

# HE BUILT OUR NAVY

We're in France today because Jim Forrestal pitched in and did the job the late Frank Knox handed him four years ago

**BY QUENTIN REYNOLDS**

**D**URING the early hours of June 6th, which forevermore shall be known as D-Day, there was some question as to whether or not this slash at the coast of France was a feint or whether this was really it. Then a communiqué from Supreme Allied Headquarters settled our doubts with one sentence. "Four thousand ships crossed the Channel," the sentence read, and then we knew that this was not another Dieppe, not another "feeler"; this was the thing for which we had all been waiting for so long. That night, Rear Admiral Edward L. Cochrane of the Bureau of Ships announced that, although most of the supporting big battlewagons were British, most of the landing craft (comprising the major part of this enormous armada) were American built.

On the second floor of the Navy Building in Washington, tired but satisfied, a man sat at his desk smoking his pipe, and as the gray smoke curled around his head you might have seen his lips move and he may have been thinking: "Well, Frank . . . we did it."

The actual invasion was almost an anticlimax to the Honorable James Forrestal, Secretary of the Navy, just as it would have been to Frank Knox, were he still alive. Back in August, 1940, Jim Forrestal was appointed Undersecretary of the Navy to be a special assistant to then Secretary Frank Knox.

"You're in charge of production, Jim," Frank Knox said bluntly. "Congress has just passed the two-ocean Navy bill. And, Jim, it's up to you to build it."

Then Forrestal took off his coat. His thin lips became thinner and his frown deepened and his manner became even more brusque and sharp.

They built it—and more. They spent ninety-four billion on it but they (and we) got value received. In 1940 we only had three hundred and eighty-five combat ships. The last available figures show that Knox and Forrestal added nine battleships, nineteen first-line aircraft carriers, twenty cruisers, more than five hundred destroyers and destroyer escorts, more than one hundred submarines, and literally thousands of auxiliary ships, landing craft, patrol boats, mine layers and sweepers. When this team started work the Navy had a mere 2,112 aircraft of all types. Today our Navy has 42,600 planes, more than half of which are combat aircraft.

Petty jealousies, sensitive nerves, imagined slights abound in Washington among government heads. It wasn't like that with Knox and Forrestal. They worked in beautiful harmony, each complementing the other, each admiring the qualities which the other had, and gradually everything from huge battleships and aircraft carriers to LSTs, LCTs, ducks, LCIs, PT boats and a dozen other types of invasion craft emerged from the blueprints and the contracts to take concrete form in shipyards. They built these craft anywhere, and it didn't matter if the only available spot was a cornfield in Kansas or a cow pasture in Colorado.





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"Get them out," Forrestal ordered bluntly when shipbuilders came to him with petty problems. "Get them out," the shipbuilders told their men. "Get them out," union leaders told their members when they raised unimportant objections. And the team of Knox and Forrestal "got them out."

Four years ago you could almost call America the country with half a Navy, but Knox and Forrestal "got them out" so fast that when D-Day came America was within six months of having a greater Navy than all the other countries in the world combined. That's why Forrestal sat alone in his office during the early hours of D-Day, smoking his inevitable pipe and getting battle reports with satisfaction tinged only by the regret that he couldn't hear the booming voice of Frank Knox.

Jim Forrestal is an easy guy to like but a hard guy to interview. The fact that I've known him well for fifteen years didn't make it any easier. He looked at me incredulously when I told him I wanted to do a story on him. To him such a story was a waste of time for everybody concerned. Why, damn it all, a war was being fought; we still had ships to build, aircraft to build—how could anyone be foolish enough to want to write a silly story at this time? That's what Jim Forrestal said to me.

"Can't I duck it?" the Secretary of the Navy added anxiously.

"I don't see how," I told him. "I got orders to do a piece on you."

"I can get some naval or marine heroes for you to write about," he suggested hopefully.

"That won't do," I said.

"Look, you can't make a hero out of a man in a blue serge suit," he said. "So don't try. I'm a businessman trying to do a job down here. That's the whole story."

James Vincent Forrestal, newest member of the Cabinet, is one man in public life who honestly and sincerely tries to escape personal publicity, personal appearances and whose only personal ambition is to get the war over with so he can get back to his peacetime job. Forrestal is completely without pretense or sham, and his desire to escape interviewers and speeches is in no way an affectation or evidence of false modesty. Forrestal is a completely honest man who hates to waste time.

