

MASTER OF SEAPOWER

A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King



THOMAS B. BUELL



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A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King

Thomas B. Buell

With an Introduction
by John B. Lundstrom

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Contents

List of Illustrations

Introduction to the Classics of Naval Literature Edition

Introduction

Chronology

I: Before the War

1. In the Beginning
2. Learning
3. Maturing
4. Versatility
5. The First World War
6. Peace and Command
7. Aviation Begins
8. *Lexington*
9. The New Admiral
10. Home Stretch

II: The Second World War

11. Resurrection
12. The Atlantic Conference
13. Taking Command
14. Opening Moves
15. Organizing for War
16. Stopping the Japanese: Coral Sea and Midway
17. Eyes toward Germany: Operation TORCH
18. Striking Back: Guadalcanal
19. Wars on the Home Front
20. Roosevelt, Congress, and the Press
21. Casablanca
22. The Battle of the Atlantic

23. After Casablanca: Ships
24. After Casablanca: Men
25. TRIDENT
26. Accountability
27. Getting Ready—1943
28. Aviation
29. The Fleet Admiral
30. QUADRANT: The First Quebec Conference
31. Planning and Logistics
32. Cairo-Teheran
33. Onward in the Pacific
34. OVERLORD and ANVIL
35. Strategic Decisions in the Pacific
36. Climax

III: After the War

37. Anticlimax
 38. The Final Years
- Acknowledgments

Appendix I. Exercise of Command—Excess of Detail in Orders and Instructions

Appendix II. Exercise of Command—Correct Use of Initiative

Appendix III. Executive Order Defining King's Duties as COMINCH

Appendix IV. Executive Order Defining King's Duties as COMINCH/CNO

Appendix V. King's Strategy for the Pacific War, March 1942

Appendix VI. Minutes of CCS Meeting, Quebec, 14 September 1944

Appendix VII. Decorations, Degrees, and Awards

Bibliography

Bibliographical Notes

Index

Illustrations

Ernest J. King, 1945
Ernest J. King at Oxford, 1946
Ernest J. King, ca. 1890
Leona Doane, ca. 1896
Midshipman King, 1901
Ernest King and Mattie Egerton, 1901
Aboard USS *Illinois*, 1902
USS *Cincinnati*, 1904
King and his division, 1905
The newlyweds, 1905
Mrs. Ernest J. King, 1905
King with his first daughter and his first car, 1909
USS *Cassin*
Admiral Mayo and King
The King family
King and Secretary of the Navy Wilbur
King's naval aviator certificate
Lexington with her captain and exec
The Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics
King and his flagship looking for seaplane bases
King and Captain Kenneth Whiting at French Frigate Shoals
King and his chief of staff, Leigh Noyes
King and Secretary Edison
King and Secretary Knox
Flagships *Texas* and *Augusta*
Aboard *Prince of Wales* at Argentia
Admirals Horne, Willson, Edwards, and Cooke
King's homes afloat and ashore: USS *Dauntless* and the Naval Observatory
King's view on paperwork
The JCS at lunch
King and Nimitz at Pearl Harbor
Main Navy building and King's office
King's propaganda poster
Inspecting USS *Boise* (CL-42)
The Americans at Casablanca

The Americans and British at Casablanca

Rear Admiral Francis S. Low

King laughing

On vacation in Louisiana

Vice Admiral Randall R. Jacobs

The CCS during TRIDENT

King and Mildred McAfee

King and Marshall go to sea

Inspecting a carrier aircraft

A study in uniforms

The CCS during QUADRANT

King visiting Jonas Ingram in Brazil

Forrestal sworn in as Secretary of the Navy

King at Normandy

Admirals King and Hewitt

Visiting the Central Pacific

Admirals King and Halsey

The Kings, father and son

The Big Three at Yalta

King and Secretary of State Stettinius

King and Midshipman Stansfield Turner

Current historiography exhibits a fashionable bias toward determinism and dotes on social history. Its practitioners tend to disparage the very real impact that individuals can exert on the broad course of events, particularly at times of great crisis. In contrast, the study of warfare often flirts with the Carlylean interpretation of history that emphasizes the importance of individual commanders. Given the nature of the subject, the actual process of deciding strategy during a campaign or fighting a battle can be analyzed minutely, and the role of specific leaders carefully assessed. Obviously, the institutions that nurtured these commanders to a large extent fashioned their basic philosophy and created the weapons they wielded in battle. Yet at crucial times the particular man or woman placed on the spot can have a great influence on how an entire nation will respond to a crisis.

