Tape #[redacted] Oral History

Dick Keresey, May 3, 1993

I was born in Delawana, New Jersey in 1916, May 8. I went to public schools and then Dartmouth College 1938 including a year at Ecole Estanis Coatik in Paris in 1937 and Columbia Law School. I was on the law review, graduated in 1941.

I joined the navy because I had a low draft number. I was really subject to the draft by the end of my third year in law school. I had taken the precaution of signing up for the midshipman program--the 120 day midshipman program called V7. I managed to work a couple of months down at the Krevatz, Swing and Moore in New York, a big law firm that I came back to after the war. In Sept. 1941 I went to midshipman's school not expecting at that point of fighting any war. As a matter of fact I didn't even think that whatever I did in the navy would have anything to do actually with the war because here I was already a lawyer admitted to the bar, bilingual in French and English. So I saw myself as a man in naval intelligence. As a matter of fact when I graduated in Jan. of '42, they sent around a questionnaire and it was so obvious to me that I would go into naval intelligence that I went out and bought 4 white uniforms, calling cards, and a sword.

I opened my orders and found that I was being sent to torpedo school. I remember saying to my five midshipmen roommates that this had to be a mistake. They looked at me and said "No, Dick this is no mistake". I thought I would go to the Commandant and tell him it's a mistake. They said "Listen, you do that, you'll end up on guard duty on the run to -----?---". So I thought better of it. I went to the torpedo training school which was in Newport, Rhode Island. That without question was the worst school I have ever attended. It may have been the worst school in military history. You know our torpedoes were inferior to the Japanese and Germans. The school fitted right in with that and it bored me.

It so happened that down in Melville, RI which is about 7 miles from Newport, they had just completed a training school for PT boats. The usual way, having completed the school, it suddenly occurred to me they needed some students. They didn't have any. So then Officer Wescott of the Newport torpedo school took the first 30 clamoring to get out of that place. I practically had him by the knees at that point--I would have volunteered for bomb disposal.

That would have been in March 1942, the end of the torpedo boat school. I remember very clearly the first time seeing a PT boat. I tell you, I fell in love with that PT boat the minute I saw it and what really finished me off was when they leveled off the engines. The sound of those engines starting -- it's a sound I'll remember all my life. I wish I had a recording of them, particularly the three as they started up with a whine, and then a cough, and then that rumble. It was a beautiful sound no matter where I was so see those engines.

The PT boat has gotten some pretty bad press in books about JFK for some reason or other. I think the authors obviously were limited in time. They sort of borrowed the one from the other on the PT boat without actually ever studying the PT boat itself--hands on. Of course one reason for that is that the PT boat was peculiar to its time. The U.S. PT boat was conceived shortly before WWII and put together and developed in about two years and then after WWII it disappeared. It had served its purpose. I for one think it served a very good purpose, diverse purpose at that time.

Let me first describe the boat I'm talking about: This was the Elco Patrol Torpedo boat. It was 80' long. Some of these authors all say it was built of plywood--it wasn't, it was built of two 1" planks of mahogany, that came originally from the Philippines and then came from Honduras. They were a beautiful looking boat, beautiful lines and I think it had to be the strongest wooden boat ever built because at 80' long, weighing over 50 tons when it got its full armament on it, it would travel at a top speed that was rated at 42 knots. I know once I had mine going 48, 49, or 50 knots--I could only tell that from where the rpm's were, we had no speedometer. At that point my needles were so far beyond maximum that it was incredible.

That boat was marvelous. It was when I was running from shore guns, I had been caught by shore guns, and what I needed at that time was speed and I just put the throttles right up against the stops and she just kept working up more and more speed. Thank God, the engineer taped down the over-speed cut outs that you have on the engines because every once in awhile the screws could go out of work and if they went out of work and ran from above 2,500 rpms, they could go up to 5,000 rpm's cause there was no resistance and the whole engine and everything could just fly apart. So they had what was called an overspeed cut-out that cut the engine at 2,800 rpm's but my engine had already taken down because that was the least of our worries.

