JFK's *Other* PT Boat Rescue

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After recovering from his extreme efforts to save the crew of his smashed *PT-109*, John F. Kennedy captained *PT-59* on a mission to rescue trapped marines.

by Joseph Hinds

JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS WOBBLY ON HIS FEET. He tired easily and got terrible headaches. He often got seasick, a more than inconvenient affliction for a navy lieutenant. His back, a chronic source of pain so bad that he'd been turned down for duty in the army, hurt worse than ever. The August 1943 wreck of his motor torpedo boat *PT-109* in the Solomon Islands and his efforts working and swimming for hours to rescue his crew had strained his frail health to the limit. But after that ordeal, which earned him the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, he rested briefly—and kept mum about his health. The last thing he wanted was to be sent home.

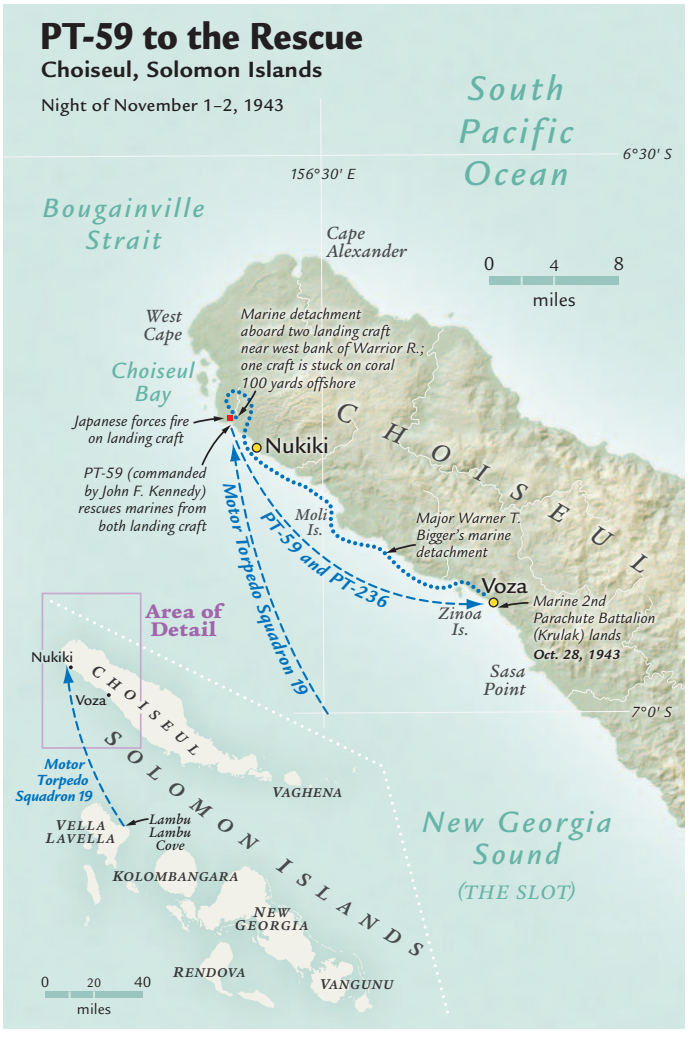
Kennedy's efforts worked, and in October 1943 he received a new assignment as skipper of *PT-59*, a 77-foot Electric Launch Company (Elco) gunboat. His new patrol torpedo boat came with a war-ravaged history of its own. The *59* had sunk her first ship on April 9, 1942, while still in American waters off Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island. An accidental discharge sent a torpedo loaded with depth charges shooting through the water at 40 miles per hour, barely missing a pier on Prudence Island. Three miles later it struck the cargo ship USS *Capella (AK-13)*, at anchor off Jamestown, Conanicut Island. The explosion sent cargo and a military floatplane stored on the deck into the sea. By sheer luck, there were no deaths and only eight minor injuries.

