

A Review of Into the Dark Water: The Story of Three Officers and PT-109

by John J. Domagalski, published by Casemate Publishers

Review by T. Garth Connelly

Earlier this summer, I heard about this book and even though I am not a huge *PT-109* fan, I was intrigued about the book due to the fact that the book, apparently, give the reader a history of the famous boat before its final and most famous patrol.

A few weeks ago, I emailed the publisher and asked if they would contact Mr. Domagalski and ask if he would contact me via email because I wanted to ask him some questions about the book so I could speak about it intelligently on my website. Apparently, at the same time I was typing and sending my email, Mr. Domagalski was sending an email to me.

His email praised my own books, which surprised me, and asked me if I would be so inclined as to review the book and post it on my website. I agreed to and the publisher sent me a review copy. The reading of the book started straight away.

The first thing the author did, which I thought was/is a good move was to describe how the boat was rammed and sunk by the *IJN Amagiri*. Doing so grabbed the reader's attention. Then, he described, briefly, the early PT boats. I think that was a good idea too, inasmuch it gives the idea of where the *109* came from.

Next, the author gave the reader an overview of both officers (Rollin Westholm and Bryant Larson) who proceeded Kennedy as skipper of the boat, such as Rollin Westholm was a graduate of the Naval Academy and was a professional naval officer and not a reservist like Bryant Larson and John F. Kennedy, as were a lot of the PT officers. Westholm remained on active duty until 1964. During the later stages of the war, he commanded the Destroyer, *USS Bush*, which was heavily damaged by Kamikaze planes off Okinawa in 1945.

As an aside, Chip Marshall told me that when the US gave South Korea the *PTs 613, 616, 619, and 620*, it was Westholm who trained the South Koreans on how to use the boats. Mr. Larson left active duty after the war and remained in the Reserves until 1956, ultimately reaching the rank of Lieutenant Commander. In his sixties, he earned an advanced college degree.

As everyone knows, John F. Kennedy became President in 1960. However, from reading this well written book, I learned that these three gentlemen were not the only skippers of the boat. Two other men were skippers of the *109*. Her original skipper, until it was time to leave Panama for the Solomons, was an officer named Kempner.

Another officer named Allan H. Harris commanded the boat between Westholm and Larson and before Kennedy.

Mr. Domagalski gave the reader a little torpedo boat history as well, which as the reader will discover, goes back to the time of the American Civil War and involved such vessels such as the *CSS David* and the locally acquired steam launch (by the Union Navy's Lt. Cushing) which sank the Confederate Ironclad Ram, *CSS Albemarle* with a spar-torpedo.

He also told his readers how the Italian MAS Boat, *MAS-15* sank the Austro-Hungarian Battleship, *Szent István*. This was a nice touch, in my opinion, because it gave the reader the knowledge that PT boats or Motor Torpedo Boats were not an invention to be used in the Second World War.

The author stated something that I was never aware of. That was the *109* was the squadron's flagship while Westholm was squadron commander and her skipper. He also enlightened me as to what the famous PT boat's first action was like, which I found very interesting to say the least. Another event in the book was how *PT-59* while skippered by a hero of mine named Jack Searles, torpedoed and sank the Japanese submarine *I-3*.

I learned something that I never knew or even realized and that was Jack Searles actually skippered the *109* on one patrol. I also learned that, under Westholm, the boat fired two torpedoes at a Japanese Destroyer and missed, and that, on another mission, the boat's crew destroyed some Japanese supplies by gunfire.

I never knew that the PT boat was damaged in battle. That occurred when a Japanese shore battery put three holes into the boat. So, one could say that, before being commanded by the future President of the United States, the boat was a battle-scarred veteran. She also freed, over two missions, three PT boats which ran aground, those boats being the *40*, *48* and the *115*. It should be noted that *PT-48* is still in existence and available for sale in New York.

Most people think the *109* did not have radar before her loss. Technically speaking, that is true, however, an experimental fitting of a radar unit was tested on the boat. The set was an aircraft radar unit from a wrecked *PBY*. Its array was fitted to the boat's bow. Apparently, it was successfully tested, but drew too much power and it was removed before Kennedy arrived in the Solomons. I have heard about this radar being on the boat, but this is the first time I have seen it being stated in a book.

That gave another dimension to that boat that I don't think most people actually knew.

From reading this book, I learned that Ensign Leonard Thom actually became the boat's executive officer before Kennedy assumed command of the boat. I always, apparently wrongly, thought Thom reported to the boat after Kennedy.

