men.

J. H. TOMB.