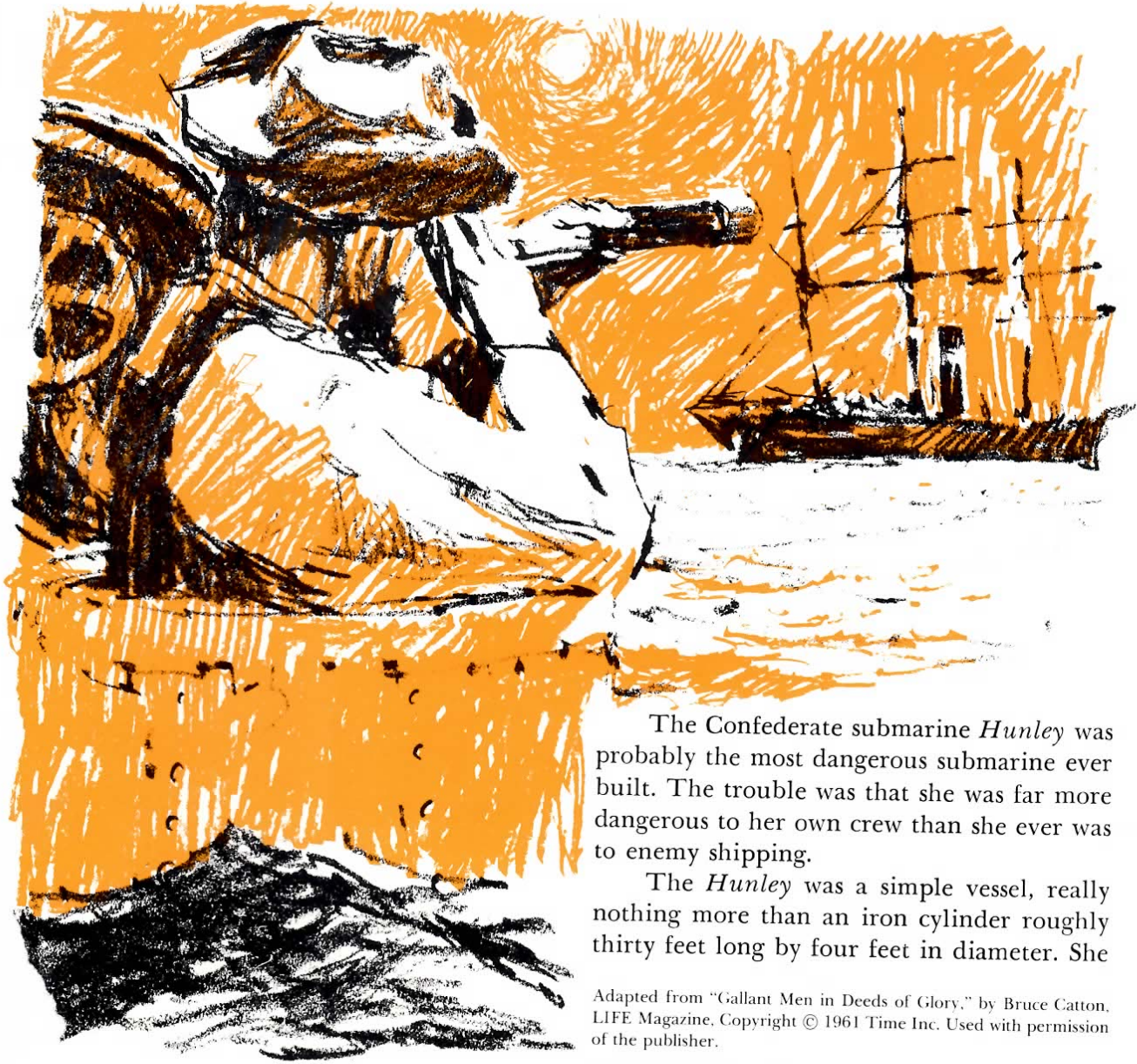


The Hopeless *Hunley*

by Bruce Catton

LEVEL 4 SELECTION 75



The Confederate submarine *Hunley* was probably the most dangerous submarine ever built. The trouble was that she was far more dangerous to her own crew than she ever was to enemy shipping.

The *Hunley* was a simple vessel, really nothing more than an iron cylinder roughly thirty feet long by four feet in diameter. She

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SKILL CARD
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was pointed at each end, and had adjustable diving planes along her sides. She was pushed through the water by a propeller at her stern. Since she had no engine, she had to be operated by sheer manpower. The propeller was turned by a long crank handle which the eight crew members swung by hand while crouching on benches facing one another.