The *59* before Kennedy

AFTER THE MISHAP *PT-59* was sent to Central and South America and then to the Pacific. On the night of December 7, 1942, the *59* and three other patrol boats attacked an Imperial Japanese Navy

OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Opposite: A PT boat bristling with weapons cuts through South Pacific waters in the Solomons. The light wooden boats packed a punch out of proportion to their size. Above: Two PT boats defined John F. Kennedy's brief but action-packed war career. He is seen recuperating after the *PT-109* incident that made him famous. Soon he would skipper another PT boat—and get a fresh opportunity for heroism.



DREAMLINE CARTOGRAPHY / DAVID DES

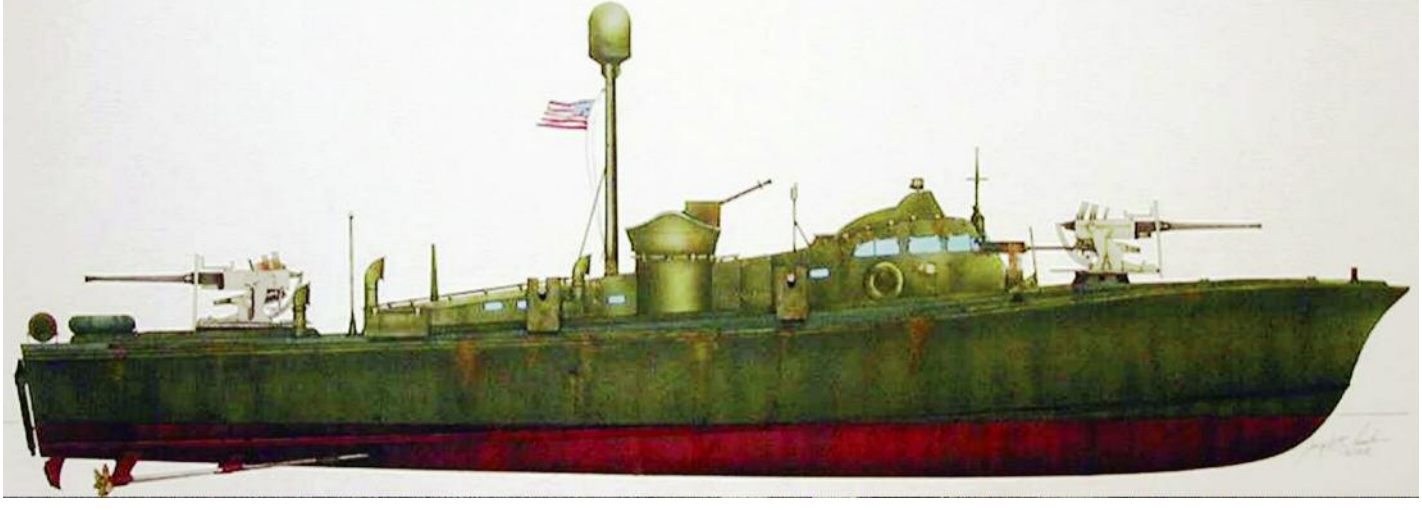
convoy of eight destroyers under the command of Admiral Raizo Tanaka that were taking desperately needed supplies to beleaguered Japanese troops on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Such convoys, collectively dubbed the Tokyo Express, had to pass through what Americans called the Slot, which runs from the southern tip of the big island of Bougainville, past the islands Choiseul, Santa Isabel, New Georgia, and finally Guadalcanal. During the course of the war, the Japanese and Americans each lost 30 large ships under this water, which acquired the nickname Iron Bottom Sound.

In the Japanese convoy that *PT-59* and her companion boats attacked, the ships were loaded with hundreds of infantrymen on their open decks and food and ammunition stores beneath. The PT boats, from the Allied base at Vella Lavella Island, struck the Japanese off Cape Esperance and Savo Island, approaches to Tassafaronga Point on the northwest edge of Guadalcanal. The PTs loosed 12 torpedoes and moved in for a strafing run of heavy machine-gun and 20mm cannon fire. The *59* advanced to within 100 yards of the *Oyashio* and raked the ship's superstructure and gun mounts, killing the soldiers on deck. The PTs left the embattled Japanese ships scarred and full of holes that crews had to patch. For the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the men of the PTs had cause to celebrate: they had forced Admiral Tanaka to abandon his mission and run back to Bougainville.

