



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

Tim Brady

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The Dirty Dozen meets *Band of Brothers* in this true story of how a rusty old New Orleans banana boat staffed with an unlikely crew of international merchant seamen, a gang of inmates from a local jail, and a French harbor pilot spirited out of Morocco by O.S.S. agents in the trunk of a Chevy, were 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 for North Africa in November 1942. Operation Torch was the true beginning of the liberation of Europe since control of Northwestern Africa — Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia -- gave the Allies a base on the Mediterranean for the coming invasion of southern Europe. The prime objectives of the Moroccan invasion, headed by General George Patton, were the port city of Casablanca and an airfield 60 miles northeast of the city, which had the only concrete runways in the region. Unfortunately, the field was located a dozen miles up a shallow, twisting Moroccan river that wound its way down from the Atlas Mountains to the Atlantic. Patton needed five hundred tons of highly volatile airplane fuel and nine hundred tons of bombs delivered to that Moroccan airport to supply his planned air campaign against Casablanca, but he faced a major challenge: the river was too shallow for any available transport ship in the entire Allied fleet. As the clock ticked down on the invasion, the War Department searched every harbor and cove in the Atlantic and only at the last moment turned up the *Contessa*, a salt-caked, rust-stained Honduran-registered civilian freighter that had spent most of her undistinguished career hauling bananas and honeymooners from New Orleans to the river port harbors of the Caribbean. But at least she would be capable of hauling heavy cargo in shallow waters.

Twelve Desperate Miles tells the incredible story of the *Contessa*'s role in the opening salvo of World War II. This unremarkable ship, crewed by seamen from twenty-six different nations and eighteen sailors pulled from the Norfolk County jail, became the focus of the first invasion of the war as it was rushed to Virginia at the insistence of George Patton and quickly retrofitted for war. Too late to join the safety of 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 final and most daunting challenge: the twelve mile voyage up the shallow and well-defended Sebou River, carrying an explosive cocktail of gasoline and bombs in her holds.

In *Twelve Desperate Miles*, veteran history writer Tim Brady chronicles one of the great untold stories of the war. This surprising and entertaining account of the baptism of American forces on the Western Front is a mix of Moroccan intrigue, portraits of some of the great figures of the war (Patton, Eisenhower, Marshall, General Lucian Truscott) at its outset, snapshots of the daily workings of the colorful crew of a merchant ship, along with a thrilling account of the invasion of French Morocco. *Twelve Desperate Miles* offers a unique and fascinating picture of the war in its opening moments.

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

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From Reader Review Twelve Desperate Miles: The Epic World War II Voyage of the SS Contessa for online ebook

Zettie Jones says

The first half of the book was an informative, sometimes tedious history lesson. It really picked up in the last half & I couldn't put down !

Bob Schmitz says

During the first day of the US invasion of Morocco during WWII the mission of the Contessa, a former Standard Fruit Company banana boat, was to carry a huge load of bombs and fuel 12 miles up the shallow Sebou River to an airport captured (hopefully) by American paratroopers. The ships available for the invasion were long enough for planes to take off but not to land thus the need for a land based airfield with supplies. Patton had made this small detail a priority.

To me it was not a particularly exciting or dramatic tale as are many war books but it was an insight into a very small interesting part of the US war effort and the crazy, intricate minutiae involved in these huge dramatic undertakings. Some interesting minutiae:

- United Fruit Co banana boats did double duty as plush cruise ships with fancy accommodations, food etc for the wealthy. Bananas below decks and honeymooners above.
- The propeller shaft in many boats of that time went through a bearing tube made from a Caribbean hardwood lignum vitae. Who knew? Metal boats with wooden mechanical parts.
- Small changes in the design of the invasion could lead to huge effects on the supply chain. For instance if Rangers were substituted for paratroopers the equipment requirements would change leading to changes in cargo requirements, the order of packing, shipping needs, navy escort demands as well as capacity in ports in England and North Africa, a whole cascade of changes.
- Britain ordered duplicates of supplies already delivered because that was easier/faster than finding the originals in the maze of warehouses across England.
- In 1931 Sandinistas killed several farm workers at Standard Fruit farms in Nicaragua and US sent in US Marines on a banana boat to rescue other workers. They succeeded barely after a gun battle on the dock.
- Walter Cronkite landed with the troop in Morocco.
- The pilot of the Contessa, Rene Malevergne, a Frenchman who was the pilot for boats up the Sebou and who was spirited out of Morocco earlier, was the first Frenchman to be awarded the Navy Cross.
- And I know this reflects more on my lack of knowledge but I had not realized that the French in Morocco resisted the invasion setting ablaze 2 US ships and killing many US soldiers.

