

*J. (jg) Kennedy*DECLASSIFIED
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MOTOR TORPEDO BOAT FLOTILLA ONE

22 August 1943

MEMORANDUM TO COMMANDER MOTOR TORPEDO BOAT FLOTILLA ONE:

Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

SOURCE: Survivors of PT 109.

NARRATIVE: On the night of August 1 fourteen boats were ordered into Blakett Strait from the Rendova PT base in anticipation of the "Bougainville Express" running into Vila. Four patrol sections were formed: 1st, under Lt. G.E. Cookman was stationed in Ferguson Passage; 2nd, under Lt. W. Rome, whose station was east of Makuti Island; 3rd, under Lt. A.H. Berndston stationed between Makuti Island and Kolombangara; and the 4th, the section of which PT 109 was a part, under Lt. H.J. Brantingham stationed five miles West of the 3rd section. Lt. Brantingham's boats were further subdivided into two sections; PT 159, radar equipped, operating with PT 157, while PT 162, under the command of Lt. (jg) J.R. Lowrey, was the lead boat of thesecond section with PT 109 following. PTs 159 and 162 both carried TBYS for interboat communications. Instructions were issued to Lt. (jg) Jack Kennedy, captain of PT 109, to follow closely on PT 162's starboard quarter, which would keep in touch with the radar equipped PT 159 by TBY.

All boats departed from Rendova at 1830 and reached their patrol station about 2030. The 4th section patrolled without incident until gunfire and a searchlight were seen in the direction of the southern shore of Kolombangara. No radio or other warning had been received of enemy activity in the area. It was impossible to ascertain whether the searchlight came from shore or from a ship close into shore. Presumably it was not a ship as PT 162 retired on a westwardly course toward Gizo Strait. PT 109 followed and inquired as to the source of the firing. PT 162 replied that it was believed to be from a shore battery. However, PT 109 intercepted the following sudden terse radio message: "I am being chased through Ferguson Passage. Have fired fish." That was all, but it was enough to inform the group that an action with the enemy was in progress, and a significant one. At this time the PT 169 came alongside to inquire about the firing in Blakett Strait and to report that one of her engines was out of order. PT 169 lay to with PTs 109 and 162 to await developments.

In the meantime all contact with PT 159 had been lost. Instructions from base were requested and orders were received to resume normal patrol station. PT 162, being uncertain as to its position, requested PT 109 to lead the way back to the patrol station, which it proceeded to do. When Lt. Kennedy thought he had reached the original patrol station, he started to patrol on one engine ahead at idling speed.

The time was about 0230. Ensign Ross was on the bow as lookout; Ensign Thom was standing beside the cockpit; Lt. Kennedy was at the wheel, and with him in the cockpit was McGuire, his radioman; Marney was in the forward turret; Mauer, the quartermaster was standing beside Ensign Thom; Albert was in the after turret; and McMann was in the engine room. The location of other members of the crew upon the

Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

boat is unknown. Suddenly a dark shape loomed up on PT 109's starboard bow 200-300 yards distance. At first this shape was believed to be other PTs. However, it was soon seen to be a destroyer identified as of the Hibiki Group of the Fubuki Class bearing down on PT 109 at high speed. The 109 started to turn to starboard preparatory to firing torpedoes. However, when PT 109 had scarcely turned 30°, the destroyer rammed the PT, striking it forward of the forward starboard tube and shearing off the starboard side of the boat aft, including the starboard engine. The destroyer travelling at an estimated speed of 40 knots neither slowed nor fired as she split the PT, leaving part of the PT on one side and the other on the other. Scarcely 10 seconds elapsed between time of sighting and the crash.

A fire was immediately ignited, but, fortunately, it was gasoline burning on the water's surface at least 20 yards away from the remains of the PT which were still afloat. This fire burned brightly for 15-20 minutes and then died out. It is believed that the wake of the destroyer carried off the floating gasoline thereby saving PT 109 from fire.

