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What's in a name?

An aircraft name can mirror success. A name has power. Careful name selection is paramount.

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NAMING a new plane can evoke more emotion than naming a new baby. Company executives, like proud parents, will often haggle over options until the cows come home. Pleasing everyone is about as easy as adding payload and saving weight at the same time. It can be fun, but frustrating.

Choosing an individual cognomen for each design is certainly not necessary. It will not improve performance, reduce liability costs or increase market share. But I think it is important. And though the intrinsic value of naming planes is almost impossible to measure, most managers would agree that it helps imbue a sense of pride in the company and in its products.

Besides, it is a time-honored tradition, dating back to the Wright brothers and their *Kitty Hawk Flyer* in 1903. For whatever reason, some airframe manufacturers who may have named each of their models in the past no longer do so, among them Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. Today these companies identify their products by corporate title and model number only.

That a corporate name can mirror success is indeed true in Boeing's case. The very word Boeing, writes Bob Serling in his new book *Legend & Legacy*, invokes images of "mighty airliners, great bombers, technical excellence and integrity." The *Stratocruiser* was the last Boeing commercial product to have a name.

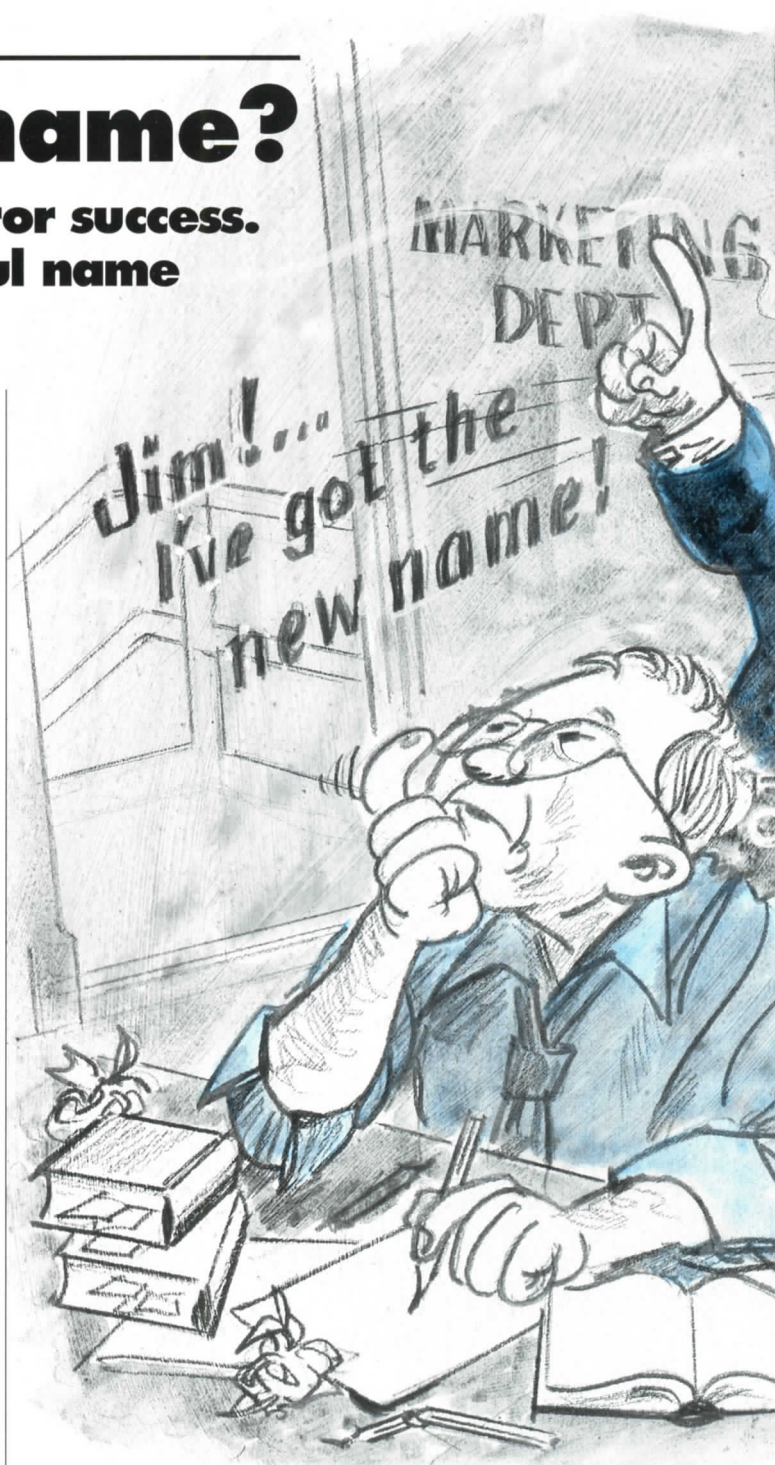
The spirit in a name

All military aircraft are introduced with letters and numbers, but the men who flew them or fought against them called them by their names, such as *Spitfire*, *Zero*, *Wildcat*, *Corsair*, *Dauntless*, *Mustang* and *Lightning*. And most recently the ugly but effective A10 became the *Warthog*, which proved its worth during Desert Storm. We all know the *Warthog* but who knows the A10?

Generally, designers and manufacturers hope the appellation they pick will reflect the character, capability and even purpose of their creation. And occasionally the name might also describe the plane. Ford *Trimotor*, for instance, told you that it had three engines which, in your mind's eye over 60 years ago, meant more safety, reliability and comfort.

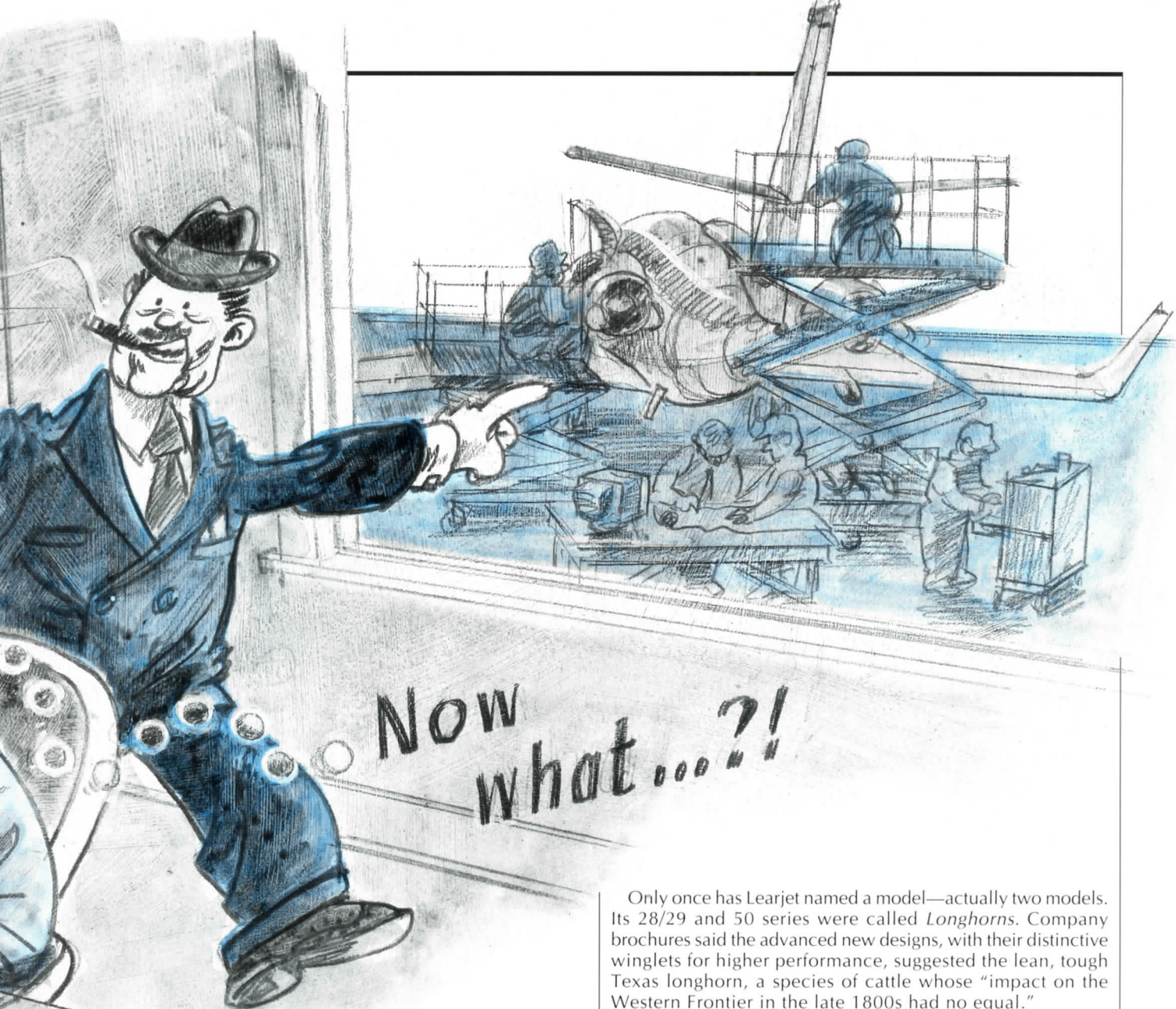
Spartan Aircraft named its all metal, low-wing monoplane the *Executive*, indicating its primary market, narrow as it might have been in 1936. The commercial version was later converted to a military trainer.

