

# H.M.T. RESTIVE 1940

The Story Behind the Bell at the River Towy Yacht Club, Ferryside

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*A Royal Navy rescue tug, the lives she saved, and how her bell came home to the Towy*



*The bell of H.M.T. Restive, River Towy Yacht Club, Ferryside*

From the ceiling of the River Towy Yacht Club in Ferryside hangs a brass ship's bell, green with age around the rim, its rope worn pale by generations of hands. The inscription reads H.M.T. Restive 1940. Behind those three words lies the story of a small ship with a remarkable war, a vessel built not to fight but to save, and one whose work brought hundreds of men and women home alive when their own ships were burning or sinking beneath them. Her story runs through some of the great campaigns of the Second World War, from the invasion of North Africa to the landings in Sicily and Normandy, and it is gathered here so that everyone who passes beneath the bell may know what it once meant to hear it ring.

## **Built for War, 1940**

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When war came in 1939 the Admiralty faced a problem it had known before. Ships damaged by torpedo or bomb did not always sink at once. Many could be saved if a powerful vessel could reach them in time, take them in tow, and bring them to port or beach them in shallow water. In the First World War the loss of damaged ships that might have been saved had cost Britain dearly, and with the U-boat campaign against merchant shipping beginning within hours of the declaration of war, the Admiralty Rescue Tug Service, closed down after 1918, was re-formed in October 1939 to do exactly that. Its ships would become one of the least known and most valuable services of the war at sea, credited with saving millions of tons of shipping and cargo at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic, when every hull was precious.

Restive was one of its new ships. She was an Assurance class rescue tug, one of twenty-one built by Cochrane and Sons Shipbuilders of Selby in Yorkshire between 1940 and 1943. She was laid down on 25 April 1940, in the very weeks that the war in the west turned from waiting into catastrophe, launched on 4 September 1940 as the Battle of Britain reached its height, the year cast into her bell, and commissioned on 12 December 1940 with the pennant number W 39. With a 1,350 horsepower engine these tugs could make fourteen knots and were powerful enough to haul almost any ship afloat back to port. The work was dangerous. Rescue tugs went towards the ships everyone else was leaving, and five of the twenty-one Assurance class boats were lost during the war.

## **Operation Torch and the Battle for the Mediterranean**

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In November 1942 the Allies launched Operation Torch, the invasion of French North Africa, landing American and British forces at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers. It was the first great Anglo-American offensive of the war, intended to trap the German and Italian armies in Tunisia between the Torch forces advancing from the west and Montgomery's Eighth Army pursuing Rommel from El Alamein in the east. Everything the armies in Africa needed, men, fuel, tanks, ammunition and food, had to come by sea, in convoys running the length of the Algerian coast. The German response was immediate. U-boats were ordered into the Western Mediterranean and the Luftwaffe attacked from bases in Sardinia and southern France, and the waters between Gibraltar and Algiers became some of the most dangerous of the war.

This was the battle Restive was sent to join. She was based at Oran under Lieutenant D. M. Richards of the Royal Naval Reserve, on call for whatever the enemy left crippled along the convoy routes. Her first major task came on 1 December 1942, when the fast minelayer HMS Manxman, one of the celebrated ships that had run supplies through to besieged Malta, was torpedoed by U-375 off the Algerian coast. Restive went out and helped bring the damaged ship into Oran the following day. The name of that submarine is worth remembering, for it enters this story again.

## **The Loss of the Strathallan, December 1942**

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Three weeks later came the hardest night of her war. On 12 December 1942 the P&O liner Strathallan, 23,722 tons and one of the finest passenger ships in British service, sailed from the Clyde as commodore ship of convoy KMF 5, carrying reinforcements for the North African campaign. Aboard were more than five thousand people, including some 4,400 British and American troops, 248 nurses of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, and members of General Eisenhower's own headquarters staff bound for Algiers, among them his secretary and driver Kay Summersby. Also aboard was the celebrated American photographer Margaret Bourke-White of Life magazine, whose account of the night that followed, *Women in Lifeboats*, was published across America in 1943.

