

CHRONICLES

Echoes of War

By Debra Judge Silber

For a long time, the memorial stone in Killingly's old Westfield Cemetery told a sad and simple story:

EZRA CHAMBERLIN
CO K 7TH C.V.
DIED JULY 11, 1863.
AE 23

But it's not so simple anymore.

Not since last April, when the young Yankee's identification tag—a copper disc about the size of a half-dollar, bearing his name, regiment and date of enlistment—was found amid remains of a crew entombed inside a long-lost Confederate submarine.

The discovery of Ezra Chamberlin's medallion on the *H. L. Hunley*, a pioneering rebel sub that went down seven months after Chamberlin reportedly died, presents an intriguing his-

torical puzzle that is challenging historians from Connecticut to South Carolina. Was Chamberlin a spy or a defector, a prisoner who saw service to the Confederacy as his only salvation? Or did he give his life for the Union, only to have this proof of his valor stripped from his corpse?

"In the absence of fact, one can make up any story one wants," says South Carolina State Archeologist Jon Leader, who is among those sifting through the physical and documentary evidence surrounding the submarine, and the question of whether Chamberlin was on it. "But we're not interested in stories," Leader says. "We're interested in facts."

But the fact is, there's a lot of interest in this story.

Edwin Ledogar, executive director of the Killingly Historical Society, is nearly talked out about Ezra Chamberlin, his tag and his grave. Almost a year after the find, his phone still rings with inquiries. It's not surprising. For Connecticut Civil War buffs, Chamberlin's tag represents a tangible link to that crucial historical chapter played out somewhere beyond their back yards. "To have this kind of connection to the Civil War, in this unexpected way, is thrilling," says Nick Bellantoni, the state archeologist who is working with both Ledogar and



When a Connecticut soldier's identification tag was found in the remains of a sunken Confederate submarine, the questions began: Who was he? Where was his body? Had he deserted to the other side? Or had he just become the victim of things that happened after he had died? Illustration by Terry Miura

South Carolina researchers to determine the truth about Chamberlin. "In a lot of towns in Connecticut you have your Civil War monuments, you have your state regiments that went off and fought, but it was a distant war to us. But that war really made us a nation. Before the war, the 'United States' were plural. After the war, it was singular."

And the possible—if unlikely—presence of the young Connecticut volunteer on the rebel ship epitomizes the country's most visceral struggle. "It was truly a state of the nation against itself," says South Carolina state Sen. Glenn McConnell, head of the governmental commission overseeing the sub's excavation. "If Ezra Chamberlin is on that ship, it graphically illustrates just how complex the war was, and how it touched the families of so many Americans. It's part of the great, complex American story."

By 1839, when Ezra Chamberlin was born, Killingly was turning from farms to factories. Brick mills that now house small businesses and fitness clubs spun cotton off the current of the Quinebaug River, and homes were multiplying around the new railroad depot in Danielsonville. Contributing his

skill to the building trade was master carpenter Elisha Chamberlin, Ezra's father.

Through the summer evenings of 1861, the depot would be crowded with townspeople waiting to cheer on the "soldiers' trains" that had begun passing through since spring with their cargo of young recruits. It was not long after, in September, that Ezra Chamberlin, 5-foot-7, dark-haired, dark-eyed and just shy of 22 years old, signed up with Company K of the 7th Connecticut Volunteer Regiment. All but three of the regiment's 89 volunteers were from Windham County; 25 were from Killingly.

"He got caught up in it, like kids get caught up today," muses Ledogar, whose staff of volunteers has pieced together what they can of Chamberlin's life. But facts are few and the gaps large. Chamberlin left no known photographs, no diaries, no heirs. "You've got to remember he was only 21," Ledogar says.

After nearly two years of duty along the Southern coast, Chamberlin's company was sent to Morris Island, outside Charleston, in July 1863. On the morning of July 11, the boys from Windham County led Union troops across the beach,



then charged up the sandy walls of Fort Wagner, one of the shoreline batteries protecting the besieged city. Unsupported by the troops that followed them, they were battered badly and told to retreat. When they reassembled, Chamberlin was not among them.

It was a week after the Union had routed the South at Gettysburg, and a week before the Massachusetts 54th regiment, made famous in the movie *Glory*, would storm the same battery, also unsuccessfully.

