



EPISODE 1 2004 - CIVIL WAR SUBMARINE, LOUISIANA.

Elyse Luray: Our first investigation reveals a startling new technology developed by the Confederates during the Civil War. The year is 1861. The first shots of the Civil War have just been fired. But the battle between North and South isn't confined to the land. Control of the sea and rivers is also crucial. To break Union blockades and keep their economy afloat, the Confederates turn to a new tactic. To a new technology still in its infancy. To a vessel that could surprise enemy ships and deal a deadly blow to the Union fleet.

A man in Louisiana believes this could be an early and extremely rare example of a Confederate submarine. Wayne Wehner grew up playing around the sub outside a local museum. He hasn't seen it in over 35 years.

Wayne Wehner: I recently found an article with my great-grandfather's picture and the sub stating that he built the sub. The article made me feel like I had to locate the sub again and to see if the story of my great-grandfather is really true.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray and I've come to New Orleans to look into Wayne's story. The first thing I want to do is to reintroduce Wayne to his long-lost sub. I've tracked it down to a warehouse on the west side of town. Here you go. What do you think?

Wayne: I think it's amazing.

Elyse: Is it the same one?

Wayne: Oh, this is it. Looks the same as it did 35 years ago.

Elyse: So Wayne, what would you like to know?

Wayne: Well, I come across this article where my great-grandfather claims to have built this submarine, and I'd really like to know if he built this submarine, and if it's seen any action.

Elyse: Alright, well let's see what it says here. It says Wayne's great-grandfather, Frances J. Wehner, helped build the sub so he could take it on a mission. He was going to go down to the bottom of the water, go up side the enemy ship, and then blow both himself up, and the enemy vessel.

Wayne: He's basically saying it's a suicide mission.

Elyse: Well lucky for you he survived.

Wayne: Thank God he did.

Elyse: Well, let's see what I can find out.

Wayne: Appreciate that.

Elyse: Now, I've only ever heard of one sub from the Civil War, The Hunley, which was recently raised, after sinking in 1864. All I have to go on that this is a Civil War sub too, is Wayne's great-grandfather's word. In tracking it down, I discovered it's now owned by the Louisiana State Museum ... who are still trying to authenticate it. I've arranged to meet Greg Lambousy, the curator of the Museum, and an expert on the Civil War. First, I want to know just how serious the South was about submarines.

Greg Lambousy: They were very serious. In April of 1861, Lincoln had ordered a blockade of all Southern ports. The North had a much larger navy. This forced the South into experimenting with submarine warfare to gain any advantage.

Elyse: So was anybody successful with submarines?

Greg: Indeed the South was the first in history to launch a successful submarine attack. In that attack, the Hunley rammed a torpedo into the Housatonic, a Union ship blockading Charleston Harbor. It was the only one of the 15 or so

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subs built during the Civil War to pull this off. Even so, it sank shortly afterwards. Its crew drowned, like dozens of other men, who perished in Confederate sub activity from Houston, Texas to Richmond, Virginia.

Elyse: So you'd have to be pretty dedicated to the southern cause to put yourself in one of those submarines.

Greg: You really would. Yes, yes.

Elyse: Alright, let's talk about our Louisiana submarine. How did it end up in the museum's collection?

Greg: It was discovered by a dredge crew working off the mouth of Bayou Saint John in Lake Pontchartrain, here in New Orleans, in 1878.

Elyse: Do you know who built it?

Greg: We don't know, we don't know who designed or constructed it. There's bits of evidence out there, but it hasn't all come together yet.

Elyse: I want confirm the sub really is from the Civil War. So I'm meeting metals expert Dave Johnson - a specialist in Civil War vessels.

Dave Johnson: Well, the first thing I'd ask is, is it a submarine. You can see that it's football-shaped, pointed on both ends. And the real unique thing is the fact that it has a set of dive planes up here – and dive planes are unique to submarines and submarines only. They would make the front end of the boat go underwater so that the submarine could submerge.

