

PT-109

Eighty years later (1943-2023)

Like most young boys in the 1960s, I was captivated by the story of PT-109. Roughly about 30 years after PT-109's ill-fated collision with a Japanese destroyer known as the *Amagiri*, the story of PT-109 and the heroism displayed was legendary. Remembering television's McHale's Navy, which I watched on a black and white floor model Magnavox TV set, I often thought about PT-109, the story, and the connection to an assassinated US President. To me, as a 10-year-old boy discovering model ships and floating them in a makeshift dam created behind my house out of the local creek, I would dwell on PT-109.

Remembering this week, this is the 80th anniversary of the sinking of PT-109 and the brutal struggle for survival of the crew of that small 80-foot ELCO Torpedo boat. As it turns out, the "109" would have its start right here in Virginia in August 1942. Loaded onboard the Liberty ship *SS Joseph Stanton* at the Norfolk Navy Yard, it was transported to the Solomon Islands operations during the height for the struggle of Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands. The boat would come to be based at the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 2 headquarters at Tulagi Island. The boat would see action from late December during Japan's abortive Operation "K"; the withdrawal of all Imperial Japanese Naval Forces, in and around Guadalcanal and the lower Solomon Island chain, culminating with their cease of operations in early February 1943.

The commander would come to be John F Kennedy on April 23rd, 1942. Taking command of PT-109, the boat was in a miserable state, in much need of repair and overhaul. Kennedy and his crew whipped the boat into shape and shortly thereafter, started offensive operations against the Japanese "Tokyo Express" frequently operating in the Solomon Island chain resupplying their garrisons. This would lead to PT-109's run-in with the Japanese Destroyer *Amagiri*, a Fubuki-Class Destroyer.

On the evening of August 1st, 1943, PT-109 was on patrol in Blakett Strait, a very narrow sea lane in the vicinity of Kolombangara Island. The 109 was at low-speed or "idle" sometime around 2 AM on August 2nd, the *Amagiri* came upon the 109, having left Kolombangara, heading north at a very prudent speed of about 30-32 knots. Stated reports of survivors of the 109 indicated that there were less than 10 seconds for Kennedy to issue orders to increase speed on his boat. The resulting collision sliced the 109 in half at about midship at a 20-degree angle. The rear section of the 109 quickly sank, the forward portion remained afloat due to trapped air and watertight compartments. Two members of the 109 were killed instantly, closest to the collision side of the ship. The rest of the unlucky crew of 13 were injured in some way or another, with several members having been severely burned by aviation fuel that caught fire when the fuel tanks ruptured.

The boat stayed afloat long enough for Kennedy to formulate a plan to try and swim for a neighboring island known as Plum Pudding Island which was about 4 miles away. They set off, leaving the floating forward section of the hull and made the trip to the island, towing the injured in the process. There, Plum Pudding's roughly 100-yard-wide spit of dry land afforded trees that the 109 crew would hide in from passing Japanese patrols. With no fresh water or food on the small island, the decision was made to swim to additional islands on the 4th and 5th. On the night of the 4th, they swam almost 4 more miles to Olanasana Island which was within eyesight of Plum Pudding Island. While on Olanasana, the crew was able to have access to fresh coconuts, although there was still no fresh water. Kennedy knew that in the tropical heat, with no water, their survival was vital to finding some. Several nights, he swam out to the middle of the channel with a battle lantern in the hopes of flagging

down PT boats that were operating in the Ferguson Passage. With Lenny Thom, the executive officer, Kennedy and Thom then swam to Naru Island which was a further half mile away and found a small canoe that contained packages of crackers and candy and a fifty-gallon drum of drinkable water that was left by the Japanese. To Kennedy and Thom, it was like hitting a lottery jackpot. They took the canoe and paddled back to their crew on Olasana Island. Once there, they distributed the supplies to the crew. Eventually, two native Coastwatcher's by the names of Biuku Gasa and Eroni Kumana would stumble upon the 109 crew. From that point, a message written on both paper with pen and a Coconut laid out the situation that would be taken to rescuers.... stating that 11 of the 13 were still alive and needed immediate rescue.

The 109 crew would survive a total of six days stranded on a floating hulk, and 3 small islands in Blakett strait. Had it not been for the canoe found with the water and limited food, the crew might have perished. What little bit of water they could find came from rainwater, caught by leaves. Once rescued, the crew would recover, Kenney's injuries would plague him through the rest of his life, mainly with chronic lower back pain. He would never get over that injury.

