



**John  
Kennedy**  
*Navy*

## **John Kennedy**

**May 29, 1917 - Nov 22, 1963**

**BIRTHPLACE: Brookline, MA**

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### **SOLDIER DETAILS**

**HIGHEST RANK: Lgt**

**DIVISION: Navy**

**THEATER OF OPERATION: Pacific**

**SERVED: Sep 24, 1941 -**

**MILITARY HONORS: Navy and Marine Corps Medal**

**HONORED BY: The Eisenhower Foundatio**

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### **BIOGRAPHY**

Young John F. Kennedy's future was one of privilege and opportunity with his graduation from Harvard University in 1940. He had previously attended the London School of Economics and was entering graduate school at Stanford University in California when he paused, with all of America to intently listen to President Roosevelt's galvanizing declaration following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor ending with "a date which will live in infamy". Young Kennedy's nation was now at war. Older brother Joe joined the Navy and was training to be a pilot. John whom friends and family called Jack, wanted in on the action too. The problem was Jack had a bad back and it was doubtful the Navy would take him. The family patriarch Joseph Kennedy relied on a few well-placed connections to help his second eldest son. The elder Kennedy was the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain and good friends with Captain Alan Kirk who was the Director of Naval Intelligence. This was the break young Jack needed to get his foot in the door and he was soon assigned as an ensign in the Naval Reserves serving in intelligence. His initial duties with the Navy were modest at best shuffling between office bound assignments stateside. Ensign Kennedy's next big break came when he was able to attend Officers Training School in the late summer of 1942. This set him up for his big chance he had so longed for where he could contribute and command as an officer. It was a calling based on his skills and passions from a life of growing up on Cape Cod among the sleek and fast luxurious wooden hulled motorboats effortlessly skimming across the waves on weekends. A Patrol Torpedo (PT) Boat skipper had arrived ready for duty. Ensign John F. "Jack" Kennedy was finally was at the helm of his own boat with the salt air spray in his face and the ocean chop bouncing him and his crew across the waves aboard the roaring PT 101. The 101 was a 78-foot Higgins boat which was one of two variants the Navy was fielding along with the slightly larger Elco PTs. His time aboard the 101 was only for training with the Navy's Motor Torpedo Squadron Four located in Melville, Rhode Island and later for testing in the tropics in Panama, but it gave the young officer the thrill of commanding a roaring wooden hulled

boat across the sea but this time with a compliment of torpedoes and heavy machine guns. The PT boats were the US Navy's concept for quick attacks and for close in shore support. Combat Command and the PT-109 Lt. (jg) John F. Kennedy aboard the PT-109 in the South Pacific, 1943 Lt. (jg) John F. Kennedy aboard the PT-109 in the South Pacific, 1943 John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade (JG) Kennedy entered combat with an assignment to Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron Two based in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific in 1943. It was there he boarded "his" PT boat. Finally he had his first combat command. It was the PT-109. She was an Elco type. The bigger of the two variants by about 10 feet complete with a formidable array of torpedoes, heavy machine guns and depth charges. No time to waste for the young Kennedy as he skippered the 109 with several other PT Boats away from the Solomons towards the Russel Islands as the US Navy prepared for the invasion of New Georgia. Soon Kennedy and his crew of eleven sailors were conducting nightly attacks on Japanese barge traffic frantically attempting to resupply their isolated garrisons in New Georgia. The US Navy used the lightning speed of the PT boat to attack with quick surprise launching torpedoes and strafing the enemy craft with 50 caliber heavy machine gun rounds. The boat's speed allowed for a quick exit before counter attacks could be a serious threat. The crew of the 109 also found themselves on patrol in and around the remote islands serving as lookouts for the larger more formidable Japanese destroyers and cruisers that may attempt to attack US warships or US Marines on beach heads in the New Georgia-Rendova area. The only real weapon the PT boat had when facing off with the venerable much larger and heavier destroyers was speed, the quick release of torpedoes and a rapid exit before the large guns of the destroyer could attempt to fix their targets. The PT boats and their crews would easily succumb to a single blast from a destroyer's heavy guns. It was speed or nothing. Collision with a Japanese Destroyer Higgins type PT-796 similar in appearance to the Elco type PT-109 Higgins type PT-796 similar in appearance to the Elco type PT-109 United States Navy The 109 joined fifteen PT boats on patrol on a dark night in early August 1943 to intercept Japanese warships in the straits. Fellow PT skipper Ensign George Ross with his boat out of commission joined Kennedy aboard the 109. The group engaged several Japanese destroyers firing their complement of torpedoes and withdrawing, but due to the unreliability of American torpedoes in the early stages of the war the attack did not affect much damage. Kennedy and crew on the 109 stayed in reserve with a few other boats to protect against counterattack by lingering as the attacking boats withdrew. Kennedy kept his speed to a crawl hoping to keep the wake and noise to a minimum in order to avoid detection. At 2 a.m. Kennedy noted a vague silhouette of vessel approaching in the darkness. His first thought was another friendly PT boat slowly approaching. Soon he realized it was the massive Japanese destroyer Amagiri traveling at 40 knots. Kennedy attempt to steer his boat into a firing position but before he could react, the massive destroyer slammed broadside into the much smaller wooden boat cutting the PT 109 in two in ten seconds. Ironically the Japanese destroyer didn't even realize that they had struck an enemy vessel and kept motoring forward soon out of earshot. The tremendous impact had thrown Kennedy into the cockpit where he landed on his bad back. As the chaos and short lived ensuring flames doused by the destroyer's wake subsided, Kennedy and 4 of his sailors clung to some wreckage of the 109. He called out into the darkness and could hear 5 other members of his crew somewhere in the darkness of the now quiet sea. Sadly two of his sailors were killed upon impact with the destroyer. Kennedy, a champion swimmer from his time at Harvard made his way to his forlorn crew pulling them all to the relative safety of the floating wreck of the 109. Confident that his crew was safe and secure, Lieutenant JG John Kennedy and his friend Ensign George Ross knew they had one more exhausting swim to make. They set out for yet a third trek this time to the tiny Island of Nauru several miles away faintly seen on the horizon where they were confident they would find local friendly natives. The locals of Nauru must have been stunned when they witnessed the two American men wade ashore. The natives were trusting towards Americans after witnessing poor treatment at the hands of the Japanese. They were willing to help. Kennedy couldn't risk attempting to canoe with the natives for

