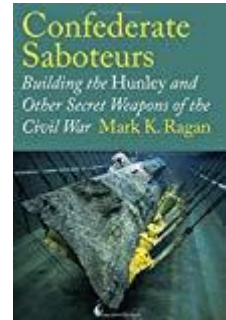


**Mark K. Ragan.** *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War*. Ed Rachal Foundation Nautical Archaeology Series. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62349-278-6.



**Reviewed by** Lindsay Rae Privette (University of Alabama)

**Published on** H-War (October, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

On May 3, 1995, the *H. L. Hunley* was discovered resting beneath the murky waters of Charleston's outer harbor. Since then, the Confederate submarine, its attack against the USS *Housatonic*, and its subsequent sinking has become the subject of public fascination, fed by several documentaries, books, and even a TNT miniseries starring Donald Sutherland as P. G. T. Beauregard. Yet, while the *Hunley*'s contributions to the Confederate war effort have been reincorporated into the historical memory, the exploits of the Singer Secret Service Corps, the organization that conceived, built, and operated the *Hunley*, have largely remained forgotten. Mark K. Ragan's *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War* seeks to correct this omission. Drawing on a new "comprehensive archive of materials" established at the Warren Lasch Conservation Center, Ragan's work attempts to uncover the Singer Corps's wartime exploits (p. 6). Thus, the book expands the Singer Corps's accomplishments beyond the *Hunley*, in-

corporating them into the larger narrative of Confederate secret weapons development.

*Confederate Saboteurs* is one of the first works examining the Singer Secret Service Corps's wartime activities. As a result, the book adheres to a strict chronological narrative. Following the Confederate recapture of Galveston Bay in January 1863, Private Edgar C. Singer began experimenting with underwater explosives. After constructing a successful model, Singer was granted a leave of absence to produce more devices, and within the month he was supervising somewhere between seventeen and thirty-seven operatives. By late spring, Singer's men had scattered across the Confederacy. They established torpedo manufactories in both Yazoo City, Mississippi, and Mobile, Alabama. Singer traveled to Richmond, where he spent most of the winter of 1863 trying to secure funding for a fleet of semi-submersible torpedo boats. By April 1864, operatives working in Tennessee began detonating Singer torpedoes along

the Union railroad lines. Interspersed through all of this, Ragan tells the story of the *Hunley*.

Despite the fact that the Singer Corps was organized just months before the Confederacy's devastating losses at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga, the South's ultimate collapse in the face of Union hard war policy is never assumed. Instead, by emphasizing the Singer Corps's technological successes, Ragan describes a weapons industry adapting to the evolving needs of the Confederate war effort. Because of its renown, the *Hunley*'s successful assault against the *Housatonic* looms large over the project, serving as a watermark for the Singer Corps's military contributions. There were, however, other successes. The land "torpedoes" detonated in Tennessee particularly vexed General William T. Sherman, who declared that they should be "put on the ground and tested by wagon loads of prisoners, or if need be, citizens engaged in their use" (p. 66). Additionally, it was a cluster of Singer mines protecting Mobile Bay that sank the USS *Tecumseh* in August 1864. Unfortunately, while the study's chronological approach successfully narrates the history of Singer's organization, it is less effective when dealing with the development of their weapons. Operatives were scattered across the Confederacy, working on different weapons under unique wartime conditions. However, Ragan's chapters jump rapidly between different bands of operatives because all of their efforts occurred simultaneously. The result is a fragmented narrative that obscures the technological advances made by the Singer Corps, and negates any discussion on how these weapons contribute to the larger evolution of military technology.

It is in relation to these new technological advances that Ragan's work has the greatest potential to influence the current historiography. Often described by Union officers as "dishonorable" and "barbaric," the weapons designed by Singer and his operatives challenged traditional notions of how civilized warfare should be conducted (pp.

50, 66). Hidden beneath darkened waters, the effectiveness of Singer's submarines and torpedoes depended on the element of surprise. They are remarkably similar to the weapons that would come to dominate naval warfare in the twentieth century. It is therefore reasonable to wonder what role the Singer Corps played in redefining conceptions of "civilized war." In Ragan's careful unveiling of the Corps's clandestine operations throughout the Confederacy, it becomes apparent that the Singer Secret Service Corps did not operate alone. Indeed, Ragan's work points toward a network of Confederate incendiaries working to subvert Union naval power with the blessing—and the monetary support—of the Confederate government. For all its efforts to place the construction, deployment, and sinking of the *Hunley* in the larger narrative of the Singer Corps's achievements, *Confederate Saboteurs* never quite contextualizes these achievements within the evolution of nineteenth-century military strategy. Nevertheless, Ragan has provided a welcome start by reclaiming the story of the Singer Secret Service Corps and the men who, until now, labored in secret.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Lindsay Rae Privette. Review of Ragan, Mark K, *Confederate Saboteurs: Building the Hunley and Other Secret Weapons of the Civil War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46653>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.