

Topic Page: [Ernest King](#)

Definition: **King, Ernest Joseph** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1878-1956

US naval officer

Born in Lorain, Ohio, of British parents, he was a graduate of the US Naval Academy, Annapolis. During World War I he served on the staff of the US Atlantic fleet (1916-19). Qualified in submarines, he commanded the submarine base at New London (1923-25); he also qualified in naval aviation (1927). He was commander-in-chief of the Atlantic Fleet (January-December 1941), and commander-in-chief of the US fleet (December 1941). From 1942 to 1945 he was Chief of Naval Operations and masterminded the carrier-bases campaign against the Japanese.

Summary Article: **King, Admiral Ernest J. (1878–1956)**

From *The Encyclopedia of War*

As both Commander in Chief, US Fleet (CominCh) and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral King was the senior US naval commander and the chief US naval strategist during World War II. Prior to American entry into the war, King, as commander of the US Atlantic Fleet, directed American anti-submarine operations against Nazi Germany, a role he continued to fill as commander of the US Tenth Fleet, a purely operational headquarters established on May 20, 1943.

King was born in Lorain, Ohio, on November 23, 1878. He graduated fourth in his 1901 class at the US Naval Academy, his time there broken by service in the USS *San Francisco* during the Spanish-American War. With the exception of duty as a naval observer during the Russo-Japanese War, 904–1905, and tours at the Naval Academy, 1906–1909 and 1912–1914, King was assigned to sea duty, 1901–1917, rising to command the destroyers *Terry* (during the occupation of Vera Cruz in 1914) and *Cassin*. During World War I King was promoted to captain and served as chief of staff to Vice Admiral Henry T. Mayo. During trips to Europe his meetings with Royal Navy officials and observations of naval operations led him to develop a distrust of the British.

Between the world wars King shifted to submarine duty, 1923–1925, before he recognized the importance of aviation and transferred to that warfare community, 1926–1936. Aviation tours included command of the aircraft tender *Wright*, the Norfolk Naval Station, and the carrier *Lexington*, before attending the Naval War College (1932). Promoted to flag rank, he served as Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics (1933–1936); Commander, Aircraft, Base Force, Pacific (1936–1938); and Commander, Aircraft, Battle Force (1938–1939). Passed over for command of the US Fleet and for promotion to Chief of Naval Operations, King was assigned to the General Board (1939–1940). Such a posting traditionally preceded retirement, but King's chairing of a group that recommended methods to defend fleet units from air attack led Secretary of the Navy Charles Edison to recommend him to President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the man to lead the transition of the navy to a war footing. When appointed Commander in Chief, Vice Chief, Atlantic Fleet (1940–1941), King assumed direction of US anti-submarine operations against Nazi Germany.

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on the United States, King was promoted to Commander in Chief, US Fleet on December 30, 1941. He immediately set about restoring morale,

expanding the fleet into the largest in world history, and reorganizing the navy to meet the challenges of global war. On March 26, 1942 King added Chief of Naval Operations to his responsibilities. As a member of both the new US Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff, King played a leading role in the formation of Allied strategy. Though committed to the Europe First strategy, King sought to initiate offensive operations in the Pacific as soon as possible and once complained that the Pacific merited twice the 15 percent portion of Allied resources it received. He worked to ease the transition from a battleship navy to one formed around aircraft carrier task forces, seeing them as vital to a Central Pacific advance toward Japan rather than one through the Southwest Pacific and the Philippines, as advocated by army leaders.

Before operations could be commenced in the Central Pacific, news that Japanese troops had begun constructing an airfield on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands reached Washington. King responded by proposing the seizure of Guadalcanal and nearby Tulagi, the site of a Japanese seaplane base. When the Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and Douglas MacArthur, Allied commander in the region, opposed the plan citing a shortage of troops to continue operations in New Guinea, invade North Africa, and attack Guadalcanal, King responded that the navy could undertake the campaign using Marines. This led to the transfer of the Solomons from MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Command to the Pacific Command led by Admiral Chester Nimitz and to the transformation of the Marine Corps from a base-seizing and defense force into an offensive service, a shift that laid the basis for its explosive expansion during the war. The January 1943 decision by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill to delay for a year the cross-Channel attack on German-occupied Europe, opened the door for King to secure the resources for an attack on the Gilbert Islands. Following their capture and that of the Marshall and Marianas Islands in the Central Pacific, King championed bypassing the Philippines to attack Taiwan. Fellow members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff rejected this strategy, as they did the suggestion King made after the capture of Okinawa in April 1945 that plans for the invasion of Kyushu and Honshu be cancelled in favor of depending on an air and naval blockade to force Japanese surrender.

King's numerous policy disagreements with Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and his successor, James V. Forrestal (especially over King's failed attempt to get President Roosevelt to revise navy organization so that bureau chiefs would report to him rather than the civilian secretary), his colleagues on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and members of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (King resisted assigning British forces a role in the Pacific and operations designed to recover imperial possessions in the eastern Mediterranean or Far East), brought him sharp criticism, as did his often abrasive manner.

Promoted to Fleet Admiral on December 17, 1944, King remained on active duty until December 1945. Later, he twice appeared before the Senate Military Affairs Committee to oppose the unification of the armed forces.

Intelligent and hard-working, though tactless and given to drink, King had the breadth of experience and vision for high command. King never directly led forces in combat, but he was a master of administrative detail. Among the most controversial senior commanders of either world war, King drew praise from Australians for backing the Solomon Islands Campaign and criticism from British leaders for his opposition to their proposals for an attack through Sumatra to liberate Singapore. King lacked tolerance for anyone he judged to perform poorly and was quick to relieve subordinates. His colleagues respected rather than liked him, an attitude that suited King, a feeling reflected in the comment attributed to him: "When they get in trouble they send for the sons-of-bitches."

SEE ALSO: Marshall, General George C. (1880–1959); Nimitz, Admiral Chester (1885–1966); Roosevelt, Franklin D. (1882–1945): World War II: War in Asia.

Further Reading

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