

## How I Found the USS KING

By  
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In July of 1995 I received a call from a film producer who was working on some pick-up shots for a film in Wilmington, NC. The film was a TV drama set during the American Civil War. The name of the production was Andersonville. Being an amateur Civil War historian and having already worked on a number of other Civil War films as a technical advisor I agreed to take on the task of being a coordinator of extras in the prisoner of war camp that had been built in a swampy wasteland near the Wilmington River. My responsibility was to coordinate a number of Union soldiers for the camp during this 3 day shoot. The film had already been shot earlier near Atlanta, but for some reason an entire film canister had been lost and now pick up shots had to be made, so the camp was reconstructed for this single purpose.

After I agreed to take the job, directions of the new camp were faxed to me. Everyone was in a panic, as usual, so I dismissed the horrible directions and prepared to leave. The map was hardly understandable, but I had been to Wilmington a number of times and considering the drive up from Charleston, SC was only a couple of hours I set out a few hours after I received the map. I packed my gear and was on the road by 3pm.

I arrived in downtown Wilmington about 5:30. The center of town is where the map got confusing. Directions from this point made reference to a turn off that didn't exist. I drove around for a while and then realizing I was going to lose sunlight I drove to the police station and inquired as to where the shooting location might be. As police are usually hired for crowd control on such ventures, they certainly would know where I was to go. Well, they didn't. They did have a general idea though and sent me on my way with directions that amounted to something along the lines of; take the salvage yard exit at the river and head north along the frontage road, then turn towards the river at the abandoned diner.

I found the exit to the salvage yard ok, but evidently took a wrong turn. Soon I was headed down a dirt road that seemed to be going nowhere. There certainly wasn't an abandoned diner in sight or any kind of structure at all for that matter. Just dirt road heading into an abyss.

The scene was starting to get spooky. It was by now 7:30pm and the summer sun was starting to set. Along with that the fog was beginning to rise from the marsh on both sides of the road and was hanging in the thick air. The air conditioning in my car was nonfunctional and I was sweating like a hog. I drove on, came to a fork in the road, stopped and got out. Ok, I thought, now what? Right, left or go back? Being left handed and figuring I still had a good 45 minutes of light remaining I jumped back in and headed left off the fork.

Within a few minutes I came upon the open gates of what appeared to be a large scrap yard. Gates open, I figured somebody must be in there that I could get directions from. Wrong again. I drove up to the security gate and it was standing empty. I got out of my car and hollered a couple of times. Nothing. I mean nothing. Absolute quiet. I was

starting to get a little nervous. This was scene right out of the Twilight Zone. So, what did I do? Like any jackass in a horror film I did the one thing most do. I abandoned my car and set out on foot hoping to find someone, or something, possibly the abandoned diner.

I walked about a hundred yards past the security house and headed up a small rise. Then, I spotted something gray with black windows sitting behind the fog. The diner? I didn't think so.

In the autumn of 1994 I had spent 3 months working on a submarine movie as an art director. One of my duties was to redress the USS Lackey WWII destroyer that sits in the Charleston Maritime museum. I had spent an entire week on the bridge of that thing and what I was looking at now was something very similar to that. I thought to myself, can this be the bridge of a destroyer? I knew the river was over that rise, but what would a destroyer be doing in the Wilmington River? I walked on, and as I did, sure enough, not one, but two complete destroyers came into view.

Well, not complete, but almost. They had been stripped of there guns, radar, and other equipment, but the hull and superstructures were intact. Now, my fear changed to excitement. I walked up to them. There wasn't anyone around, just these two huge hunks of steel pulled up onto the beach. What a solemn sight. Here I was, standing before two massive US Navy warships that had been scrapped and soon to be forgotten. I thought to myself, this isn't fair. Surely these ships have a history. Who, what, when, where? Why weren't they headed to a maritime museum? What was it about these two that only warranted the cutting torch?

I stood between the bows of both and looked them over. It appeared their last paint job had been long ago. The haze gray finish was streaked with rust, and was now disappearing in the haze of the fog that was rising from the river. The ship's numbers had been painted over, and there was nothing visible to identify them. My curiosity got the best of me. I took a stroll around the bow of one ship. I could see where she had been numbered, but couldn't make it out. The paint was too heavy and she was deep in the shadows. I then moved over to the other and crossed over to her port side. It's that left handed thing again. When in doubt, lefties always head for the port side.

The sun was low now, and it cast a bright orange glow on her port bow. I looked up and sure enough, that glow was cutting through the top coat of paint and the ghost of a number was there. 10. As clear as it could be. Number 10. That was all I needed.

Now, it really was getting dark and the fog was filling in fast. I jogged back to my car, but stopped when I reached the rise and turned back for a final look. Two ghost ships disappearing in the fog and me with no camera. What a beautiful sight. What a shame no one would ever see this.

For two days that number haunted me. 10. Why do I know that? 10.

On my drive back to Charleston the following day I thought I'd call the Naval base there and see what info they could give me and then it hit me. My friend David Turk, a fellow filmmaker had told me about the ship he served on. 10. Number 10. Could this be the same ship? I made a phone call to him that very night. He called the scrap yard soon after, and well, as they say, the rest is history. Or would that be..... his story?

Anyway, if I've told this story to him one time I've told it a thousand. He's right, the story needs to be told to you all. Even for a guy with no investment in your ship at all, it really was.....something to see.

Oh! The Andersonville prisoner of war camp? The mosquitoes ate us alive.