Following this approach, it is fascinating to contemplate how different the course of World War I might have been without the unique contribution of Fleet Admiral Ernest Joseph King, U.S. Navy, and the strategy employed by the United States in particular and the Allies in general.

On 7 December 1941, Admiral King was serving as commander in chief of the Atlantic Fleet. Though he was free of the taint of the debacle of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. Respected for his abilities and toughness, King was the logical choice to revitalize the U.S. Navy and lead it to victory. On 3 December 1941 he was elevated to the restored billet of commander in chief of the United States Fleet, whose official abbreviation he insisted on changing from the uninspiring CinCUS (pronounced “sink us”) to CominCh.

Soon after, King acquired more control over the Navy. On 26 March 1942, while still remaining CominCh, he replaced Adm. Harold R. Stark as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and became the first individual to hold both posts simultaneously. In addition, a presidential order gave him unprecedented control over the Navy’s administrative apparatus. Especially during the tenure of Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox (who died in 1944), King enjoyed relatively little interference from his civilian superiors. Thus he became the most powerful naval officer in the history of the United States and likely the entire world. Certainly no one else has ever commanded more ships, naval aircraft, and sailors.

In addition to running the Navy, King took his rightful place on the newly established U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and concurrently on the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff. There he joined in the often stormy counsels that put together the grand strategy employed by the Allied coalition to defeat the Axis powers.

During 1941 while the United States was still at peace, planners from the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy worked in concert with their British counterparts. Following the lead of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his key strategists, they determined it was necessary to concentrate forces to defeat Germany and Italy before dealing extensively with any threat Japan might present. Their resulting war plan, Rainbow Five, prescribed future offensive operations in Europe and dictated a strict defensive

posture in the Pacific. This was in line with Roosevelt's policy of supporting Britain against Germany. He significantly weakened the Pacific Fleet (the principal deterrent against Japan) in order to fight what was essentially an undeclared war between King's Atlantic Fleet and the German Navy. The desperate plight of the Soviet Union in its savage war with Germany gave even more urgency to this approach.

In the first months of the Pacific War, Japan blitzed through Southeast Asia, the Dutch East Indies and the western Pacific. The stunned Allies withdrew into the Indian Ocean, the environs of Australia and eastward halfway across the Pacific. In early 1942 despite these terrible blows, U.S. Army planners, looking always toward Europe, continued to advocate remaining on the defensive in the Pacific Theater, even accepting the loss of Australia if otherwise unavoidable given the meager forces allocated. Conversely, Army chief of staff Gen. George C. Marshall pressed for a massive buildup in England to conduct in the summer of 1942 an amphibious offensive across the English Channel into France.

To King, such passivity in the face of the surging Japanese was totally unacceptable. His long experience as a naval strategist argued that the best defense was a good offense. He knew that it was imperative to seize the initiative from the Japanese and attack before they could advance further to consolidate their hold on their newly gained territories. King also felt that the strident calls for a general European offensive were premature, given the time needed for the United States to mobilize its military strength. Therefore, during this long, unavoidable buildup, some of the massive resources earmarked for eventual use in Europe would be much more effective if used immediately in the Pacific.

King's reasoning compelled him to oppose the prevailing Germany-first strategy. To the president and his fellow American service chiefs, Marshall and Gen. Henry H. Arnold of the U.S. Army Air Forces, King forcefully and tirelessly championed an early offensive in the Pacific. Remarkably, he got his way, and the invasion in August 1942 of Guadalcanal was the result. Thereafter, he followed the Navy's traditional Pacific doctrine based on the old War Plan Orange (the color designated the opponent, in this case Japan). This strategy dictated a general advance from one island group to another all the way across the Pacific Ocean to the Japanese homeland.

At times, King's inflexible stance brought him into direct conflict with the British allies. Yet he showed the perseverance and ability to demonstrate the wisdom of his position. If he did not win over his objectors, at least he secured their general compliance. The astounding war production of the United States in particular gave the Allies the matériel superiority to conduct simultaneous offensives in the European and Pacific theaters and fully vindicated King's audacious strategy.

In December 1944 King became the first officer to be promoted to the new five-star rank of Fleet Admiral. When he finally stepped down in December 1945 (fleet admirals were considered on active duty for life), he had won the greatest naval war in history.

In 1980 Thomas B. Buell published *Master of Sea Power: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest King*, the first book-length study of this superb naval officer. It is the second of Buell's highly acclaimed lives of prominent U.S. naval officers. In 1974 he wrote the prize-winning *Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance*, which in 1987 became the first of his books to be reissued in the U.S. Naval Institute series Classics of Naval Literature.

