



## PT 109: John F. Kennedy in WW II

*Robert J. Donovan*

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Seventeen years before John F. Kennedy became the 35th president of the United States - in the early morning of August 2, 1943, to be exact - a PT or Motor Torpedo Boat under his command was rammed and sliced in half by a Japanese destroyer in the waters of Blackett Strait, in the Solomon Islands. Kennedy's wartime career had been unremarkable to that point. He had shown a talent for scrounging the occasional loaf of bread or haunch of New Zealand mutton for his crew, he had nearly destroyed a refuelling dock in his rush to be the first PT boat returning from overnight patrols, and he was a congenial and businesslike commander of his tiny boat with its crew of twelve. The PT boats were the terriers of the Pacific Fleet, yapping at the enemy's heels but rarely getting the chance for heroics, and PT109 was no exception. Kennedy's first direct confrontation with an enemy ship was the one that sank his boat. There was no time to react; in the concealing darkness, with no radar, the destroyer was inside torpedo range before they saw it. In the aftermath of the ramming, as the destroyer swept away and fired two shots back at the broken and burning PT boat, and with an injured back, Kenne Gathering his surviving crew to the derelict forward section of the boat, which was still floating, Kennedy swam into the darkness and towed the injured back to the hulk. He would spend 30 of the next 36 hours in the water, during which time he and the crew swam three miles to a small island with Kennedy towing a badly burned survivor. Over the next three days Kennedy placed his life at risk in the effort to secure the rescue of his crew, which was finally effected on day 4. Only two men were lost, and those at the time of the collision. In September 1943 Kennedy assumed command of PT59 and was promoted to Lieutenant. In October he plucked 50 marines from the water beneath enemy guns. In November, suffering from a ruptured disc and malaria, Kennedy was directed by a doctor to leave his command, and returned stateside in early 1944 weighing just 125 pounds. He was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps medal and the Purple Heart. In August 1963, three months before his assassination, Kennedy wrote: "Any man who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worthwhile, I think can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction, 'I served in the United States Navy'".

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