

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

JFK in the Pacific: PT-109

a presentation to the Institute on 30 January 2011 by

Lieutenant Colonel Owen O'Brien (Ret'd)

John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States, served in the United States Naval Reserve in the Pacific in World War II. A motor torpedo patrol boat he commanded, PT-109, collided with a Japanese destroyer and sank in the Solomon Islands. Here, Owen O'Brien describes these events, drawing on recently-released documents from the United States archives.

Key words: John F. Kennedy; *PT-109*; World War II; Pacific Theatre; Solomon Islands; patrol boats; PT boats.

Despite being an infantryman, I wish to tell you about brave sailors, famous men, political spin, and giant egos – the stuff of legend! Tales of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK – or 'Jack' as he was known to family and friends), the 35th President of the United States, are sometimes exaggerated, of course, but this is a good story, which is based on a recent biography by Geoffrey Perret (Perret 2002) and documents from the JFK Library.

In 1943, the Allies had recaptured Guadalcanal and were pushing the Japanese north up the Solomons chain of islands. One small motor torpedo boat, one of many, had a very minor role to play. In August 1943, the captain of that boat, the USS *PT-109*¹, was the son of a rich and influential man, and later became quite famous himself. Consequently, the role of *PT-109* has since grown in stature and significance. Indeed, the JFK adventure has prompted an examination of the tactical impact of the World War II patrol boat programme in the Pacific. Historical judgement is that their value was questionable – but Americans do not want to hear that! American patrol boats did not sink a single important enemy ship in the Pacific, only barges. The Japanese disregarded them. They cost lives and money for almost no return.

The PT Boat Mystique

Mystique about patrol boats began from their use to evacuate General Douglas MacArthur from the Philippines in early 1942 when America needed a hero! A PT boat took MacArthur from Bataan to Mindanao and a B-17 Flying Fortress flew him to Darwin, despite him having a great fear of flying. Interestingly, MacArthur had demanded to be taken to the first port with a railhead, namely Darwin – but Darwin was not to be connected to the south by rail for another 62 years! So, with staff and entourage, and family, and nanny, and

furniture, and car, and Major-General Sutherland's Cadillac, and gold from the Philippines President, he had to fly to Alice Springs in the centre of Australia, and then get a train to Adelaide in the south. When the train stopped en route at Terowrie, South Australia, he said those immortal words: "I shall return" – not, as legend has it, in the Philippines or in Melbourne. The captain of the PT boat that effected MacArthur's escape, John Bulkeley, was awarded the Medal of Honour (for extended valour). From that moment on, PT boats were in the news.

Patrol boats were glamorous, adventurous, buccaneering and romanticised as a vital contributor to the war effort. Over 600 were built. Jack Kennedy was attracted to them after six boring months as a very junior United States Naval Reserve officer in Washington, D.C.

Kennedy's Early Life

Jack Kennedy's grandfather was a poor Irish immigrant who opened saloon bars and went into politics and banking. Jack's father, Joseph Kennedy, became chief executive officer of his father's bank at the tender age of 25 years. He made much money importing liquor, not only before and after prohibition, but during it as well. He became one of the wealthiest men in America and a United States ambassador. He had nine children.

Joe Junior was his heir apparent and joined the navy after law school. His little brother, Jack, failed the physicals for the army and navy, but then passed them (reputedly with some help) and, four months before Pearl Harbour, was commissioned as an ensign in the United States Naval Reserve. He was already known as an intelligent and articulate young man. He had travelled extensively in Europe and, a Catholic, had had an audience with the Pope. After applying for sea duty, he met Captain John Bulkeley, Medal of Honour, who had delivered MacArthur from Bataan to Mindanao. The captain was invited to lunch with Ambassador Kennedy and, eight hours later, Jack was offered a billet on PT boats. At the patrol boat training school, Jack was well regarded and he was retained for a while as an instructor.

¹PT boats were small, fast, wooden patrol boats armed with four torpedoes and were used by the United States Navy in World War II to attack larger surface craft. Typically, they had a planing hull and a displacement of only 30 – 75 tons, enabling them to reach speeds of up to 40 knots. They relied largely on their speed, manoeuvrability and small size for protection.

Kennedy's War Service

In April 1943, Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Jack Kennedy was deployed to the Pacific. On his way to Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron No. 2 on Tulagi Island in the Solomons, he saw his first combat. He was on a barge – a Landing Ship Tank – when it was attacked by Japanese aircraft and he acquitted himself well in this engagement. After nine days of familiarisation training, he was made captain of the motor torpedo patrol boat, USS *PT-109*.



Ensign Jack Kennedy, USNR, in 1941 aged 24 years.