Elyse: Okay, so we know it's a submarine. But how do we know that it's from the Civil War?

Dave: Well it's made of the type of materials that were used during the Civil War. It's made of iron and not steel. It's riveted together; you can see these rivets are very close together. And that's a fabrication procedure that is very common to the Civil War.

Elyse: And there's more evidence dating this sub to the Civil War.

Dave: One of the features that's unique to this submarine and other Civil War submarines is the fact that it has a socket in the bow which would have held a spar or a wooden pole. And at the end of that wooden pole would be a bomb that was called a torpedo. And that bomb would be ignited after the submarine ran it into the side of a ship.

Elyse: So we're definitely looking at a Civil War vessel. Then Dave spots something about the sub's construction that could help him date it to a specific year.

Dave: This submarine was very unique in its shape. Each panel was rolled. This front piece was cast individually. There's nothing that we can find on the submarine that was made from anything else.

Elyse: In other words, it was built entirely from scratch. That's important because late in the war the south ran low on resources and had to improvise with existing metal objects. When the Hunley was built in 1863, it was constructed from a converted boiler! So our New Orleans' sub must have been built earlier ... but when?

Dave: From the fact that New Orleans surrendered to the North in 1862, and that the Civil War started in 1861, I think this is an 1861 sub.

Elyse: Wow! So that would make this the earliest Civil War sub still in existence! But I'm curious, how does it work?

Dave: Well, let me show you here. This is where the propeller would have been. If you looked right here there would be a couple people in here and they would operate a crankshaft of some sort that would turn the propeller. And then

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you would have a captain inside that would operate the rudders and guide the submarine.

Elyse: And how did these people breath?

Dave: Well, if you look up here, you can see that there's a pipe still attached to the sub, and we think that there was a hose connected to it that would have gone to a float to the surface.

Elyse: Now I know what it is. And how it worked. But did it ever see battle? The Louisiana State University Library has an archive of the New Orleans Picayune from the early days of the Civil War. I'm hoping to find a reference to the Louisiana sub. These newspapers are full of accounts of New Orleans preparing for war.

Elyse: "Arrival of more troops. The Jefferson Davis Rebels, a company of 79 men strong arrived yesterday morning in this city ..."

Elyse: "The Gains Invincibles, another Mississippi company numbering 81 men..."

Elyse: "The enemy, with an army estimated at 200,000 to 250,000..."

Elyse: "He expects to overall us and crush us by his numbers..."

Elyse: "This they hope to accomplish in conjunction with control of the Mississippi river below..."

Elyse: Clearly things are heating up. But if submarines like ours are being used to defend the Mississippi, there's no mention of it here.

Librarian: I have some more books for you.

Elyse: Oh thank you.

Librarian: I'll put them over here.

Elyse: Great. The library also has a collection of oral histories from the men who fought in the Civil War. Perhaps I'll have more success with these.

Elyse: This is a 1910 edition of the Confederate Veteran Journal. Listen to what I found.

Elyse: "Story of a big fish from New Orleans. Some years after the war, there was washed up on the beach of Lake Pontchartrain a huge fish of strange appearance." Well the huge fish is a submarine, and Lake Pontchartrain is where our submarine was found. This article goes on to say that the sub went down on its maiden voyage.

Elyse: And the Veteran quoted here, says he thought his men had deserted and taken the sub to the Yankee side. "He visited the object and was seen wringing his hands and exclaiming, 'this explains it all and for years, I had thought them to be traitors.'"

Elyse: I don't know who wrote this story, and can't be certain this is our sub. If it is, it had a very short career before ending up at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain. But what about Wayne's article, and his great-grandfather's claim to have helped build the sub? From the look of him, he could have been having fun telling a tall tale. So to separate tall tales from the truth, I've come to Annapolis, Maryland to meet Mark Ragan – the country's pre-eminent authority on Civil War submarines.

Elyse: Who would have been building submarines in the early part of the Civil War in New Orleans?

