

THE NAVY REGRETS: "JOHN F. KENNEDY

By JACK RYAN

LIEUT. (JG) JOHN F. KENNEDY barely heard the warning over the idling engine of PT 109. "Ship at 2 o'clock," Machinist's Mate Harold Marney had called from his forward gun turret. Kennedy looked to his right; a black shape was moving across the starlit sea.

There was no alarm aboard the motor torpedo boat. The approaching vessel probably was their sister ship, PT 162; the two were to rendezvous here after an unsuccessful night of trying to intercept the "Bougainville Express," a troop-supply convoy which nightly reinforced Jap units in the Solomons during the fierce fighting of mid-1943.

In the bow, Ensign George Ross dropped his binoculars and called back to the cockpit. "Jack, that's sure no PT!" The shape loomed larger and larger. "She's coming head-on at 30-40 knots."

"Prepare starboard torpedoes!" Kennedy yelled. He spun the wheel of the 109, but with only one of its three airplane engines running, it responded sluggishly, rolled against a wave, and sat almost motionless as the huge vessel, distinguishable now as a two-stack Jap destroyer, moved relentlessly on. The 13 men aboard the 109 gripped railings and bulkheads; even so they were hurled to the deck or into the sea when the *Amagiri* knifed into the starboard forward gun station with a splintering of wood and ripping of steel.

In those 10 seconds shortly after 2:30 a.m. August 2, the 109 was lost—and very nearly lost, too, was the gangling, freckled young officer who would become President John Fitzgerald Kennedy 18 years later. At the moment of impact, Kennedy remembers only making a quick Act of Contrition.

But moments later, he found himself still alive, clinging to the partially submerged hull of the 109 as the *Amagiri* droned off. The destroyer had sliced off the 109's bow. Luckily, its wake also had sucked off the boat's highly inflammable 100-octane gas. The fuel burned brightly about 20 yards away.

In the flickering light, Kennedy reviewed his roster: Ensigns Ross and Leonard Thom and three enlisted men clung to the hull with Kennedy. Five other crewmen floated some 100 yards off. Kennedy and Ross called for the two missing men.

"Marney! . . . Kirksey!" There was no answer. Marney and Torpedoman Andrew Jackson Kirksey were never found.

The three officers struck out to rescue the stunned men floundering in the calm waters of Blackett Strait. Kennedy, a Harvard backstroke star five years before, found Machinist's Mate Patrick McMahon seared black with burns. With McMahon under one arm, Kennedy paddled back toward the hull. The 100-yard return took 45 minutes as tides swept the hull constantly out of reach.

Kennedy made two more trips for injured survivors, and then traded his life jacket for a defective one which impeded the progress of Gunner's Mate Charles Harris, a poor swimmer. It took three hours to assemble the crew. By then it was dawn, and the 109 was taking water fast.

The crew spent the morning coughing up blood,

... MISSING IN ACTION"

smoke, and sea water. Kennedy first realized then that he had wrenched his back severely in the collision; stabbing pains in his groin told him he'd suffered internal injuries, too.

There was no time for rest, though. By 2 p.m. the hull barely bobbed above the water. The officers agreed to swim for an island some three miles away, gambling it was not Jap-occupied. Two non-swimmers were strapped to a gun mount which the swimmers would push. "McMahon can't make it this way, Skipper," said Bill Johnson. "He's burned too bad to be lashed on."

Kennedy Tows Mate 3 Miles

Kennedy grabbed a long strap from McMahon's "Mae West." "I can tow him with this," he said. They slipped the machinist's mate into the sea, and Kennedy, with the strap between his teeth, began breaststroking to the strip of coral in the distance.

Evening was falling before the exhausted group crawled over knife-sharp coral to the safety of the island. For an hour, they lay there gasping for breath. But Kennedy was planning, too. In Ferguson Passage, which lay just beyond an outer reef, a PT attack unit went on nightly runs.

"I'm going out there," Kennedy told Ross. "Maybe I can attract the patrol's attention."

By 7 he was in the sea again, carrying a ship's lantern and a .38 pistol. He'd been in salt water the better part of 16 hours, and now faced at least another six hours. And all for nothing.

The PT patrol was out and fighting all right—but this night some 10 miles beyond Ferguson Passage. Chilled numb, Kennedy started back.

While swimming the final lap, Kennedy was caught in an unexpected current. Too exhausted to struggle, he was swept back into the Passage. His arms became too heavy to move. His vision hazed and thoughts of death came again. Then he found himself being swept back to shore. The current carried him to an islet half a mile from his crew.

Kennedy unstrapped the lantern from his belt and flashed a signal to the island. He shouted the code word the crew had agreed upon: "Roger!"

"Wilco!" came the answer. The men on the island rushed to the beach. They heard another fainter call, "Roger!" Then another—then silence.

"He's dead," somebody said. Angrily, the others told him to shut up. But they, too, felt that Kennedy had foundered in the surf off the island.

They were not alone. Joseph P. Kennedy, the lieutenant's wealthy father and former ambassador to Great Britain, received a telegram reading: "The Secretary of the Navy regrets . . . John Fitzgerald Kennedy is missing in action . . ." And at the Rendova base, crews of Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla One attended services for their comrades.

Edmund Mowier, a torpedoman among the 109's survivors, squinted through the morning haze of August 3. "Somebody's out there," he shouted.