In the early hours of 21 December 1942, in bright moonlight north of Oran, Strathallan was torpedoed by U-562. The ship was hit in the engine room, and though the loss of life in the explosion was small, more than five thousand people now had to be taken off a darkened liner in the open sea. The escorting destroyers came alongside and lifted off troops and nurses by the thousand, work that stands among the great mass rescues of the war. A handful of nurses drowned when lifeboats capsized, but almost every soul aboard was saved. Restive came out from Oran with the salvage vessel King Salvor and went alongside to pump the flooded engine room, and for a time it seemed the liner might yet be brought in. Then oil reached the hot boilers and the fumes exploded, sending flame up through the funnel until the ship was ablaze amidships. Restive took off the remaining crew except for a skeleton party and then did something that says everything about the men who crewed these little ships. She continued to tow the burning liner slowly towards Oran for fourteen hours, refusing to give her up, until Strathallan finally capsized and sank twelve miles from port in the early hours of 22 December. Of the greatest troopship loss of the North African campaign, it could still be said that the sea took the ship but not her people.

## **The Salvage Spring, 1943**

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Through the early months of 1943 the battle for Tunisia ground on ashore, and the convoys feeding it continued to suffer. Restive's work never slackened. On 23 February 1943 the American Liberty ship Nathanael Greene, a Gallant Ship citation holder that had survived the terrible Arctic convoy PQ 18 to Russia the previous autumn, was torpedoed by U-565 some forty miles north east of Oran. Restive took over the tow the following evening and by half past six on the morning of 25 February had beached her at Salamanda, four miles west of Mostaganem, saving the ship and her cargo for the campaign. In March she sailed from Oran to the aid of the Union-Castle liner Windsor Castle, torpedoed from the air east of Algiers, though the liner sank before she could be brought in, and in the same week she towed the torpedoed merchantman City of Perth to the coast and beached her south of Cape Figalo. Every ship beached rather than sunk was cargo landed, and every cargo landed shortened the campaign. On 13 May 1943 the Axis armies in Tunisia surrendered, a quarter of a million men, and the way was open for the next great step.

## **The Road to Sicily, 4 July 1943**

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That step was Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, the largest amphibious operation the world had yet seen. Through late June and early July 1943 the invasion convoys converged on the Mediterranean from Britain, America and North Africa. Among them was convoy KMS 18B, the slow assault convoy carrying the men and equipment of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division from the Clyde towards the

beaches of Sicily. On the night of 4 July 1943, as the convoy passed along the Algerian coast, U-boats attacked off Cape Tenes. The converted liner City of Venice, carrying around three hundred Canadian troops, was hit first, and half an hour later a torpedo struck the St. Essylt. Both ships were lost. Restive, working with the corvette HMS Rhododendron, picked up more than three hundred survivors from the water.

The attack was credited to U-409 and to U-375, the same boat that had crippled the Manxman seven months before; both submarines were themselves sunk within weeks. Thanks in part to the rescue ships, the loss of life that night was mercifully small, and six days later the men of the 1st Canadian Division went ashore in Sicily on time. Somewhere in Canada today there are families whose grandfathers came home because a tug from Selby reached them in time.

## **Normandy and Home Waters, 1944**

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By 1944 Restive had returned to home waters for the greatest operation of all. The invasion of Normandy in June 1944 required the largest gathering of tugs in history, towing the sections of the two prefabricated Mulberry harbours across the Channel, positioning the blockships, and standing by the invasion anchorages to drag damaged ships clear. Restive is listed among the rescue tugs that served the Normandy operation.

Her recorded contribution came in August 1944, when the veteran cruiser HMS Frobisher, which had bombarded the German defences in support of the D-Day landings, lay damaged by an aerial torpedo in the Seine Bay anchorage. On 10 August Restive took the cruiser in tow from the assault area and brought her across the Channel, arriving off Sheerness on 12 August for repair in the Medway. It was the long habit of her war, bringing wounded ships home.

## **Peace, Rescue and the Silver Screen, 1945 to 1965**

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Restive survived the war and kept working. On 18 October 1949 the brand new aircraft carrier HMS Albion, under tow from her builders on the Tyne to Rosyth, collided with the steamer Maystone near the Longstone Lighthouse off the Farne Islands and began to sink by the stern. Restive was sent out from Rosyth to assist, and the carrier was brought safely into port with five feet of water in her engine room. A ship that would go on to serve around the world for another twenty years owed her survival in part to a tug already nine years old.

Then came an unexpected turn. In 1957 Restive went to Portland in Dorset to star in the feature film *The Key*, released in 1958, directed by Carol Reed from Jan de Hartog's novel, with William Holden, Sophia Loren and Trevor Howard.

The film told the story of the wartime rescue tug crews, the very service in which Restive had served, and she was painted up to play three different fictional tugs. Men who had served in the real Rescue Tug Service remembered the filming, and Trevor Howard buying pints for naval ratings in the Portland pubs. It is a rare thing for a working ship to play herself on screen, and rarer still for the film to honour a service so few people had ever heard of.