Lt. Kennedy, Ensigns Thom and Ross, Mauer, McGuire and Albert still clung to the PT 109's hull. Lt. Kennedy ordered all hands to abandon ship when it appeared the fire would spread to it. All soon crawled back aboard when this danger passed. It was ascertained by shouting that Harris, McMahon and Starkey were in the water about 100 yards to the Southwest while Zinser and Johnson were an equal distance to the Southeast. Kennedy swam toward the group of three, and Thom and Ross struck out for the other two. Lt. Kennedy had to tow McMahon, who was helpless because of serious burns, back to the boat. A strong current impeded their progress, and it took about an hour to get McMahon aboard PT 109. Kennedy then returned for the other two men, one of whom was suffering from minor burns. He traded his life belt to Harris, who was uninjured in return for Harris's water-logged kapok life jacket which was impeding the latter's swimming. Together they towed Starkey to the PT.

Meanwhile, Ensigns Thom and Ross had reached Zinser and Johnston who were both helpless because of gas fumes. Thom towed Johnston, and Ross took Zinser. Both regained full consciousness by the time the boat was reached.

Within three hours after the crash all survivors who could be located were brought aboard the PT 109. Marney and Kirksey were never seen after the crash. During the three hours it took to gather survivors together, nothing was seen or heard that indicated other boats or ships in the area. PT 109 did not fire its Very pistols for fear of giving away its position to the enemy but blinked light till dawn.

~~SECRET~~
Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

Meanwhile the IFF and all codes aboard had either been completely destroyed or sunk in the deep waters of Vella Gulf. Despite the fact that all watertight doors were dogged down at the time of the crash, PT 109 was slowly taking on water. When daylight of August 2 arrived, the eleven survivors were still aboard PT 109. It was estimated that the boat lay about four miles north and slightly east of Gizo Anchorage and about three miles away from the reef along north-east Gizo.

It was obvious that the PT 109 would sink on the second, and decision was made to abandon it in time to arrive before dark on one of the tiny islands east of Gizo. A small island $3\frac{1}{2}$ -4 miles to the southeast of Gizo was chosen on which to land, rather than one but $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles away which was close to Gizo, and, which, it was feared, might be occupied by the Japs.

At 1400 Lt. Kennedy took the badly burned McMahon in tow and set out for land, intending to lead the way and scout the island in advance of the other survivors. Ensigns Ross and Thom followed with the other men. Johnson and Mauer, who could not swim, were tied to a float rigged from a 2 x 8 which was part of the 37 mm gun mount. Harris and McGuire were fair swimmers, but Zinser, Starkey and Albert were not so good. The strong swimmers pushed or towed the float to which the non-swimmers were tied.

Lt. Kennedy with McMahon arrived at the small island about 1800. During the last half hour of the swim a strong easterly current, almost swept the second group, 20 minutes behind Kennedy and McMahon, east of the island. The island was about 100 yards in diameter, was surrounded by reefs, boasted 6 coconut trees, was partially covered with brush, and, most important, was not occupied by Japs.

Lt. Kennedy was dressed only in skivvies, Ensign Thom, coveralls and shoes, Ensign Ross, trousers, and most of the men were dressed only in trousers and shirts. There six 45's in the group (two of which were later lost before rescue), one 38, one flashlight, one large knife, one light knife and a pocket knife. The boats first aid kit had been lost in the collision. All the group with the exception of McMahon, who suffered considerably from burns, were in fairly good condition, although weak and tired from their swim ashore.

That evening Lt. Kennedy decided to swim into Ferguson Passage in an attempt to intercept PT boats proceeding to their patrol areas. He left about 1830, swam to a small island $\frac{1}{2}$ mile to the south-east, proceeded along a reef which stretched out into Ferguson Passage, arriving there about 2000. No PT's were seen, but aircraft flares were observed which indicated that the PTs that night were operating in Gizo not Blackett Strait and were being harassed as usual by enemy float planes. Kennedy began his return over the same route he had previously used. While swimming the final lap to the island on which the other survivors were, he was caught in a current which swept him

~~SECRET~~
Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

in a circle about 2 miles into Blakett Strait and back to the middle of Ferguson Passage, where he had to start his homeward trip all over again. On this trip he stopped on the small island just southeast of "home" where he slept until dawn before covering the last $\frac{1}{2}$ mile lap to join the rest of his group. He was completely exhausted, slightly feverish, and slept most of the day.

