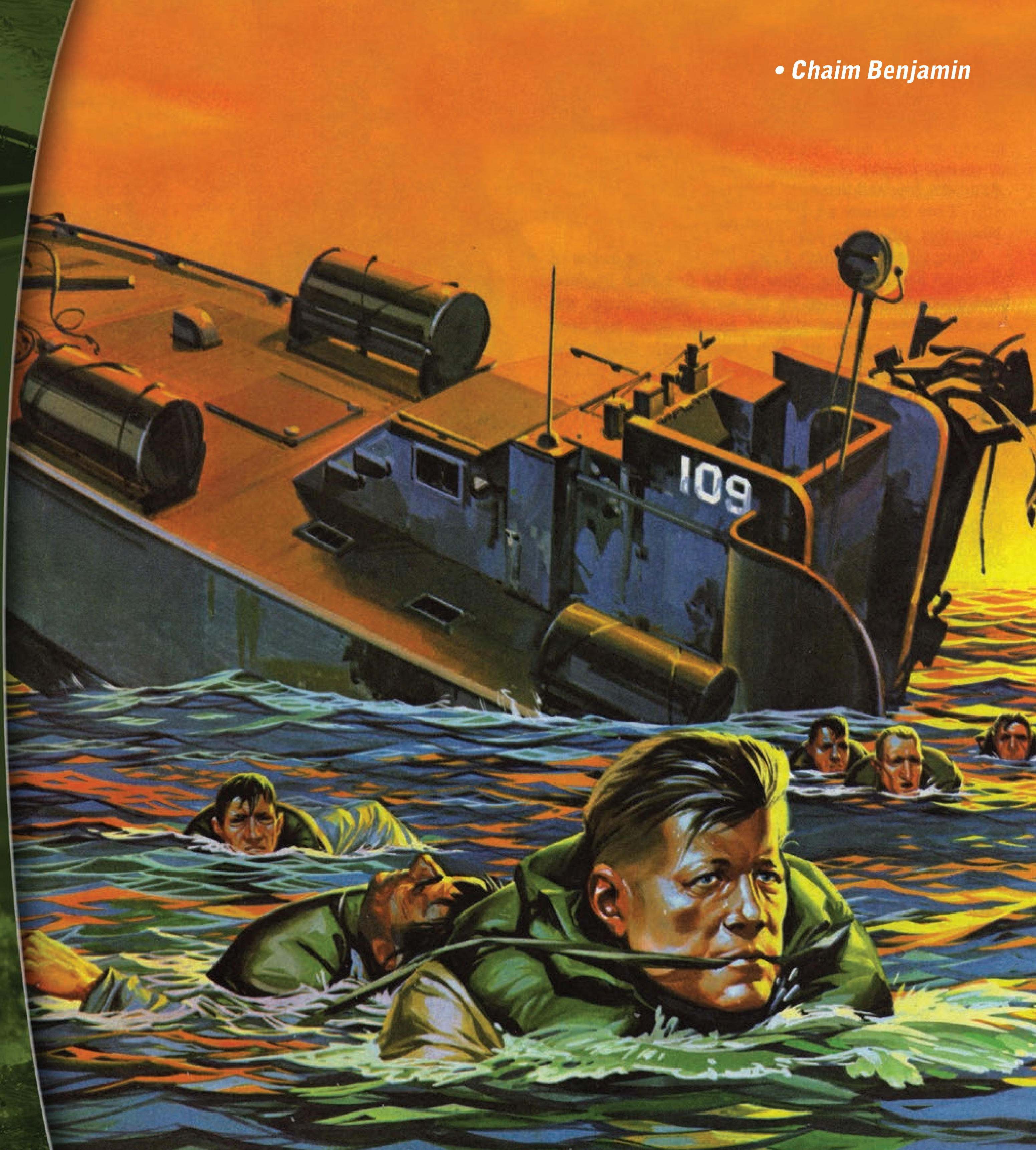
• Chaim Benjamin

The dramatic story of how future president John F. Kennedy, earned his reputation as a war hero

PT-109

When asked to explain how he had come to be a hero, the young former naval commander, by then an aspiring politician, replied laconically, "It was involuntary. They sank my boat."

The aspiring politician was none other than the future President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. The story of his heroism is miraculous to the point of almost being superhuman. Through his numerous escapes from sure death, one can see in retrospect why many people believe he was always destined for great things.



