

# The Lost Art of Naming Operations

By John T. Correll

Once there was Overlord and Rolling Thunder and Desert Storm. Now we get such mush as Enduring Freedom and Inherent Resolve.

**US** air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria began in August 2014, but for more than two months, the operation did not have a name. The Pentagon finally settled on Inherent Resolve.

The press wondered why it took so long to come up with what the *Los Angeles Times* called “a moniker so inherently bland that it sparked jokes on late-night TV.” The *Wall Street Journal* quoted a military officer who acknowledged the name was “just kind of bleh.”

About the same time, a re-naming operation was underway in Afghanistan. After a run of 13 years, Operation Enduring Freedom ended in December

2014 and was superseded by Operation Freedom’s Sentinel.

There was some confusion from a reference during the transition ceremony in Kabul to Operation Resolute Support, but that turned out to be a NATO designation. By way of clarification, the US commander explained that “Resolute Support will serve as the bedrock of an enduring partnership.”

Inherent Resolve, Enduring Freedom, Freedom’s Sentinel, and Resolute Support share a mind-numbing similarity that makes it difficult to keep track of which is which. They sound like slogans or something made up by the marketing department.



US Coast Guard photo by Chief Photographer's Mate Robert F. Sargent

These operations—and the military members serving in them—would have once had more distinctive designations that had some chance of being remembered. Unfortunately, naming military operations seems to have become a lost art.

The gold standard was set by Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion in 1944, Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against North Vietnam 1965-1968, and Operation Desert Storm, the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

That was too good to last. The selection process has been taken over largely by staff bureaucrats assisted by an automated system. Sometimes senior officials get in on the act. They make sure operation names have the right political texture and that—above all—they do not offend anyone.

#### WHERE IT ALL STARTED

“Naming operations seems to have originated with the German General Staff during the last two years of World War I,” said Lt. Col. Gregory C. Sieminski, who explored the history of it in the Army War College’s *Parameters* in 1995. “The

Germans used code names primarily to preserve operational security, though the names were also a convenient way of referring to subordinate and successive operations.”

Among the German operations in 1918 were Archangel, St. Michael, St. George, Roland, Mars, Castor, Pollux, and Valkyrie.

The Germans picked up the practice again in World War II. The planned name for the amphibious invasion of England—canceled after the unexpected victory of the British in the Battle of Britain—was Sea Lion.

The invasion of Russia was initially named Operation Fritz, after the son of one of the planners, but was changed by Hitler to Operation Barbarossa, the folk name of the Germanic emperor Frederick I, who conquered the Slavs in the 12th century.

Both the Americans and the British named their operations in World War II as well, mostly for reasons of security. In 1942, the US War Plans Division devised a list of 10,000 words that could be used without any suggestion of a specific purpose or a particular place.

On June 2, 1944, just before D-Day, the crossword puzzle compiler for the *London Daily Telegraph* was visited by intelligence agents who wanted to know about one of the answers published that day for the May 27 puzzle. The word in question was “overlord,” the code name of the operation about to begin.

Furthermore, words in other puzzles in past weeks had included “Utah,” and “Omaha,” code names for two of the D-Day invasion beaches. As recounted by Cornelius Ryan in *The Longest Day*, it was simply a coincidence. The puzzles had been prepared months before but did not appear in the newspaper until just before the operation.

There is some claim that the British were more diligent than the Americans in choosing names that would give no hint of the plan. One example cited is Market Garden, the failed British-led airborne operation in the Netherlands in 1944.

However, US Operation Matterhorn was at least as opaque. The Matterhorn is one of the highest peaks in the European Alps and there was nothing about it to suggest the nature of the operation, which



Troops disembark at Omaha Beach, France, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. The invasion of Normandy was named Operation Overlord.

was the strategic bombing of Japanese forces in Asia by B-29s based in India and China in 1944-1945.

Code names for programs and projects—separate from operation names, but related—also came into widespread use in World War II. The Manhattan Project, for example, was the program to develop the atomic bomb. The first two bombs were Little Boy and Fat Man.

These names were not chosen randomly. Little Boy and Fat Man derived from the relative size and shape of the bombs, and the initial base for the project was the Manhattan Engineer District of the Army Corps of Engineers.

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF NAMING

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill loved code names and picked them personally whenever he got the chance, but one of his most notable contributions was about an American operation.

For reasons long forgotten, the mission to bomb Ploesti in 1943 was first known as Operation Soapsuds. Churchill warned President Roosevelt that a whimsical name was “inappropriate for an operation in which so many brave Americans would risk or lose their lives.” The name was duly changed to Tidal Wave.

Some World War II operations were elegantly named, such as Torch, the North Africa campaign in 1942-1943. Some were not, such as Grubworm and Rooster, two US airlift operations to redeploy Chinese army forces and their equipment in 1945. Operation Chattanooga Choo Choo, the air offensive against trains in France and Germany in 1944, could also have been better named.