If you are looking for a dashing tale full of excitement move on. If you want a detailed account about a complex, interesting but minor episode in a minor battle read on.

Terry Brack says

Interesting account of the efforts to start the American Campaign on the European front. Most notable are the many references to how hastily forces were gathered and organized into an invading army consisting of mostly green undertrained men under the leadership of a handful of very competent officers and administrators. This account of the US invasion of Morocco forms the backdrop to the tail of how this remarkable banana boat played its role in the invasion and how a French Moroccan River Pilot was "exfiltrated" and eventually brought back across the ocean to play his heroic role in the story. Brady tells a the thrilling story well maintaining an edgy tension despite the readers foreknowledge of the outcomes.

David says

Great story - it was easy to get involved in it. Read more like a novel. But there were some obvious errors that could have been the result of editing. (I don't remember the exact sentence. The way it was in the book, it said the US entered WWII in 1942. Uh, when was Pearl Harbor again? But, with a different edit of the sentence, it could have read that major European theater combat started in 1942 - or even US offensive ground combat). Probably would have been 4 stars otherwise. But a worthwhile story anyway.

Mark Yost says

My WSJ review:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001...>

Historians have so thoroughly fished the drama of World War II that it is hard to believe the subject still has prize catches to offer up, but here comes a keeper: Tim Brady's "Twelve Desperate Miles," about Operation Torch in November 1942, when the Allies made their first big move against the Axis Powers by invading ports along the Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian coasts. The hope was to wrest away the French colonies, then governed by the pro-German Vichy government, and use western North Africa as a base for attacking the Germans to the east. Operation Torch had a more important goal, too: to force the Germans to commit more troops to Africa and the defense of southern Europe, thus taking pressure off the Russians in the east.

The operation's planning and execution involved prominent U.S. Army generals who would eventually play decisive roles in achieving victory less than three years later, including Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, Mark Clark and Lucian Truscott, the man charged with studying the tactics of British commando forces and creating an American counterpart. The North African landings would be the first test of what Truscott had learned.

Mr. Brady gives us vivid portraits of these major figures, but he also tells the story of some of the lesser-known—though no less interesting—characters who were integral to the success of Operation Torch. Most impressively, he conveys the campaign in an almost novelistic way, bringing seemingly disparate figures and incidents into an engaging narrative.

The book's subtitle, about "the epic World War II voyage of the SS Contessa," refers to a New Orleans-based banana boat of the Standard Fruit Co. that was pressed into wartime service. But the story is about much more than one ship. Three Allied task forces, sailing from America and Britain, eventually delivered 300 ships and 110,000 troops to North Africa.

The forces would pour ashore at landing sites at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers, but one crucial target was a dozen miles inland, up the Sebou River: the Moroccan airfield at Port Lyautey. The Allies needed the airfield to support the attack on Casablanca about 70 miles away, but the Sebou was shallow even at high tide. They would need an experienced pilot to navigate the rivers, and they found him in René Malevergne, a French-born seaman living in Morocco and Mr. Brady's primary character. Malevergne knew every bend and sandbar of the Sebou.

Two years before Operation Torch, Malevergne had been caught up in a failed French Resistance plot in Morocco to smuggle out 40 Belgian pilots. He was indicted for participating in the plot but acquitted by a Vichy court. Mr. Brady uses this earlier episode to introduce Malevergne to the reader and to paint a picture of the tensions in North Africa between the Vichy government, on the one hand, and, on the other, the native-born Moroccans and French citizens there, whose loyalties often belonged to Free France. He also details the North African activities of the Gestapo, the French Resistance, the OSS (America's wartime intelligence service), and the civilians and refugees caught between these warring parties.

