65 Years Ago

Description

The story begins a few years earlier, but you trot down to the Recruiting Office and sign in, then take the physical. It seems you have been â€œa very, very sickly little boyâ€• and your father has managed to hide that, in fact, it even stays hidden form many more years. So you get a 4-F designation, even before WWII for America has even begun? What do you do?

â€œI am rapidly reaching a point where every one of my peers will be in uniform, and I do not intend to be the only one among them wearing cowardâ€™s tweedsâ€• you write to your friend. With some â€œhelpâ€• and connections, you land a commission in the US Navy and a billet in the Office of Naval Intelligence, which you are well suited for. You still have, by the medical records, suffered trough jaundice, colitis and back problems (a result of too many steroids). However, along the way, you have gone into the demanding sports and not let such trivial things slow you down.

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You have dated some world class women, and get connected with a Europe beauty, whoâ€™s family has a few â€œconnectionsâ€• not on the right side of the prevailing sentiments. You get told you intel gig is at risk. Do you dump the dame, and keep the office job? Nope. You take the option. Thereâ€™s a slight change since taking the commission: Thereâ€™s now a shooting war onâ€¦

Along comes a man, looking for men like you, sailors of yachts, smart, dependable. He wears a light blue ribbon around his neck, when in a full dress uniform, heâ€™s been in the hardest, dirtiest fighting, left behind with his crew to manage to be â€œself sufficientâ€• or die and he becomes a monumental road block to the enemy, before he finds his way south to Australia, with the rescue of a general and president to his credit, all without a SIMA, tender, TYCOM or NAVSEA to hold his hand. Heâ€™s manning up the PT Boat fleet and he needs men who want a challenge. You take it.

Side note: You may have family connections (Dad sends a telegram for a lunch date), but LCDR Bulkeley is a man who only does things the right way. Lunch with Joe Kennedy Sr lasted from 1 to 8PM, with John Bulkeley agreeing to interview Jack the next time he was at Northwestern, and would accept him if he measured up. From â€œSea Wolf: The Daring Exploits of Navy Legend John D. Bulkeleyâ€• by William Breuer:

> Twenty-five-year-old Jack Kennedy passed muster with flying colors. In his interview, the handsome young man appeared fearless and eager, and had sailed his own sloop in Cape Cod since he was 15 years old. These assets would make him and ideal PT-boat- skipper.

The two men would next meet at JFKâ€™s inauguration in 1961. And then once more, team up to fight the enemy, this time at a small island base named Guantanamo Bay.

Back to the tale of this day long ago:

You do so well in training you get a gig as an instructor, before shipping out to the Solomon Islands. When you arrive, they give you the hanger queen: PT-109. It needs work and you donâ€™t have a crew yet. You put on your shorts and grab some tools and go to work. Itâ€™s hot, itâ€™s humid and youâ€™re an officer, but you crew arrives to find you, not wearing a shirt or rank insignia and you have a scrapper or paint brush in your hand. They arrive, you keep working along side them.

Eventually, you take your boat to sea to patrol Blackett Strait. No RADAR, just seamanâ€™s eye and judgment are your main sensors that moonless night. You had 10 seconds warning to take evasive maneuvers. Not enough time to clear the stem of steel headed your way.

Much of the tale of the events that transpired from Aug 2 to Aug 9th, 1943 have been captured for the record. What I found striking in the article in this monthâ€™s America in WWII magazine about John Kennedy is John had always been a man plagued with medical issues, but he was a man who, for whatever reason, had been taught to â€œcowboy upâ€• and â€œget â€˜er done,â€• in todayâ€™s parlance. The accepted story is his back problems of later public life were a result of being rammed by a Japanese destroyer going 40 kts. Not true, he had already been suffering for years, and it seems out in theater, only his XO knew.

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So, as the story goes, JFK decided the crew that served him worthy of being saved, even if he perished at night, alone, in the ocean currents, hoping to flag down a patrolling PT boat miles from shore. In retrospect, the ship sinking survivor stories of WWII are replete with the terror of the shark attacks, snatching men to their death from below. John Kennedy went out two nights alone after the first arrival ashore.

The bottom line? He took care of his men, and specifically the badly wounded. He did not avert his gaze, he did not declare some one beyond hope, fitting to be left behind to die alone in the sea. He swam them to safety, not once, but twice.

Bad back, bought of severe abdominal distress, under normal conditions, he did not waver, he did not fail, he did not give up, he did not surrender, and he did not forget those who could do a job. But, it all started with a man not taking the lead in getting into the military, but being shamed into it by those around him joining up. The end result? A great leader emerged, to take on the Soviet Threat and to take the US and the world to the moon.

The editorâ€™s column asks for a post card vote to say if the Navy Marine Corps Medal JFK was awarded should be upgraded to a Navy Cross. After reading this story, once more, but in light of a man graded not fit for active service, but who did all that anyone else was required anyhow, I think my vote is â€œYes.â€•

You can mail you vote to:

America in WWII â€“ JFK
PO BOX 4175
Harrisburg, PA 1711-0175

Write â€œNavy Cross for JFK â€“ Yesâ€• or â€œNoâ€•

Related: Last yearâ€™s PT-109 post , which includes a link to Robert Ballardâ€™s location of the wreckage of PT-109.

Category

1. Military

Date Created
August 2, 2008
Author
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