My rpm's at that time were running around 3,000 and that was fast, that had to be 50 knots. One of these authors said that one well placed bullet and it would explode if it hit the gas tanks and the boat would just explode. Well, I know of one boat, cause I was in this gun boat action with it, it was my companion boat, and I'm not exaggerating. This boat was hit so many times that it was sawdust below decks, sawdust covering everything. There was an inch of 100 octane gasoline in the boat ----- . The fumes were so bad that bringing the boat back to base, everybody had to stay on deck because they would become unconscious if they went below deck because of the gasoline fumes. Nothing happened--it didn't explode, it didn't do anything. The boats poured into its gasoline tanks and of course the gasoline tanks were full enough so that the boats just went out because----------
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There was no gas in it just fumes. They might have gotten off------, I don't recall any instance of a PT boat exploding from being hit by shells or gun fire unless they got a real direct hit, or say like the----------, which did explode when it was rammed by the Japanese. It was bound to happen because there were such tremendous sparks. Hitting torpedoes, etc. which would create sparks and just to the point where vapor would ignite. The 109 did explode. Curiously they only lost two people because the ball of fire--the stern of the destroyer created a suction. The destroyer was going a good 35 knots when it hit Jack's boat and that creates a suction at the stern--air pocket, kind of a vacuum. First it swept the fire along with it and also because of the vacuum it extinguished, so the flame only lasted a very short time, almost like a flash fire and it went along with the stern of the destroyer. Anyone on the destroyer stern got kind of singed.

Of course, some of those boys were pretty badly burned but you'd think seeing it that no one would survive.

There's been an estimate made of the amount of damage that it caused to enemy shipping in terms of tons sunk. The estimate was right around 200,000 tons of

enemy shipping. That's a lot. It wasn't spectacular tonnage. A couple of Japanese destroyers were hit and badly damaged at Guadalcanal by torpedoes. By far the greatest effectiveness was in gun boat work. And there we went out every night--I didn't go out every night, but there were boats out every night. Almost all our operations were at night.

Every night you could expect a PT boat would get something or other. It may be a Jap barge here, a small freighter there, one or two times a canoe, whatever--small things but it all added up. People forget the Mediterranean. We had highly effective torpedo boats in the Mediterranean ranging up the Italian coast. They took on the same kind of coastal freighters that we experienced in the Pacific. There they were called "lighters", we called those we were attacking "barges". I don't think either description was right, it was a general term. We used barge for anything 40' to 100', and these lighters I think, on the whole, were somewhat bigger. The estimate as I said was well over 200,000 tons of shipping sunk.

Besides that you would have to add the boys in Italy hit a railroad train. In the South Pacific a couple of fellows racked up trucks at nights. We had a few boats with radar in mid-summer 1943. By September of 1943 we all had radar. It was a big advantage too.

To begin with it was all sight. As a matter of fact, the radar was good for spotting sometimes but these small craft (barges, etc.) knowing we were around would run as close to the beach as possible. Our radar wasn't that sophisticated so there would be a lot of clutter right near the beach. If a barge was say within 100, 200 yards off the beach and that's where they traveled, the radar really wouldn't pick them up--or it would be very difficult to pick up.

This didn't bother a guy like Joe Burke who I think was probably the greatest gun boat captain since John Paul Jones. He was the United States singles sculls champion just before the war. Joe beat Kelly who was Princess Grace's father. I think, who was a great singles sculls man. I only knew Burke at Newport in the training school in late 1944 when we both came back. I had heard about him by reputation and I really expected to find a ferocious sort of guy, very macho, etc.; of course, he was very athletic, but he was anything but that. As a matter of fact I played bridge with him for a couple of weeks before I realized that this was the great Joe Burke.

Talking about him, here's what Burke would do. In New Guinea, Burke would get somewhere close to one of these Jap barge posts and then he would run practically on to the beach--so far, that his crew and executive officers kept changing--. It meant that any moment he was going to land on a coral reef and he did on at least one occasion. He ran aground. He was the kind of man that could see right around, and his crew was frantic because the Japanese had spotted them and they sent out a couple of armed barges or these landing craft to take the PT boat. Burke himself was underneath the boat trying to get the screws loose from the coral. His crew shouted down to him "Captain, we got to get off, we gotta get slim for our lines, because these fellows are coming." He said "I'll be right up, I'll be right up." He came out from underneath the boat, got on the boat and said "Everybody just remain quiet, don't open fire, don't do anything until the Jap barges got within 30 feet". Then he said--open fire. They blew these barges out of the water, went down under the boat and finally managed to get the propeller off--it was stuck, and they went home.

