

Norwegian Ship Tungenes Aground in Carmarthen Bay, 1948



In the winter of 1948, the Norwegian motor vessel *Tungenes*, a cargo ship of approximately 1,600 tons, became stranded on a sandbank in Carmarthen Bay once again underscoring the enduring hazards of this stretch of the Welsh coastline.

The vessel ran aground roughly half a mile off the old harbour at Burry Port, near Pembrey, after encountering heavy seas and rough weather. A broken rudder left her without steerage, unable to free herself from the shifting sands beneath her hull.

The grounding occurred at the top of a spring tide, a critical moment in the tidal cycle. Tug owners involved in the salvage operation expressed concern: unless the ship could be re-floated immediately, she would likely remain stranded for nearly a month until the next comparable tide returned.

The predicament of the *Tungenes* immediately drew the attention of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, whose crews were well accustomed to the dangers of Carmarthen Bay.

At the time, responsibility for much of the bay fell to the Ferryside lifeboat station, which operated a powerful motor lifeboat capable of responding in severe conditions.

On the evening of the incident, following reports received by the Coastguard, the Burry Port/Ferryside motor lifeboat **Caroline Oates Aver and William Maine** was launched at approximately 9.26 pm. Conditions were punishing. A fresh south-easterly gale swept across the bay, creating rough seas and poor visibility as the lifeboat pressed toward the reported position.

The *Caroline Oates Aver and William Maine* was a **Liverpool class motor lifeboat** one of the RNLIs most advanced designs of the era. Built in 1939, she featured a strong wooden hull, a wide beam for stability, and reliable diesel engines that allowed her to operate in conditions that would have overwhelmed earlier pulling or sailing lifeboats. These qualities made her particularly suited to Carmarthen Bay, where shifting sands, powerful tides, and sudden weather changes routinely tested even the most experienced mariners.

Crewed entirely by local volunteers, the lifeboat battled through the gale, **assisting another vessel en route** before finally locating the *Tungenes*. By then, the Norwegian ship was lying high and dry on the sandbank, her rudder broken, and her hull embedded. With no immediate danger to the crew and no possibility of towing her clear, the lifeboat could not affect a direct rescue.

Yet their task was far from over. The lifeboat remained on station, **maintaining a vigilant watch** while salvage tugs attempted unsuccessfully to re-float the stranded vessel. In the worsening weather, the RNLIs crew provided reassurance to the *Tungenes'* officers and men, who faced the prospect of being stranded aboard a powerless ship as the storm continued to build. The lifeboat stood ready throughout, prepared to evacuate the crew at a moment's notice should the situation deteriorate.

Such steadfastness was typical of RNLIs operations in the post-war years. Lifeboat crews often launched into severe weather with limited navigation aids, relying on seamanship, local knowledge, and sheer determination. Their role extended beyond dramatic rescues: they provided a protective presence, a guarantee that help was close at hand in some of Britain's most treacherous coastal waters.

Carmarthen Bay: A Perilous Legacy

The grounding of the *Tungenes* was far from unique. Carmarthen Bay particularly the waters between Burry Port, Cefn Sidan, and the Loughor estuary has long been notorious among mariners. Wide tidal ranges, constantly shifting sandbanks, and sudden weather changes have claimed or imperilled countless ships over the centuries. Even in the mid-20th century, with modern navigation aids and experienced crews, the bay remained unforgiving.

The fate of the *Tungenes* serves as a reminder of the enduring maritime hazards of Carmarthen Bay and the vital role played by lifeboat crews and salvage services. Their readiness, skill, and quiet courage often meant the difference between rescue and disaster.

Graham T Emmanuel 2026