

Jerome H. King Jr., 88; Commander in Vietnam

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Retired Vice Adm. Jerome H. King Jr., 88, the commander of U.S. naval forces in Vietnam who helped wind down the military branch's involvement in the Vietnam War, died June 13 at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, Calif. He had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and pneumonia.

Adm. King held demanding assignments at sea and in the front offices of the Navy hierarchy. His most crucial mentor was Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, who became chief of naval operations and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Moorer had taken note of Adm. King's skill and helped his protégé win several important jobs. The most public task was succeeding then-Vice Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr. as commander of naval forces in Vietnam.

Reporting to Saigon in 1970, Adm. King continued work started by Zumwalt overseeing the transfer of the Navy's small coastal and river combat boats to the South Vietnamese. This assignment was part of the U.S. strategy called "Vietnamization," in which the South Vietnamese took over more responsibility for military operations.

"Vietnamization became frustrating to King because it wasn't the same desire to victory that had existed before," said historian Paul Stillwell, who conducted an oral history with Adm. King.

"He presided over the diminishment of American capability there," Stillwell said, "and was not always confident of the South Vietnamese ability or willingness to take over the equipment and the roles" of the U.S. Navy operating in rivers and canals.

After an 11-month tenure in Saigon, Adm. King was deputy chief of naval operations for surface warfare. From 1972 to 1974, when he retired from active duty, he was a key aide to Moorer, who was then serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Jerome Henry King Jr. was a native of Youngstown, Ohio, and a 1941 engineering graduate of Yale University, where he was in the Navy ROTC program.

He received a master's degree in nuclear physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1951 and became an authority on the effects of nuclear weapons.



In Vietnam, Vice Adm. Jerome H. King Jr. oversaw combat boat transfers to South Vietnamese as the military sought to wind down its war engagement.
Photo Credit: Family Photo

He began his Navy service in the Pacific during World War II and first rose to prominence in the late 1950s when Moorer was commander of Carrier Division Six, which operates mostly in the Mediterranean.

Stillwell said Moorer took note of Adm. King's ability as a surface operations officer, who coordinates and directs operations of carrier formations at sea.

In 1969, Adm. King was commander of an anti-submarine warfare group when he was asked to lead a delicate assignment. He was the senior member of a joint U.S.-Australia board of inquiry into a fatal collision between the U.S. destroyer Frank E. Evans with Australian aircraft carrier Melbourne during NATO maneuvers that month in the South China Sea.

The panel primarily faulted the actions of the U.S. destroyer, which was sheared in half after turning at night in front of the carrier. Seventy-four U.S. sailors died.

In 1970, Adm. King became one of earliest Navy ROTC graduates to achieve the rank of three-star admiral. Until then, almost all vice admirals had been U.S. Naval Academy graduates.

His military decorations included three Distinguished Service Medals, two awards of the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star with Combat V and two awards of the Navy Commendation Medal.

He spent his retirement in Southern California and was a resident of Palos Verdes Estates.

His marriage to Jane Bellows King ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife of 22 years, Annette Neely King of Palos Verdes Estates; three daughters from his first marriage, Judith Griggs of Norcross, Ga., Anne McFarland of San Diego and Sally King of Snohomish, Wash.; two stepsons, retired Navy Cmdr. Timothy McElhannon of Lexington, Va., and Stephen McElhannon of Woodstock, Ga.; six grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.