The Beech *Staggerwing* spells out its configuration, while the company's modern *Starship* suggests something futuristic. Canadair's *Global Express* implies its mission, as does the name Airbus (Airbus Industries, though Airbus might make one think of a big motor coach filled with weary, angry travelers).



The power of a name

Learjet is a good example of how aggressive promotion can ingrain a word in the public consciousness. By achieving high visibility in mass media during the early years, the Lear name became generic for any small civil jet flying. It became synonymous with business aviation. It used to frustrate Bill Lear's competition when back in the '60s, the public and prospective customers would call every business jet a Learjet.



In fact, the publicity campaign actually backfired. Because of all the exposure in movies and television and its popularity with celebrities, the Lear was soon perceived as a status symbol, a plaything for the rich and famous. Thanks to some effective marketing, this negative image has all been turned around.

Curiously, when Gates bought the Lear company in 1967, a new marketing group based in Denver decided the Learjet 25 needed its own name. After much wrangling over all sorts of ideas, Denver marketeers came up with "Rainbow," possibly suggesting a pot of gold awaited Model 25 owners at the end of the trip. Instead, the name went over like a lead balloon in Wichita.

Wichita factory managers protested vigorously, pointing out that the name was still linked with a failed project, the aborted Republic *Rainbow*. Denver capitulated—the Learjet 25 remained the Learjet 25. It sold famously while in production.

Only once has Learjet named a model—actually two models. Its 28/29 and 50 series were called *Longhorns*. Company brochures said the advanced new designs, with their distinctive winglets for higher performance, suggested the lean, tough Texas longhorn, a species of cattle whose "impact on the Western Frontier in the late 1800s had no equal."

Promotional hype has characterized the aviation business from the beginning. But if the product earns a fine reputation, then customer acceptance is the best sales tool.

For example, a Beechcraft is considered the Cadillac of light planes, a reflection of its superior quality. Beech has always called its model line Beechcrafts. And in the opinion of many, the company's all-time favorite is the *Bonanza*. The name itself conveys a plane with a V, or butterfly tail.

Interestingly, the conventional-tailed *Debonair*, in name at least, never radiated the magic of its progenitor, the *Bonanza*. And yet the designation appeared fitting. The dictionary defines *debonair* as "being of good breed; genial, affable, carefree and jaunty." *Musketeer* and *Sierra* were less impressionable names in the marketplace.

Today Beech is perhaps better known for its royal family of Beechcrafts—*Duke*, *Duchess*, *Baron*, *Queen Air* and top of its turboprop line, the regal *King Air*. But in the 1950s, Beech invaded the animal kingdom, if only briefly. It christened its then new light twin-engine Model 95 the Beechcraft *Badger*.

Beech explained the 95 had all the exceptional qualities of the American badger—"Speed, tenacity, toughness, longevity and the ability to get the job done." But not every-

body in the house of Beech liked the epithet.