### Forrestal Goes to Work

He became Undersecretary of the Navy in August, 1940. There had never been an "undersecretary" in the Navy before and there was no office available for the new man. They put Forrestal, his aide, Commander (now Captain) John E. Gingrich, and his secretary, bright Kate Foley, into an office that measured about ten by ten. Forrestal's desk was piled high with contracts which he had to read and approve. This was just after the Seventy Per Cent Expansion Act (popularly known as the two-ocean Navy bill) was passed, and Forrestal had been put in charge of "procurement and production." He went right to work on the contracts, and according to custom signed them "James V. Forrestal." A week later he dropped the middle initial, and then he asked the legal minds of the naval department if the contracts would be legal if he merely signed "Forrestal." They told him that the contracts would be equally binding. Today he signs all legal documents with merely his last name. Sometimes he has had to sign a hundred contracts a week. By dropping the "James V." he saves considerable time. He even streamlined his initialed interoffice memorandums. Originally he signed them "J.V.F." Now his associates get notes each day signed with a hurried "F."

They finally moved Forrestal, Captain Gingrich and Kate Foley into larger quarters but his passion for not wasting a moment in the day was not affected by his relatively lush offices. Mrs. Forrestal was very anxious to have a painting of her husband. She commissioned an artist to do the job. When Forrestal characteristically complained that he had no time to sit for a portrait, she had anticipated his objections.

"You have that little dining room off your office," she pointed out. "Now the artist can work in there. During the day when you have a free half hour just drop in there and let him work. Or if you have a long contract to study, sit in there with it and the artist can go on without disturbing you."

Forrestal promised faithfully and the artist took up his post in the small room adjoining the office of the Undersecretary. Time went by, but the Undersecretary never entered the small room, and the artist, discouraged, reported back to Mrs. Forrestal. She confronted her husband with his delinquency.

"I just never thought of it, Jo," he said. "I'm so busy during the day I completely forgot he was there."

"But, Jim," she wailed. "I've (Continued on page 71) commissioned him to do it. You must make time."

"I just can't do it, Jo," he said. "But you know I've always wanted a good painting of you. Suppose we have him paint you instead of me."



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And that is the story of the lovely portrait of Mrs. Forrestal which hangs in their Washington home.

Forrestal not only hates to waste his own time, he won't waste the time of others. His engagement pad shows appointments from eight o'clock until seven-thirty at night. He usually has luncheon in his private dining room and usually he'll have four or five guests.

But they do a lot more talking than eating. They are there to talk business primarily, and many a policy has been threshed over the luncheon table. If the table could talk, it could tell tales of high naval strategy which might be very valuable to certain gentlemen in Berlin and Tokyo. Occasionally the staff is pleased to see Forrestal duck out around four o'clock in the afternoon.

"When he did that at first," one of them told me unhappily, "we all thought we were going to get off early. But we soon learned better. It meant the boss was tired and he needed some time off to play squash. Sure, when he's overworked and doesn't feel too good he murders that ball for an hour and then comes back to the office all set to go on his long as he has to. He drives us but he drives himself even harder."

Any man who works as hard as Jim Forrestal does should be a very high-tensioned, crotchety creature who spends his spare time in bawling out waiters or throwing rocks at little old women. Forrestal doesn't fit that picture at all. To begin with, he smokes a pipe continuously, and who ever heard of a nervous man smoking a pipe? He is a very good-looking guy in a Jimmy Cagney sort of way, and he smiles easily and he is capable of very real and firm friendships. He came up the hard way, but he is not one of those so-called adjacent idiots who like to sit around pointing out lessons which the young might learn from his successful life. His father endowed Jim with practically no dough at all but with plenty of common sense.

### A Genius for Managing

"The older I get the more I admire him," Forrestal says now. "He never made more than \$2,000 a year, but he had everything he wanted. He'd lecture me on leisure. He'd say, 'A man is only really happy when he knows exactly what to do with what he's got. It doesn't matter so much how much you make. The thing that counts is to know how to spend your time so you get the most out of life.' I used to think that these were platitudes, but he was right."

The Secretary's father (James Vincent Forrestal) was known to everyone in the village of Matteawan, New York (now incorporated into the city of Beacon), as "Vin." Vin had a lot of common sense, and when young Jim wanted to work after school he got him a job on the Matteawan Journal, one of those fine small-town papers which so often have a greater dignity and integrity than do their big-city sisters. In 1911 a spirited political contest was held in the strictly Republican upstate New York county. Ferdinand Hoyt (now Judge Hoyt) ran for the assembly, while a good-looking young lawyer ran for the senate. The good-looking young lawyer was named Franklin Roosevelt. Young Jim was given the job of covering the political campaign. Forrestal didn't meet Roosevelt again for more than twenty-five years.

