

## A Finder of Lost Things

### Forum Nokia Developer Vibe Series

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Ron Patton, a project leader at mobile developer Handmark Inc., helped discover the wreck of the USS Columbine, a patrol ship sunk during the 1864 Battle at Horse Landing, part of the U.S. Civil War. In 2004, Patton joined a discovery team led by Bill Rivers, a retired Marine and active scuba diver who now focuses on finding historical shipwrecks. Patton, who is also a diving enthusiast, says he joined Rivers for the thrill of diving and discovery. "I like finding things that are lost," Patton says.

The Columbine certainly was lost. For decades the government had mistakenly placed the wreck about a mile from where it actually lay. Through persistent historical sleuthing, Rivers realized the mistake and calculated the wreck's actual location. Now he needed divers to confirm the location by recovering identifiable pieces of the ship.

Finding the wreck entailed diving in the murky, alligator-infested St. Johns River in northeastern Florida. Patton and Rivers took their first dive in May 2004. When they arrived, Rivers pointed to two nearby alligators, one 13 feet long, the other, 9 feet. The team guessed the two alligators had formed a couple. "That freaked me out," says Patton. "Alligators are only aggressive during the mating season, and May is the middle of the mating season."



Handmark's Ron Patton, pictured at the alligator-infested Florida river where he helped discover the sunken wreck of a Civil War ship, likes "finding things that are lost."

But the alligators didn't make any aggressive moves, so the divers ventured into the water. Rivers and Patton did manage to bring up some chains and pipe that seemed to come from a pre-1900 vessel. But they found nothing that signified a Civil War wreck.

Patton and Rivers returned to the wreck the following September. Once again, a big alligator was sitting on the riverbank. But this time, the two men heard an ominous growl. "The alligator was clearly agitated," says Patton. A few minutes later, a Navy helicopter flew overhead, and the two men guessed that the noise had bothered the animal. "We waited, and the gator calmed down," Patton says.

That minor crisis over, the two men jumped into the water, hoping to definitively identify the wreck. Although Patton is nominally credited with the critical discovery, he says: "If you asked me, I have to admit we never actually saw the wreck." Instead, he and Rivers felt their way along the river bottom through the black water. Unable to see even 6 inches in front of their face masks, they moved in a methodical pattern, searching with their hands in front of them. Whenever the men felt a man-made object, they brought it up to the surface. At one point, Patton found a board with something in it. That "something" turned out to be spikes of a kind that were used during the Civil War. The spikes also meant the ship was probably the *Columbine*.

During that second dive, Patton unfortunately developed a severe eye infection. But as he returned to work at Handmark, he also felt triumphant. Patton had experienced the thrill of historic discovery and the satisfaction of honoring the sailors who died in the shipwreck.

Efforts are now under way to have the site designated an official war grave. But given the presence of alligators, Patton doesn't plan to visit anytime soon.

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