On December 9, *PT-59* and the other boats set out to hunt for Japanese barges in the shallows of nearby islands. They were ready to start their barge-busting activities when something huge was spotted in the night moving at a sedate two miles per hour. It turned out to be the 2,000-ton blockade-running submarine *I-3 (Togami)*. The *I-3* was stuffed with desperately needed infantry, ammunition, and food. In Kamimbo Bay at Cape Esperance, the *59* sent two torpedoes into the sub's midsection. The *I-3* sank in a few minutes. The crew managed to recover one Japanese officer from the wreck.

Two nights later, on the 11th, an opportunity arose for *PT-59*'s squadron to strike again at Tanaka's Tokyo Express. American dive-bombers had attacked 10 Japanese ships, and four PTs left Tulagi and took up positions off the beach of Tassafaronga and Cape Esperance to join in. *PT-48* was the first to attack, and the other three followed, firing four torpedoes each. The *59* was credited with one of two hits. Again, Tanaka ordered all his ships to retreat and return to their base. The PTs were tearing the Japanese strategic timetables to shreds.

Below: Kennedy's new command was *PT-59*. He stepped aboard just after the vessel was converted into a gunboat with serious firepower, new armor, and up-to-date radar. The downside: terrible fuel efficiency due to increased weight.



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COURTESY OF JOSEPH HINDS

The crew of *PT-59* mugs for a photo. The boat and her crew had seen plenty of combat by the time Kennedy took command. Joining in attacks on Japanese troop and supply ships traveling in the so-called Slot (the waterway that moved through New Georgia Sound in the Solomon Islands), the *59* had helped disrupt the steady stream of enemy shipping traffic known as the Tokyo Express.

Kennedy Takes Command

THIS WAS THE HISTORY KENNEDY STEPPED INTO when he took the helm of *PT-59*. He came aboard in October 1943, just after the *59* had been converted from a torpedo boat to a gunboat. She had received a new radar unit and topside armor plating. The torpedo tubes came off, and the decks were strengthened to accommodate the weight of two Bofors 40mm cannon. Next came two twin-barrel .50-caliber machine guns on each side of the cockpit in the boat's front and two single-barrel .50-cal machine guns, one amidships and one to the rear. After the conversion, *PT-59* had enough firepower to do real damage. She could now overpower any Japanese barge. The downside was the enormous weight imposed by the additional weapons and crewmembers to man them. The *59* would never again attain speeds of 45 knots. She also guzzled more fuel, which reduced her operating range. But the offset of increased firepower and armor protection looked to be worth the trade.

PT-59 was part of Motor Torpedo Squadron 19, based at Lambu Lambu Cove on the northeast coast of Vella Lavella Island. Kennedy and his fellow PT men did not know it, but they were about to become part of Operation Blissful, a US Marine Corps operation begun on the 22nd and designed to interfere with a large-scale shift of Japanese forces.

Expecting major US incursions in the Northern Solomon Islands, the Japanese were rushing huge numbers of men from the Central Solomons north to Bougainville and other islands. Part of Blissful involved a diversionary raid to Choiseul, a large island that formed an eastern barrier to the Slot and bridged the waters between the New Georgia Group and Bougainville. Choiseul was a key component in this Japanese troop movement. There was a barge relay station on Choiseul Bay 75 miles from Lambu Lambu, and a seaplane base nearby.

Two Royal Australian Navy coast watchers and several islanders kept a constant eye on Japanese movements at Choiseul. There were about 4,000 Japanese troops waiting for barge transportation to Bougainville. They were short of rations and many of them were sick and malnourished.

Lieutenant Colonel Victor H. Krulak's 2nd Parachute Battalion of the 1st Marine Amphibious Corps would land on Choiseul with more than 600 men, conducting small hit-and-run raids on the northwest coast to make the Japanese think a large US invasion force had been sent to take the island. Meanwhile, a naval

Japanese Light on PT-109

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The ramming of Kennedy's *PT-109* by the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri* was no accident. Official Japanese reports prove that. But was it preventable?

