
Historic Hunley takes on new significance for state's future

BY GLENN MCCONNELL

South Carolina is blessed to be the home of a unique asset that links our past with our future in ways that continue to amaze us all. I am of course referring to the H. L. Hunley submarine, which is now being carefully conserved at the Warren Lasch Conservation Center in North Charleston by a team of international scientists.

By now, most Americans are familiar with the historical importance of the Hunley. On Feb. 17, 1864, just off the coast of Charleston, eight mariners sank a warship with a spar torpedo delivered by the world's first successful combat submarine. That night, international naval history changed forever.

Today, once again, the Hunley promises to change the future. Earlier this year, Clemson University made a proposal to the city of North Charleston and the Hunley Commission to build a restoration institute on land that was part of the former Charleston Naval Base. The proposal contemplates using as its hub the conservation lab that was built for the purpose of excavating and restoring the Hunley for future generations.

All South Carolinians should celebrate the recent decision by North Charleston and the Hunley Commission to approve Clemson's proposal. If this project moves forward, as many as 5,000 new high-tech jobs will be brought into the local economy. Plus the Hunley itself will be well on the way to serving as the centerpiece for a world-class maritime museum, which will attract millions of dollars in tourist revenue to South Carolina each year.

The institute proposed by Clemson will be a research park designed to promote economic development and apply the latest restoration techniques to a variety of materials, disciplines and industries. It will be the only facility of its kind in the Southeast, with the innovative Hunley lab serving as the centerpiece. Most important of all, in economic terms, the institute will empower South Carolina to compete in the knowledge-based global economy.

Using the Hunley lab as a starting point for such an ambitious project is both appropriate and logical. Already, the U.S. Navy has called on the Hunley lab to handle historically significant artifacts, such as items recovered from the CSS Alabama and from the Battle of Hampton Roads, one of the most famous naval battles in American history. The lab has correctly been described as "a world-class conservation center."

The Hunley lab has set new standards for marine archaeology and conservation. Now, thanks to the vision of Clemson University, Mayor Summey and the city of North Charleston, the Hunley lab's legacy will expand into other forms of restoration and technical achievement in the future.

The Hunley's association with cutting-edge technology truly is an amazing story, rooted in the 19th century and

now continuing into a new millennium. First of all, the Hunley ushered in the age of modern submarine warfare in a way that took the world decades to fully understand. In fact, there would not be another submarine as successful as the Hunley until World War I, nearly 50 years after the Hunley accomplished her historic mission.

In the 20th century, it took more new technology to allow the next chapter of the story to be written. After having disappeared at sea for well over a century, we needed high tech magnetic tracking and sonar equipment to pinpoint the Hunley's location. Finally, in 1995, she was found.

Then it took another five years to develop a plan for the Hunley's rescue. On Aug. 8, 2000, she was gently lifted intact from the ocean floor and delivered to the lab.

After recovery, remarkable new discoveries were made almost daily about the vessel and the eight crewmen whose remains were still onboard. Unexpected spin-off results also were achieved, including the discovery of new techniques that may help protect first responders in the war on terror. With no "textbook" in hand, Hunley scientists, in collaboration with Clemson University, also developed new metal treatment methods, which promise to decrease the time and funding needed for conserving other artifacts.

This research may have applications that reach far beyond historical artifacts. Researchers are optimistic that the work being done on the Hunley will help modern industries deal with the challenges of corrosion for bridges, ships, oil drilling platforms and the metal infrastructure in chemical plants.

For nearly two centuries, the Hunley has been on a voyage of discovery. As Thomas Wolfe wrote, "Every moment is a window on all time." A journey that started with one moment in 1864 now opens up new windows in our time, linking our past with our future. South Carolina is fortunate indeed to be the home of the Hunley.

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