

ERNEST JOSEPH KING FLEET ADMIRAL

ERNEST JOSEPH KING FLEET ADMIRAL, U.S.N. 1878-1956 Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet (COMINCH) and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). 1941-1945

by Brother Rylance Allen Lord. M.Sc., R.Ph.

It is said that war brings out the best in some individuals. This may be true. for in the case of Ernest J. King, born in Lorain, Ohio, November 23, 1878, the Nation possessed both a superb seaman and a Mason of the highest regard.

The professional career of Admiral King has been well-treated in numerous places and he, himself, authored his memoirs, FLEET ADMIRAL KING in 1952, four short years before his death. There is little need, then, to dwell upon his early life or pre-World War II naval career because those details are available elsewhere.

For this narrative, let us pick up the story of Ernest King at the time of his entry into the Masonic Fraternity in George C. Whiting Lodge No. 22 in Georgetown, Washington, D.C. June 25, 1935 while he was Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. He received the Fellowcraft Degree in July of that year and was Raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason on September 12, 1935.

Most of the stories about Admiral King's Masonic life and his attendance at Lodge have come down to us from Lodge Members in the form of interviews. These members, recalling the Admiral's presence, remember that he attended in a business suit until hostilities began and that Brother King wanted only to be just "another Brother". In fact, many Lodge Members never knew, at first, that Ernest King was a naval officer--and would have been greatly astonished to learn he was an Admiral. In Lodge, King is said to have been very easy going but fully aware of what a meeting's agenda would be. He would participate in open discussion and often would offer the suggestion which would be enacted as the solution to many a problem. He was accorded full attention when he rose to speak.

When King became more well known to the Brethren, he would speak more freely and openly, telling of the naval and flight operations which he could share with them. He shrugged-off formality of address when in the company of Masonic Brothers. This was to his credit as a Mason and Lodge Member but we can be grateful he was more reticent when it came to his official duties and responsibilities in WW II.

A point of some concern to many people during times of armed conflict is the so-called "freedom of the press" . . . and the open discussion and revelation of what our fighting men are doing, where, and under what circumstances. Admiral King was a staunch advocate of security in such matters. He felt that knowledge of the military activities of our fighting forces was not for

general public consumption and he guarded against such practices. In addition, during most of WW II when he was both Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet (COMINCH) and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), headquartered in Washington, D.C., he was more difficult to access than The President of the United States. King felt, and rightly so, that to broadcast the exploits of our forces was not only to weaken the effectiveness of such missions then, but also in future operations--for it provided insight of our military objectives to the enemy. But, during the War, Admiral King, within the limits of his policy of silence in the dissemination of news of naval operations, did meet in Alexandria, Virginia at the home of a friend with a group of Washington correspondents so as to give them the fullest possible and most authoritative background for the then current naval operations. The appreciation of this group was shown by a dinner given for Admiral King in October, 1945.

Admiral King's picture was a familiar one in magazines and newspapers. He was often seen accompanying President Roosevelt on diplomatic missions during the war. Personally, though, he was rarely visible. Perhaps his greatest contributions can be said to have been made in meetings and conferences with other national and Allied military and civilian leaders. Perhaps they can be described as the long, broad plans which directed the vast two-ocean naval armada enabling it to win on BOTH fronts.

Though there is no record extant of Admiral King ever being under fire on any WW II battlefield, he had been decorated for action in combat during WW I. He did travel to the scenes of action and retained active command of the Atlantic Fleet during the undeclared war on Nazi U-Boats in 1941 and, additionally, throughout the war, was in personal command of the Tenth Fleet directing the anti-submarine campaigns in the Atlantic Ocean. King believed that, because of his WW I expertise and training, he was the best suited for the job. He probably was right!

It is interesting to note that Admiral King wrote to President Roosevelt one month before his sixty-fourth birthday:

'My Dear Mr. President:

It appears proper that I should bring to your notice the fact that the record shows that I shall attain the age of 64 years on November 23d next one month from today.