Circumstances forced Buell to adopt a considerably different approach and focus to research and write the life of Ernie King than he employed for the biography of Ray Spruance. The modest, reclusive Spruance disliked writing anything down, kept few personal papers, and talked little about himself. Much of what he thought and the specific reasons behind many of his actions had to be

inferred from events and the testimony of others.

In contrast, King's conduct often bordered on the immodest, and he was certainly far from reclusive. As Buell relates, King developed a strong awareness of history and while still a low ensign deliberately preserved his correspondence. His long career and tenure in the Navy's highest commands generated vast amounts of documents, both official and personal, which now repose in numerous archives, including the Library of Congress, the Naval Historical Center, and the Naval War College. After World War II, King himself dictated a lengthy memoir that served as the basis of a massive 1952 autobiography (*Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record*). It was written in the third person by Walter Muir Whitehill in close collaboration with the admiral. The book's style is somewhat self-conscious and stilted, but withal it appears sincere and frank.

Given the tremendous mass of available source material on King, Buell faced an especially difficult task of selection in order to distill the essence of King's life, career, and personality, what he thought, why he did what he did, and what he was really like. With Spruance, Buell profited from the opportunity to meet the man whose life he would later chronicle. However, he was not so fortunate with King, who died in 1956 while Buell was still a midshipman at the Naval Academy.

The key for Buell became the wholehearted cooperation of Whitehill, King's amanuensis, who had gotten to know the man and his career so well. As with the Spruance opus, Buell searched far and wide to secure the recollections and papers of persons who knew King or had personal dealings with him. King's family and close friends provided especially valuable insights. As a consequence, Buell assembled many revealing accounts and anecdotes that cast new light on the thoughts and complex personality of his subject.

Born in 1878 in Lorain, Ohio, near Cleveland, Ernest King earned an appointment in 1897 to the U.S. Naval Academy. The next April during the commotion attendant to the war with Spain, King showed characteristic personal initiative by managing on his own to go to war on the protected cruiser *San Francisco* (Cruiser No. 5), no mean accomplishment for a plebe. Back at the Academy that fall he excelled in academics and leadership, and in 1901 he graduated fourth in his class. Tall, handsome, and supremely confident, the young naval officer (nicknamed "Rey," Spanish for "king," by his classmates) was encouraged by President Theodore Roosevelt's vast expansion of the U.S. Navy and anticipated a naval career that would bring him to the top of his profession.

By 1932 Captain King was poised to don the gold braid and single sleeve stripe of a rear admiral. In the thirty-one years that had elapsed since his graduation from Annapolis he had seen a wide variety of duties — as junior officer, gunnery expert, and destroyer skipper — and an introduction to higher command by serving on staffs. Going further afield after World War I, he led a division of submarines (but never qualified to wear the submarine dolphins) and commanded the submarine base at New London. Although not a salvage expert, he greatly distinguished himself by raising the sunken submarine *S-51* in 1926 and the *S-4* two years later.

In the meantime, King had found in the growing power of naval aviation a more congenial specialty than submarines. He became a protégé of Rear Adm. William A. Moffett, the politically astute chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics. In 1927 at the advanced age of forty-nine, King learned to fly and was designated a naval aviator. He considered earning the right to wear the golden wings one of the most memorable events in his long career. After a stormy tour in Washington as Moffett's assistant, he happily went to sea as captain of the huge new aircraft carrier *Lexington* (CV-2), one of the most prestigious commands in the Navy.

During the summer of 1932 King advanced another important rung on the ladder of command. He attended the senior course of the Naval War College, where instructors and students examined the

strategy to be employed in the event of war. Japan was thought to be the most likely opponent, and the advantages and disadvantages of the many routes across the Pacific were endlessly debated. King's performance during World War II amply demonstrates that he learned his lessons well. That fall, King was selected for future promotion to rear admiral.

After Moffett's untimely death in 1933, Rear Admiral King took over the Bureau of Aeronautics to the disdain of the career aviators who distrusted the senior "Johnny Come Lately" opportunists who had come to aviation to further their careers. They had hoped that one of their own, Capt. John D. Towers (Naval Aviator No. 3), would have succeeded Moffett. In 1936 King became commander of the Navy's patrol planes and greatly improved their search capability and readiness for war. He reprised this success in 1938 and 1939 while vice admiral in charge of the carriers themselves. Commander, Aircraft, Battle Force, U.S. Fleet.

King had always thought that his naval career would culminate with the post of chief of naval operations. Unwilling to ingratiate himself with the president, he felt his record of command would speak for him. Thus he was crushed in 1939 when Roosevelt reached far down the Navy List to choose Rear Adm. Harold R. Stark instead. Reverting to his permanent rank of rear admiral, King feared as he neared statutory retirement at age sixty-four that his pursuit of the top prize was over.