The dissenters emphasized that the badger was a "burrowing mammal, a ground lover" akin to the Australian wombat and a very large Indian rat called a bandicoot, an animal well known for its destructive habits. Yet all the negative connotations didn't phase the proponents, who held that badger was an apt descriptive term for the 95, semantically and phonetically.

As the debate intensified, Beech learned that the US Air Force had already adopted "Badger" as a code sign for identifying a new Soviet jet bomber, the Tupolev Tu16, which was later used as a testbed and only recently retired.

To avoid any possible confusion among military and civilian aircraft spotters, Beech gave up the original name and the 95 became the Beechcraft *Travel Air*, which added luster to a distinguished line of aircraft built by Walter Beech during the 1920s.

And what is the most widely known name in aviation?

Arguably it is the Piper *Cub* (originally the Taylor *Cub*). This ubiquitous airplane has given wings to tens of thousands of pilots. In more recent times, the pioneer light plane builder has turned to Indian tribes for model names—*Apache*, *Cherokee*, *Cheyenne*, *Commanche*, *Mohave*, *Navajo*, *Seminole*.

However, in a society of extremists, using Native American names to callously promote an obvious sign of opulence, such as the private airplane, may not be politically correct.

I am sure Cessna gave a lot of thought to naming its popular pistons and propjets, the *Skylane*, *Skywagon*, *Caravan*, *Centurion*, *Titan*, *Golden Eagle*. Some labels allude to function, others are spiffy and sound nice. Still others have been corrupted, such as "Mixmaster" for Cessna's push-pull *Skymaster*. Yet, many light plane owners continue to refer to their planes by model number.

Name that plane

The debut of Cessna's first business jet put marketing to an even greater test. I was there then and I recall my two toughest sales: persuading Dwane Wallace and Del Roskam we should have a direct factory sales/service program for the new Fanjet 500, and convincing both that we had the best name.

My marketing team wanted a designation with style, rhythm, euphony—a name timeless and memorable, one that also connotes a winner. Brainstorming at lunch one day, somebody rattled off names of horses that had won the legendary Triple Crown. And bingo—we had it. In 1948 a big chestnut colt by the notable name "Citation" had accomplished this outstanding feat.

Here was a name that met all of our criteria. Citation was indeed a champion's champion. But at first, Wallace and Roskam said no, implying that naming an exciting new plane after a horse was like naming your first child after the neighbor's cat.

In a moment of sheer genius, I bought a couple of pony shoes at a local western store, had them chrome plated (my budget ruled out silver or gold) and placed them surrepti-

tiously on the desks of Wallace and Roskam. That was the tour de force. They said go. And today the name *Citation* is as well known in aviation circles as it is in thoroughbred racing.

Selecting *Challenger* for the Canadair CL600 and -601 was relatively easy. After all, we were challenging a market segment dominated by two worthy competitors in the heavy corporate jet class—the Lockheed *JetStar* and the *Gulfstream*—Grumman's name, meaning a warm ocean current. Also, several airline types (727, 737, DC9) were entering the business jet market as well.

So Canadair *Challenger* was not only appropriate, it had a nice ring. Interestingly, we sold over 110 *Challengers* before the first prototype ever flew.

My experience at Pan Am was another matter. To make the new Dassault *Mystere 20* remarkable, we had to rewrite the specs. We also had to change its name. For two good reasons. First, Juan Trippe was afraid our customers would

confuse the Pan Am jet with a French fighter by the same name. Second, and most important, Trippe hated Charles de Gaulle.

After lunching with Fred Donner, then chairman of General Motors, Trippe cornered me and said, "I've got the name—we'll call it the Rocket." I knew where he'd been and I remembered an Oldsmobile by that name. I didn't like it and I told him so, reminding him of the Johnson *Rocket* and Riley *Rocket*.

"Besides," I added, delivering the coup de grace, "very few executives these days are ready to ride in a rocket. It sounds like a bomb about to explode!" At that time businessmen were travelling in DC3s, Convairs, B25s, Lodestars

and other surplus military and airline equipment.

For the next several weeks our ad agency suggested dozens of names. All were rejected out of hand. Then one day Trippe asked me to meet with him again. Beaming as though he had just erased Pan Am's total debt, he said, "Jim, I've really got it this time. We'll call it the Falcon."

"You must have had lunch with Henry Ford," I said.