Most Americans know of the demise of John F. Kennedy's first patrol torpedo boat, *PT-109*. But what most people know—that the *109* was sunk by the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri* in the Solomon Islands in August 1943, and Kennedy worked for hours afterward to rescue his men—is not the whole story. Few know exactly *how* the boat was sunk.

Today, we know for certain that the sinking was not an accident, the result of an unintentional ramming, as some writers have proposed. The accident theory is usually stated something like this: *It was black as night and the Japanese destroyer came out of nowhere and unwittingly rammed the* 109. But a recently translated 31-page report from *Battle Lessons Learned in the Greater East Asia War (Torpedoes), Volume VI, Annexed Volume 1 (Motor Torpedo Section)*, published by the Imperial Navy of Japan's torpedo school on November 5, 1943, and captured by Allied forces during the war, has some very specific things to say about the *PT-109* incident.

The report is a Japanese attempt to figure out the utterly surprising effectiveness of PT boats in the Pacific theater. In all their long-range war planning before the war and in its early stages, the Japanese had never considered that small, insignificant wooden boats might disrupt their naval strategies. For that matter, the US Navy had never dreamed that its patrol torpedo boats would be so instrumental in blocking the Japanese navy from many major and minor achievements. Senior US Navy officers had never expected that PT boats would face down enemy convoys of cruisers, battleships, and destroyers and come out on top.

The 31-page report shows that the Japanese eventually put serious study into PT boats' strengths and weaknesses. One major weakness spelled out is lack of speed, something the Americans were well aware of. As Bern Keating writes in his 1963 book *The Mosquito Fleet: The History of the PT Boat in World War II*, "The American navy had learned the hard way that any enemy destroyer could make 35 knots [40 miles per hour], and many could do considerably better—plenty fast enough to run down a PT boat, especially after a few months of action had cut the PT's speed."

So, the Japanese knew the PT boats were slow. According to the report, they also learned how to detect and identify them in the dark of night. "PT boats under high speed are usually detected by the white waves [the bow waves they create]," the report states. "As the wake of the PT boat is distinctly narrow, there is no danger of mistaking it for a destroyer or other ship."

Next, the report moves into how to attack these relatively slow targets. "When the enemy has pressed in close…," it continues, "sink him by ramming, if the torpedo can be avoided in the process." What then follows, in the section "Method of Attacking PT Boats, Item E," is a real-life example of just such an attack: "While the destroyer *Amagiri* was proceeding in Vella Bay on a reinforcement mission to Kolombangara (in Blackett Strait) on 2 August 1943, it detected an enemy PT boat close aboard and sank it by ramming." That PT boat was *PT-109*.

The US Navy has its own documentation of the incident. "Report on Loss of *PT-109*" states that there were eight men on watch. The rest of the crew was presumably and legitimately curled up asleep somewhere. "Suddenly a dark shape loomed up on the *PT-109*'s starboard bow 200-300 yards in the distance," the report states. "Kennedy had swung the wheel to starboard…. The destroyer traveling at an estimated speed of 40 knots neither slowed nor fired…. 10 seconds elapsed between time of sighting and the crash."

The American report does not contradict the Japanese account. It seems a lookout on the *Amagiri* spotted the white, thin, wake of the PTs as they moved at a very moderate speed, and the destroyer's captain called for full speed ahead in the direction of the *109*. Down she went.

The question that remains for historians is whether *PT-109* could have avoided the ramming. To this author, while acknowledging that Kennedy was a hero for saving his *PT-109* crew after the ramming, it seems very likely that the watch crew was asleep. No matter how black the night, a Japanese destroyer couldn't have sneaked up on a PT boat with an alert crew. The noisiest boats in the Pacific theater, Japanese destroyers had no stealth ability. Yet that night in August 1943, a Japanese destroyer went hunting for PT boats and succeeded. Crewmen could have spotted the *Amagiri* by its telltale wake. At the very least, they would have heard it.

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officer with the marine battalion would scout out a site for a PT boat base.

