

## Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, U.S. Navy

**Ernest J. King was born on** 23 November 1878 in Lorain, OH. He attended the U.S. Naval Academy from 1897 until 1901, graduating fourth in his class. During his senior year at the Academy, he attained the rank of Midshipman Lieutenant Commander, the highest midshipman ranking at that time. While still at the Academy, he served on the USS *San Francisco* during the Spanish–American War. While at the Naval Academy, King met Martha Rankin Egerton, whom he married in a ceremony at the Naval Academy Chapel on 10 October 1905. They had six daughters, Claire, Elizabeth, Florence, Martha, Eleanor and Mildred; and then a son, Ernest Jr.

After graduation, he served as a junior officer on the survey ship USS *Eagle*, the battleships USS *Illinois*, USS *Alabama*, and USS *New Hampshire*, and the cruiser USS *Cincinnati*.

King returned to shore duty at Annapolis in 1912. He received his first command, the destroyer USS *Terry* in 1914, participating in the U.S. occupation of Veracruz. He then moved on to a more modern ship, USS *Cassin*.

**World War I:** During the war he served on the staff of Vice Admiral Henry T. Mayo, the Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet. As such, he was a frequent visitor to the Royal Navy and occasionally saw action as an observer on board British ships. He was awarded the Navy Cross "for distinguished service in the line of his profession as assistant chief of staff of the Atlantic Fleet."

After the war, King, now a captain, became head of the Naval Postgraduate School. Along with Captains Dudley Wright Knox and William S. Pye, King prepared a report on naval training that recommended changes to naval training and career paths. Most of the report's recommendations were accepted and became policy.

**Submarines:** Before World War I, he served in the surface fleet. From 1923 to 1925, he held several posts associated with submarines. As a junior captain, the best sea command he was able to secure in 1921 was the store ship USS *Bridge*. The relatively new submarine force offered the prospect of advancement. King attended a short training course at the Naval Submarine Base New London before taking command of a submarine division, flying his commodore's pennant from the USS *S-20*. He never earned his Submarine Warfare insignia, although he did propose and design the now-familiar dolphin insignia. In 1923, he took over command of the Submarine Base itself. During this period, he directed the salvage of the USS *S-51*, earning the first of his three Distinguished Service Medals.

**Aviation:** In 1926, King transferred to naval aviation and took command of the aircraft tender USS *Wright* with additional duties as senior aide on the staff of Commander, Air Squadrons, Atlantic Fleet. That year, the U.S. Congress passed a law requiring commanders of all aircraft carriers, seaplane tenders, and aviation shore establishments be qualified naval aviators or naval aviation observers. King therefore reported to Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida for aviator training in January 1927. He was the only captain in his class of twenty. King received his wings on 26 May 1927 and resumed command of *Wright*. King commanded *Wright* until 1929. He then became Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics under Moffett until he transferred to command of Naval Station Norfolk.

On 20 June 1930, King became captain of the carrier USS *Lexington*—then one of the largest

aircraft carriers in the world—which he commanded for the next two years. During his tenure aboard the *Lexington*, Captain King was the commanding officer of notable science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein, then Ensign Heinlein, prior to his medical retirement from the US Navy. During that time, Ensign Heinlein dated one of King's daughters.

In 1932, King attended the Naval War College. In a war college thesis entitled "The Influence of National Policy on Strategy", King expounded on the theory that America's weakness was Representative democracy:

On 4 April 1933, King became Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics and was promoted to rear admiral. King worked closely with the chief of the Bureau of Navigation, Rear Admiral William D. Leahy, to increase the number of naval aviators. At the conclusion of his term as bureau chief in 1936, King became Commander, Aircraft, Base Force, at Naval Air Station North Island, CA. He was promoted to Vice Admiral on 29 January 1938 on becoming Commander, Aircraft, Battle Force. In this assignment, he successfully simulated a naval air raid on Pearl Harbor, showing that the base was dangerously vulnerable to aerial attack, although he was not taken seriously until 7 December 1941, when the Japanese Navy attacked the base by air for real. On 15 June 1939, King was posted to the General Board, a graveyard for senior officers until their retirement.

**World War II:** King's career was resurrected by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Harold Stark, who realized King's talent for command was being wasted on the General Board. Stark appointed King as Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Fleet in the fall of 1940, and he was promoted to admiral in February 1941. On 30 December 1941, he became Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet (COMINCH). On 18 March 1942, he was appointed Chief of Naval Operations. He is the only person to hold this combined command. On 17 December 1944 King was promoted to Fleet Admiral. He was the U.S. Navy's second most senior officer after Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, and the second admiral to be promoted to five-star rank. He left active duty on 15 December 1945 but was recalled as an advisor to the Secretary of the Navy in 1950.

**Retirement and Death:** After retiring, King lived in Washington, D.C. He was active in his early post-retirement, serving as president of the Naval Historical Foundation from 1946 to 1949, but suffered a debilitating stroke in 1947. Subsequent ill-health ultimately forced him to stay in naval hospitals at Bethesda, MD, and at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, ME. He died of a heart attack in Kittery on 25 June 1956. King was buried in the U.S. Naval Academy Cemetery at Annapolis, MD.

**Military Awards:** Naval Aviator Wings, Navy Cross, Navy Distinguished Service Medal with two stars, Spanish Campaign Medal, Sampson Medal, Mexican Service Medal, World War I Victory Medal with Atlantic Fleet clasp, American Defense Service Medal with A device, American Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, National Defense Service Medal as well as foreign awards from Belgium, Brazil, China, Cuba, Ecuador, France, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Panama, and United Kingdom.

**Masonic History:** Brother Admiral Ernest King received his Masonic Degrees in 1935 in Whiting Lodge #22 in Washington D.C., his Royal Arch Degrees in 1938 in San Diego, CA and his Knight Templar Orders in 1939 in Cleveland, OH, and his Shrine Degree in 1946. He was also a member of National Sojourners.