Ironically, the worsening world situation gave new life to a passed-over admiral considered to be a fighter. In December 1940, King assumed command of the so-called Patrol Force, a rather insignificant collection of mostly elderly naval vessels in the Atlantic. However, bigger things were in the offing. Mirroring Roosevelt's increasing support for Britain against Nazi Germany, King was promoted in February 1941 fleted up to four stars and command of the newly created Atlantic Fleet. In that role he directed America's response to the growing conflict in the Atlantic and readied his steadily reinforced fleet for the war he knew to be inevitable. During World War II, King's appointment to the top commands of the Navy redounded not only in great credit to himself but added glory to the U.S. Navy.

How can one begin to take the measure of Ernie King? In *Master of Sea Power*, Buell notes how in 1933 King put forward his name as a candidate to succeed Moffett as chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics. Adm. William V. Pratt, the Chief of Naval Operations, forwarded King's letter to the Secretary of the Navy Claude A. Swanson and added his own perceptive evaluation of the candidate's qualities:

- (a) He is highly intelligent.
- (b) He is extremely active and energetic.
- (c) He is very forceful.
- (d) He is a flyer and a pilot.
- (e) He is a man of great decision of character.
- (f) He is a good strategist and tactician.
- (g) He is not as tactful as some men but he is very direct.
- (h) He is trustworthy.

Pratt's list of King's personal attributes provides a useful starting point for taking a closer look at some of the main facets of King's personality, his many strengths and occasional weaknesses, as revealed with discerning insight by Buell in *Master of Sea Power*.

Many of King's words and deeds testify to his acute intelligence and clear thinking. He always liked to say that he could master any job in six months and over the years accumulated vast practical knowledge of his profession. Even more important than his intellectual brilliance, however, was his

contempt for the status quo. Buell described King's "perpetual struggle to improve the Navy through the stimulus of change and new ideas." He demanded clarity and brevity and warred against excessive paperwork. While CominCh he usually refused to read any memorandum longer than a single page. Whether he himself was a good administrator is another question, but he chose and closely supervised surrogates who were.

King's forte was strategy, and soon after he took command of the Navy, he articulated to President Roosevelt the need to go over to the offensive in the Pacific. Buell called King's efforts in this regard "the most important contribution he would make to victory in the Second World War" and later added: "In a period of one month — March 1942 — King had inspired and advocated the plans and strategy that would govern the entire course of the war in the Pacific." Just over three years of hard fighting across the broad expanse of the Pacific placed the Allies at the gates of Japan.

Throughout the Pacific War King stayed close to the planning process, conferring often with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas. Once the Japanese advance had been halted in the South Pacific, King initiated a direct advance across the Central Pacific through the Marianas toward Taiwan (Formosa) to isolate the Japanese homeland from its southern conquests. With varying degrees of success, he attempted to keep Nimitz's chief rival, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of the Southwest Pacific Area, on a short leash. King tried but failed to advance the capture of Taiwan over MacArthur's much-stated aim to return to the Philippines, which he considered a useless diversion of forces. In the one major reversal of his basic strategy he agreed with Nimitz and Vice Admiral Spruance to substitute the invasions of Okinawa and Iwo Jima for his long-advocated landings on Taiwan.

King retained a hands-on approach in dealing with the German U-boat scourge in his own command, the Atlantic Ocean. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, Admiral Karl Doenitz's submarines found easy pickings among unescorted ships plying the East Coast. The Navy's antisubmarine effort was too weak and ill prepared to deal with the onslaught that one recent book, Michael Gannon's *Operation Drumbeat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), described, with harsh criticism of King, as worse than the Pearl Harbor disaster. If King failed at the beginning, he learned quickly. To coordinate the U.S. Navy's efforts against the U-boats, he created the Tenth Fleet, nominally under his direct command but run by its chief of staff, Rear Admiral Francis C. Low. The Tenth Fleet contributed mightily to victory in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Imperious, arrogant, supremely confident in his own abilities, and pushing to the limit his powers and prerogatives, King was always a difficult man to serve under. Also, for superiors he did not respect he was on occasion an unruly subordinate. His theoretical concept of leadership involved the selection and training of subordinates who could exercise initiative. He thought it should be sufficient for good commanders to tell their junior officers what needed to be done and let them decide how best to do it.