It was a coolness that very few people would have. His crew had respect for him, but I tell you I've heard one or two guys say they thought he was a nut. That was before I met him and he was far from a nut. He knew just what he was doing. Just very quickly, one other one on Burke.

He studied everything he did. He studied charts. He went up in an airplane to view the reefs and everything because the charts weren't that accurate and he decided that he would raid one of these Jap barge installations. He found a Nisei, an American-Japanese, who we had over there as interpreters. This Nisei was dying to actually fight for his country which was American. Burke had no problem in talking him into coming on the boat. He went over to this Japanese held island, got to the short river that ended up in the lagoon inside. He turned around and he backed up the river--this is in the dead of night--and he told me he did this for two reasons: one was he didn't think he'd be able to turn around and get out so he had to back up in order to get out, and he felt he looked more like a barge by backing in than by coming in with our very distinctive bow.

He came into this lagoon and he had the Nisei talking to himself in Japanese and finally the Nisei was saying in Japanese "We can't find the dock, put a light on to show us the dock." These people standing on the dock turned on the light, flashlights or whatever it was, so they could find it and he backed up to the dock and he blew the entire dock, the entire installation--he has a 40 mm on the stern and opened up at about 20', and in 30 seconds he absolutely destroyed this place, and then throttles forward--and he said "It just took planning, Dick, just planning, that's all", well it took planning in Joe Burke.

Interviewer: These stories indicate you must have operated very independently of higher orders on your forays.

Keresey: Yes, on the whole we did. Too much so. This wasn't true in other areas but I'll tell you frankly it was where we were, now not in Burke's case, he had some very good squadron commanders that was over in New Guinea. Most of our squadron commanders, frankly, I felt were sub-par. There were a number of men, regular navy, senior lieutenants or junior lieutenant commanders who must have been assigned PT boats against their wishes. Several of them demonstrated they obviously shouldn't have had a command of a destroyer where any decision by that man could lose a whole destroyer. The squadron commander of PT boats can make a lot of mistakes and not lose 12 folks, he may lose one or two by a mistake.

I'm sure the navy did this. The navy did not send many top people from the regular navy to command squadrons. Unfortunately where we were we had several who were like that, they never rode the boats. My squadron commander could not dock a PT boat. He rode them as little as possible. He only participated in one combat mission and that was the biggest disaster we ever had. It was a dawn raid on Japanese harbor installations. It was his idea. To credit him, he conceived of it so I guess he figured he should lead it. It would have worked out better had he stayed at home the way he did otherwise. Number one, there were three Japanese barge installations. Actually they were only about three or four miles apart on Coleman Garon, which is one of the Russell Islands.

He conceived of our arriving at dawn and catching these people by surprise. I didn't realize that he thought when the tide and time tables said it would be

dawn that that's when it would become light. It becomes light a half an hour before actual dawn so that was his first mistake.

Second, he did the navigating and we got there another half hour late. So it had been daylight for an hour when we paraded up the coast of Coleman Garon--nine boats in the squadron five. I had a new exec on my boat, I had lost my other exec to a bomb a couple of weeks before and they had been giving me, what I referred to myself, as the bum of the night after that. But I got for this particular mission John. We really only met that morning and we'd seen each other before that but this was the first time he'd come on my boat. I know John came aboard thinking here we were (he was new, a replacement officer) people who knew what they were doing. I could tell John was getting more and more uneasy and by the time we were just riding along the coast of Coleman Garon held by the Japanese, we were a half mile off the coast in broad daylight I could see he was just staring into space wondering what in God's name he had gotten himself into.

I couldn't think of anything to say except "John, you're about to do the most brazen thing you will ever do in your life." I didn't go into the harbor. I had what I thought would be a relatively cushy job. I did not have at that time installed a 37 mm on my bow so I was not selected to go in. Two other boats went into the harbor and I was to stay outside. I can remember the squadron commander saying to provide cover and when he told me I was to provide cover "Are you installing a 16" gun on my boat", you know once they go into the harbor what the hell kind of cover could I provide, I only had machine guns. Anyway he used the word provide cover--he was not really connected with reality at this point.