Within weeks, another subplot in the Charleston siege appeared: The *Hunley* arrived via railroad car from Mobile, Ala. Derided even by Southerners as a “peripatetic coffin,” the underwater boat offered one last hope to break the federal blockade’s grip on the city. As remarkably advanced as it was primitive, the 40-foot cylinder was propelled by crew members working a hand crankshaft. A snorkel system for ventilation never worked, forcing the crew to surface regularly for air. Once submerged, they were guided by nothing more than a depth gauge, a compass and the light of one candle. By October, the vessel had

twice sunk to the bottom of Charleston Harbor, killing 13 crewmen. “The common name given her is ‘murdering machine,’” one Confederate sailor confided in a letter home.

But on Feb. 17, 1864, the *Hunley* succeeded in ramming the Union sloop-of-war *Housatonic* with a torpedo attached to its bow. The Union boat sank, killing five sailors. The *Hunley*, apparently surviving the encounter, signaled its return to shore. But it never came back.

The sub was found off Charleston in 1995, by an expedition led by novelist Clive Cussler, and raised in August 2000. Eight months later, archeologists, working their way through the sediment-packed hull with tools no bigger than hand trowels, found Chamberlin’s tag.

For Elisha and Fanny Chamberlin, word of their son’s fate was anything but swift. Twelve days after the battle at Fort Wagner, a report in the *Windham County Transcript* reported him missing. About a month later, the newspaper reported there was “good reason” to believe Ezra Chamberlin had been taken prisoner.

It’s possible that the “good reason” may have been mistaken identity. Among those taken prisoner during the assault was a George O. Chamberlain of Woodstock. His capture and release, and that of some others, is documented in part in a regimental history written in 1910 by a company lieutenant, Jerome Tourtellotte, who was also taken prisoner.

Tourtellotte’s only account of Ezra Chamberlin’s fate was based on a memorial service held in Danielsonville’s Advent Church in 1864. Says Tourtellotte: “Chamberlain [sic] was instantly killed at Wagner, ‘Close up! Close up!’ being the last words of the young hero.”

While the good citizens of Killingly may have eulogized Chamberlin, they almost certainly never buried him. Surveying the headstones in Westfield Cemetery, Ledogar and Bellantoni concluded last summer that there was hardly room for a casket under his stone. Their suspicion was confirmed in July, when Margaret Weaver, the town historian, uncovered Elisha Chamberlin’s 1880 obituary. Counted among the tragedies of the old man’s life was “the loss of a brave son . . . his body never having been recovered.”

The army had lost track of Chamberlin, too. Company records from August 1863 indicate him missing, with the notation “Suppose captured.” By 1865, the notation became “Supposed to have been killed.” By 1889, the official record of the state of Connecticut settled the matter—although it misspelled Chamberlin’s last name—by officially listing him killed July 11, 1863, at Fort Wagner, S.C.

Yet when Fanny Chamberlin sought her son’s pension, the War Department denied it, saying they could find no record the young man had ever been discharged, nor that he died in service. The official bottom line was noted on a report in March 1880 that reads, in the undulating ink script of the time: “Investigation fails to Elicit any further information to Establish final disposition of this man.”

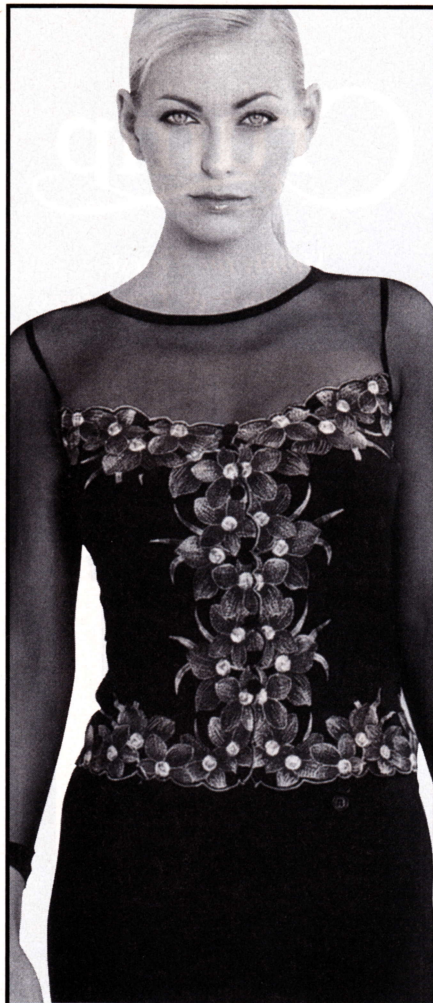
Chamberlin’s “disappearance” is no surprise to Mark Ragan, the *Hunley* project historian and author of a 1995 book on the submarine. “He was listed as missing in action essentially because some *Hunley* crewmember took his tag and had it around his neck,” Ragan claims.

