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The Sinking of PT-109: The History of the Controversial Incident That Made John F. Kennedy a War Hero

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes quotes from Kennedy and the crew about PT-109 *Includes footnotes and a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents “There’s nothing in the book about a situation like this. A lot of you have families and some of you have children. What do you want to do? I have nothing to lose.” - John F. Kennedy after the collision with a Japanese destroyer On the night of August 1, 1943 and in the early morning hours of the next day, one of America’s many patrol torpedo boats in the Pacific, PT-109 and her crew of 12 men, was performing its usual role in the Pacific Islands: a night patrol of the Blackett Strait in search of enemy convoys transporting large numbers of Japanese troops to southern Guadalcanal and other strategic locations. However, on this dark, moonless night, PT-109, with its engines idling to avoid creating wake, was severed in two by a collision with a Japanese destroyer, the Amagiri. With only seconds to respond after sighting the destroyer, the crew was unable to get the boat out of the Japanese destroyer’s path, and it’s unclear whether the Japanese destroyer even knew the other boat was there. While the destroyer suffered minimal damage, two crew members on PT-109 were instantly killed, and the other 10 who initially survived would have to struggle for their lives. In many ways, what happened following the collision is remembered better than the actual sinking, in part because the survivors’ tale was so harrowing, and their survival was marked by their own bravery. Though the role and effectiveness of PT Boats continues to be a topic of debate, the crew’s survival is a story of undisputed valor and providence. Of course, the story’s association with a future president never hurts, and like so much of John F. Kennedy’s life, the PT-109 incident is controversial. Kennedy survived the attack and famously saved nearly a dozen of his crew, one of whom he saved by swimming for several miles while clenching the crew member’s lifejacket with his teeth. A member of the swim team at Harvard, Kennedy also did the bulk of the swimming when looking for food after the survivors reached a deserted island. For this, Kennedy ultimately received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, but in the process, he suffered a back injury that would trouble him for the rest of his life. After recovering, Kennedy re-enlisted in the Navy and served on PT-59 until he was honorably discharged in 1945, just before Japan's surrender and the end of the War. Kennedy received numerous military awards, among them a Purple Heart and a World War II Victory Metal, and though he was not yet president and perhaps only held that ambition in the back of his mind, Kennedy had already seen more combat than most presidents. Naturally, his future political career would benefit from his service, but given that he was in charge of the crew at the time of PT-109’s sinking, critics and detractors have pointed to it and try to pin the blame on him. The Sinking of PT-109 chronicles the famous and controversial incident that made Kennedy a hero during World War II. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about PT-109 like never before, in no time at all.

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