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JFK's heroic link to the Solomons

John Borthwick | January 1, 2016, 2:52 pm [Share](#)



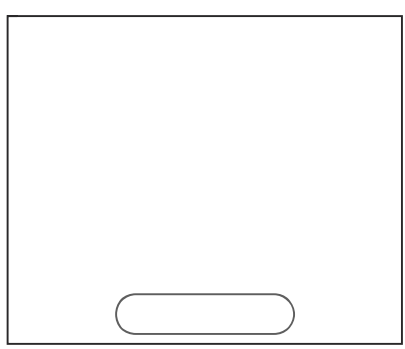
Crossing to historic Kennedy Island in the Solomon Islands. Pictures: John Borthwick

November saw the 52nd anniversary of the assassination, in 1963, of US president John F. Kennedy. Twenty years earlier, Kennedy, then a US Navy lieutenant, was in command of a torpedo patrol boat sunk by a Japanese destroyer in the Solomon Islands. John Borthwick looks back.

'Don't mention the war,' shrilled John Cleese in his guise as English hotelier Basil Fawlty. You might say the same thing, although less madly, in the Solomon Islands but it will be to little avail, especially if it's John Fitzgerald Kennedy's war.

The "Do mention the war" trail starts at the Solomons' capital, Honiara, which faces a waterway whose seabed is so strewn with World War II wreckage – of Japanese, American and Australian battleships, plus bombers and fighters – that its wartime heavy-metal nickname, "Iron Bottom Sound" stuck and then became official.

There's much more, however, to the 992 beautiful islands of "the Solleys" than maritime elephant graveyards and one president's war. Think scuba diving, island lodges, good surfing and scrumptious seafood.



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Fatboys Resort's over-water deck looks out across Gizo Lagoon to Kennedy Island.

I sit on the over-water deck of the gloriously named Fatboys Resort, lunching on the best crayfish lunch of my life (grilled, lightly dusted with garlic) and looking out across glittering Gizo Lagoon to a tiny, wooded island about a kilometre away. "It used to be called Plum Pudding Island but these days it's Kennedy Island," says Mano, Fatboys' slender manager.

Yes, I'm looking at the spot where the young John F. Kennedy, US Navy lieutenant and president-to-be, swam ashore with his crew after their patrol boat PT-109 was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer, Amagiri, on the night of August 2, 1943.

Two of the crew died and two others were critically injured. The 11 survivors swam for uninhabited Plum Pudding Island, with "Jack" Kennedy using a life-jacket strap clenched between his teeth to tow one of his badly burnt shipmates. It took four hours to reach the island but they found no food or water. Kennedy then swam his men far across Gizo Lagoon to the more hospitable Olasana Island.



The then future US president John F Kennedy as a young naval lieutenant on PT109. Divers claim they have found the boat, sunk in WW2 by a Japanese destroyer. Picture supplied.

The explosion from the sinking of PT-109 had been spotted by an Australian coastwatcher secreted in the hills, who sent two islanders, Biuku Gasa and Eroni Kumana, in a dugout to search for survivors. Days later they found the Americans surviving on coconuts. Kumana recalled the first thing they asked for was cigarettes, which he had, but there were no matches. He amazed the castaways by rubbing two sticks together to strike a light. They also lacked writing implements of any kind, so Kennedy carved a message in a coconut for Gasa and Kumana to take.



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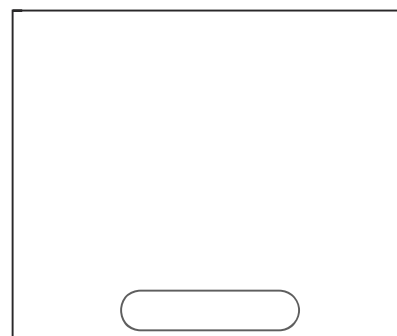


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Kennedy's part in the war is commemorated at the PT-109 Bar, Gizo.

Kennedy Island lies 15 minutes by boat from Gizo, the capital of the Solomons' Western province.

With two of the staff from Fatboys, I scoot out to it in a runabout. The island is still uninhabited and, except for its history, is fairly unremarkable, so we cross to a nearby sandbar for sundowners. Which leads to a joke session about what was the famous "rescue" message that Kennedy wrote? Was it a Warren Zevon-like memo to Dad, the wealthy and powerful Joseph P. Kennedy, "Send lawyers, guns and money"? Or, Jack being a lad (and later notorious for it), was it something like "Marooned on tropical island. Send dancing girls"?



Coming ashore at Kennedy Island.

Through waters patrolled by the Japanese, the scouts delivered the message at great risk to an Allied base at Rendova Island.

The marooned crew was rescued several days later.

History added more footnotes to the rescue. Lt Kennedy, along with a fellow PT-109 officer, Leonard Thom, was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal. This status as a decorated war hero boosted his postwar political profile; he went on to be elected a Massachusetts senator in 1953 and, in 1961, became the 35th president of the United States.

Numerous books, a 1963 Hollywood movie and television versions of the PT-109 drama followed, although the two Solomon Islanders, Gasa and Kumana, received little credit in them or in military records. Time magazine later reported that the pair were invited to Kennedy's presidential inauguration but were turned back by colonial officials at Honiara, supposedly on the grounds that "they would be an embarrassment in their appearance". Kumana, aged 93, died only last year — on August 2, 2014, exactly 71 years after PT-109's sinking.





The remains of an SBD Douglas Bomber.

Famed wreck hunter Robert Ballard headed a National Geographic Society expedition that found the forward section wreckage of PT-109 in May 2002. In 2003 a race was held, re-enacting Kennedy's epic swims across the lagoon.

So, what did the "rescue message" say? The coconut shell was returned to Kennedy, who preserved it in a glass paperweight on his Oval Office desk; it is now displayed in the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. The message states: "Commander ... native knows pos'it ... he can pilot ... 11 alive ... need small boat ... kennedy."

John Borthwick was a guest of Solomon Islands Visitor Bureau.

fact file

Solomon Islands Airlines flies from Brisbane to Honiara four times a week, and from Sydney once a week. flysolomons.com.

Fatboys Resort is at solomonislandsfatboys.com.au.

For more on the islands, go to visitsolomons.com.sb.

Gizo

Kennedy Island is 15 minutes by speedboat from Gizo, which is a one-hour flight from Honiara. Your plane lands on an airstrip first carved out of the jungle during island-by-island battles between the Allies and Nippon.

Gizo town is still reminiscent of WWII days, with its waterfront main street lined by Chinese general stores, warehouses and open-air markets. Its rambunctious watering holes such as the PT-109 Bar and the Gizo Hotel could have come straight from the set of the old Pacific War television series, McHale's Navy.

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