He is unimpressed with the arguments that no soldier would put on a dead enemy’s dog tag. “People do strange things in wartime,” Ragan said. “The guys who took it were probably rummaging around bodies at night, looking for something they could steal. If you’re already rummaging around a corpse, the idea of tearing an ID tag off somebody doesn’t seem all that dramatic.” That view, coupled with his assertion that the tag was found with the remains of a 35-year-old man, has Ragan convinced. “This is a war souvenir,” he says. “Point blank. End of story.”

But Robert Neyland, chief archeologist and *Hunley* project director, says it’s too early to draw conclusions from what he calls “a jumble of bones.”



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◀ 42 “The only thing that can be said for certain is that the tag was on the cranium of the individual we are calling No. 8,” says Neyland. The skull, he said, was found far back in the sub, and probably belonged to someone who worked the ballast pump and turned the propeller.

Probably, he emphasized. As of yet the skeletons are mingled together, with some questions over which bones belonged to whom. “It could turn out the aftermost cranium does not belong to individual No. 8,” Neyland says. “Such is the problem of making hasty judgments.”

Final judgments aside, Bellantoni has his own hunch. “My gut feeling is that he is on that vessel. I just don’t buy into the theory that a Confederate soldier—or any soldier—would take an enemy’s ID tag and put in on. If there was a Confederate soldier who took Ezra’s ID, this guy would be running the risk that his body would be ID’d as Ezra Chamberlin and his body being sent to Killingly instead of South Carolina.”

And Richard Hatcher, the historian for Fort Sumter National Monument, who researched Fanny Chamberlin’s pension request, finds himself tipping slightly toward the Yankee being on board. Among those clues are the sheer number of soldiers who switched sides during the war, and the mechanical skills that Chamberlin, the son of a carpenter, most likely had—skills that would have been in great demand by the Confederacy. “Going through this logically, as a historian, I have to balance it out,” he explains. “And there’s just a slight preponderance of evidence to the theory that this guy surrendered and went with the Confederacy for some reason.”

If documentation is scarce on Ezra Chamberlin, the eight men who manned the *Hunley*—excepting the commander, Lt. George E. Dixon—are even more elusive. To date, Dixon’s are the only remains that have been identified.

Researchers have been relying on two lists—one, contained in an official correspondence about two months after the sinking, the other on a memorial monument erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1889. Both identify five members of the crew as sailors off the Confederate ship *Indian Chief*: Arnold Becker, F. Collins, C. Simpkins, James A. Wicks, and a fifth identified only by his last name, Ridgeway. Both also list C. F. Carlson, a member of an artillery battalion that may have been active in the area of Fort Wagner, leading to speculation that he had picked up Chamberlin’s tag.

The monument offers an eighth name:

Miller. No initials, no regiment, no mention in the official records.

“My speculation is that is where they need to look,” says Hatcher, pointing out that most of the other men, in some way, can account for their past, and that Chamberlin, had he switched sides, would likely have taken on an assumed name. “My thought is, we try to find out who this Miller person is.”

Meanwhile, in Connecticut the search was on for descendants of Chamberlin who could at some point provide the DNA proof needed to set the mystery to rest. The only family line to pursue was that of Ezra’s younger sister, Lucina, who



in 1871 married a man named Lucius Miller and resettled in Providence.

But by late November, that hope was gone. A Rhode Island genealogist sent word that Chamberlin’s headline ended with the death of his nephew, John Miller, in 1943. If they wanted DNA, they would have to go into the grave of Chamberlin’s mother to get it.

“It would’ve been a lot cleaner, that’s for sure,” Bellantoni says of not finding any descendants, as he prepared to file for permission to open the grave of Fanny Chamberlin. The plan is to extract a molar containing enough DNA to compare against the bones in Charleston.

That answer, however, will be long in coming. The DNA analysis, says Neyland, will be among the last tests done on the bones before they are buried beside the remains of the rest of the *Hunley* crew in Charleston, sometime in 2003.

Until then, or until further artifacts are uncovered, Neyland hesitates to take a position on whether Ezra Chamberlin will be found on the sub. When asked, he responds with caution. “I don’t really have an opinion at this point,” he says. “Whenever I speculate, archeology always corrects me.” ■