Of course, King, like anyone else, often failed to practice what he preached. When aroused he could be fiery. While captain of the *Lexington*, "if something went wrong, King's voice rose and his arms flailed like a windmill," but Buell also added, "although King lost his temper he rarely lost his self-control." He was always aware of the effect his outbursts would create. Every subordinate seemed to have a favorite King story with which to horrify friends.

The key to getting along with King was demonstration of unremitting competence and results. He respected those few who had the courage to stand up to him when they, not he, were in the right. However, heaven help any subordinates whom he decided were weak or slack. King hounded such unfortunates unmercifully and never relented, even if they later proved themselves under different

circumstances. To him, superior performance was routinely expected and not something deserving special praise. King led by example as well as by rank and never shirked responsibility, nor did he send others to do what he himself would not do. He pushed his commands to the limit of endurance but he made them far better for all of their suffering.

Professional experience accrued during a naval career and a broad personal knowledge of naval history have both contributed to award-winning author Thomas Bingham Buell's manifest ability to research and write the lives of naval officers. A 1958 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, he served in a wide variety of assignments afloat and ashore. Drawn by inclination to the study of naval history and strategy, he was both a student and an instructor at the Naval War College and also taught at the U.S. Military Academy. He considers a high point of his naval career to be his command of the *Joseph Hewes* (FF-1078), an Atlantic Fleet frigate. That was a sentiment he shared with Ernest King, who treasured the memories of his first command, the destroyer *Terry* (DD-25). Commander Buell retired from the Navy in 1979 and now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

This student of naval history hopes that Tom Buell will chronicle the life and career of yet another influential American naval officer, with the full expectation that this effort, too, will be another Classic of Naval Literature.

JOHN B. LUNDSTROM

Introduction

THE SECOND WORLD WAR had been over for ten months when Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King boarded a Navy transport plane in Washington, D.C., on a June day in 1946. He was on his way to England, to receive an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree from Oxford University. King was retired now, after four years of wartime service as Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, and Chief of Naval Operations. He had commanded the largest Navy in the world: more than eight thousand ships, nearly twenty-four thousand aircraft, over three million naval officers and sailors, and a half million Marines.

But King was as much thinker as active leader. He had directed the war together with his colleagues on the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, General of the Army George C. Marshall, and General of the Army Henry H. Arnold. Armed forces officers would never again exert the power these four men had wielded in defeating Germany, Japan, and Italy. Civilians would henceforth run wars.

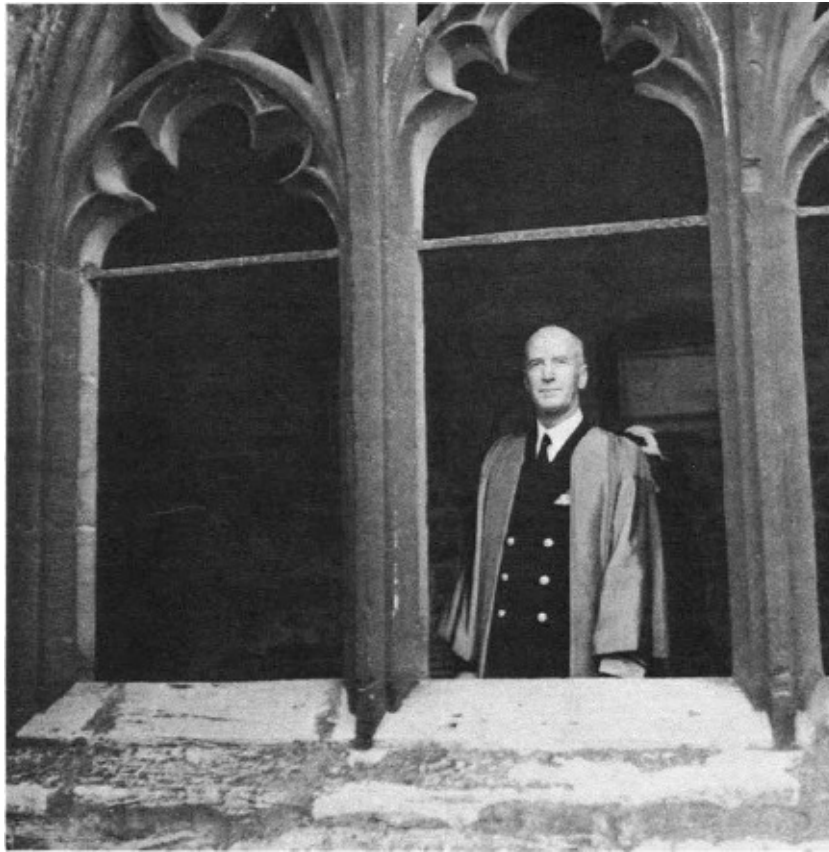
Great Britain had been America's ally. The wartime coalition had succeeded in large measure because the Combined Chiefs of Staff (the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the British Chiefs of Staff) had worked so well together. Yet the British had regarded King more as adversary than ally. Perhaps some of their mutual hostility stemmed from their divergent heritages. King's family had been working-class Scots and Englishmen who had immigrated to northern Ohio in the late nineteenth century. King had been born in a laborer's cottage, reared in a railroad yard, and educated in a small-town school. His British colleagues were aristocrats by inheritance or by inclination, defenders of the British Empire who perpetuated the 1672 injunction of Charles II to Louis XIV: "It is the custom of the British to command at sea."