Among the notable named operations in World War II were these:

- Husky, the invasion of Sicily in 1943.
- Strangle, the aerial interdiction of Italy in 1944. The US liked Strangle well enough to use it again in Korea.
- Point Blank, the combined bomber offensive in Europe.



USAF photo

***F-105s and an RB-66 on a mission over North Vietnam. Many operation names during the Vietnam War, such as Linebacker, were ill-conceived.***

■ Argument, also known as “Big Week,” Feb. 20-25, 1944, the coordinated attack on the German aviation industry.

■ Frantic, the shuttle bombing missions in 1944, launched from Britain and Italy, landing in Soviet-controlled territory and launching from there for the return missions.

■ Crossbow, air attacks on German V-1 and V-2 rocket launch sites in 1944.

■ Carpetbagger, Army Air Forces night flights over occupied Europe to support partisans.

Two of the best operation names were not used, scrubbed when the atomic bombs brought the war in the Pacific to an end without invasion of the Japanese home islands. Operation Olympic would have been the attack on Kyushu, projected for November 1945, followed by Operation Coronet against Honshu in the spring of 1946.

## OTHER NAMES, OTHER WARS

The custom of naming operations continued after World War II, but there was no need for secrecy in most peacetime actions so the names were often open and direct. The folksy designation of Operation Vittles was given to the

Berlin Airlift. In Operation Haylift in 1949, Air Force transports dropped feed and supplies to isolated ranchers in Nevada and Utah where cattle were stranded and starving in deep snowdrifts during the worst winter in 60 years.

The first recorded political problem with an operation name was in Korea in 1951, when Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway was chastised by Washington for calling his Eighth Army offensive Operation Killer. Unrepentant, Ridgway said, “I did not understand why it was objectionable to acknowledge the fact that war was concerned with killing the enemy.”

Something similar happened in Vietnam in 1966 when Operation Masher was changed to Operation White Wing because President Lyndon Johnson wanted it to sound more benign.

Operation names in the Vietnam War were mostly in the classic tradition. In addition to Rolling Thunder, they included these:

■ Farm Gate, 1961-1963, training and support for the South Vietnamese air force.

■ Barrel Roll, 1964-1973, support of ground forces in northern Laos.

■ Steel Tiger, 1965-1973, interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

■ Igloo White, 1968-1973, seeding of the Ho Chi Minh Trail with 20,000 acoustic and seismic sensors to detect enemy movement, monitored by aircraft orbiting overhead.

■ Bolo, 1967, the “MiG Sweep,” in which seven North Vietnamese aircraft were shot down in 12 minutes.

■ Commando Hunt, 1968-1972, intensified air strikes in southern Laos.

■ Arc Light, 1965-1973, B-52 strikes in Southeast Asia.

Some of the air operations in Vietnam could also have been better named. Linebacker, for example, was an uninspired sports metaphor that did not really fit. Linebacker II, the bombing of North Vietnam in 1972 that brought the peace talks to fruition, was the most

F-15s and F-16s fly over burning oil wells in Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. The operation name was a throwback to more classic naming conventions.



important offensive operation of the war but it was named after a defensive position in football.

The “Menus,” named with misplaced levity, was the covert bombing of Cambodia in 1969-1970, a series of missions named Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, Snack, Supper, and Dessert.

On the other hand, Operation Homecoming was just right for the airlift of the POWs from North Vietnam in 1973.

### THE DRIFT TO MUSH

The planners were obviously not on a tight leash when they called the airlift to Israel in 1973 Operation Nickel Grass. It was adapted from a bawdy World War II fighter pilot ballad (“Throw a nickel in the grass. . .”) but it was a strange choice for a mission in which the fate of an allied nation hung in the balance.

The era of freewheeling names was fast coming to a close. In 1972, the Department of Defense issued Directive 5200.1, which said that operation names must not “express a degree of bellicosity inconsistent with traditional American ideals or current foreign policy.”

The Joint Chiefs of Staff implemented the guidelines in 1975 with a computer system called the Code Word, Nickname, and Exercise Terminology System, an unwieldy title shortened to NICKA, which is still in use today. The present directive says that names must not “convey connotations offensive to good taste or derogatory to a particular sect or creed” or offend US allies or “democratic free world nations.”

Contrary to popular belief, NICKA does not generate random lists of names. Mainly, it assigns two-letter alphabetic sequences to various commands and agencies, which develop two-word operation names beginning with a letter pair from one of the sequences. For example, NORAD and US Northern Command are assigned sequences AM through AR, FA through FF, JM through JR, and VG through VL.

Even so, assigned names do not always stick. The attempt to rescue American hostages held in Iran in 1980 was dubbed Operation Evening Light, but it will be forever remembered instead as “Desert One,” which was the refueling site where the mission was aborted when two US aircraft collided in a sandstorm.

From the NICKA letter pair UR assigned to US Atlantic Command, a staff officer came up with Urgent Fury for the invasion of Grenada in 1983. That wasn’t exactly a reprise of Operation Killer but nevertheless aroused some press comment that it was “too militant.”

