

The Fenian Ram

24 February 1841:

John Philip Holland, Irish inventor and developer of the modern submarine, born.

Although men had dreamed of building submarines since the time of Leonardo Da Vinci, it would be John Philip Holland who would build what we would recognize as the first true modern submarine. Earlier designs, such as David Bushnell's *Turtle* in 1775 and the Confederate *Hunley* in 1864, depended on human power to move them or else, as with the Confederate David-class rams during the Civil War, were powered by steam engines that allowed them to be only semi-submerged. In 1881 Holland launched and successfully operated a submarine boat that for the first time incorporated a gasoline engine, diving planes, a tapered hull, ballast tanks cleared by compressed air, and a compressed air powered underwater torpedo launching tube.

Holland's designs anticipated the work of other designers by as much as 20 years, and were so far advanced that the US Navy of the time dismissed them as impractical. Unable to get his boat funded by the US Navy, Holland turned instead to an organization more

open to creative thinking. His innovative craft would be funded by and built in New York City for the Irish Fenian Brotherhood.

An international revolutionary organization dedicated to ending English rule in Ireland and the establishment of an Irish republic, the Fenians maintained a “skirmishing campaign” against the British Empire, declaring their intention to strike any where, any time, by whatever means presented themselves. They saw in Holland’s submarine a means of carrying their skirmishing campaign out to sea, sinking English warships and perhaps even breaking a future blockade of Ireland.

But while Holland’s boat, named the *Fenian Ram*, created a sensation when it was launched in New York harbor, it was destined never to loose a torpedo in anger. Instead it became a cat’s paw in the factional infighting that beset the American Fenian movement in the mid-1880s. Hijacked one night from its berth in Jersey City’s Morris Canal Basin, the *Fenian Ram* was towed to New Haven, Connecticut to keep it out of the hands of a rival Fenian faction. Hauled ashore in New Haven, it sat forgotten in a corner of a boatyard for many years before being dusted off to serve as a fundraising exhibit during the Irish War of Independence that followed the Easter Rising of 1916. Carried overland back to New York, it was displayed in Candlestick Park

in the Bronx for a time before being brought to Paterson, New Jersey, the site of Holland's first submarine experiments.

After the *Fenian Ram* fiasco Holland quietly dropped his connections with the Fenian movement and carried on as best he could alone, seeking whatever support and collaboration he could find. Finally, in the 1890s the US Navy was at last ready to take an interest in his ideas, and in 1900 he built and sold the U.S. Navy its first submarine, gaining Holland the title of founder of the US submarine fleet. (The Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut is a descendent of a corporation co-founded by Holland.) Left unsaid amidst the accolades that attended the launching of the *Holland I* was the fact that his 1900 design owed much to the research and experimentation that he carried out in building the *Fenian Ram*.

The *Fenian Ram* may be seen today on display in the Paterson Museum in New Jersey, along with an earlier one-man experimental craft built by Holland. Another one-man submarine of his was lost while being towed behind the *Fenian Ram* on the midnight cruise to New Haven, and is believed to rest somewhere beneath the footings of the Bronx Whitestone Bridge.

Curiously, John Philip Holland's obituary in the New York Times hailed him as the builder of the US Navy's first

submarines, but made no mention whatever of the
Fenian Ram