As the figure approached, they recognized Kennedy and shouted and jumped in half-hysterical relief. Kennedy had to be carried out of the water;

he was almost incoherent, but before he lost consciousness, he told how after calling to his crew he had drifted helplessly onto a nearby islet, fallen asleep, and then struck out again at dawn.

Kennedy's next 24 hours were a semiconscious daze. Ross swam out on patrols, but it was obvious there would be no rescue here. The few coconuts on the barren, guano-deep island had been eaten. At noon, August 4, Kennedy was strong enough to make a crucial decision: they would swim toward a small island on the horizon which appeared to have a heavy coconut growth—and possibly Japs.

Kennedy, again towing McMahon, was first to reach the island. Heavy currents swept the others off course, but by evening they were reunited.

A heavy rain began, and the men's half-naked bodies shook violently in the chill. Kennedy drank some coconut milk and became nauseous throughout the night. At dawn they finally got a look at their new home. It was a fair-sized island with enough coconuts—but were they all foul? Before they could decide, a thundering roar broke over their heads. "Planes! Down!" They plunged for cover as an Australian P-40 spattered bullets at them.

"That's enough here," Kennedy said. "Let's see what's next door."

A Gift from the Japs

With Ross, he swam westward to Cross Island, one of the largest in the area. To avoid possible Japs, they "belled" up the coral and ducked into a heavy undergrowth. Then Ross grabbed Kennedy's arm and pointed to the beach. A rectangular box with Japanese writing on the side rocked back and forth in the wash of the sea.

"Let's go!" Kennedy snapped. The two officers dashed to the box and pulled it quickly back to the brush. Inside they found 30 or 40 bags of crackers and candy which they cached. A few hundred yards farther, they found a native one-man canoe. Luck, at last, was swinging toward the castaways.

Ross stayed on to scout the island, while Kennedy paddled the canoe out to sea to contact PTs. He returned at nightfall disappointed, but he loaded the Jap food in the canoe and started toward the crew's island. As he approached, he could hear the men talking to some natives.

"No, not Jap. We American. American," Thom was saying impatiently. Kennedy ran to the group and took up the chant and, after endless haranguing, convinced the natives that these indeed were "nice 'mericans" not "dirty Japs." The 109 crew now had friends. They gave the Americans fresh coconut meat and milk and shared the Jap rations in what became a neighborly feast.

On August 6, the natives paddled Kennedy to Cross Island, where he found Ross, and then showed the Americans to a cove where a two-man canoe was hidden. Kennedy took a coconut and chiseled a message on it: "ALIVE—NATIVES KNOW POSIT AND REEFS—KENNEDY"

Over and over, he repeated, "Rendova . . . take coconut to Rendova. Understand?" The natives

nodded and started off in their canoe—in the wrong direction. Kennedy and Ross decided their best bet was to go for help themselves.

Far out on Ferguson Pass, a blackening rain squall swept down on them in the small canoe. They tried to escape its path, but a howling rush of wind caught the stern of the canoe, spun it in a whirlpool, and flipped it over.

The wind propelled Kennedy and Ross toward shore at a terrific speed. Over its howling and the rush of water, they could hear the breakers, six and seven feet high, smash with crushing force on the reefs. Once again Lieutenant Kennedy said a prayer and anticipated death.

He was pitched dizzily upward as they approached the jagged reef south of Cross Island. Miraculously, the sea lifted him clear of the deadly coral and dropped him almost gently in a lagoon. Staggering through the tepid water, he first saw a spreading stream of blood and then, half submerged, Ross. He appeared dead. The coral had ripped strips of flesh off Ross' chest and abdomen and left his hands red-raw. Kennedy lifted him from the water and heard him groan. He was alive after all. When they reached shore, both men collapsed. Blazing sun awoke them the next morning. Kennedy's internal injuries were torturous now, and Ross' body burned with open sores. Kennedy propped himself up. "Listen!" he said hoarsely. "Hear something?"

"Hieeeeh! 'mericans!"

The officers jumped up and peered out to sea. An outrigger canoe was cutting for their island, paddled by eight natives. When they landed, they shook hands, then handed Kennedy a note:

"I strongly advise that you come with these natives to me. Meanwhile I shall be in communication with your authorities at Rendova."

It was from an Australian coastwatcher. The two natives of yesterday had wisely ignored instructions to go to distant Rendova, and instead proceeded to the Australian's secret headquarters. Kennedy and Ross looked at each other, stunned.

Wordlessly, they followed the natives to the island occupied by the rest of the crew. There the rescuers prepared a hot meal, then motioned Kennedy to the bottom of their outrigger, covered him with palm fronds to prevent detection from the air, and took him to the Australian coastwatcher. The Aussie, Reg Evans, insisted that Kennedy rest while the others were rescued. Kennedy refused, saying it was his job to take part in the rescue.

The official Navy report concludes:

"It was arranged that PT boats would rendezvous with him (Kennedy) in Ferguson Passage that evening at 2230 (10:30 p.m.). Accordingly he was taken to the rendezvous point and finally managed to make contact with the PTs at 2315. He climbed aboard the PT and directed it to the rest of the survivors. The rescue was effected without mishap, and the Rendova base was reached at 0530, August 8, seven days after the ramming of PT 109 in Blackett Strait."



Lieut. Kennedy in 1944.



With Patrick McMahon under one arm, Lieutenant Kennedy paddled back to the crushed hull of PT 109.

ILLUSTRATION BY DOM LUPO

the official report, here is the amazing story of a

young lieutenant's survival of a wartime shipwreck—a true test of courage for a future President