Meanwhile, at high school Jim was playing basketball. But today Judge Hoyt says, "You know, whenever Jim went out for a team or for any other school activity, he wound up as manager. He had a knack of running things and running them well. He always liked to stay in the background and let the other fellows take the bows. I guess." Judge Hoyt added with a smile, "Jim hasn't changed much since those days."

His work on the Matteawan Journal under the editorship of Morgan Hoyt left a lasting



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mark on Forrestal. Arthur Krock of the New York Times has said that Forrestal would have been a great writer had he stuck to his early trade. It is a fact that he himself writes the occasional speeches he is forced to make, and they are succinct, absolutely barren of the superfluous, flowery or meaningless phrase, and are beautifully co-ordinated and to the point. Forrestal writes the way he thinks—in a straight line.

Jim Forrestal had to work pretty hard to meet expenses when he entered Princeton, but he found time to work on *The Daily Princetonian*. I was in his office a week after his appointment to the Cabinet, but a day before the Senate had confirmed it. A telegram arrived while I was with him. He opened it, laughed, and handed it to me. It read, "Stop worrying. The class of 1915, Princeton, has already ratified your appointment." It was signed by a dozen members of his class.

The next day his appointment was confirmed by the Senate, and he was forced to take time out to take the traditional oath of allegiance. Rear Admiral Thomas L. Gatch recited the oath and the new Secretary said, "I do, so help me God," shook hands with the admiral and went back to his desk. He had only wasted six words and a little more than six seconds on the whole ceremony.

Forrestal says that his hobby is obscurity, and it annoys him a bit that he isn't allowed to indulge it more. Even when he became president of Dillon, Read in 1938, he refused to allow his passion for anonymity to lapse. It was this highly lucrative job that he quit to be a White House "liaison" man at \$10,000 a year.

He became friendly with Harry Hopkins, a man with many of Forrestal's own qualities. Stalin once said that he admired Hopkins above all other Moscow visitors because Hopkins was the only man he had ever met who worked harder than he himself did. Those of us who have seen Hopkins in action in London and Moscow used to marvel at the seemingly inexhaustible amount of energy stored in the frail, pain-racked body of Harry the Hop. It was inevitable that Forrestal and Hopkins admire each other. Both are blunt. Neither is personally politically ambitious. Neither is a yes man, and both love to untangle tough jobs which others have given up. Hopkins decided that Forrestal was too big for the White House job he was doing.

With the passage of the two-ocean Navy bill, the United States Navy became in effect one of the two or three largest corporations in the world. Frank Knox, devoted to his job of building the world's greatest navy, couldn't do it all alone. He needed a highly experienced executive to deal with the complex problems of procurement and production.

He needed a man who talked the language not of the bridge but of industry; a man who could meet Sloan and Kaiser and Grace and Grumman on their own grounds. By now Roosevelt was as enthusiastic about Forrestal as Hopkins was, and Harry didn't have to do much (if any) of a sales job.

Knox and Forrestal got along fine from the start. Knox, highly articulate, trained by his profession of newspaper publisher to take the limelight in his stride, didn't mind making speeches or being interviewed. Frank Knox made us all conscious of the greatness of our own Navy, and this pride we all felt communicated itself to the Navy and revived the morale and *esprit de corps*, which had been a bit shaken by the Pearl Harbor debacle.

Meanwhile, Forrestal buried himself under piles of contracts; planned, built and inspected plants; organized, financed, cajoled threatened—and naval production zoomed.

Forrestal is a professional who has small patience with amateurs. Like any good professional worker, he is always willing to lis-



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ten to experts in other fields. He asked the admirals what they thought the rate of attrition would be in the Pacific. How many planes, ships, might we be expected to lose when we began to take the offensive against the Japs? They studied the question carefully. Forrestal went to the Pacific to talk to men in the field. He returned to confer with the admirals once more. They arrived at figures and Forrestal inaugurated a production schedule designed to cope with our anticipated losses.

Tactically, the Pacific Navy under Admiral Nimitz showed a brilliance in operations not even hoped for by the best naval minds, and the attrition was considerably lower than had been expected. Production, however, kept to schedule and today, perhaps for the first time in the history of any warring power, our Navy has a tidy supply of everything it needs. In football language, our Navy is three deep in everything. Before he died, Knox on more than one occasion gave Forrestal full credit for this. They made a great team, charming, smiling Knox and taciturn, brisk Forrestal, and a real affection grew between them.

"He would never evade a responsibility," Forrestal says of him. "The Friday before he died, we discussed a Senatorial committee hearing coming up on the following Tuesday. It concerned contracts with small business. Knox was tired, but even those of us who worked with him every day didn't realize how bad his heart was. But we knew he wasn't well. I told him I'd attend the Senate hearing in his place. He shook his head and said, 'Jim, I wouldn't have anyone think I was trying to duck anything. I'll go.'" As it turned out, I had to attend the hearing. Knox was dead when it took place. Frank Knox was a man who never ducked an issue. It was a privilege to work with him."

