



Master of Seapower: A Biography of Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King

Thomas B. Buell

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A comprehensive biography of the most powerful naval officer in the history of the United States who was the controversial architect of the American victory in the Pacific.

Someone once asked Admiral Ernest J. King if it was he who said, "When they get in trouble they send for the sonsabitches." He replied that he was not -- but that he would have said it if he had thought of it.

Although never accused of having a warm personality, Ernest J. King commanded the respect of everyone familiar with his work. His is one of the great American naval careers, his place in history forever secured by a remarkable contribution to the Allied victory in the Second World War. "Lord how I need him," wrote Navy Secretary Frank Knox on December 23, 1941, the day he summoned King to take control of the Navy at its lowest point, the aftermath of Pearl Harbor.

Raised in a stern Calvinist home in Lorain, Ohio, Ernest King grew interested in a naval career after reading an article in a boys' magazine. After graduating from Annapolis fourth in his class (1901), King's early career was "rather ordinary" according to biographer Robert W. Love. But in 1909, at the end of a stint as a drillmaster at the Naval Academy, King distinguished himself by writing an influential essay entitled, "Organization on Board Ship." King performed well in a number of commands between 1914 and 1923, when he began a three-year stint as commander of the submarine base at New London, Connecticut. In 1926 his career took an important turn: he completed the shortened flight course at Pensacola, and from that point on, he would see aviation as the decisive element in naval warfare. This conviction deepened when he served as assistant bureau chief under Rear Admiral William Moffett, widely considered the father of American naval aviation.

King's career received another boost when he ably commanded his first aircraft carrier, the *Lexington*, in the early 1930s. But as his prospects for advancement increased, so did his reputation as a difficult character. "He was meaner than hell," commented one junior officer, reflecting the general opinion that King was as much despised as he was respected. This didn't seem to bother him, though. Love observed that he "seemed almost to pride himself on the fact that he had earned his rank solely on his merits as a professional naval officer, rather than as a result of the friendship of others."

In the spring of 1939, the sixty-year-old King coveted the job of Chief of Naval Operations. But his personality and decided lack of political skill or tact led President Roosevelt to pass him over in favor of Admiral Harold Stark. Seemingly banished to duty on the General Board in Washington, King's career was resurrected by the war that soon started in Europe. When Stark grew dissatisfied with the commander of his Atlantic Squadron, he looked to King, who took over in December, 1940. With his slogan "do all that we can with what we have," King ably managed the undeclared war with Germany's U-boats. Although his command was limited to the Atlantic, it brought him to Washington frequently and he stayed abreast of developments in the Pacific. The morning after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Stark called him to Washington; soon after he was running the Navy -- first as Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet, soon adding the title Chief of Naval Operations, making him the first man to combine both jobs.

In the early months of 1942, King's strategic brilliance earned him the complete confidence of President

Roosevelt. When none of the British or American war planners even dared to think of going on the offensive in the Pacific in 1942-43, King successfully lobbied to do just that. "No fighter ever won his fight by covering up -- merely fending off the other fellow's blows," he wrote. "The winner hits and keeps on hitting even though he has to be able to take some stiff blows in order to keep on hitting." It's easy to see why even those who despised Ernest King were glad he was on their side.

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