How they had fought! Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had clashed repeatedly with King over questions of strategy when they had met in war councils in Washington, London, Quebec, Casablanca, Malta, and Cairo. General Lord Ismay, chief of staff to Winston Churchill, wrote that King was tough, blunt, rude, intolerant, and suspicious of all things British. Admiral of the Fleet Andrew B. Cunningham, Britain's First Sea Lord, thought King impatient, unmannered, ruthless, and arrogant.

It had been King who had insisted upon fighting hard against Japan, over British protests that the Allies had to beat Germany first. Shipping controlled Allied strategy, and King controlled Allied shipping. He used this advantage to coerce the British into acquiescing to King's war in the Pacific—or so it seemed to the British. Most galling of all, the Royal Navy had become second best to King's Navy. King would not let them forget it.

With victory came goodwill. Discords were forgotten or forgiven. Now the British would honor King. King, too, had mellowed. His aircraft carried several crates of fresh citrus fruit, gifts from the Admiral for the King of England, for Winston Churchill, and for Lord Halifax, the Chancellor of Oxford University. They would be glad to get them. Food was still scarce in England.

On the twenty-sixth of June, King prepared to receive his degree. The past few days had been pleasant—luncheon with Averell Harriman, drives through the countryside, dinner at Claridge's Hotel in London with senior American naval officers, and finally a formal dinner the night before at the residence of the Dean of Wadham College. Now it was time for the grand procession with the other honorary graduates (including Lady Churchill) into Sheldonian Theatre. King wore a crimson robe in this noble gathering of British pomp and pageantry. The most distinguished leaders of Great Britain were in the audience. The ceremony began.



King in his crimson robes at Oxford (Courtesy Walter Muir Whitehill)

The Public Orator presented King. “Si robur illi atque aes triplex circa pectus erat . . .” Those who were unfamiliar with Latin read the English translation in their programs: “Solid oak and triplicate bronze, if Horace is right, enclosed the heart of the first man who put to sea. What armor plate, the world must be worn by this brave soul, whose love for his profession taught him to sail *on* the seas as a boy, to sail *under* them as a young man, and to fly *above* them in his later years—the commander in turn of surface craft, submarines, and air arm. . . . The example of his tireless devotion to duty, combined with his peculiar gift of pungent expression, served to tighten naval discipline. . . . It was no surprise to hear of his appointment as Chief of Naval Operations, with supreme command in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The vastness of that war area and the huge scale of the necessary preparations were not more remarkable than his readiness of mind and speed in execution. I present to you . . . our Ally of the Trident, Admiral Ernest J. King, whose threefold knowledge was a prime factor in our triple victory.”

After the ceremony King returned to the United States and obscurity. A stroke slowed him the following year, his health worsened, and he lived in hospitals until he died in 1956.

A destroyer and two minor buildings in King's name are his only commemoration by the Navy. Some say that during his career King antagonized too many people who later wanted his name

forgotten. King had but one aim in life during his first forty years of naval service: to become the Chief of Naval Operations. He sought that goal with zealous, single-minded determination. He made no secret of it. He would tell anyone who would listen, and his ambition was common knowledge throughout the Navy.

By 1939 he had risen to the temporary rank of vice admiral for a year and a half before reverting to his permanent rank of rear admiral. Many other flag officers had achieved that much, and more. His career would have been no different from that of other prewar officers who strove for the top, failed to make it, and then retired into anonymity. Yet retirement was incomprehensible. The Navy was his only life.

There were those who said that King failed on his first try—despite his ambition and professionalism—because he had too many enemies, he chased men's wives, and he drank too much. Indeed, his entire career was a series of contradictions. He could be both cruel and loving, both immoral and ethical. His temper was as quick as lightning and as terrible as a volcano. Yet his fearlessness and perseverance steadied the Navy and the nation through the worst crises of the war. Above all, he was a fighter.