After Malevergne's trial and his return to Morocco, he was smuggled out of the country by OSS agents and brought to the U.S. for the naval mission. The Contessa was officially piloted, the author notes, by Capt. William Henry John, a Welsh seaman who had settled in New Orleans after World War I. In 1918, Capt. John had been a 25-year-old navigator on a Royal Navy destroyer that sank a German U-boat in the Mediterranean. Karl Dönitz, a lieutenant on that U-boat who survived the attack, was by 1940 the rear admiral in charge of the German U-boats patrolling the Atlantic.

The Contessa was rushed into service so quickly that it put to sea without most of its usual crew, who were on leave in far-flung places after completing a supply-convoy run to England. Other able seamen were found in Norfolk, Va.—including sailors who had enjoyed their own liberty ashore so enthusiastically that they were being deprived of it at the county jail. Delayed by the crew shortage, the Contessa had to race unescorted to catch up with its convoy in the mid-Atlantic.

Accompanied by the destroyer USS Dallas, the Contessa, carrying 500 tons of volatile airplane fuel and 900 tons of bombs, snaked up the "twelve desperate miles" of the book's title, taking fire from the Vichy French along the way and edging past mines. "To navigate both the fearsome entrance to the Sebou and its shallow, bending path to the port was the work of an expert," Mr. Brady writes. Malevergne's knowledge of tides and the Sebou River proved invaluable as the Allies took Port Lyautey and the airfield—and the Contessa's cargo reached its destination. Many of the details of this tricky journey come from "The Exfiltration of René Malevergne," an unpublished diary of the Frenchman's wartime exploits. Mr. Brady, borrowing the manuscript from the family, makes good use of it.

The successful outcome of Operation Torch may not be a mystery, but Mr. Brady tells the story in a style that will keep readers on the edge of their seats, wondering how a combination of the tides, the French, the Germans, the Allies and pure luck will ultimately play out. In the event, the Vichy French fell quickly—so quickly, in fact, that the Contessa's mission to the airfield, engaging though the story is, turned out to be superfluous. "None of the munitions or gasoline that the Contessa carried up the Sebou were used in Operation Torch," Mr. Brady says. "Not a single P-40 got into the air before hostilities in French Morocco came to a conclusion."

Then why tell the story? One good reason: Operation Torch showed, at a time when U.S. naval prowess in the Atlantic was doubted by many, that America and its allies could set "forces down on a particular series of beaches on a notoriously volatile coastline" and prevail. You close "Twelve Desperate Miles" with a

satisfying sense that two years later, on another particular series of beaches on another dangerous coast, all will be well.

Mr. Yost is the author, most recently, of the e-book novel "Soft Target."

Charles says

The back cover states, "Twelve Desperate Miles is a surprising and entertaining account of one of the great untold stories of the war." I agree completely. It changes the images stamped in minds of what it was like then and does so in an entertaining way.

History can be dry and painstakingly boring when the focus is on facts, dates, and documenting. But put that information into the hands of a masterful storyteller, and history leaps off the pages and becomes the reader's time machine. Even knowing the eventual outcome doesn't matter as it would in a mystery novel. The joy of watching it unfold becomes the focus. Like the saying: reaching the destination is not as important as discovering the joy in the journey. Brady accomplishes that in this account of how an insignificant banana boat did more than it was designed to do and played a significant role in changing the course of World War II.

One reference in the book shaded credibility, however. Brady mentions an incident with details that match Operation Mincemeat, which was a clandestine operation intended to give the Germans misinformation on where a major Allied landing would occur. You can read about it in a book by the same name. Either another event had actually happened, and Operation Mincemeat tried to simulate it, or Brady's research did not uncover the ruse. Plus, Operation Mincemeat didn't play out until nearly a year after the North Africa invasion, so it wouldn't have been in anyone's minds adding to their angst.

