

## **Solve the JFK in History Mystery: What is this object?**

**Topic:** Historical Research and Biography

**Grade Level:** 3-8

**Subject Area:** Social Studies, ELA

**Time Required:** 60 minutes

### **Goal**

Students research an artifact using primary and secondary sources, and use the information to determine the object's historical significance.

**Essential Question:** What is an artifact and what makes it historically significant?

### **Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- examine a primary source and generate questions for further research.
- investigate photographs and captions to gather evidence.
- listen to and read a secondary source, and synthesize the information to determine an object's historical significance.

### **Connections to Curriculum (Standards)**

*National History Standards Historical Thinking:*

2. Historical Comprehension 3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation 4. Historical Research Capabilities

Standards for History and Social Science Practice (PS) 3. Organize information and data from multiple primary and secondary sources.

Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

### **Historical Background**

Many young Americans of all backgrounds volunteered for military service in World War II, including young John F. Kennedy who enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1941. Commanding the USS PT 109 (patrol torpedo boat), Lieutenant, Junior Grade, John Kennedy and his crew participated in the early campaigns in the Allies' long struggle to roll back the Japanese from their conquests throughout the island chains of the Pacific Ocean. The role of the small but fast PT boats was to

attack the Japanese destroyers known as the "Tokyo Express" that supplied Japanese troops in the islands, and to support the US Army and Marine Corps attacking the Japanese on shore.

On August 2, 1943, as PT 109 was running silent to avoid detection, it was struck by the Japanese destroyer *Amagiri*. Traveling at 40 knots, the destroyer cut PT 109 in two. The entire crew of thirteen was thrown into the dark waters; two of the men were never found. Kennedy towed injured crew member Patrick McMahon 3.5 miles to a small island to the southeast. All eleven survivors made it to the island after having spent a total of fifteen hours in the water. After seven days on the island, with the help of a message Kennedy carved on a coconut carried by local islanders working with an Australian coastwatcher, spying on the Japanese they were finally rescued on August 8th.

After the War, the Kennedy family had the coconut husk encased in wood and plastic, and JFK used it as a paperweight on his senate desk and in the Oval Office. The artifact is one of the most treasured objects at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and is displayed, along with Kennedy's Navy and Marine Corps Medal and Purple Heart, in the *Young Jack* exhibit.

## Materials

[Photograph of the coconut husk artifact](#)

[World War II media gallery](#)

[JFK35 Podcast: JFK and the PT 109](#) – transcript is included here

## Procedure

In this lesson, students examine a photograph of a “mystery artifact” (the coconut husk) and generate questions about the object. They investigate photographs and their captions in the [World War II media gallery](#) to gather evidence about the artifact and then listen to a [podcast](#) for additional information. After reflecting on the artifact's historical significance, they create a slideshow for first- and second- grade students to introduce them to the artifact and the story it helps to tell about John F. Kennedy.

1. Explain that museums are selective in choosing objects for their exhibits. They collect and preserve artifacts that are historically significant, that tell important stories about the past. They will be examining a photograph of an object related to John F. Kennedy and then conduct research to learn more about the artifact and to determine whether it is historically significant, whether it provides important information about his life.
2. Have students examine the photograph of the “mystery artifact” and elicit their observations and ideas. Explain that historians use questions to guide their research and prompt them to suggest questions about the object.
3. Explain that to find answers to their questions, historians use the information in primary sources such as documents, photographs, and artifacts. Provide the link to the [World War II media gallery](#) and have them investigate the photographs and captions for possible answers to their questions.

4. Regroup as a class or in small groups and discuss their findings. Help students synthesize the information, including the message on the coconut husk. If they do not bring up the exact transcription of the message, share it and discuss its meaning:

NAURO ISL...COMMANDER...NATIVE KNOWS POS'IT...HE CAN PILOT...11  
ALIVE...NEED SMALL BOAT...KENNEDY

5. Explain that historians also use secondary sources in their historical research. Reliable secondary sources are created by people who have used primary sources to help them understand a person or event in history. They offer an interpretation, or explanation of an historical event. Explain that they will be using a podcast as a secondary source to gather more evidence about the artifact. Have students [read the transcript as they listen to the JFK and the PT109 podcast](#). The key information for the lesson is covered by minute 5:48 after this comment:

*Stacey Bredhoff: I think it's really one of the most unique and significant pieces in the whole collection because without it JFK wouldn't have survived. And just the fact that it was always in such close proximity to him shows how important it was to him. And so it's important to us.*

(Students can listen to the entire podcast which is full of additional information.)

6. Discuss what students learned. Use these suggested questions to help students reflect on the object's historical significance:
  - What does the coconut help to reveal about John F. Kennedy?
  - How would you describe him as a leader?
  - What skills and qualities did he use to help his crew to survive?
  - Do you think the object is historically significant? Why or why not?