People fight in wars for different reasons, some because they are forced to fight, others for self-defense, and still others from patriotism. Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote of the war in Europe as a crusade “bound together by common love of liberty and a refusal to submit to enslavement.” Winston Churchill loathed Hitler and the Nazis as a monstrous evil that threatened to destroy civilization. Yet King seemed without emotion or patriotic motivation. Not once did he write about his feelings toward the German nation. Japan was simply an adversary that finally justified his forty years of preparing for war. Italy was a nuisance.

King was, in fact, a dispassionate professional warrior who held his own political system in contempt and spurned all civilian authority except that of his commander in chief—the President. The Axis Powers happened to be the enemy that he had to destroy. A few years earlier King had considered Great Britain as one of America's greatest potential enemies, and we may assume he would have fought the British as ruthlessly as he had Japan and Germany.

One summer as a midshipman in the Class of 1958 at the Naval Academy, I noticed unusual activity near the cemetery. “What is happening?” I asked. “It's Admiral King's funeral,” a friend replied. His name meant so little to me then that I thought no more about it. Several years later I helped commission the USS *King* at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. She was the most beautiful warship I have ever known. By then I had read King's memoirs, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record*. I remember admiring his candor and forthrightness and wanting to be that way myself.

At the Naval War College in the early 1970s I was writing my biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance. While I was there my good friend Henry E. Eccles introduced me to the late Walter Muir Whitehill, who had collaborated in writing King's memoirs. I accepted Dr. Whitehill's invitation to visit his North Andover home outside Boston, where King had stayed off and on twenty years before. I slept in King's bed, sat in his chair, ate at his table, and talked for hours with Walter and his lovely wife, Jane, about Fleet Admiral King. That Sunday afternoon, in the Whitehills' converted barn behind their home, I read the files Whitehill had used in writing *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record*, published in 1952. There was magic in those papers. King's soul and spirit permeated every page that I read. I was fascinated. That afternoon I decided that I wanted to write a biography of Ernest J. King.

My research began, even though I soon went to sea to command a destroyer. Two years later I came ashore to teach history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Walter Whitehill lent me his

papers, and with them as my foundation, my writing began.

~~And now my work is finished. I offer my readers this story of the most powerful naval officer
the history of the world, on the centennial anniversary of his birth.~~

Thomas B. Buell

West Point, New York

November 1978

Chronology

23 November 1878

Ernest Joseph King born to James Clydesdale King and Elizabeth Keam King Lorain, Ohio

6 September 1897

Sworn as Naval Cadet, U.S. Naval Academy, from the fourteenth Congressional District of Ohio

July–August 1898

Temporary duty aboard USS *San Francisco* during Spanish-American War

7 June 1901

Graduates from the Naval Academy with distinction

7 June 1903

Promoted to Ensign

10 October 1905

Marries Martha Lamkin Egerton in the Cadet Chapel, U.S. Military Academy

7 June 1906

Promoted to Lieutenant

1 July 1913

Promoted to Lieutenant Commander

30 April 1914

First command, USS *Terry*

18 July 1914

Second command, USS *Cassin*

6 April 1917

United States enters First World War

1 July 1917

Promoted to Commander

21 September 1918

Promoted to Captain

11 November 1918

First World War ends

7 July 1921

Third command, USS *Bridge*

20 November 1922

Fourth command, Submarine Division Eleven, with additional duty as Commander, Submarine Division Three, in April 1923

4 September 1923

Fifth command, U.S. Submarine Base, New London, Connecticut

25 September 1925

USS *S-51* sunk off Block Island, Rhode Island. King awarded Distinguished Service Medal for directing salvage

28 July 1926

Sixth command, USS *Wright*

26 May 1927

Designated Naval Aviator #3368

17 December 1927

USS *S-4* sunk off Provincetown, Massachusetts. King awarded Gold Star in lieu of second Distinguished Service Medal for directing salvage

1 June 1928

Seventh command, Aircraft Squadrons, Scouting Fleet

24 May 1929

Eighth command, U.S. Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia

20 June 1930

Ninth command, USS *Lexington*

26 April 1933

Promoted to Rear Admiral. Chief of the U.S. Navy Bureau of Aeronautics

15 June 1936

Commander Aircraft, Base Force

1 October 1937

Commander Aircraft, Scouting Force

29 January 1938

Promoted to Vice Admiral. Commander Aircraft, Battle Force

1 July 1939

Reverted to permanent rank of Rear Admiral. Ordered to General Board

17 December 1940

Commander Patrol Force, U.S. Fleet

1 February 1941

Promoted to Admiral. Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet

9–12 August 1941

Atlantic Charter Conference, Argentia, Newfoundland

7 December 1941

United States enters Second World War

22 December 1941

First Washington Conference (ARCADIA) begins, leading to the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff and Joint Chiefs of Staff