I am, as always, at your service. Most sincerely yours. /S/ Ernest J. King Admiral, U.S. Navy"

to which the President penned at the bottom and returned to King, the following:

"EJK

"So what, Old Top! I may even send you a birthday present! FDR"

That was in 1942. On 11 December 1944, Congress passed a Bill authorizing the appointment of four Fleet Admirals and four Generals of The Army.

The President immediately named Admirals Leahy, King, and Nimitz to the Naval five star rank. (Halsey later became the fourth as an honorarium for his wartime services.) The Senate confirmed these appointments on 15 December 1944 and on 20 December--the third anniversary of his designation as Commander-in-Chief, United States Fleet. King took the oath of office as a Fleet Admiral in the United States Navy.

Shortly thereafter, in January 1945, Roosevelt was inaugurated for an unprecedented fourth term. One week later, King was off to Bermuda and thence to Casablanca in French Morocco--headed for Malta where a meeting with the British was to be held preparatory to the American-British-Russian three power conference at Yalta in the Crimea.

This would be the final "big" meeting for President Roosevelt. He was sailing to the site aboard the new cruiser QUINCY having as his only companion his daughter, Anna Boettiger. Roosevelt enjoyed being at sea. During this voyage he celebrated his sixty-third birthday on 30 January with a pleasant small party.

When he noticed The President sitting on the quarterdeck of The Quincy, Admiral King realized that Roosevelt was a sick man. Indeed, in a few months, Roosevelt lay dead.

Attending funeral services for their fallen chief in the Hyde Park garden, the Joint Chiefs of Staff could not even see the grave because of the large number of mourners present.

So victory came in Europe and then in the Pacific. In the summer of 1945 The Tenth Fleet was dissolved. In October, Admiral King's dual post of COMINCH/CNO was reorganized into CNO only. Admiral King retired in December, 1945 with the rank of Fleet Admiral and, in 1952, published his memoirs, FLEET ADMIRAL KING, with the noted historian and Director and Librarian of The Boston Athenaeum, Walter Muir Whitehill, Commander, United States Naval Reserve.

But, just as he was down to earth with his Masonic Brethren, Ernest King also had time for answering queries posed by the masses . . . even children . . . and NOT just after the cessation of hostilities. There was kindness, as well as directness and simplicity, in his answer to a Brooklyn eighth-grader who in January, 1943 wrote to ask if he drank or smoked, and what his favorite movie star, hobby, and sport might be.

"Dear Harriett:

I have your letter of January 6th and am interested to learn that you have to do my biography as part of your English work.

As to your questions:

I drink a little wine, NOW and then.

I smoke about one pack of cigarettes a day.

I think I like Spencer Tracy as well as any of the movie stars.

My hobbyist cross-word puzzles--when they are difficult.

My favorite sport is golf--when I can get to play it otherwise I am fond of walking.

Hoping that all will go well with your English work. I am.

Very Truly yours.

E.J. King Admiral, U. S. Navy."

In addition to Blue Lodge, Admiral King was a Royal Arch Mason, joining Darius Chapter 143, San Diego, California in 1938. It is not known where he took the Degrees in the Council of Royal and Select Master. He was also a Member of Hollywood Commandery No. 32. Knight Templar in Cleveland, Ohio joining in 1939. He became a Shriner in Al Koran Temple No. 4 in 1946.

Admiral King passed away at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. Portsmouth New Hampshire June 25, on the 21st anniversary of his Entered Apprentice Degree. The Navy was in charge of funeral arrangements. Later as his body Lay in State in the Washington Cathedral. Washington, D. C.. permission was secured for Masonic Services to be conducted by George C. Whiting Lodge No. 22, Carleton F. Graham. Master. Interment followed in the Naval Academy Cemetery at Annapolis.

As we enter this 50th anniversary period for World War II. it will be difficult not to remember such leaders as Ernest J. King. Truly. the Nation and the Masonic Fraternity were well represented by this brilliant Naval Leader and humble man.