The book also told me something that I never knew and that was Kennedy was assigned, unofficially, as the executive officer of *PT-47*. Presumably, this was done to give him time getting acquainted with the area, the squadron's activities and the like. I found that information to be interesting because that was the first time I've ever seen it in print anywhere.

Another thing from the book that was interesting to me was that Al Cluster was not squadron commander when Kennedy arrived, he became squadron commander after Kennedy arrived in the area. Because of the movie and other books I've read throughout my life, I came away with the impression that it was Cluster who assigned the *109* to Kennedy. Thanks to the book, that, I now know, apparently was not the case.

Something from the 1963 film that I always enjoyed but always considered to be a 'myth' was when Kennedy rammed the pier as they were racing with another boat to get refuelled first and destroyed a shed on the pier. That incident was included in this book, so, was that incident myth or a reality. Frankly, now, I'm leaning toward reality.

There has been quite the debate over whether or not the boat was gray or green. In fact, back in the mid-1980s, the then surviving four crew members of the boat sent me letters (and three of the four letters were handwritten and all four were lengthy), two of the gentlemen said that the boat was a gray on her last patrol and the other two said that she was green, and one of them even went so far as to say it was Olive Drab.

In two places in the book, I found two places where the author stated the boat was painted a green. Once was while the boat was under the command of Westholm and the other was while Kennedy had command of the boat. That instance was during the time when the boat was drydocked to repair one of the boat's rudders. The passage stated the boat was painted a dark green, which dovetails to what one of the crewmen told me, i. e.: Olive Drab. That description leads me to believe the boat was painted in what was known as Navy Green, which as I've been told, is close to Olive Drab.

Another controversy which was put to rest, at least for me, is how the *109* lost its port-side mounted (on the foredeck) depth-charge. I have seen it being described as happening when the boat was pulling away from the USN Destroyer, after being given a pump by that ship and the Destroyer 'bumping' the boat, dislodging the depth charge.

As I read it in the book, a wave hit the boat, caused the port forward torpedo to come out of its tube and smashing into the depth charge and causing it to crash through the deck and into the crew's compartment below. But, it is still not clear if that depth charge was replaced or not.

How the book further described the ramming and subsequent sinking of the boat opened my eyes more. For instance, I always suspected but didn't know for sure, but when Kennedy had the 37mm M3 anti-tank field piece to the foredeck, the boat's life raft was removed to make room for the gun.

Contrary to what Dr. Robert Ballard has indicated, the boat did split in two when it was rammed. The collision knocked the 37mm gun off of the foredeck and left it dangling off the side of the boat and in the water. The crew of the boat had to abandon ship when the forward section of the hulk rolled over. It took the survivors four hours of swimming to reach the first island they swam to, Plum Pudding Island and after a few days, Kennedy moved them to Olasana Island. And, yes, Kennedy did tow the wounded 'Pappy' MacMahon behind him.

From reading other books and from watching the 1963 movie, I always thought and believed that Reginald Evans was the only Coast Watcher who helped to find and rescue Kennedy and his crew after the ramming. That was not the case, originally, there was another Coast Watcher involved, Frank Nash, but it was Evans who helped to effect the rescue.

Additionally, from reading Mr. Domagalski's excellent book, I discovered that the natives connected to the Coast Watchers had more of a role in the search and rescue of Kennedy and his crew than what is reported in other books and in the movie. In point of fact, it was the natives who found some debris from the boat, which included a letter written by crewman Raymond Albert, and brought it to Evans, who then contacted the US base at Rendova.

After the rescue, Kennedy was given command of a PT boat which was being converted into a gunboat, that boat was *PT-59*. His executive officer, Leonard Thom, was given command of *PT-61*, which was also being converted into a gunboat. He died in an auto accident in 1946. While in command of the *59*, Kennedy was sent to rescue and evacuate a Marine unit on the island of Choiesel. This mission was harrowing because the boat did not have a full fuel load and had to be towed back to base. On the way back to the base, a gravely injured Marine died in Kennedy's bunk.

Most people, thanks to the movie, think the rescue occurred while Kennedy had the *109*, this book definitely shows that this was not the case.

I thoroughly 'enjoyed' the book, inasmuch I learned things that I never knew and when I finished it, I walked away pleased that I had learned something from the book. I think readers will feel the same way and based on that feeling, I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in PT boats and their history.

The book is 280 pages, with 16 photos and retails for \$29.95 and is available at

www.Casematepublishing.com, www.amazon.com and I presume at brick-and-mortar bookstores.
Again, I highly recommend this book.