Mark Ragan: There were really private ventures at this point in the war. They would have been financed though investors. They would have applied for letters of mark, which were privateering commissions from the Confederate govern-

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ment. Which, here's a copy of one right here.

Elyse: "President of the Confederate States of America." A letter of mark gave private individuals permission to attack and plunder Union ships on behalf of the Confederate government. And split the profits!

Mark: A good example of this would be the Pioneer, this is a diagram of it here. The Pioneer was another New Orleans sub... but it has never been found.

Elyse: Rebel submarine ram. This looks remarkably similar to our sub. So who built it?

Mark: McKlintock & Watson, two steamboat engineers. Matter of fact, the group that built the Pioneer later built the Hunley, that was built in Mobile Alabama, that's been recently raised up off of Charleston, South Carolina.

Elyse: Could they have built the Louisiana submarine while they were in New Orleans?

Mark: It's possible. It was probably more likely that they were consultants in the project. I mean, they were in New Orleans at this period building a submersible themselves.

Elyse: But there aren't any records on who built the Louisiana sub?

Mark: No. Unfortunately, these projects probably would have been considered relatively secretive. The records were pretty much dispersed, or burned, or destroyed. Submarines in the Victorian period, were regarded as unchivalrous weapons -- "Infernal machines" is one of the nicknames given to them. Very little documentation and what documentation there was has probably been scattered to the winds ever since.

Elyse: Do you think Wayne's great-grandfather could have worked on the Louisiana sub?

Mark: If he was in the region of the city in the early part of '61, the commencement of the war, through, say to the spring of '62 when the city collapsed, had the right skills, being a metalworker, a machinist, that sort of thing, then it's possible he could have volunteered his skills, yes. To see if Frances J. Wehner fits that profile, I've come to the Louisiana State Archives in Baton Rouge--First, I'm looking through his military records:

Elyse: It says here that Frances Joseph Wehner served in the Confederate army from 1861 to 1865. And look at this! When he enlisted in early 1861, he was in New Orleans! And according to these muster rolls, he remained there until the Fall of that year before being shipped off to battle. So he was in the right place at the right time to have worked on the sub. And this is interesting!

Elyse: This is a list of all the battles that he was engaged in during the Civil War: Cedar Run, Harper's Ferry, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg. Wilderness, May 6, 1864 he's listed as AC, which means absent due to capture-- He was a Prisoner of War...that's some war record! And here's something else. It says here, that he was elected from the rank to Lieutenant, which means that he was promoted by his own men. That means they must have thought very highly of him. So perhaps Wayne's great-grandfather's claim to have helped build the sub should be taken seriously. But I'd still like to find some hard evidence he had the necessary skills. My last chance is here. I'm looking through the New Orleans City Directory for 1867, which lists the occupation of every resident. "Andreas Weber, Cistern maker; Peter Weil, Coffee Stand. James Watterson, Carpenter; Frances J. Wehner..." And this is just what I've been looking for.

Elyse: I can't wait to tell Wayne, everything I've discovered about his great-grandfather and his "long lost sub".

Elyse: (telling Wayne) "...making it one of the earliest known subs in existence.

Wayne: What can I say? All I want to do is learn more about it.

Elyse: There's one more piece of information that I found. In the New Orleans City Directory Frances J. Wehener was listed as a machinist... Exactly the skill needed to build a submarine! It's circumstantial evidence... but suggests Frances



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Wiener's story could be true after all.

Wayne :Well, that's great – I always knew he had something up his sleeve – I mean, all us Wehners' have something up our sleeve, and I would just like to see him get the recognition that he so well deserves.

Wayne: Well, that's great. Thank you.

Elyse: Thanks so much. It was a great discovery.

Wayne: And it's a great discovery for me too.

Elyse: The South made amazing advances in early submarine technology. Still it wasn't enough to defeat the North's formidable navy. Today, sophisticated nuclear-powered submarines patrol the oceans. What the Union once called, "infernal machines", have now become a vital part of the navies of the world.

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