fear of being seen by a Japanese patrol boat or plane. He instead cut a message on a coconut that read "NAURO ISL...COMMANDER...NATIVE KNOWS POS'IT...HE CAN PILOT...11 ALIVE...NEED SMALL BOAT...KENNEDY". He then handed the coconut to one of the natives and said, "Rendova, Rendova!" The next morning the natives returned with food and supplies. Kennedy discovered along with the provisions a letter from the coast watcher commander of the New Zealand camp. The letter directed for Kennedy to return with the natives whereby the New Zealand forces would unite him with U.S. forces. Not long after their rendezvous, Kennedy's feeling of elation must have been immense as he watched the PT-157 rumble over to greet him. Shortly after picking up Kennedy, his crew of 10 sailors saw the 157 roaring towards their little island. After six long days, their skipper came through and they were going home. After a few months of healing up in the rear but still wanting to stay in the fight, Lieutenant JG Kennedy requested another PT boat. In October 1943 he took command of PT-59. Kennedy, possibly doubtful of the Mark 8 and Mark 14 torpedoes' abysmal performance decided to discard her torpedo tubes and convert her into purely a gunboat. He had two 40-millimeter anti-aircraft guns installed along with an additional array heavy machine guns. Reflecting on his battle experiences Kennedy did ballistics tests on heavy armor plating he had mounted along with his gun positions to ensure his crew's survivability. Kennedy's venerable PT boat proved its valor when the 59's crew sprinted towards Choiseul Island. Fifty US Marine of the 1st Marine Parachute Regiment were clinging to a beach head with an overwhelming Japanese force on the verge of over running them and pushing them into the sea. Kennedy and his crew roared in with guns blazing long enough to provide suppressing fire as the Marines made their way to the 59. The Navy crew loaded all Marines aboard, including several wounded. Kennedy had a severely wounded Marine taken to his bunk. Small arms rounds were hitting the wooden boat and bouncing off the armor plates Kennedy had installed. Kennedy gunned her engines and roared away from Choiseul. To his dismay the wounded man taken to his bunk had expired due to his wounds. He carried the rest of the grateful Marines to safety. Kennedy later had the coconut shell encased in wood and plastic and used it as a paperweight on his desk in the Oval Office. John F. Kennedy was promoted to Lieutenant and continued as the skipper of the PT-59 but by 1944 the injuries sustained with the collision with the Japanese destroyer sent him stateside to receive treatment and physical therapy at Castle Hot Springs, a military hospital in Arizona. Sadly older brother Joe was killed in action piloting a British Mosquito night fighter in a top secret operation. John was honorably discharged in 1945. He would later undergo back surgery as a young U.S. Senator 8 years later. For his service in World War II, John F. Kennedy received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal (the highest non-combat decoration awarded for heroism) and the Purple Heart. He also kept and had preserved the coconut shell with his inscription: "NAURO ISL...COMMANDER...NATIVE KNOWS POS'IT...HE CAN PILOT...11 ALIVE...NEED SMALL BOAT...KENNEDY" Kennedy became the 35th President of the United States. Courtesy of nps.gov