“With Operation Just Cause in 1989, code names began to be used consistently to shape public opinion,” said William M. Arkin, a journalist who has collected and analyzed more than 3,000 names of military plans, programs, and operations. The *New York Times* called Just Cause “Operation High Hokum.” The following, Operation Promote Liberty, did not attract much attention.

### DOWN FROM DESERT STORM

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of coalition forces in the Gulf

War, is credited with naming Operation Desert Storm, but that was not his first choice. He initially recommended Peninsula Shield, but that was rejected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The second proposal, Crescent Shield, was not accepted either.

Stormin’ Norman next suggested Desert Shield, which was accepted for the preparatory phase of the Gulf War. Desert Storm spun off from that. It was a throwback to the classic tradition of operation names and one of the last of its kind.

Typical of things to come was Operation Productive Effort, a disaster relief mission to Bangladesh in 1991, but even the Pentagon couldn’t abide that one and renamed it Sea Angel.

Provide Comfort, 1991-1996, was humanitarian relief to the Kurds in Iraq. Provide Hope in 1992 was an airlift of food, fuel, and medicine to the former Soviet Union. That was not to be confused with Restore Hope, which was humanitarian relief for Somalia in 1993-1994.

The names for Operations Southern Watch and Northern Watch, enforcing no-fly zones in Iraq through the 1990s, were plain and literal, unencumbered by political overtones. That could not be said for Uphold Democracy, the invasion of Haiti in 1994, Deliberate Force in Bosnia in 1995, or Allied Force in Kosovo in 1999.

In 1994, the *Los Angeles Times* complained that “today’s military code names lack flair.” A “Pentagon strategist” who spoke with the reporter agreed

**An A-10 takes off from Bagram AB, Afghanistan. The US-led coalition effort there was named Operation Enduring Freedom—a nice thought, but one that hasn't proved prescient.**

USAF photo by CMSgt. David L. Stuppy



that the selections were “not the kind of thing they’ll remember in the year 2021.”

Soon enough, US planners would have reason to reflect on their vastly overstated designation of Infinite Reach for an air assault on Osama Bin Laden’s training camps in 1998.

### **SINCE 9/11**

Since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, it has mostly been one forgettable operation name after another. The best of them was the first, Noble Eagle, the ongoing homeland security effort that includes air defense of the United States.

Then came Infinite Justice, the broad military response to the attacks. It lasted only a week before being changed to Enduring Freedom on Sept. 25, when Islamic scholars complained that only Allah can provide “infinite justice.”

Enduring Freedom continued overseas, mostly in Afghanistan, until 2014 with a parallel Iraqi Freedom in Iraq from March 2003–August 2010.

In September 2010, transitional operations began in Iraq under the rubric of New Dawn. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates said the United States was sending “a strong signal that Operation Iraqi Freedom has ended and our forces are operating under a new mission.”

In March 2011, US forces took part in a two-week intervention in Libya called Odyssey Dawn, attributed by the *New York Daily News* to an “operation gibberish name generator.” There was big uproar in May 2011 when news

media reported Operation Geronimo as the action in which Osama Bin Laden was killed.

Angry reaction poured in from the Apache tribe, the Cherokees, the Navajos, the Onandagas, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, and Geronimo’s grandson, a Vietnam War veteran. The government claimed the name of the operation had been Neptune Spear, with Jackpot as the code name for Osama and Geronimo as the code word for his capture or death. A book by a former Navy SEAL who participated in the mission said that Geronimo had been the code name for bin Laden.

In addition to the military departments and the combat commands, code names are assigned to operations, projects, and programs by others, including the CIA, the Department of Homeland Security, and NATO.

Some of them are pretty good, such as Elephant Grass, CIA intelligence operations in Iraq, 1987–1988, later changed to Druid Leader and Surf Fisher. Some have origins that can only be guessed at, such as Reindeer Games, an Army airborne operation in Iraq in 2003.

The DOD directives on operation names are shredouts from the series of publications that deal with information security and classification. However, there is no longer any pretense or secrecy.

A press release announces the name of an operation as soon as it is chosen.

“The current fashion in nicknaming operations is to make the names sound like mission statements,” Sieminski wrote in *Parameters*. “There is also a certain formulaic monotony about such names, which makes them less memorable than they might otherwise be. Like having a 1950s classroom full of Dicks and Janes, it’s hard to tell the Provide Hopes and Comforts apart.”

If there had been only one or two operations named in the Just Cause/Enduring Freedom/Inherent Resolve mold, it might not have been so bad, but having found their formula, the namers ran it into the ground.

The habit has developed of referring to operations by their initials: OEF for Operation Enduring Freedom, OIR for Operation Inherent Resolve. It is impossible to imagine Operation Overlord being called “OO.”

Operation names from the past 20 years provide administrative identification—sort of the way a number might do—but not much else. They have little power to inspire or motivate. The biggest loss, though, is that they do not convey the instant recognition and sense of history that the operation names of yesteryear still possess after the passage of half a century or more. ★

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