Nothing was observed on August 2 or 3 which gave any hope of rescue. On the night of the 3rd Ensign Ross decided to proceed into Ferguson Passage in another attempt to intercept PT patrols from Rendova. Using the same route as Kennedy had used and leaving about 1800, Ross "patrolled" off the reefs on the west side of the Passage with negative results. In returning he wisely stopped on the islet southeast of "home", slept and thereby avoided the experience with the current which had swept Kennedy out to sea. He made the final lap the next morning.

The complete diet of the group on what came to be called Bird Island (because of the great abundance of droppings from the fine feathered friends) consisted of coconut milk and meat. As the coconut supply was running low and in order to get closer to Ferguson Passage, the group left Bird Island at noon, August 4th, and, using the same arrangements as before, headed for a small islet west of Cross Island. Kennedy, with McMahon in tow arrived first. The rest of the group again experienced difficulty with a strong easterly current, but finally managed to make the easterntip of the island.

Their new home was slightly larger than their former, offered brush for protection and a few coconuts to eat, and had no Jap tenants. The night of August 4th was wet and cold, and no one ventured into Ferguson Passage that night. The next morning Kennedy and Ross decided to swim to Cross Island in search of food, boats or anything else which might be useful to their party. Prior to their leaving for Cross Island, one of the three New Zealand P-40s made a strafing run on Cross Island. Although this indicated the possibility of Japs, because of the acute food shortage, the two set out, swam the channel and arrived on Cross Island about 1530. Immediately they ducked into the brush. Neither seeing nor hearing anything, the two officers sneaked through the brush to the east side of the island and peered from the brush onto the beach. A small rectangular box with Japanese writing on the side was seen which was quickly and furtively pulled into the bush. Its contents proved to be 30-40 small bags of crackers and candy. A little farther up the beach, alongside a native lean-to, a one-man canoe and a barrel of water were found. About this time a canoe containing two persons was sighted. Light showing between their legs revealed that they did not wear trousers and, therefore, must be natives. Despite all efforts of Kennedy and Ross to attract their attention, they paddled swiftly off to the northwest. Nevertheless, Kennedy and Ross, having obtained a canoe, food and water, considered their visit a success.

~~SECRET~~
Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

That night Kennedy took the canoe and again proceeded into Ferguson Passage, waited there until 2100, but again no PTs appeared. He returned to his "home" island via Cross Island where he picked up the food but left Ross who had decided to swim back the following morning. When Kennedy arrived at base at about 2330, he found that the two natives which he and Ross had sighted near Cross Island, had circled around and landed on the island where the rest of the group were. Ensign Thom, after telling the natives in as many ways as possible that he was an American and not a Jap, finally convinced them whereupon they landed and performed every service possible for the survivors.

The next day, August 6, Kennedy and the natives paddled to Cross Island, intercepting Ross, who was swimming back to the rest of the group. After Ross and Kennedy had thoroughly searched Cross Island for Japs and found none, despite the natives' belief to the contrary, they showed the two PT survivors where a two-man native canoe was hidden.

The natives were then sent with messages to the Coastwatcher. One was a penciled note written the day before by Ensign Thom; the other was a message written on a green coconut husk by Kennedy, informing the coastwatcher that he and Ross were on Cross Island.

After the natives left, Ross and Kennedy remained on the island until evening, when they set out in the two-man canoe to again try their luck at intercepting PTs in Ferguson Passage. They paddled far out into Ferguson Passage, saw nothing, and were caught in a sudden rainsquall which eventually capsized the canoe. Swimming to land was difficult and treacherous as the sea swept the two officers against the reef on the south side of Cross Island. Ross received numerous cuts and bruises, but both managed to make land where they remained the rest of the night.

On Saturday, August 7, eight natives arrived, bringing a message from the coastwatcher instructing the senior officer to go with the natives to Wana Wana. Kennedy and Ross had the natives paddle them to island where the rest of the survivors were. The natives had brought food and other articles (including a cook stove) to make the survivors comfortable. They were extremely kind at all times.

That afternoon, Kennedy, hidden under ferns in the native boat, was taken to the coastwatcher, arriving about 1600. There it was arranged that PT boats would rendezvous with him in Ferguson Passage that evening at 2230. Accordingly he was taken to the rendezvous point and finally managed to make contact with the PTs at 2315. He

~~SECRET~~
Subject: Sinking of PT 109 and subsequent rescue of survivors.

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 the PT 109 in Blakett Strait.

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