Krulak's force consisted of three companies, a communications platoon, a weapons company with mortars and Johnson light machine guns, and a nine-man detachment from an experimental rocket platoon armed with 40 65-pound rockets. Transportation to Choiseul would be via the fast transports *Kilty*, *Ward*, *Crosby*, and *McKean* and the destroyer *Conway (DD-507)*. Four small landing craft for initial landings and later scouting missions were brought along.

The marines would operate with two forces on the island. One, under Krulak, would head south to a barge station at the small seaside village of Sangigai and destroy as much of the station and as many of the barges there as possible. The other force, under the battalion's executive officer, Major Warner T. Bigger, would head north to Choiseul Bay and do the same. The navy scout would seek possibilities for a torpedo boat base, and the experimental-rocket platoon would try out their new weapons on live Japanese targets.

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Above: Kennedy had frail health before the war, but he hid it well in this 1942 stateside portrait. He came home in worse shape, thanks to the *PT-109* incident. But that incident and the *PT-59* rescue would make him famous. Inset: His war deeds would became presidential campaign material, as evidenced by this 1960 lapel pin.

A Call for Help—*PT-59* Responds

On November 2, Squadron 19 was operating near Choiseul when a call came that the marines had hit a snag in their withdrawal and needed assistance. *PT-59*'s fuel tanks were only partly filled, but Kennedy responded immediately, taking the fully fueled *PT-236* along to help.

Bigger and his men had been sent 35 miles from Choiseul Bay to the Warrior River. Japanese troops were in hot pursuit. Running firefights broke out, and as the marines got closer to the river, the number of Japanese increased. The marines scrambled aboard two LCMs (Landing Craft, Mechanized). One LCM got off safely for Krulak's base at Voza, farther to the southeast on Choiseul's coast. But the other hit a reef and began taking on water. The leak went unnoticed until the vessel was well offshore.

As the damaged LCM headed for the open ocean, it became apparent it was taking on water fast—in fact it was sinking. The Japanese fire coming from the beach never died down. Then the LCM's engine quit. For a few frantic moments, the navy crewmembers did their best to restart the engine, but to no avail. Soon the vessel was drifting toward the shore, where more and more Japanese soldiers arrived and added their guns to the firefight.

At this point *PT-59* motored up, followed by *PT-236*, with Ensign William F. Crawford commanding. Kennedy moved in and took on all of the marines and naval personnel from the sinking vessel and set out for the open ocean and Voza. There were problems, however: the *59* was down to half tanks of fuel, and it was severely overloaded. More than 60 men were on board in addition to the crew of 18, and the boat could barely make headway.

On the way to safety, the PT men gave the starved marines canned peaches to eat. One of the marines, Corporal Edward James Schnell, had been seriously wounded, and Kennedy had him placed in his own bunk for the journey.

After delivering the marines to Voza, *PT-59* and *PT-236* turned toward home base at Lambu Lambu. Schnell, who needed medical attention, remained in Kennedy's bunk, but died during the trip. At about 3 a.m. *PT-59* finally ran out of gas and the engines died. Crawford hooked a towline to the *59* and the *236* pulled her the rest of the way. The next day, the PT boats returned to Voza to help protect the evacuation of Krulak's force.

For a second time, Kennedy was a hero. His injuries now earned him a medical discharge and gaunt, pale, and skinny as a rail, he went home to recover.

Joseph P. "Joe" Kennedy, Sr., had big plans for his son John. He had originally expected his oldest son, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., to run for high political office after the war, but Joseph Jr. died during an experimental mission when his plane blew up over the English Channel. John was now told it was he who would run for office. His father began paving the way, obsessively.

When Robert Donovan's book *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II* was released in 1961, Joe saw to it that a movie came out of the deal, traveling to Hollywood, spreading money around, and buying large interests in several filmmakers. He had a hand in the financing, production, and casting, and practically watched over the shoulders of the writers as they worked.

Though the JFK image was consciously sculpted, polished, and lit in favorable light, John F. Kennedy had indeed proven his bravery in combat on two separate occasions. The American fighting men involved in both actions—his *PT-59* crew and the marines of Choiseul—knew who had saved their lives. Kennedy earned his place among America's true war heroes. ★

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