30 December 1941

Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet

18 March 1942	Appointed to concurrent duty as Chief of Naval Operations
7 August 1942	Marines assault Guadalcanal
8 November 1942	Allies assault North Africa
14 January 1943	Casablanca Conference (SYMBOL) begins
12 May 1943	Second Washington Conference (TRIDENT) begins
10 July 1943	Allies assault Sicily
17 August 1943	First Quebec Conference (QUADRANT) begins
20 November 1943	American forces assault Gilbert Islands
22 November 1943	Cairo Conference (SEXTANT) begins
27 November 1943	Teheran Conference (EUREKA) begins
28 April 1944	Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox dies
19 May 1944	James V. Forrestal becomes Secretary of the Navy
6 June 1944	Allies assault Normandy
11 September 1944	Second Quebec Conference (OCTAGON) begins
20 October 1944	Army forces assault Leyte
17 December 1944	Promoted to Fleet Admiral
4 February 1945	Yalta Conference (ARGONAUT) begins
12 April 1945	President Franklin D. Roosevelt dies. Vice President Harry S Truman succeeds to the presidency
7 May 1945	Germany surrenders unconditionally
16 July 1945	Potsdam Conference (TERMINAL) begins
2 September 1945	Second World War ends
15 December 1945	Relieved by Fleet Admiral Nimitz
25 June 1956	Ernest J. King dies at the Naval Hospital, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Before the War

I had a proper ambition to get to the top, either Commander in Chief of the United States Fleet, or even to become Chief of Naval Operations.

I believe that my record will speak for itself.

— Ernest J. King

In the Beginning

ERNEST J. KING'S PARENTS, James Clydesdale King and Elizabeth Keam, were Scottish and English emigrants. James was nine when his father died in the small Scottish town of Bridge-of-Weir, in Renfrewshire. An impoverished widow with five sons and a daughter, James's mother gratefully accepted her brother's offer for her to join him in Cleveland. There James King was naturalized and later became a merchant seaman aboard sailing ships on the Great Lakes.

When the lakes froze and ice immobilized the ships, the mariners were unemployed. James wanted regular work and switched to bridge building. It was a dangerous trade that, not unlike sailing, demanded courage and stamina, especially during fall storms. Since sailing and bridge building both were nomadic, the transition was simple. And the pay was better in bridge building.

When Elizabeth — Bessie — met James she saw in his character strength, self-reliance, and industry, the virtues in her own family. Her father, Joseph Keam, had been a master woodworker — a top sawyer — in a Plymouth, England, dockyard. The shift from sail and wood to steam and steel forced the Keam family to emigrate from England to America. Father, mother and four marriageable daughters settled in Cleveland in 1872. Joseph Keam found work in an emerging petroleum industry, eventually rising to foreman in a refinery.

James King married Bessie Keam in 1876. They left Cleveland, and James resumed his rough-and-tumble life of going where bridges were building. Bessie was separated from her family, living with her husband she scarcely knew, and fearing for his life. After losing her first child, Bessie craved a permanent home, a safer job for James, and the nearness of her kin. James King agreed. He found work in a railroad repair shop in Lorain, Ohio, a Lake Erie port near Cleveland, and he bought a cottage near the shore. Their luck improved. A second son, Ernest Joseph King, was born in the home on 23 November 1878.

Ernest King's boyhood was largely influenced by his father. The boy loved to visit James King in the shops, noisy, murky, and smelling of smoke and grease. The workers liked young Ernest and taught him the intricacies of steam-driven machinery, the precision of the lathe, and the interrelationship of valves and pistons and gears. Engineers hoisted him into their cabs as they moved about the railyard. Ernest King admired such men. Like his father and grandfather, they were rudimentary, honest, blunt, and outspoken. They also could be profane, opinionated, stubborn, and self-righteous, disdaining equivocation and scorning pretention.

As early as age six or seven the boy's character was becoming evident. On one occasion he accompanied his mother to visit a family named Rawley. Following dinner the hostess served pumpkin pie overseasoned with pepper. King tasted it.

"I don't like Mrs. Rawley's pie," said young King.

"Ernest!" his mother replied. "You shouldn't say that."

"It's true," King insisted; "I don't like it."

Reminiscing years later, King remarked, "If I didn't agree, I said so." But just as early King recognized the distinction between candor and disobedience. Skipping school or coming home late

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