Restive was sold out of naval service on 11 June 1965, after a quarter of a century of pulling other ships out of trouble.

## **The Bell at Ferryside**

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How her bell came to rest in the River Towy Yacht Club at Ferryside is not yet recorded, and that is the one chapter of this story still to be written. Ships' bells were often kept when a vessel was sold or broken up, passing to former crew members, to families, or to institutions with a connection to the sea. Somebody carried this bell to the Towy estuary and thought a sailing club was the right place for it, and they were right. If any reader knows how it arrived, or remembers who gave it, that memory is worth setting down before it is lost. It would complete the story.

In the meantime, when the bell is rung, it is worth remembering what it is. It is the voice of a small Yorkshire-built ship that served three of the great invasions of the Second World War, that steamed towards burning liners when every instinct said to steam away, that held her tow for fourteen hours against a fire she could not beat, and that lifted three hundred soaked and exhausted soldiers out of the Mediterranean on a July night in 1943 so that they could land in Sicily six days later.

Few clubs in Wales have anything finer hanging above them.

## **In Closing**

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Between 1940 and 1965 one small ship from Selby served through three of the great invasions of the Second World War and spent a quarter of a century going to the aid of others.

She helped bring the crippled Manxman into Oran, fought fourteen hours for the burning Strathallan, beached the Nathanael Greene and the City of Perth to save their cargoes, lifted three hundred survivors from the sea on the road to Sicily, towed the wounded Frobisher home from Normandy, saved the new carrier Albion in peacetime, and ended her days playing herself on the cinema screen.

No battle honours were painted on her bridge and no headlines carried her name, yet hundreds of people lived out their lives because she reached them in time.

All that remains of her now, so far as we know, is the bell at Ferryside. It asks nothing of us except to be understood. A ship's bell was her voice, marking the watches, sounding in fog, ringing the alarms, and this one heard everything Restive ever did.

When it rings above the Towy today, it speaks for a ship, a service and a generation that went towards danger so that others could come home from it.

## Timeline of H.M.T. Restive

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Date	Event
<b>25 April 1940</b>	Laid down at Cochrane and Sons, Selby, Yorkshire
<b>4 September 1940</b>	Launched, the year inscribed on the bell
<b>12 December 1940</b>	Commissioned into the Royal Navy as pennant W 39
<b>1 to 2 December 1942</b>	Assists the torpedoed minelayer HMS Manxman into Oran
<b>21 to 22 December 1942</b>	Tows the burning troopship Strathallan for fourteen hours before she sinks off Oran
<b>23 to 25 February 1943</b>	Tows and beaches the torpedoed Liberty ship Nathanael Greene near Mostaganem
<b>23 March 1943</b>	Sails from Oran to the aid of the liner Windsor Castle
<b>26 to 27 March 1943</b>	Tows and beaches the torpedoed City of Perth south of Cape Figalo
<b>4 July 1943</b>	Rescues over 300 survivors of City of Venice and St. Essylt, carrying Canadian troops to Sicily, off Cape Tenes
<b>10 to 12 August 1944</b>	Tows the damaged cruiser HMS Frobisher from Normandy to Sheerness
<b>18 October 1949</b>	Sent from Rosyth to assist the sinking carrier HMS Albion off the Farne Islands
<b>1957</b>	Stars in the film <i>The Key at Portland</i> , released 1958
<b>11 June 1965</b>	Sold out of naval service
<b>2026</b>	Her bell recorded at the River Towy Yacht Club, Ferryside, Carmarthenshire

## Sources

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The service record of HMS Restive (W 39) is drawn from the Allied Warships database at uboat.net, which is itself compiled from Admiralty war diaries and reports of proceedings held at The National Archives, Kew. Details of the Assurance class come from the records of Cochrane and Sons Shipbuilders of Selby and the published class histories. The account of the Strathallan draws on the P&O Heritage records, the Clyde Maritime record of her loss, and the survivor testimonies gathered at the Strathallan memorial archive, thestrathallan.com. The Nathanael Greene's Arctic service in convoy PQ 18 and her Gallant Ship citation follow the United States Maritime Administration vessel history. The account of the attack on convoy KMS 18B and the losses of City of Venice and St. Essylt follows the Canadian official histories of Operation Husky and Legion Magazine. The HMS Albion incident of October 1949 follows the published record of that ship. The filming of *The Key at Portland* in 1957 is recorded in the production notes for the film and in the recollections of Rescue Tug Service veterans. Positions on the accompanying map marked as exact are taken directly from wartime Admiralty records; port and landmark positions are indicative.