



# The Daring and Deadly ‘PT Boats’

by George S. Nammack

When one sees or hears the short form of a patrol motor torpedo boat, as in “PT boat”, the number 109 frequently comes alongside as does the handsome visage of the young and intrepid naval officer, LTJG John Fitzgerald Kennedy, that famous boat’s commander. Though a number of its predecessors doubtless performed outstanding feats in sea battles, the shining wake of 109 and the jutting jaw of a young president-to-be directing its swift slicing of the sea, remains etched on many eyes and minds.

PT-109 was a member of the PT-103 class, of which hundreds were completed between 1942 and 1945 by the Elco Naval Division of Electric Boat Company at Bayonne, NJ. Launched June 20, 1942, she was 80 feet long with a 20-foot, 8-inch beam and her three 12-cylinder 1500 hp Packard gasoline engines could move her along at 27 knots. That was moving for an 80-foot vessel, but slower than the destroyers and cruisers they were to target in the Solomon Islands! PT-109 and her ilk were effective against aircraft and ground targets. She routinely carried three officers and 14 enlisted men. Her punch included four Mark VIII torpedoes, a 20 mm cannon aft, four .5-inch machine guns, and a 37 mm anti-tank gun mounted forward. PT boats could not survive a direct hit in the engine compartment and almost always would lose the entire crew.

To take an attacking shot, PTs had to close to within five miles of a target vessel. That’s well within gun range of, say, an enemy destroyer. Usually, they’d approach in darkness, fire their torpedoes, which gave away their position, then flee like blazes behind a smoke screen. Sometimes retreat was made difficult by seaplanes dropping flares and bombs on them. PTs had to rely on their speed, relative smallness, maneuverability and darkness to make it through. Some in the military were more than a little jaded in their description of the PTs as “plywood coffins.”

PT-109 was one of six Elco boats, 109 through 114, sent to the Solomon Islands. They arrived at Sesapi, Tulagi Harbor in November, 1942. John F. Kennedy was assigned to PT-109 at Tulagi and relieved the executive officer, Leonard J. Thom. On June 16, 1943, PT-109 shifted with other boats to newly captured Rendova Island. By August, the US Marines were forcing the Japanese out of Munda airfield at New Georgia, yet the other nearby islands remained held by the Japanese forces. PT-109 was one of 15 boats ordered on a mission to attack a Japanese warships’ venture dubbed the Tokyo Express. The PTs fired all of their 60 torpedoes, some of which exploded prematurely, and did not sink a single enemy ship. Poor planning was blamed. PT-109 returned without her radar.

Kennedy’s vessel patrolled the area, searching for any enemy ships when, on the night of August 2, 1943, idling on one engine to avoid detection, it found itself squarely in the oncoming path of the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri*, which was doing nearly 30 knots. PT-109 had no time to get its engines up to torpedoing speed and was run down and cut in half

by the speeding destroyer. PT-109 was out of it, with only its watertight compartments keeping the forward hull floating in a sea of flames.

JFK put a lantern, all shoes and all non-swimmers on a timber from the boat and everyone kick-paddled toward a tiny deserted island three and a half miles away. It took four hours, with Kennedy, who’d swum for Harvard and was superb in the water, towing another badly-burned man by holding the fellow’s life jacket strap in his teeth! He and his crew had to hide from the passing Japanese barge traffic. JFK swam another four kilometers to Naru and Olanana islands to look for help and food. He then led his men to Olanana, which offered coconuts and water. They survived for six days on that diet, and then were rescued by two Solomon Islander scouts paddling canoes. Kennedy cut an urgent message on a coconut shell and sent it ahead via the scouts. In part, it read “11 alive. Need small boat. Kennedy.” That coconut shell was kept in a glass container by JFK on his desk during his presidency. It is on display currently at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, Massachusetts.

This writer was a lad of 10 when on Sunday, December 7, 1941 President Roosevelt announced that the Japanese had sneakily bombed a place by the name of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and destroyed totally three of our battleships, capsized a fourth, heavily damaged three others, two light cruisers, three destroyers and other vessels.

The dastardly attack inflicted 2,718 casualties on the U.S. navy, of which more than 2,000 were fatalities. Army casualties totaled more than 600 men, of which more than 200 died. My father was down in the living room and I was upstairs in my room at the time, both of us waiting to hear our favorite radio program, “The Shadow”, a nightmare-invoking bit



PT-109 with survivors of “USS Northampton”

boat”. People became intensely involved, adults joining the services, youngsters out in the fields on weekends playing Parris Island, old-timers rooting for the “Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>”, singers’ voices summoning victory, clasped-handed clergy of all denominations raising their flesh-and-blood steeples on high. Four and a half years later, with victory at hand, many of those steeples remained erect by way of gratitude.

Our navy’s PT boats had distinguished ancestors. Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) was the name conferred on fast torpedo boats by the United States Navy, the Royal Norwegian Navy, the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy. In World War II, US Navy boats were called by their hull classification symbol of “PT” (Patrol, Torpedo), but their class type was “motor torpedo boat”. The Royal Navy called them “MTBs,” and the German Kriegsmarine referred to theirs as S-Boote (*Schnellboote* – fast boats). Generally, these were known among the Allies as E-boats.

With almost no armor, MTBs counted on their high speed and agility to avoid gunfire from larger vessels. The British and Italian navies were the initial developers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of these precursors to PTs. The Italian MTBs were called MAS and were comparatively small boats; however, in 1918, the Italy’s MAS 15 sank the Austrian battleship *Szent István*.

The Royal Navy launched its HMS *Cricketer* in 1906, the first RN ship to use oil in her boilers. Initially placed as an *Insect* class coastal destroyer, she was later reclassified as a torpedo boat. RN seamen hung the nickname “Oily Wads” on this class. Similarly sized boats of the RN had different jobs to perform and were known as Rescue Launches. Among notable operations involving the MTBs were the daring and swift evacuation of Dunkirk, the English Channel Dash and “Operation Neptune”. The final MTBs active in the RN were a pair of Brave class fast patrol boats in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These could do 50 knots!

The Royal Canadian Navy had torpedo boats in its 29<sup>th</sup> MTB Flotilla. Designed originally as Motor Gun Boats (MGBs) because they sported six formidable naval guns, they later were known as Motor Torpedo Boats. Built by British Power Boats, Hythe, these vessels displaced 55 tons, were nearly 73 feet with beams measuring almost 21 feet and five-foot eight-inch draughts. Powered by three Rolls-Royce or Packard supercharged V-12 engines providing 3,750 hp, they could whisk along at 41 knots. They bristled with six nasty 2.24-inch guns, two torpedo tubes, a .50-inch Vickers machine gun and a 40mm Bofors cannon. Just say please when passing, pal...

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PT-109 on board “SS Joseph Stanton” at Norfolk Navy Yard, August 1942.



Lt. John F. Kennedy aboard the PT-109

of broadcast drama. FDR’s grim message shocked us. Dad banged on the top lid of his big RCA console.

Weeks and months passed as America’s involvement in World War II deepened and the public became more aware of words and phrases like “U-boat”, “Luftwaffe”, “Zero”, “Kamikaze”, “LST”, “depth charge”, “leathernecks”, “jarheads”, “P-40”, “Spitfire”, “Hellcat”, “turret gunners”, and, yes, “PT

