

75 years ago today, a squadron of PT boats left their base on Rendova in the central Solomons for the waters of Blakett Strait, between Kolombangara, Ghizo and Vonavona Islands. Their mission was to disrupt the Japanese resupply convoys, known as the “Tokyo Express.”

One year after the invasion of Guadalcanal, Army and Marine Corps units began recapturing the central Solomon Islands and the PT’s moved from their base at Tulagi, across Iron Bottom Sound from Guadalcanal to a forward base 200 miles north at Rendova. The PT’s – many built by Elko Marine of Bayonne, New Jersey - were fast and maneuverable in the waters around the Solomons but were fueled with gasoline, highly dangerous for plywood boats expected to do battle with Japanese warships.

As night fell on Aug 2, 1943, the PT’s formed divisions around the few boats that were equipped with radar to acquire targets. It was a particularly dark night and the boats idled down to drift in their patrol areas.

Japanese destroyers like the Amagiri which had just left Kolombangara enroute to Rabaul, were used as armed transports to ferry supplies and troops. The Amagiri steamed quickly and silently through the very waters in which the American PT’s lied in wait unaware that one boat, captained by a wealthy politician’s son from Massachusetts, was directly in their path. Aboard PT 109, no one saw them coming until it was too late to crank up the engines and move out of the way. The Amagiri collided with PT 109, severing it’s stern setting fire to the PT’s volatile fuel, severely burning their engineer. The captain, who had suffered a debilitating college football injury was thrown off his feet exacerbating his old injury and despite great pain, organized a search that rescued all but two of the crew. TM2 Andrew Jackson Kirksey and MM2 Harold William Marney were killed in the collision. The 11 survivors, huddled on the foredeck of boat until daybreak.

Dawn revealed their position mid channel, drifting southward, surrounded by Japanese-held islands. The captain determined their only chance of avoiding capture was to swim some 3 miles to a tiny uninhabited island, then called Plum Pudding, now called Kasolo. Lashing planks together, the crew abandoned the boat and made the swim, led by their captain who towed the badly burned engineer, MM1 Patrick H. McMahon by holding his life vest straps in his teeth.

On Plum Pudding, the crew rested by day and at night, the captain swam south to Ferguson Passage to try to signal other PT’s expected to be on night patrol there. His attempt, and another attempt the next night by another officer were unsuccessful. As Plum Pudding had no food or water, it was determined that they would make a second swim to an island further south called Olasana.

The fire resulting from the collision, was observed by an Australian coast watcher, Sub-Lieutenant Arthur Reginald Evans who later realized it was the PT 109 that had been reported missing. He dispatched two Solomon Islanders, Biuku Gasa and Eroni Kumana to search for survivors on the small islands south of Ghizo. They came upon the stranded crew on Olasana. The captain scratched a message on a coconut shell which they brought back to Evans. Gasa and Kumana were in great danger aiding the American crew behind enemy lines – like Evans, discovery meant instant death. The coconut informed Evans that 11 of the crew were alive. Evans arranged for a rescue PT to be dispatched and sent Gasa and Kumana back to Olasana to pick up the captain who would meet and pilot the rescue boat that eventually collected the balance of the crew.

Some years later, that coconut shell with it’s message to Reginald Evans, was a cherished souvenir that sat atop the desk in the Oval Office of the Whitehouse. Behind that desk, sat the captain of PT-109,

John Fitzgerald Kennedy – a member of an honored generation, “born in this century, schooled in war, hardened by a long and bitter peace” all of whom brought our nation to unimaginable heights.