### **Assessment**

Have students create a slideshow for first- and second- grade students to introduce them to the story of the coconut husk artifact, what it helps to reveal about John F. Kennedy, and why it is displayed in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

### **Additional Resources**

[JFK in History essay on the PT 109](#)

[Photographs of the coconut husk artifact in the Oval Office](#)

[Photographs of the model of the PT 109](#)

[A digital archives folder with a condensed version of the article "Survival" by John Hersey.](#)



*John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Department of Education and Public Programs*

# JFK 35 Podcast Transcript Excerpt

## JFK and the PT 109

To access the podcast, visit <https://www.jfklibrary.org/about-us/social-media-apps/jfk35-podcast/season-1-episode-1-jfk-and-the-pt-109/transcript>

JAMIE RICHARDSON: 75 years ago in World War II, Lieutenant John F. Kennedy and 12 crew members were on a late night patrol of the South Pacific Ocean when they had a devastating encounter with a Japanese destroyer.

MATT PORTER: But the future 35th president and his crew beat the odds and survived the crash deep in enemy territory. Jamie Richardson and I are here to take you inside the crash and rescue that would help shape President Kennedy's life on the premiere episode of our new podcast, JFK 35.

[THEME MUSIC]

MATT PORTER: Welcome to the first episode of the JFK Library Foundation's new podcast, JFK 35. I'm Matt Porter.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: And I'm Jamie Richardson. In this new podcast, we'll take you in for a closer look at President Kennedy's life and his time in office, through the documents, photos, and artifacts found right here in the archives at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston.

MATT PORTER: And we're also here to introduce you to the people behind the scenes at the Library, including our passionate archivist, curators, and educators, all to give you a better look at the nation's 35th president and how his legacy continues to shape our world today.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: Our topic today involves the 75th anniversary of the destruction of JFK's patrol torpedo boat, the PT-109, and the ensuing rescue of its crew. During the night of August 1 into the second in 1943, the 80-foot boat was struck in the South Pacific by a Japanese destroyer, the Amagiri. The PT boat itself was destroyed.

MATT PORTER: And on that night, Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, commander of the PT-109, led his crew members to a nearby set of islands. JFK swam miles in enemy waters to try to find help. Days later, he encountered two native coastwatchers who carried a message to the Allies. A rescue was mounted on the morning of August 8, almost seven days after the crash of the PT-109.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: Our podcast's first guest will take us deeper into this dramatic story. Museum Curator Stacey Bredhoff, curator of the Young Jack exhibit in the Museum, which features this PT-109 story. Stacey, welcome to the show.

STACEY BREDHOFF: It's great to be here, thank you.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: Stacey, can you set the stage for us. What were JFK and his crew doing out there on the night when the PT-109 was hit?

STACEY BREDHOFF: So the PT-109 was on a routine patrol and it was a very, very dark night, and they were rammed by a Japanese destroyer, Amagiri. There was a huge explosion. The boat was sunk. Two men instantly died.

And through the night, the remaining crew and JFK clung to what was left of a piece of the boat. And then in the early morning light, it seemed that the best solution was to swim to a nearby island. They had every expectation that they were surrounded by the Japanese, so they realized that they needed to get to land quickly.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: Was anybody out there looking for them? Did they know what had happened?

STACEY BREDHOFF: Well, because of the explosion, that was witnessed from afar, the presumption was that there were no survivors. So there were no immediate rescue teams looking for them.

MATT PORTER: Stacey, I've heard that not everybody who was involved in the crash was a great swimmer, and I think JFK had to go through some pretty extensive means to get some of his crew to those islands that night, right?

STACEY BREDHOFF: Yes. So, actually, one of his crew was so badly injured-- he was burned-- that he was unable to swim. And so JFK took the belt of this man's life vest in his teeth and towed him the entire way to the island.

MATT PORTER: Well, that's pretty amazing that anyone could do that under that situation. When they got to the islands, what was to do from there? What was JFK, as the commander, trying to do?

STACEY BREDHOFF: Yes. So he's still commander. I mean, there's no boat but he still is the commander. And so every night, in the cover of darkness, he would swim out into the channel, hoping to encounter some PT boat, and they never did.

And so he and his crew actually swam from island to island. They were subsisting on coconuts. And, finally, one day JFK encountered these two native islanders in a canoe. They had been sent by an Australian coastwatcher.

And JFK, first of all, convinced them that he was not Japanese and explained his situation. And the native islanders showed him how to carve a message into a coconut. And they took that coconut back to the coastwatcher, and that's what eventually led to their rescue.

MATT PORTER: And so what was the message that Kennedy wrote on that coconut to get the Navy's attention?

STACEY BREDHOFF: So the message read, Nauro Island, which was the name of the island. Commander. Native knows position. He can pilot. 11 alive. Need small boat. Kennedy. And, actually, that little shard of coconut got back to JFK and he later had it mounted into a paperweight, and it remained on his desk, really, for the rest of his life.

MATT PORTER: Awesome.

JAMIE RICHARDSON: Yes, it's incredible. And it's one of the, I feel, like one of our prized features in the Young Jack exhibit. It's so special.

STACEY BREDHOFF: I think it's really one of the most unique and significant pieces in the whole collection because without it JFK wouldn't have survived. And just the fact that it was always in such close proximity to him shows how important it was to him. And so it's important to us.

*For the full podcast transcript, visit <https://www.jfklibrary.org/about-us/social-media-apps/jfk35-podcast/season-1-episode-1-jfk-and-the-pt-109/transcript>.*