



The Confederate Submarine *Hunley*, the Blue Light, and Its Most Likely Source

By Kim Johnson, June 8, 2020
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The *Hunley*, by Conrad Wise Chapman | American Civil War Museum

On the evening of February 17, 1864, 4 miles off the coast of Charleston, the Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley* became the first submarine in history to sink an enemy warship. But after sinking the USS *Housatonic*, a 1,240-ton screw sloop-of-war, the *Hunley* vanished, lost to the world until found in 1995 by shipwreck hunter and author Clive Cussler. The mystery as to how and why the submarine sank continues to this day. And part of the mystery surrounds the sighting of a blue light by *Housatonic* crewman Robert F. Flemming. Many people believe the blue light was a signal sent by the *Hunley* crew confirming the success of their mission and requesting a light to guide them home.

I think otherwise. I believe another Federal ship is a much more likely source.

Landsman Robert F. Fleming was one of six lookouts assigned to the evening watch (8 p.m.–12 p.m.) on board the doomed *Housatonic* that night. A landsman was the lowest rank of the United States Navy in the 19th and 20th centuries; it was given to new recruits with little or no experience at sea.

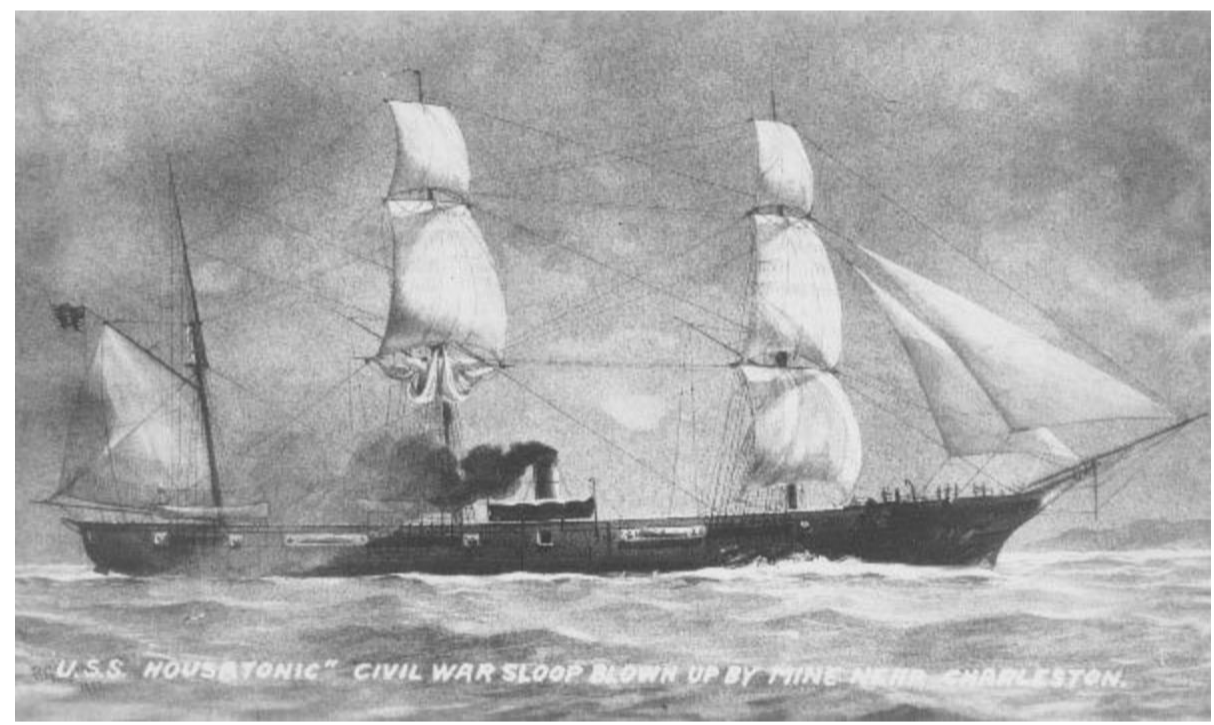
Flemming's watch assignment that night was as a lookout on the starboard side of the forecastle, or rather at the front of the ship on the right side. The following is part of his testimony before the official U.S. Navy Court of Inquiry:

Question by the Judge Advocate: Did you see any object on the water approaching the ship just previous to the explosion?

Answer: I did. It was about 8:45 p.m. I saw something off the starboard bow, about two ship's lengths off and reported it to the Officer of the forecastle...By this time the object had got within 30 feet...I ran aft and before I got to my quarters...the explosion took place. Immediately, the ship began to settle by the stern...I then saw the object [the *Hunley*] about six or eight feet from the starboard quarter, apparently stationary and I fired my musket at it.

Question by the Court: Did you see this object at any time after you fired at it?

Answer: I did not...I saw a blue light on the water just ahead of the [nearby rescue ship] *Canandaigua*.



USS *Housatonic* | Department of War

Assuming the blue light Flemming saw did not come from the *Hunley*, what then might have been its source? I have long suspected that the real source was a Union picket boat, a tug, or another larger vessel belonging to the blockading fleet. For proof, I submit the following:

Report of Captain S. C. Rowan (commanding the USS *Ironsides* and senior officer of the blockading fleet at Charleston):

On the loss of the USS *Housatonic*, which was sunk by a torpedo last night, as soon as the signal was made from the *Canandaigua*, "Assistance, in want of," Lt. Commander Belknap went out in a tug [the *Daffodil*].

Log of the USS *Canandaigua*, February 17, 1864:

The tug *Daffodil* from inside the bar communicated with us.

Log of the USS *Wabash*, February 17, 1864:

Tug [the *Daffodil*] came out from inside the bar & communicated with the *Canandaigua*.

I believe the evidence suggests that the *Daffodil* might have been approaching the area of the *Canandaigua* while the crew of the *Housatonic*, clinging to the rigging, was still being rescued. If the *Daffodil* signaled with a blue light, and that seems like a reasonable possibility, then that might have been the light Flemming saw. [Note the *Daffodil*'s deck logs for February 1864 are contained in the National Archives but are currently missing and cannot be found by archives personnel.]

Corporal Daniel McLaurin, 23rd South Carolina, CSA, was stationed at Battery Marshall at the time and had this to say years later: "About sundown the crew went aboard [the submarine] and put out to sea through the inlet ...to search for their prey. The sinking of the *Housatonic* soon followed. We could see the commotion created by the frantic signaling from the various vessels of the fleet."

From this evidence, it seems to me a very good possibility that the blue light most likely came from the tug USS *Daffodil* as it approached the *Canandaigua* and the wreck of the *Housatonic*. The blue light was a recognition signal shown by ships outside the bar to distinguish friend from foe. I think this explanation is a lot more plausible than the belief that the *Hunley* showed a blue light 4 miles out from Sullivan's Island, to request that a light be exposed as a guide for its return.



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