But what happens, no sooner did they disappear into this harbor, small entrance maybe for 25 yards it looked kind of like a river then it would open up in a lagoon in some sort of a tropical formation. They disappeared and I can still see Bob Shearer who was captain of the lead boat sort of leaning over the edge of the cockpit and he was going in fast. Obviously he didn't give a damn if he should run aground, he figured the quicker he could get in there the better off they'd be. I was surprised at how fast he disappeared into the harbor with another boat behind him.

I had to stop thinking of that cause no sooner had they disappeared when a 4.5 shell went right over my head and exploded about 200 yards down the way. We'd been spotted by shore guns that were up the beach from us and they had just been waiting for us and when these first two boats turned into the harbor they had been training their sights on all three of them, and when two went into the harbor they decided to open up on me.

I did the most natural thing--I started getting the hell out of there. I started off running away from the shore guns, down the shore line that we'd just come up and John Eiles had the wheel and I guess we hadn't been going in that direction for more than about 30 seconds or so, I realized Jesus, I was told to provide cover and here I am running, and that's not exactly what I was told to do. So I turned to John and said "John, we got to go back". John looked at me and said "Yah", and I said "Do you want me to take the wheel?", he said "Yah", so I took the wheel.

Put it over to hard port and started racing back the way we'd come. Now, of course, going full into the shore guns immediately stopped firing -- either they had to get some more ammunition. I mean they were firing awfully fast, but it stopped! Either they had to get up another box of ammunition or maybe they

stopped a moment wondering where in hell this guy is going because at this point I was going straight for them. They were still 1,500 or 2,000 yards away, at least--maybe 3,000 yards away. I got an order to lay smoke, we had a smoke screen generator in the stern. Any by color I figured what I could do was lay a smoke screen and I was on the radio and I wasn't getting any response but I told them I'm under fire, when you come out, come out fast.

I yelled for the boys to start the smoke screen generator. I had another guy on the boat who was really colorful. His name was Tom Haide, a warrant officer, and Tom had been a Chicago fireman and they gave him a warrant officer rating because he was an expert on engines. When I lost my regular exec, Phil Hornburg, and I had these bums of the night for a week or two, Tom Haide came up from a rear base. He and I had been good friends. He was our squadron engineering officer on the beach. He came up from rear base without orders, came up to Rendover, in other words he just got on the boat and said that he had been ordered to Rendover. Nobody knew about Rendover. When he got to Rendover he said "I've been ordered to become Keresey's executive officer". They didn't question that, who would ask for written orders to get on my boat which was not considered a lucky boat in view of what had happened.

He came aboard my boat as executive officer and had ridden with me for three or four missions. He knew absolutely nothing about operating a boat but he was an Irishman and could tell the best stories and he was just what I needed, just what I needed to restore my morale. Lot of funny stories.

Anyway, this mission--John Eiles has come aboard so there was no need for Haide. He could have stayed on the beach. Everybody knew this was kind of suicidal what we were trying to do. By golly, Haide was on board when we left. I didn't ask him to get off, I was glad to have his company--I'm glad I did because--remember, I'm at the wheel, Haide came up to me and said "They can't start the smoke screen generator." This is the way he told it later, he said "Keresey turned around, looked at me with his eyes popping out of his head and he said, "That's all right, start it anyway". There's no question, I was beside myself at this point. Then Haide said to himself as he tells it "Well, there's no reasoning with this guy, I'm just going to have to start this generator".

Being a fireman he went back and somehow found an axe--all of this I'm talking about in the space of less than a minute. He found an axe and chopped off the end of the generator cause all that was needed for the gas inside to become in contact with air and that generated the smoke. I never knew what generated the smoke, but Haide knew all he had to do was get some air to that cylinder. I tell you we had a ball of smoke come out of the back and continued--it was as big as a big barn. I've seen smoke screens before, they were nothing like this. It was gorgeous. It just started when the two boats came tearing out of the harbor. They had just been in there a minute before they realized they had to get out. They came tearing out of the harbor. As they're coming out, I'm going the other way--toward the harbor. We passed each other at about 40' but they had this gorgeous smoke to take care of them going out and my problem of course was once they came out, I had to go hard to port and that was one of my worst moments as I tell you I was getting awfully close to the beach and I could feel that any moment that sickening great, great punch when you're propeller is hit and you're there forever. It didn't happen.