My favorite part of the book is its cutting through the bravado of our entry into the war, showing how much we went limping and stumbling until we were able to get war machinery production up to the level we needed to make a permanent difference. I'm afraid the heroism of the first men into battle is not told enough. Thank you, Brady, for this contribution to correct that.

Matthew says

I got this book after reading a review in the Wall Street Journal. It is as much a basic story of the Allied invasion of North Africa as a specific story of the final twelve miles described in the title. It was OK. (If you like the subject, Army of Dawn I think is much better.) My favorite moment in the book came in the epilogue: After the US Navy spent a day shelling a French armory (the Port Lyautey Arsenal) in Morocco, observers came ashore after the invasion to see how much damage they had done to their intended target. As they approached the armory, they encountered an elderly Frenchman, himself a former WWI artillery officer, who came out and expressed astonishment at the incredible accuracy of the Navy bombardment, saying "You cut every road leading to the arsenal and not one shell fell inside to do damage...you have left it intact for yourselves." (Of course, this was not their intent.)

Anyways, the book is OK, but not great.

Terry says

This is the interesting account of how a banana boat was brought into the US Navy to go up a river in Morocco at the outside of the African campaign let by Patton in WWII. The crew of imprisoned civilian seamen and a few regular recruits performed admirably and delivered gas and munitions to the troops that had landed.

The book also shows how the Vichy French regime did put up resistance in French Morocco and that there were US soldiers killed by the French army that was under Nazi collaborators. They withered quickly, however.

This is an interesting historical account from a tough period in history.

Kate says

This is the story of the first amphibious landing in the European theater of war, and an American captain running a refitted United Fruit Company ship in trans-atlantic convoys and a French river pilot brought in to land troops and fuels and ordinance 12 miles up a shallow river under the fire of the Kasbah.

Would really rate 3.5 stars but that option is not available. Author's style was slightly set to a lower reading capacity, and was a little off-putting when it mentioned all of the well known rumors about the death camps in Nazi Germany in 1942. Knowing European survivors knowledge was not well known either in Europe or in the US...those escaping Europe knew something was very wrong and to be rounded up as a Jew was dangerous, but the idea of extermination camps was beyond what they could even comprehend.

But the story was very interesting, in that the invasion of Morocco was a training camp for Normandy, so much for the invasion fleet went right and so much went wrong: fortunately they were not facing the German Army and German fortifications as the things that went wrong would have been fatal to the effort which Patton led. Worth a read just to round out information if you are a WWII buff.

Tiffany says

It felt padded in spots--like the author didn't really have enough material for a whole book. And yet a lot of this ground was covered in another book I read recently, Destination Casablanca, which told a more expansive story of the reality of life in Casablanca at the start of WWII. I much preferred that book. People who are more interested in a play by play of military movements and battles would probably prefer this one.

Daniel Fell says

Well researched and fast moving. This was a really enjoyable read.

John Gardner says

It's been a while since I read a book with a military theme, but my curiosity was piqued by the following blurb on the book's jacket cover:

The Dirty Dozen meets *Band of Brothers* in this true story of how a rusty old New Orleans banana boat and an unlikely crew of international merchant seamen, a gang of inmates from a local jail, and a French harbor pilot spirited out of Morocco in the trunk of a Chevy by OSS agents were drafted into service in WWII — and heroically succeeded in setting the stage for Patton's epic invasion of North Africa.

After spending a relaxing weekend enjoying this story, I came away feeling that my review should be a "tale of two books": the one that Tim Brady wrote, and the one the **Crown Publishing** marketing department sold. Both are good books, but they aren't the same.

First of all, the book that is written is excellent. Brady is a great story-teller, and weaves a fascinating tale of America's first World War II battle in the European theater centered on some of the more obscure characters and events involved. At times he may go into more detail than some readers will prefer, but I appreciated the immersion into the world of 1940's Morocco, as I shared in the anxiety of ordinary soldiers and civilians on the brink of imminent war.