There were water tanks, bow and stern, to help her submerge. To empty the tanks in order to make the craft buoyant again, the crew had to work hand pumps.

There was no periscope. To see much of anything, the skipper had to put his head out of the deck hatch while the *Hunley* lay on the surface, just awash. If the sea happened to be a bit rough, water would come in the hatch and likely as not the ship would founder.

In the beginning the Confederates had high hopes for the *Hunley*. According to their plans she would drag a mine at the end of a long line. When she spotted an enemy vessel she would dive under it and keep going until the mine struck the vessel's hull. The mine would explode, the enemy would be sunk, and the *Hunley* would come back to port.

That was the theory. The trouble was that nobody was ever quite sure what would happen when the *Hunley* submerged—or rather, they were a lot surer than they would have liked to be. The odds were heavy that she would never get back to the surface.

The result of her first trial run at Charleston had been chilling. The submarine sank, drowning her entire crew. After the accident the vessel was raised and provided with a

new crew of volunteers, and tests were resumed. In three subsequent tests the sub again sank with all hands. Each time another crew doggedly volunteered.

It was agreed at last that diving was no go. Instead the *Hunley* would operate on the surface with a long spar protruding from her bow and a mine on the end of the spar. It was hoped that on a dark night the *Hunley* could approach a Yankee warship unseen and plant the mine against its side. What happened next would be anyone's guess. Maybe with luck—a great deal of luck—she could then back away and set off the charge at a safe distance.

On the night of February 17, 1864, the *Hunley* set out to do just that. She cruised out of Charleston harbor under the command of Lieutenant George Dixon of the 21st Alabama Artillery.

The nerve it must have taken to volunteer for that cruise is something to think about. This boat was a proven crew killer, and even a simple practice run involved hair-raising risks. Indeed, the *Hunley* had once sunk while quietly moored to her wharf. Could she work her way out to the Union fleet and position herself alongside a Yankee warship? Having done that, could she possibly survive the explosion of a powerful mine at a distance of about one hundred yards? Any modern submariner could have told the men that this was impossible, but of course there were no modern submariners then. The only submariners in all the world were the nine men who crouched down in the *Hunley's* narrow hull.

In any event, all the questions about the

Hunley were soon to be answered. Lieutenant Dixon spotted the U.S.S. *Housatonic*, a big wooden steam sloop, lying at anchor, and headed for her. About fifty yards away he stopped the *Hunley* and put his head out the hatch for a last look. Then he closed the hatch and the *Hunley* made her run.

The Confederate strategy worked. That is, Dixon got on the target, the *Hunley* got in close, the mine exploded, and the Union vessel went to the bottom.

But so did the *Hunley*. Perhaps the explosion cracked open her flimsy plates, or possibly she was caught under the hull of

the Union ship. The precise reason for the tragedy was never discovered. She simply went down, as she had four times before, drowning all hands. Nobody, including her crew, could have been very surprised. It is hard to think of any men on either side in that war, afloat or ashore, who knowingly took a longer chance. Those volunteers must have known from the beginning that theirs was a suicide mission. Nevertheless, they did succeed in achieving one distinction for the hopeless *Hunley*—she was the first submarine in history to sink an enemy warship in combat.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The power to turn the *Hunley*'s propeller was provided by**
 - A an engine
 - B the crew
 - C batteries
- 2. The sub was made to rise by**
 - A turning a long crank handle
 - B pumping water out of her tanks
 - C filling the hull with hot air
- 3. To see where he was going, the skipper had to**
 - A raise the periscope
 - B push up a window
 - C open the hatch
- 4. Under the original plan, the *Hunley* was supposed to**
 - A ram the enemy
 - B blow up the enemy ship
 - C capture the enemy ship
- 5. On her first four trial runs the *Hunley***
 - A drowned four crews
 - B sank three times
 - C made two successful trips
- 6. After the trial runs it was agreed that the *Hunley* would not**
 - A attempt to dive
 - B carry a mine
 - C go near the enemy
- 7. The author thinks that the *Hunley*'s plan to blow up a warship and survive had**
 - A a pretty good chance to succeed
 - B one chance in ten to succeed
 - C no chance at all to succeed
- 8. Including Lieutenant Dixon, the *Hunley* carried**
 - A four men
 - B six men
 - C nine men
- 9. No one ever learned exactly why the *Hunley***
 - A chose to attack at night
 - B stopped just before attacking
 - C failed to survive the attack
- 10. If the *Hunley* had not gone down, her mission would have been described as a**
 - A complete success
 - B partial triumph
 - C noble failure