



JFK, WORLD WAR II, AND THE HEROIC RESCUE OF PT 109

IN HARM'S WAY

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CHAPTER 1

A FAST SHIP

*I wish to have no connection with
any ship that does not sail fast; for
I intend to go in harm's way.*

—Captain John Paul Jones, 1778

NANTUCKET SOUND, JULY 29, 1941

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Eleven years later, Jack once again sailed on the Nantucket Sound, this time in his beloved twenty-five-foot sailboat *Victura*. Jack had chosen the name, a Latin word meaning “about to conquer.” The boat had been a gift from his father to him and his brother Joe Jr. Together they had raced it many times and won several championships. Today, however, Jack was heading for the sailboat race at Edgartown, on Martha’s Vineyard, with his lifelong friend Torbert Hart Macdonald.

Jack was now twenty-four years old. Both he and Joe Jr. were Harvard graduates, both outstanding young men at the start of promising adulthoods. Yet the brothers had put aside law school to volunteer for the navy. Joe was learning to fly bombers, and Jack had been assigned to Naval Intelligence in Washington, DC. War was coming. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time before the United States was drawn into the fight with Germany, Italy, and Japan. When the time came, the brothers wanted to serve.

As he sailed into the harbor, Jack noticed a type of boat he had never seen before at the pier. It was a navy patrol vessel. PT boats, as they were called, were elegant craft made from wood; this particular type was seventy-seven feet long and powered by three enormous Packard engines, each capable of 1,350 horsepower. At full throttle, they could reach speeds above forty knots (forty nautical knots equals forty-six miles per hour). Built for war, they were armed to the teeth with two twin .50-caliber heavy machine gun turrets and four torpedo tubes that held Mark VIII 21-inch torpedoes. They were the fastest and, for their size, the most heavily armed craft in the navy.

It wasn't just a PT boat's speed that impressed Jack. The boat was commanded by a junior officer, a lieutenant, which was only two ranks above Jack's rank of ensign. Unlike a larger warship where he would just be one of many junior

Kennedy Family Scrapbook

Who Was John F. Kennedy?

Jack arrived into the world on May 29, 1917, in his father's house at 83 Beals Street in Brookline, Massachusetts. Christened John Fitzgerald Kennedy after his grandfather, he was the second son of Joseph and Rose Kennedy. In addition to his older brother, Joseph Jr., there would be seven more siblings: Rosemary, Kathleen, Eunice, Patricia, Robert, Jean, and Edward. The Kennedys were Irish Catholics—loyal Americans, but often looked down upon by others as outsiders. John F. Kennedy would become the first Catholic president of the United States.





PT 20 was a 77-foot Elco boat that won the Plywood Derby.

officers, he realized if he volunteered to serve with PT boats, he could command one right away. It would be a chance to make a difference in the coming war. Commanding a PT boat in the Pacific would be far better than the safe job writing reports that his father had arranged for him at Naval Intelligence in Washington, DC.

The U.S. Navy's focus on motor torpedo boats came from U.S. Army general Douglas MacArthur. The general was stationed in the Philippines and charged with defending the

islands from an expected Japanese invasion. Unfortunately, he had very few warships assigned to help him. MacArthur believed that hundreds of small motor torpedo boats would deter an enemy navy from attacking the islands until the U.S. Navy arrived in full force. He requested two hundred PT boats be constructed and sent to his command. But time was running out as the threat of war approached.

When the Japanese invaded the Philippines on December 8, 1941, General MacArthur had only six PT boats under his command. In three months, the American-Filipino forces was trapped and under siege on the Bataan Peninsula west



TORBERT HART MACDONALD

Torbert Hart Macdonald was Jack Kennedy's Harvard roommate and captain of Harvard's varsity football team. He would also become a naval lieutenant and command several PT boats in Squadron 12, stationed in Papua New Guinea, later winning a Silver Star for his heroism. He would go on to serve in Congress and Jack would be a godparent to his son Torbert Macdonald Jr.



JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY
Born May 29, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Prepared at The Choate School. Home Address: 294 Pondfield Road, Bronxville, New York. Winthrop House. *Crimson* (2-4); Chairman Smoker Committee (1); St. Paul's Catholic Club (1-4). Football (1), Junior Varsity (2); Swimming (1), Squad (2). Golf (1). House Hockey (3, 4); House Swimming (2); House Softball (4). Hasty Pudding-Institute of 1770; Spee Club. Permanent Class Committee. Field of Concentration: Government. Intended Vocation: Law.



General Douglas MacArthur photographed in Manila in 1945.

of Manila, where they were cut off from receiving Allied help. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the general to evacuate the Philippines, MacArthur, his family, and a select few officers boarded the last four PT boats on March 11, 1942, for a 560-mile ocean voyage through enemy-controlled seas to the island of Mindanao. There the party was picked up by American B-17 bombers and flown to Australia.