While the *SS Contessa* does figure prominently in the story, the scope of Brady's book is much larger. He takes readers through the politics and preparations behind Operation Torch (the Allied assault on Northern Africa) as well as the logistical nightmares and insufficient training that made the attack such a risky proposition. We learn *why* it was necessary for the U.S. Armed Forces to draft a "banana boat" from the Standard Fruit Company into military service, and fill it with crewmen from the Norfolk County Jail — there simply weren't enough resources and personnel available (with the United States already heavily engaged in the Pacific Theater) for the largest naval mission ever launched to that point in history.

To me, though, the ending seemed anti-climactic. The *Contessa's* journey of "twelve desperate miles" up the Sebou River ended up lasting only a few pages at the end of the book, and I guess I'd expected more. That said, I don't think Brady needed to change anything he wrote. The space designated for the *Contessa's* role in the invasion is probably roughly proportional to her importance in the scope of Operation Torch, which is to say, not much.

But, like I've said, I thoroughly enjoyed the story. The "problem" with the ending has nothing to do with the way it was written, and everything to do with my expectations leading into this book... which brings up the "second book" — the one advertised by the marketing department.

When I read of comparisons to *The Dirty Dozen* and *Band of Brothers*, I expected the book's focus to be relatively narrow, something of a human interest story. Inmates from a local jail chosen to serve in a special mission? Great! What were they like? How did they go about their work? What happened to them afterward?

We never really learn the answers to these questions because the "gang of ex-cons" mentioned on the front cover simply don't figure prominently into the story. The crew members taken from the jail weren't hardened criminals, but sailors serving time for partying a little too hard on shore leave, and by all accounts, they performed their duties admirably and without incident. So while the fact that they were needed at all is an interesting historical tidbit, they aren't the story here.

With all due respect to Hollywood, real life often provides better drama than fiction. This book didn't *need* to

tell the story of these men to be a page-turner. And while credit goes to the marketing department for getting the book in my hands (after all, I might not have bought it in the first place without the intriguing subtitle and jacket blurbs), the story works better as the book Brady wrote than the one I thought I was buying.

If you're into military history, I think you'll appreciate this one. If you're looking for something that really is a real-life version of *The Dirty Dozen*, you'll probably be disappointed. Buy it [here](#) .

Loralee says

This is actually a collection of family opinion--myself, who enjoyed the book but found parts of it too slow, my husband, who liked it so much he chose it over all our audio fantasy books on our recent car trip (but never gives anything many Goodreads stars), my son, who was entranced and, when later quizzed, accurately recounted the story in incredible detail, and my four-year-old daughter, who claimed to be enjoying it so much that she demanded to listen to the CDs she'd missed but didn't seem to understand much of the story about two ships on a mission to travel up a treacherous river to capture a Moroccan airfield during the WWII Allied invasion of Africa, Operation Torch. The twelve desperate miles appear only in the final part of the book, but the tale of how the French-Moroccan pilot, a Navy ship, and a wallowing banana boat chosen to carry a cargo of bombs were turned into an invasion team is covered in remarkable detail with many interesting twists.

David says

I always wondered how the US got involved in the fighting in North Africa in WWII. Most of what I saw had us already there and going back and forth against Rommel along with the British. This book goes into a lot of detail about the planning and execution (with lots of learning curves for the inexperienced American troops) of the invasion and the key roll that George Patton and others played in it. It also focuses on one key individual, a river pilot who knew the river the allies needed to go up in order to secure the airport from which they could stage ground-based aircraft to support the next phases of the war. It reveals many similarities before the invasion of Morocco, and Casablanca specifically, with the movie of the same name that was in the works (one of my all-time favorites). The whole scene of people from many countries trying to find a safe passage out of North Africa to escape the war conditions. I found it to be a thoroughly fascinating read and learned more that I thought was possible about this little-known aspect of the beginning of the end of the axis powers.

Ray says

Twelve Desperate Miles describes the voyage of merchant ship SS Contessa as part of the Allied invasion of North Africa during WW II. The book isn't exactly a gripping, can't-put-it-down page turner, but still it provides an interesting look at this piece of pre-invasion war planning.

The invasion of North Africa, and the planning behind it, is rarely given the attention given to the Normandy Invasion, the Pacific Theater, or more well known European battles. And since it covered a lesser known, less discussed portion of the WWII story, it was that much more interesting to me.