"Right," he replied. "How did you know?"

The name stuck. And it remains with Dassault's business jet fleet to this day. I doubt if we could have made a much better choice, even though Henry Ford's Falcon didn't last. It also proves there is more to a business lunch than good food, a few bad jokes and two or three extra dry martinis.

Everyone has an opinion

Usually it is the marketing team that picks the name, subject to the chief executive's approval. But unsolicited input, of course, can always be expected. In the corporate world, everyone in senior management has a point of view. Selling it can be just as competitive as selling the product itself.

Another approach is to go public. To find a name for their GP180, Gates Learjet and Piaggio, then partners, conducted a worldwide contest. Over 50,000 entries were submitted. Finally the judges chose "Avanti." The prize: an all-expense paid trip to Europe for two. While the partnership soon dissolved, Piaggio's 180 is still the *Avanti*.

Names give airplanes a special quality, a warmth and allure that cold numerical designations can never convey.

You may never become involved in naming a new airplane, but if you do, the following tips might be helpful.

Don't identify with a loser like *Rainbow* and *Rocket*. And avoid names of animals with unsavory kin (wombats or bandicoots). Also, try to steer clear of duplication or similarities—Short's *Skyvan* and *Skyliner* are close to Cessna's *Skywagon* and *Skylane*.

Occasionally a manufacturer will repeat a name. Lockheed's single-engine *Orion* of the 1930s later emerged as the PV3 *Orion* patrol plane. And its turboprop Lockheed *Electra* also had a namesake in the 1930s, the classic Lockheed 10 *Electra*.

The Lockheed C130 *Hercules*, a plane designed for lifting heavy loads in specialized roles, is aptly named. (*Hercules* is a mythical hero known for his brute strength.) But

Howard Hughes had previously used the name for his giant H4 flying boat, which never entered service. Incidentally, referring to the H4 as the "Spruce Goose" drove Hughes right up the wall.

When adopting a word, be sure of its definition, especially any hidden meaning or negative interpretation. Piper *Malibu* seems harmless enough, but "Malibu" conjures up visions of sandy beaches, pretty sunbathers and water sports. That's fine, if the IRS can tell a business machine from a sailboat.

If you select an unusual name, it is a good idea to check out what the word means in other cultures. "Tuna" might be a great name for a commercial fishing boat, but it is also a California Miwok Indian word, Penutian language, for a "deer thinking about going to eat wild onions."

The local public library should have reference books listing uncommon names of every description from all over the world. The options include astronomical names, astrological names, masculine names, feminine names, animal names, flower names, geographical names, geological names, ethnic versions of English names, even English versions of ethnic names—you name it.

As a rule, only brand names, trade names, corporation names and names of unique products are registered and proprietary. If there is a legal concern, you might contact the Register of Copyrights in the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Any name you choose should be easy to pronounce, pleasing to hear, easy to understand. And it should also have a harmonious symmetry when joined with the corporate title such as the Bristol *Britannia* and the Fokker *Friendship*.

Not surprisingly, the chief executive's personal tastes or whims may influence the final choice at the expense of something truly imaginative. As mentioned earlier, though, the boss more often than not will direct the marketing department to propose a suitable name. And the big decision could be yours.

Names give airplanes a special quality, a warmth and allure that cold numerical designations can never convey. But if all of your ideas are shot down and your creative juices suddenly turn to stone, then simply fall back on design engineering's original digital symbol, however nondescript or impersonal it may be. There is always safety in numbers. ✈



Jim Taylor has held senior management positions with Pan Am, Cessna, Canadair and Learjet. He is a regular contributor to the pages of Professional Pilot.

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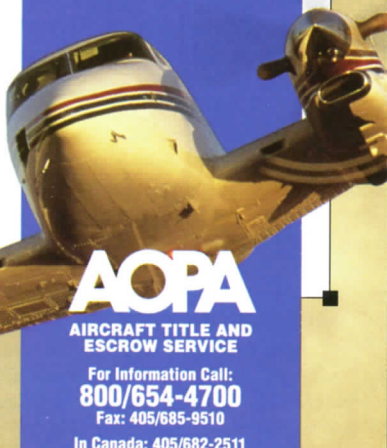
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