

## **The First Sinking by a Submarine and a Bloody Battle in Florida**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On February 17 in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, the C.S.S. *Hunley* became the first submarine to sink an enemy vessel in an attack on the U.S.S. *Housatonic*. Designed by Horace Hunley and built in Mobile, Alabama, the experimental ship, powered solely by a hand cranked propeller and armed with a torpedo attached to a long spar, had sank twice during training, resulting in the loss of numerous crewmembers. A third crew, under the command of George Dixon, left its dock on the night of February 17, targeting the ships of the Union blockading squadron. The crew of the *Housatonic* spotted something approaching their ship about 8:45 p.m., but the *Hunley's* crew was able to successfully detonate its torpedo, causing the sinking of the Union ship with a loss of five sailors. Perhaps damaged by the explosion, the *Hunley* never returned to port. Its remains were raised in 2000 and are currently undergoing preservation in Charleston.

To the south the largest Civil War battle to occur in the state of Florida would take place on February 20 at Olustee. The campaign that resulted in the battle grew out of the Lincoln administration's desire to establish a loyal government in Florida in time to take part in the 1864 elections. Other objectives included disrupting Confederate supply operations in the state and obtaining recruits for Union black regiments. General Quincy Gillmore, commander of the Union Department of the South, received permission in early February to mount an expedition to occupy Jacksonville and portions of northeast Florida. Gillmore accompanied the expedition during its initial stages, but the actual commander was General Truman Seymour.

The Federals occupied Jacksonville on February 7 and over the next week mounted raids to the south and west. At the time of the landing only a small Confederate force under General Joseph Finegan defended the region, though reinforcements under General Alfred Colquitt would eventually be sent from South Carolina and Georgia. Finegan established defensive positions near the railroad depot at Olustee, located about ten miles east of Lake City and awaited a possible Union advance. Gillmore, meanwhile, had returned to his headquarters at Hilton Head, leaving Seymour with orders to maintain defensive lines around Jacksonville. For reasons that are still unclear, Seymour determined to advance eastward with a force of about 5,500 men, apparently to capture Lake City and then destroy a railroad bridge across the Suwannee River.

On February 20, Seymour's advance ran into Confederate skirmishers, and a major battle soon erupted. Early in the fighting a veteran northern regiment collapsed, focusing Confederate attention on the untried Eighth United States Colored Troops, which suffered appalling casualties. Both Finegan and Seymour funneled additional troops into the battle, with the more experienced Colquitt actually directing the Confederates on the field. The vicious fighting continued for several hours, until late in the afternoon when Seymour ordered his final reserves, the Thirty-fifth United States Colored Troops and the famous Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry into the lines to cover the Union withdrawal. By the next morning the Federals, with 1,861 casualties, had retreated back to Jacksonville, while the Confederates with about one-half the Union losses, remaining in command of the field. At the battle's close some vengeful Confederates committed atrocities on the troops of the three black Union regiments that remained on the field.

In the aftermath of the fighting, both sides sent additional forces to Florida, though another major engagement did not take place. Instead the soldiers were gradually withdrawn to

more active theaters of the war, though the Federals maintained an occupation of Jacksonville until the war's end.