Of interest, on April 23rd, 1944, one year to the day that John Kennedy took command of PT-109, the destroyer that rammed the 109, the *Amagiri*, would be sunk after striking a Naval mine in the Makassar Strait near Borneo. And an even stranger twist, the *Amagiri* would take two hours to sink in water that was roughly 100 feet deep. The 109 would sink in water that was more than 1,200 feet deep. Illegal salvaging of the *Amagiri* would see the wreck broken up and carted away for salvage leaving very little of the ship remaining whereas the 109 would be discovered almost 60 years later in 2002 by a National Geographic team headed by Robert Ballard. Literally finding a needle in a wide ocean, one of the torpedo tubes attached to the deck of PT-109 was found half buried in the sand on the bottom of Blakett strait. Upon investigating it further, it was determined that the forward portion of the hull had drifted south until it sank and over 80 years, the sediment from the ocean currents slowly covered the remaining hulk until only that torpedo tube was visible. For size comparison, the Mk 8 torpedo tube on PT-109 was only around 20 feet in length. Partially covered and obscured from searches, one can sense the tremendous stroke of luck it would take to find it 1,200 feet on the bottom.

As for Kennedy and his men, they were recovered on August 8th, 1943, with Kennedy enduring many months of rehabilitation for his injuries suffered in the collision. August 8, 2023, is just a few days from the date I wrote this on August 3rd. It marks roughly 80 years. Kennedy would be awarded the Navy and Marine Corps medal for his bravery though he was recommended for the Silver Star. Established on August 7th, 1942, this medal is award to those that "Distinguished oneself by heroism not involving actual conflict with an enemy of the United States." Although the Silver Star was mentioned, controversy arose from the awarding of the Navy and Marine Corps medal. As pointed out, PT 109 had been involved in action earlier that night and was still on patrol in enemy water when the *Amagiri* collided with it. It was pointed out that the 109 had not been destroyed due to gunfire, but by simple collision. Joe Kennedy, John's father who would play up his son's action for political gain was most offended by the lower grade medal. As pointed out, the Navy and Marine Corps medal was awarded, given to Kennedy in the act of risking his life in trying to save his men. When you think of it in those terms, that makes what Kennedy endured that much more special.

Kennedy would also receive the Purple Heart for his injuries. Those injuries were caused by the actual collision and would require months of rehabilitation. These injuries would result in a host of connected illnesses that would plague him for the rest of his life. It is thought that the injuries caused problems that he had with

gastrointestinal issues along with chronic pain in his lower back. Later while in public office, Kennedy would require years of constant battling with that pain.

Later, Kennedy would be assigned to skipper PT-59. Kennedy's executive officer Thom would die in 1946 because of an auto crash. Kennedy would serve as one of the pallbearers. Gerard Zinser, Motor machinists Mate 1st class would be the last survivor of PT-109 to die in 2001. He achieved the rank of Chief Petty Officer. As for Kennedy, he would achieve the rank of Lieutenant and retire from the service in 1945. He would go on to be awarded the American Defense Service Medal, the American Campaign Medal, The Asiatic-Pacific campaign Medal with 3 service stars, and the World War II Victory Medal.

Growing up within 25 years of this event, it was still somewhat captivating to all Americans. What captivated my attention to this event in history was a result from watching a movie that came out in 1963 starring Cliff Robertson. Being a young man, I was often enthralled by watching movies of the 60's that glorified WWII. This movie being no different, it painted a heroic romanticism of the event which would never really address the six days of horror that the surviving crew of PT-109 endured.

I always wanted a model of the PT-109. Revell introduced a 72nd scale kit of PT-109 that was somewhat inaccurate and out of scale. To this day, a suitable, accurate larger scale model of this subject has yet to be released to the modeling world. Available today, Revell kit #850310 can be found for about \$25 dollars. But other than this one plastic kit, there really isn't anything offered that a modeler could look to purchase. There are several Radio Control models that are nice and in larger scale, the true plastic model is only available by Revell. It is hoped that a larger scale will become available.

Additionally, I would recommend reading about PT-109 in a book by William Doyle entitled *PT 109: An American Epic of War, Survival, and the Destiny of John F. Kennedy*. All these sources can introduce you to the story of the PT-109. And you can always visit the Kennedy Library in person and online for additional information.

In closing, as you think about the 80th anniversary of this event, you think about what John Kennedy went through to bring his ten surviving crew members home. He displayed unbelievable courage swimming at night in shark infested waters to try and flag down passing PT boats, swimming in waters patrolled by Imperial Japanese Naval vessels. Kennedy was nothing short of devotion to his crew. This would propel Kennedy into the office of the Presidency in the 1960 election.

PT boats would continue to struggle to prove their worth with Admiral Halsey maintaining that they were unsuitable for offensive operations against the Japanese Imperial Navy. But, in the confined waters of the Solomon Islands, they were perfect for their role when the American Navy was rebuilding after so many losses. The PT Boats harassed, interdicted, and took the fight to the enemy.