Some of the old Navy guard shudder every time they see a newspaperman enter the office of the Secretary. Forrestal's blunt honesty and refusal to take refuge in the ordinary double talk of diplomacy upsets them considerably. Recently Vice-Admiral Hewitt came out very flatly in favor of reviving an old naval custom of having beer on ship-board (as every other navy in the world has).

Shortly afterward, Forrestal was holding a press conference. The reporters had barely begun to ask their questions, when one of them queried: "Mr. Secretary, Admiral Hewitt in the Mediterranean said one of the things the boys missed most is beer."

"That's what I missed, all right!" Forrestal said, referring to the months he spent in the naval air service during World War I.

"What is your attitude on that?" came the next question. "Is the Navy considering any lifting of the restrictions on the serving of alcoholics aboard ships?"

Out of consideration for temperance interests in the country, the new Secretary of the Navy framed his answer: "It would require a change in regulations if we did, and there is no such change. As a matter of fact, consideration of the shipping space available would probably be of prime importance, outside of any change in the regulations themselves."

People who don't know Forrestal think him cold, impersonal. He is cold and impersonal when he is dealing with contracts. It must be remembered that at the moment Forrestal is running the second largest business in the world. Only the Army is larger. In 1943 the Navy entered into contracts for the building of ships, planes, guns, etc., to the amount of twenty-six billion dollars. You would have to lump together 25 of the biggest corporations in the country to run up a total that large. When you're responsible for spending that big a hunk of taxpayers' money, you are very apt to develop what appears to be coldness (that is, if you don't go completely nuts altogether). Forrestal feels the same sense of responsibility in handling



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each contract that he once felt when he was considering new bond issues as president of Dillon, Read.

### A Marine Enthusiast

But swing the talk away from contracts and you find a new Forrestal. Get him talking about the Marines (he'll do that anytime) and you might think you were talking to the kid down the block whose older brother is with the Marines in the Pacific. Forrestal has the same feeling of hero worship for the United States Marines that the rest of us have.

"The Marines always keep their hands in," he says. "That's the only way to attain maximum efficiency. I used to box a lot. Well, I laid off three years and then one day went back. Before I knew what had happened, I'd been hit with a right-hand punch that broke my nose."

Forrestal ruefully stroked his blunt nose. "You've got to keep at it to remain really good. That's why our Marines are so magnificent. You know, those Marines really typify true democracy. When they land at a place like Tarawa, their officers—high-ranking ones—land with them. They live together, bunk together, fight together, eat together and each knows his own particular responsibility. They're very wonderful."

Forrestal's admiration for the Marines is a reflection of his feeling for the man who is trained to do his job—for the professional. All competent executives hate the bungling amateur. Forrestal, for instance, believes that the British system of permanent civil servants in government is a sound one that might well be borrowed by us.

"When the British come to joint conferences," Forrestal says, "they come thoroughly informed and briefed in the most complex of situations. Their basic information is sound. They have available to them the long experience of able civil servants who have spent a lifetime training for and learning their jobs. Incidentally, compared to our Civil Service employees they are very well paid; they average from 33 to 66 per cent higher pay than do our men in comparative jobs. When war came, we had to recruit thousands of men from industry, men whom industry could ill afford to release. In the Navy the burden of administration fell upon commissioned officers who were needed afloat. A permanent staff well trained and well paid would release such men and would allow industry to keep men that it needed. If all government agencies had permanent staffs headed by undersecretaries, a great deal of waste would be eliminated."

Ask Forrestal how he likes working in Washington and he'll chuckle. "It's a dangerous place to work. Unless you watch yourself, you find that you get into the habit of dealing with abstractions rather than realities. When you first come to Washington from the business world, you are filled with terror when you have to arise to defend some point of view or to present some new point of view. You get over that all right and then after a while you enter the second stage. That is, you are in a constant state of surprise because you haven't fallen flat on your face. You're doing your best and you find that it's all right. Now," Forrestal laughed, "is the time when you should start to watch yourself. So many people hit that third stage. That comes when you start looking for an audience to impress. Then you're a dead goose. Once the ham starts coming out in you and you get a false sense of your own importance, you'd better get out of Washington quick."

In the Navy Department they'll bet you fifty to one that the Secretary will never reach that third stage. A man in a blue serge



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suit may never be a hero as Forrestal says, but he can be one hell of a fine public servant. That is Forrestal's only ambition. It's a pretty good one.

THE END



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