I rode down the beach. I stayed in board and as close to the beach as I could because I realized when I got to a certain point in--these shells were no longer

coming over me! The guns up the beach were not designed to train down the beach so I got them where they just couldn't train their guns enough to get me when I was very close to the beach. So I went skittering down that way. I got my boat up to 50 knots and would you believe it, I went down that way and saw two other boats one of which had my closest buddy aboard, Dave Payne, who I didn't know was badly wounded. They were coming out of the harbor down the way and they had really run into a terrible blast of gun fire. Both captains killed. That boat was the 108 and it was the one boat that had a name, it was called "Little Doc" after Sid Hick's girl in Kentucky or Tennessee. Little Doc was really destroyed and it was our only boat that got that badly damaged.

We were very superstitious. Everybody gave up the idea of naming a PT boat. Mine always remained 105. At any rate, more by accident than design, I ran in back of Dave's boat. I could tell by that time that they were in trouble. They were outboard of me cause I was real close to the beach. I didn't know it but there was one guy on his feet, and he had been hit three times. He was the quartermaster and he had crawled to the wheel and inched himself up and he was holding on with his arms, his legs were out--he had been hit in the legs. He was steering the boat out and they had one engine that would be going and then die because bullets would go into it. The engineers down below, would keep restarting the engines and was inching out--just inching out, going three or four knots at the most. I go by with this out of control smoke screen--magnificent thing.

I could hear the whistles around my ears that this was not a place to stay and I was at this point going so fast, these Jap gunners couldn't have caught me. That was Aug. 22, 1943.

First time I remember meeting JFK he hauled me off a reef. This was when I first got out there. He then had the 109. I ran on to the only marked reef in Tulagi Harbor. There are thousands of unmarked reefs, but I picked the one that had range markers on it. I got out of the range so quick I ran right on the reef the range markers were sitting on. It was real stupid. I could have easily become permanent laundry officer. Jack Kennedy towed me in. What I remember very distinctly, this isn't after the fact, eventhough I was just in despair about myself at the moment, I rather admired his boat handling because he got me into the floating drydock with a minimum of fuss. Although we talked about this and that, he never said "How the hell did you run on the reef". I was so greatful he didn't say that, because everyone else when they saw me said "How the hell did you run on the reef?" That was my first encounter with him.

Then I just saw Jack as one of the boat captains around. The next thing I knew, the next morning after the battle of Blackett Strait on Aug. 3, 1943, we got back for the debriefing session. It was an absolute fiasco that night. We learned that the 109 had been rammed and sunk. Heard a boat captain say "I saw it, it just exploded in flame. I was a hundred yards away, there couldn't be any survivors." They were saying this to the base commander because a couple of officers, not me, said we ought to go back and look for them. I would have gone back, we all would have gone back but the base commander said after hearing this, "There's no point." Looking back, this was a very poor decision because these poor guys were hanging on the bow of the 109 during at least half the day waiting to be picked up and we never went back there.

I saw his boat, it was probably hit by a destroyer that I had fired on about 10 minutes before. I figured this out later because -- let me explain about this

battle. This was an attempt by 5 U.S. PT boats to intercept four Japanese destroyers that were coming in with, I believe, supplies for the base at Coleman Garon. We had pretty good information on this. I think we got it through one of these Japanese codebreakings. Fifteen boats, which is all we could muster, every boat we could muster was sent up there in four or five divisions to intercept the destroyers.

Our radio communications were terrible. At that point we didn't have the VHF radio which was a crystal set so that when you're on frequency there was no doubt about it. We had the kind you actually had to tune in. The trouble with that is the boat bounces a lot and the radio would go off frequency. Our radio communications, therefore, were bad. This was without question the worst led PT action of WWII and the most fruitless. It required a total of some 30 torpedoes and didn't score one hit. There were lots of claims but we soon found out we hadn't scored one hit. The four destroyers took on their provisions or unloaded and then paraded out. I was deserted by my division leader. He had radar and we were not speaking on the radio at that point but I knew, seeing gun flashes coming down the island against the black, that these were ships, they were not shore guns.

