# The Hunley Watch

“First. That the US Steamer Housatonic was blown up and sunk by a Rebel torpedo craft on the night of February 17, Last, at about nine o’clock PM, while lying at anchor in 24 feet of water off Charleston, South Carolina…….” That statement is part of the official findings of the Naval Court of Inquiry, March 7 1864.

The Union knew about a new Confederate submarine from information furnished by spies and they did try to minimize exposure to danger as best they could, but to no avail. This was new technology, and new rules were now in play which would change the course of naval history forever.

The Hunley, a Confederate miracle, the Southern built hand-cranked submarine with an eight man crew, had sunk a Northern ship! Would this be the breakthrough the South needed to destroy Northern Naval ships and end the blockade that was crippling southern shipping? But the Hunley vanished, not to be seen atop the water until she was raised in Charleston Harbor, in August of 2000. The mystery of her sinking is a fabulous and complex one, and is still being investigated. Many questions required answers, and many experts in various disciplines would be needed to come up with answers following a myriad of clues. We need only concern ourselves at this point, with one clue – the Captain’s pocket watch.

Watches during the Civil War were not as common as they are today. The fact that Captain Dixon had one, and that it was found on the Hunley was a phenomenal bit of luck. This is where I come in.

I was, at the time of my first involvement with the Hunley watch, the Director of the School of Horology of the NAWCC, Inc. The watch found on the Hunley needed to be identified. What kind of watch is it? Where was it made and when? How do you conserve a watch that has been submerged for 130-plus years? These and other questions needed answers. Could I help? Yes I could.

The watch movement was a standard Liverpool English fusee watch with a lever escapement marked S.I. Tobias Liverpool. The movement was relatively easy, but what about the case? There were hallmarks, and these needed to be identified. The problem was that they were nowhere to be found. The Horological library at the NAWCC is the largest in the world with a lot of material on hallmarks. Still, no luck. The next step was to enlist the aid of everyone that I could find with expertise in hallmark identification. We put our heads together and finally came to the conclusion that these hallmarks were possibly fakes made to look English.

The next and most important question was ‘What killed the crew?’ Did they run out of air or did they drown? Were they, for example, so tired from the task of sinking the

Housatonic that they could not continue and so sank to the bottom? Within a couple of hours they would run out of air and suffocate. It is also possible that when they surfaced to signal their success to their comrades on shore, a passing vessel on route to rescue survivors might have hit them. As water entered through the open conning tower, they could have drowned. Or did something else happen?

Working with scientists from the 'Friends of the Hunley', I helped dismantle the watch so that we might be able to tell how far it had unwound before it stopped. An old mechanical pocket watch would stop soon after being submerged in water. Access was also needed to many interior parts in order to conserve them for display and for further study. This was somewhat of a dicey task because the iron bearing parts, screws, pinions, springs, chains, etc. had been converted to their oxide forms and were therefore extremely delicate. Rust, for example, is an oxide form. The slightest touch would break them so we needed to avoid contact with them as much as possible. It was now obvious that some parts had to be risked for the sake of the entire project. Which to sacrifice and which to save was not an easy decision. Those of us working to conserve the watch discussed those questions based on risk versus reward, as well as tangibility. What was the likelihood of success of one approach or another? There were no absolutes and no guarantees. Still, something had to happen. I suggested an approach based on my experiences working on extremely corroded watches, and it was agreed that we should try it. It worked. Proceeding very slowly we were able to dismantle the watch sufficiently to see many of the inner parts not accessible in any other way. We determined there was most likely still wind on the watch. This did not definitively determine what killed the crew. In fact, it raised more questions than it answered. The jury is still out.

The watch however, was now sufficiently dismantled that it could be conserved for future study. Not positively knowing what killed the crew aside, the privilege and honor of being associated with this historic project has been one of the most exciting highlights of my Horological career.

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