[Photo: The History Place – John F. Kennedy Photo History]



USS *PT-109* official model

[Photo: United States Navy photo number 1145017]

The PT boat concept had been adopted by the United States Navy from the British. It was also used successfully by Italy and others, but there was growing dissatisfaction with its usefulness. There were several designs, all with three engines. It was generally quiet, but not at high speed. Its top speed was 40 knots and it was armed with four torpedoes, a mixture of machine guns, cannon *etc.* Kennedy was given a crew of 12 and started to train them, especially for night operations. He scrounged equipment, including an old Japanese anti-aircraft gun and added one crewman. He wanted a new-fangled thing called radar, but sets were scarce. He had personal medical problems, which began to bother him – a bad back and bowel; and the *PT-109* crew suffered casualties from Japanese bombs that fortunately missed the boat itself.

In July 1943, Kennedy's squadron was ordered to commence ambush operations against the "Tokyo Express", the name given to the Japanese convoys that were regularly resupplying their forces on the islands in the Solomons north of Guadalcanal. The convoys typically tracked down "The Slot", the channel which runs from north-west to south-east between the two chains of islands which constitute the Solomons group – especially that part of it between New Georgia Island and Santa Isobel Island known officially as New Georgia Sound. The American patrol boats would form a piquet line across "The Slot" towards its southern end and then move northward in line abreast to make contact with the Japanese vessels. On contact, they would put in a torpedo attack. Unfortunately, though, the United States Mark VII torpedo was not very reliable. An actual map from 1943 shows a patrol boat piquet line in Blackett Strait.

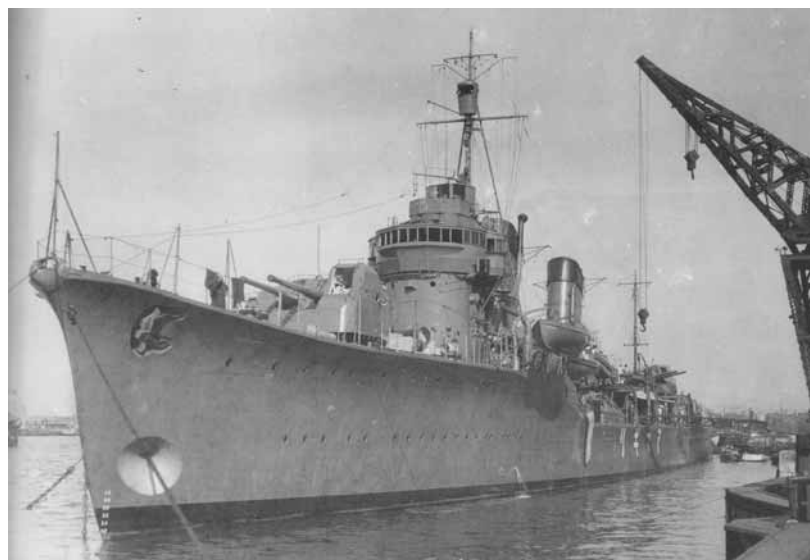


Map: The Solomon Islands, showing "The Slot" (New Georgia Sound) between New Georgia and Santa Isobel Islands

[Map: Wikipedia Commons – United States Central Intelligence Agency 1989]

For several weeks, the 15 boats of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron No. 2 had no success, but, on 1 August, they contacted four Japanese destroyers, (three resupply vessels and one escort, the *Amagiri*). Nine boats fired 24 torpedoes, but they scored no hits and were ordered to call off the attack and return to base. Only 12 PT boats received the message and three, including PT-109, kept patrolling, but all radar had gone. The Japanese destroyers delivered their reinforcements and supplies and turned for home. *Amagiri* suddenly appeared 30 seconds away from *PT-109*. A collision could not be avoided and the destroyer knifed through the patrol boat.

On the patrol boat, all hands were knocked down and some ended up in the water. Fuel on the patrol boat caught fire and Kennedy ordered everybody off. But the fire dissipated and Kennedy managed to get all his crew back on board, except for two who remained missing, presumed dead. Two men were later seen in the water. Kennedy swam out and rescued them.



The Imperial Japanese Navy destroyer *Amagiri*

[Photo: Wikipedia Commons – Shizuo Fokui, photographer, November 1930 (Todaka 2005: 63)]

At that moment, unknown to Kennedy, Sub-Lieutenant Reg Evans of the Australian Coastwatchers² was on Kolombangara Island and noticed flaming fuel. Next morning, Evans received a coded message which said: “PT Boat 109 lost in action in Blakett Strait two miles SW Meresu Cove. Crew of 12. Request any information.” Evans reported that the wreckage was still floating and any survivors might land on a nearby island.

²Coastwatchers were a pre-war initiative of the Royal Australian Navy – one of the few sensible strategic initiatives by Australia in the 1930s. Over 100 personnel – missionaries, planters, traders and veterans of World War I, with native helpers – were deployed. Their mission was to observe and report on Japanese movements in the islands and they were equipped with radios for this purpose. Admiral Halsey commented that: “Coastwatchers saved Guadalcanal. Guadalcanal saved the Pacific.”

