



Twelve Desperate Miles: The Epic World War II Voyage of the SS Contessa

Tim Brady

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The true story of how a rusty New Orleans banana boat staffed with a most unlikely and diverse crew was drafted into service in WWII—and heroically succeeded in setting the stage for Patton's epic invasion of North Africa.

The largest amphibious invasion force ever to cross the Atlantic Ocean set sail from Virginia in November 1942 with the aim of capturing Casablanca and a crucial airfield northeast of the city. Unfortunately, the airfield was located a dozen miles up a twisting Moroccan river, too shallow for any ship in the entire Allied fleet. As the invasion neared, the War Department turned up the *Contessa*, a salt-caked Honduran-registered civilian freighter that had spent most of her career hauling bananas and honeymooners.

This unremarkable ship, crewed by seamen from twenty-six different nations, eighteen sailors pulled from the Norfolk County jail, and a French harbor pilot spirited out of Morocco by OSS agents, became the focus of the opening salvo of World War II. Too late to join the massive convoy sailing for Africa, the *Contessa* set out on her own through the U-boat-infested waters of the Atlantic to the shores of Morocco, where she faced her most daunting challenge: the twelve-mile voyage up the well-defended Sebou River, carrying an explosive cocktail of airplane fuel and nine hundred tons of bombs in her holds.

Twelve Desperate Miles is a surprising and entertaining account of one of the great untold stories of the war.

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