They probably knew that if something went bad wrong and they sank, they wouldn't make it. It was February, and the water was so cold. And they were four miles out in the ocean at night," so said Wes Hall of Wilmington, N.C., an underwater archaeologist, upon inspecting the remains of the Confederate submarine, CSS H. L. Hunley.

The story of the Hunley is a triumphant, albeit sad, one. Thirty-six men, all volunteer crewmen, lost their lives in the endeavor. But it represents the ultimate in engineering achievement, in vision and skill, and in the sheer dogged determination of a few men who wanted to make a difference in their world.

The story began in New Orleans in 1861, when Baxter Watson and James R. McClintock constructed the Pioneer, the prototype to the first submarine, with backing by H. L. Hunley. Circumstance caused them to scuttle the project in 1862. They moved their operation to Mobile in early 1863 and began work on a second version, the Pioneer II. However, it was lost in a squall in Mobile Bay. In the Spring of 1863, they successfully completed the Hunley. Measuring forty feet and accommodating a crew of nine, the Hunley was launched at the foot of Theatre Street. Unfortunately, Mobile Bay proved to be too shallow and choppy for proper testing, so the decision was made to ship the Hunley to Charleston, S.C.. On August 7, 1863, it was loaded onto two rail cars for the journey to its new home.

Upon its arrival in Charleston, the Confederate Navy assumed control of the ship, which to this point had been privately owned and operated. Under the leadership of Navy Lt. John Payne, a volunteer crew was assembled for an attack. However, a passing steamboat swamped the Hunley and eight crewmen were lost. Payne was the only survivor. On September 10, it was raised and returned to service. Unfortunately, it was again accidentally sunk, this time killing six of the nine crewmen. Payne and two others were able to escape. Following this, a special crew of volunteers was brought in from Mobile, this time led by H. L. Hunley. But fate would not be any kinder to the ship's creator. Leading the crew in a test run on October 15, the ballast tanks overflowed, sinking the vessel for a third time and killing all hands, including H. L. Hunley. By this time, Confederate leaders were becoming disillusioned with the Hunley, and there was strong argument to leave it on the bottom of Charleston Bay. But two Mobilians, Lt. George Dixon and William A. Alexander, persuaded officials to raise it once more.

February 17, 1864 saw the ultimate triumph, and ultimate tragedy, of the Hunley. Under the command of Dixon, the Hunley successfully sank the Union sloop-of-war, Housatonic, by projecting a torpedo into its side. But the Hunley became its own unfortunate victim. Perhaps because of shrapnel or the sheer force of the explosion, the seams of the Hunley were loosened. She rapidly took on water and sank, with all hands lost. But history had been made, and sea warfare would forever be altered by this remarkable undertaking.

On January 27, 1958, at Groton, Connecticut, Rear Adm. Frederick B. Warder commemorated the Hunley achievement and spoke of the courage and determination of this engineering experiment. "This little boat taught man a great deal by her short and tragic adventure," he said. "True, her imperfections were many and her success in combat scant and fatal, but she set a precedent of world shaking consequence."

On May 11, 1995, the remains of the Hunley were discovered. Whether she will be raised and returned to her original home of Mobile or left in Charleston has yet to be determined. Whatever her fate, one thing is certain. The Hunley was a national treasure in 1863 just as she is today — so marks the legacy of the CSS H. L. Hunley.