Kennedy was at a different perspective and he thought that they were shore guns that were firing on us. The destroyers were up against the beach at night and when that happens you can't see them as they have no silhouette. Whereas we were against the horizon--that was the first strategic mistake. We should have been inboard of them not outboard of them. At any rate, as they started banging down toward me, I was in one of the boats in division three, and my division leader who was not from my squadron, he seemed to start up and I kept pace with him and Joe Roberts, another squadron captain, was on the port side, he kept pace with him. All of a sudden the division leader did a 1AO, he was only doing about 10 knots, so you could watch this very carefully. He made a turn to port and Joe Roberts turned with him which was what should happen. I didn't know where the hell he was going because these destroyers were up ahead of us--I didn't know what this guy had done--he was suddenly going the other way. What I had not known was that he had fired his torpedoes by radar and he had to have been 5,000 or 6,000 yards away--a ridiculous distance from which to fire torpedoes and expect to hit.

Joe had seen him fire and decided the thing to do was to put his four torpedoes in the water. I hadn't seen them fire or I might have done the same thing. There I was with four torpedoes with what were Japanese destroyers coming down and that's what I was out there for and I wanted to get me a shot. All of a sudden I saw this guy pick up speed, the division leaders both going by me and I thought hell, I got to get on the radio and find out what's going on. I came up and called them and said "Where are the targets?" or something like that, some stupid code word, it wasn't targets but it was something like that.

At that point a Jap plane was attracted by the wake of the division leader's boat and came over and dropped a stick of bombs on him, missing. Then the division leader comes up on the radio to his base and says "I'm under heavy fire from a Japanese destroyer and I'm proceeding down through Ferguson passage. I have fired my torpedoes and I am under heavy fire from a Japanese destroyer." Hell, they were bombs! I don't know where this guy had been. I don't think he'd been out very often and I think this may have been his first real mission and he decided this wasn't his trade. He was in the wrong business and this was the last time he went out.

So, I called again, I knew he'd been straddled by bombs but he was still chattering on the radio. I managed to cut in and say "Is it behind me, are there targets in Ferguson's passage." He came up and said "Get out of there, you're in a trap, get out of there." I was just beside myself at this point. I could see these damn destroyers. The base commander came on the air and said "Carry out your orders, get out of there." The guy is 50 miles away in a dugout and he's telling me what to do, and this is what that fellow tried to do all night. I'm not mentioning his name because he must have grandchildren, etc. but this guy was a shit beyond parallel. I think he's the guy who was quoted in some of those Kennedy books saying things like he was not a very good PT officer.

Kennedy was a good PT officer. He was a damned brave PT officer and he was a hell of a lot of fun. At that time, I didn't even know he was an ambassador's son. He wasn't as important out there as a guy like Wizard White, who was important. Lenny Kahn was an all American who was on Kennedy's boat and went down, survived with him and was better known than Jack Kennedy. Barney Ross was on the boat and better known. We called him Barney Ross--the funniest guy. Nobody ever thought of Kennedy as an ambassador's son or gave a damn if he was an ambassador's son. There were lots of people like that around. He was just a real nice guy.

Interviewer: What about Mr. Takahashi? What's happened since you've seen him this time?

Keresey: Purely by accident we were standing there and I didn't expect to meet him in that context but we were standing on the stage while Helen was telling us what was going to go on, and Mr. Takahashi showed up. I figured that's who it was but I didn't say anything, but there was another Japanese I'd already talked to so he got Takahashi and I could see him bringing him over to me. I went forward to meet Takahashi and he cried. It was not embarrassing, it was just a highly emotional scene and it was a moment there in all this confusion where everybody just stopped in one place and we put our arms around each other. It was a great moment for me too. I had a tough decision to make there. For many years I thought I could have made the wrong move and a fruitless one because I had heard a rumor that after we had put these 70 odd Japanese down at this army camp, there was a Japanese air raid------

End of tape.