It was dark—deeply, unrelievedly dark. Even for experienced sailors, the moonless, starless night on the ocean was disorienting. In this profound darkness, PT-109 stood at her station in Blackett Strait in the Solomon Islands, a vast, scattered and largely isolated string of islands that covers 350,000 square miles and the scene of what would be the Pacific war's lengthiest and most bitterly fought naval campaign.

"PT" is short for "Patrol Torpedo" and refers to fast attack craft used by the United States Navy in World War II to strike at larger warships, using relatively high speed to get close and fire torpedoes at the enemy while relying on their small size to avoid being spotted and hit by gunfire. The PT boat squadrons were nicknamed "the mosquito fleet." The Japanese called them "devil boats."

A PT boat built for speed and stealth could fire torpedoes at much larger ships. The Americans called them the "mosquito fleet." The Japanese called them "devil boats."

A PT boat firing its torpedoes.

PT-109 was one of several PTs on patrol the night of August 1, 1943, to disrupt the "Tokyo Express," the name that Americans called the nightly Japanese naval convoys that delivered personnel, supplies and equipment to Japanese forces operating in and around the Solomon Islands. (Americans controlled the airspace over the Solomons, forcing the Japanese to work at night in resupplying their forces.) That night the patrol located the Tokyo Express—three Japanese destroyers acting as transports with a fourth serving as escort – and the encounter had not gone well. The PTs fired 30 torpedoes with no effect.

Boats that had used up their complement of torpedoes were ordered home. The few that still had torpedoes remained in the strait. PT-109, captained by Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, was one of the boats left behind. He rendezvoused with two other PTs and the three boats spread out to make a picket line across the strait.

At about 2:30 in the morning, a shape loomed abruptly out of the darkness 300 yards off PT-109's bow. Visibility was so poor that they first thought it was another PT. George Ross, an officer on deck, was holding binoculars and staring out into the void. Kennedy was at the wheel. Suddenly, he saw Ross turn and point into the darkness. A sailor in the forward machine-gun turret shouted, "Ship at two o'clock!"

Before Kennedy could turn his ship, he saw a shape quickly take form. It was a Japanese destroyer (later identified as the *Amagiri*), moving fast and heading straight for them!

The 13 men on the PT hardly had time to brace themselves. Those who saw the Japanese ship were paralyzed by fear in a curious way: they could move their hands but not their feet. The urge to bolt and dive over the side was powerful, but still no one was able to move.

August 1942. US Marines approach the Japanese occupied Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.

View of a PT fleet docked at an American island base in the Solomons.

Then the Japanese ship crashed into the 109… and cut her right in two, crunching the hull diagonally across with a racking noise. The PT's plywood hull hardly even delayed the destroyer.

Kennedy was thrown hard to the left in the cockpit (his radioman, John E. Maguire, was actually thrown from it), and he thought, "This is how it feels to be killed."

Before he had time to think further, he found himself on his back on the deck, looking up at the destroyer as it passed *through* his boat. Its peculiar, raked inverted-Y stack stood out in the brilliant light and, later, in Kennedy's memory.

There was only one man below deck at the moment of collision. That was Patrick McMahon, an engineer. He had no idea what had happened. One moment he was reaching forward to wrench the starboard engine into gear when suddenly a ship came *into* his engine room.

He was lifted from the narrow passage between two of the engines and thrown painfully against the bulkhead, landing in a seated position. A tremendous burst of flame came back at him, where some of the gas tanks were. He put his hands over his face, drew his legs up tight, and waited to die.

But then he felt something wet hit him. He was being sucked downward into the sea as his half of the PT sank. He began to struggle upward through the water. He had held his breath since the impact, so his lungs were tight and they hurt. He looked up through the water. Over his head he saw a yellow glow—gasoline burning on the water. He broke the surface and was in fire again. He splashed hard to keep a little island of water around him.

William Johnston, another engineer, had been asleep on deck when the collision came. It lifted him and dropped him overboard. He saw the flame and the destroyer for a moment. Then a huge propeller pounded by near him and the awful turbulence of the destroyer's wake took him down, turned him over and over, held him down, shook him and drubbed on his ribs. He hung on and came up in water that was like a river rapids.

Meanwhile, Kennedy's half of the PT had stayed afloat thanks to its undamaged watertight compartments. He watched the destroyer rush off into the dark. There was an awful quiet. Only the sound of gasoline burning.

"Who's aboard?" Kennedy shouted.

Feeble answers came from four men still

Beached Japanese cargo ship, part of the "Tokyo Express" convoys supplying Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands. November 1943.