By morning, Kennedy and his shocked and burnt crew could not stay on board the floating wreckage, so Kennedy detached a mounting beam from the souvenired anti-aircraft gun and used it to float the crew ashore three miles to Pudding Island. He then tried for two nights to swim to nearby Fergusson Passage to hail an Allied vessel, but to no avail. On the night of 5-6 August, he swam and floated to Olasana Island, where he saw two natives, but they ran off. Natives, who were scouts working for the Australian Coastwatchers, then found the crew and one showed Kennedy how to write a message on the skin of a coconut. Kennedy wrote: “Naru Island native knows position. He can pilot. 11 alive. Need small boat. Kennedy.”³ The message was duly delivered to Evans who arranged a rescue⁴. Evans sent Kennedy a letter in a brown envelope stamped “*On His Majesty’s Service*” and addressed “To the Naval Officer in Charge of Naru Island”. By 8 August, Kennedy and his crew were back in base. The crew of *PT-109* had been assumed killed and a memorial service had been held for them.

Jack Kennedy was given command of another patrol boat, but the boat role was changing. Kennedy’s medical problems – back, duodenal ulcers and irritable bowel – also worsened, leading to him being medically evacuated to the United States in December 1943.

Postscripts

Jack Kennedy’s father had Jack’s story written up for publication. *The New Yorker* and *Life* were not interested initially, but *The Reader’s Digest* published it. Rumour has it that 150,000 copies were quietly sold to one person! The story was re-released in 1960! There was talk of a high bravery award, but Kennedy was not eligible as he did not engage the enemy. However, he was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Star for Gallantry in Action.

In 2007, a United States Navy ship visited the Solomons to honour Eroni Kumana, the native who had rescued Kennedy and his crew. By then deaf and nearly blind, he was presented with gifts and awards from the United States Secretary for the Navy. Earlier, he had been invited to the JFK Presidential Inaugural in 1960, but had been unable to attend.

The captain of the *Amagiri*, Lieutenant-Commander Hawami Kouhei, then aged 32, was the youngest destroyer captain in the Imperial Japanese Navy at the time she sliced through *PT-109*. Some say that he sent a congratulatory telegram to Kennedy when he was inaugurated as president in 1960. Wikipedia even says that he attended the ceremony!

³This message later had pride of place on President Kennedy’s desk.

⁴Years later, the two lieutenants, Evans and Kennedy, met again in the White House with all fares paid!



Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, USNR, being presented with the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Gallantry in Action on 12 June 1944 at Chelsea Naval Hospital in Massachusetts. He had earlier been awarded the Purple Heart.

[Photo: The History Place – John F. Kennedy Photo History]



Ensign Joe Kennedy, USNR, as a Navy pilot in training at the Naval air base at Squantum, Massachusetts.

Joe was awarded his wings in May 1942. He could have had a job in Naval Intelligence, but chose the elite aviation corps instead.

[Photo: The History Place – John F. Kennedy Photo History]

Meanwhile, Jack's elder brother, Joe, was flying B-24 Liberators in Europe. He completed a tour of 30 missions and then flew 10 more. Next, he volunteered for a special assignment, on which his plane exploded, killing him and his crew. Joe was posthumously awarded the Navy Silver Star and the United States Air Medal. Ironically, it was Jack who succeeded to the destiny that had been envisaged for Joe.

In 2002, the *National Geographic Magazine* launched an expedition to find the remains of *PT-109*. The chances of finding the wreckage of a wooden boat lost in tropical waters after 60 years were not good, but some fittings could have survived. The search grid was 5 miles by 7 miles in a depth of about 1200 feet, which was not too difficult. After two weeks of searching, a torpedo and tube, and PT boat gear, were found. As *PT-109* was the only patrol boat known to have been lost in the area, it was assumed that these artefacts came from Kennedy's boat. As the location of the artefacts is too deep for conventional divers to reach, they are likely to remain undisturbed on the seabed. The area has now been grabbed for potential tourism interest and some names have been changed to add more "Kennedy" flavours – such as changing the name of Pudding Island to Kennedy Island.

Conclusion

Jack Kennedy was a good-looking and clever young man. It is not widely known that he wrote some very perceptive analyses of world affairs and European geopolitics before the United States entered the war. History will judge that, as president, he did some great things, but also made some big mistakes. His naval experience and war service probably helped his career, as did, perhaps, his father's money and influence. But a nation is grateful for his bravery and, if Marilyn Monroe were here today, she would probably sum up for all by saying: "Thank you, Mister President"!

References

- Perret, Geoffrey (2002). *Jack: a life like no other* (Random House: USA).
- Todaka, Kazushige, editor (2005). *Japanese Naval Warship Photo Album: Destroyers* (Kure Maritime Museum: Kure).

Author: Owen O'Brien, a member of the Institute, graduated from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, into the Royal Australian Infantry Corps in 1957. In a military career spanning 31 years, including several in the Army Reserve, he saw operational service in Malaya (now Peninsula Malaysia) and Vietnam with the Royal Australian Regiment. He served also with the Special Air Service Regiment. He is a graduate of the Royal Australian Air Force Staff College, the United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Australian National University and the University of New England. Today, he gives military history lectures on cruise ships and this paper is based on one of them.