Code-Named Operations of World War II: An Interpretation

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The success of a military operation is determined by several factors, not the least being good planning. And, for planning to be effective, it must be conducted in secret. During World War II, where strategic planning was carried on in various capitals and on several continents, it was important to use coded—shorthand—names for potential operations. These classified code words[1] were designed to seem meaningless and confusing to an enemy. The names, drawing attention from the real operation,[2] were gleaned from many non-military sources: natural phenomena, mythology, history, folklore, slang.

Though coded names were not unique to World War II, they did achieve wide use and great popularity during that conflict. Perhaps the operational planners, scholars and career military men, possessed a keen sense of history and wanted to leave a footnote for future generations to decipher and, in so doing, appreciate the time and effort that went into the war effort.

Through research into codenames, one can learn the history of the war in a truly unique form. For organizational purposes, this presentation will be divided into the different areas of the war, with the codenames for each area then discussed in chronological order.

EUROPE

World War II began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland in 1939.

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[1]Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1974). A code word is defined as "a word which has been assigned a classification and a classified meaning to safeguard intentions and information regarding a classified plan or operation."

[2]Ibid. An operation is "a military action or the carrying out of a strategic, tactical, service, training, or administrative military mission; the process of carrying on combat, including movement, supply, attack, defense, and maneuvers needed to gain the objectives of any battle or campaign."

Hitler's forces did it with *blitzkreig,* a lightning strike . . . a most appropriate name for the swift, decisive destruction Germany inflicted on the Polish state. But not all operations were so effective as was the *blitzkreig.*

In other encounters on the European continent, the Germans proposed to invade Britain, in a July 1940 order. Called SEA LION, it was never implemented. The reason for the name is quite simple: the Wehrmarcht was a land animal. To go to Britain, the army would have to become amphibious—like the large, eared seals from the Pacific. Fortunately for the British, the Wehrmarcht was missing something, like the valuable coats which separate the fur seals from the sea lions. Hitler might have been more devious—and to the point. In heraldry, a sea lion is a monster having the front of a lion, webbed forepaws, and the dorsal fin and tail of a fish.[3]

In June 1941, Hitler launched BARBAROSSA, his major attack on the Russians. He viewed this attempt at creating hegemony of Europe with himself as head, as recalling Frederick I, King of Germany and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, 1152-90. Barbarossa also went to war . . . in the East during the Third Crusade. Reputedly he will rise again to save Germany in crisis. It just might have been too cold in Russia for his ghost to return.

During the same period, the Germans planned ISABELLA, a counter to a possible British move into Portugal. The name is quite transparent: a reference to Queen Isabella I, the friend and patron of Christopher Columbus. Was it possible Hitler didn't know the difference between Portugal and Spain? Or was he merely hiding his true motives? If that particular plan had been of British design, the name might have signified an airborne attack. An *isabella* was rhyming slang for an "umbrella."[4]

Another unimplemented Nazi plan was HERCULES, Hitler's proposed attack on Malta. When Erwin Rommel proved successful at Tobruk, the plan was dropped. The obvious interpretation points to Hercules, the mythical hero who performed twelve seemingly-impossible tasks . . . an apparent suggestion of the Third Reich's omnipotence. It is also possible the name suggested the Gates of Hercules, which open into the Mediterranean.

One of the most unusual missions was the 1944 GREIF Operation, an aptly-named hoax perpetrated on the Allies in the Ardennes. *Greif* is

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[3]Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1966). Subsequently listed as *Random House.*

[4]Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967). Subsequently listed as *Partridge.*

German for the griffin, the mythical animal—half-eagle, half-lion. To the Nazis, GREIF was a two-part version of the Trojan Horse. In its first stage, a company of English-speaking German commandos, wearing American jackets over their own uniforms, would infiltrate the Allied lines in captured American jeeps. This would be followed by a panzer brigade riding in American tanks. The first wave confused and disrupted American ranks—even to a challenge on General Omar N. Bradley.[5] Because of a lack of American equipment, the second phase didn't materialize.

The Allies' names were not so steeped in tradition. In March 1943, a Combined Bomber Offensive (CBO) was planned to destroy the Luftwaffe and the German aircraft industry. As part of the CBO, a series of forty-three major air raids—March-July 1943, from Stuttgart to Aachen—were included.[6] The description of a bomb's trajectory over a target closely follows the dictionary definition for Operation POINT BLANK, "so closely to a target that a missile fired will travel in a straight line to the mark." Another possibility is the World War I slang "point-blank" for white wine[7] . . . March and July are critical in the growing of grapes for wine. If the soil is not properly tilled, and precautions against frost not taken, the harvest will be poor.

In July 1943, the Allies began the massive Sicilian campaign, under the codename HUSKY. The American Chiefs of Staff were reluctant, at first, to agree to this action—thinking it a British ploy to further delay the contemplated invasion of France. Churchill spoke strongly in favor and won over the opposition.[8] One can, by thinking of the codename, envision the prime minister—that solid, sturdy, rough man—speaking to his peers with a voice hoarse, charged as with emotion.[9]

Following Allied successes in Sicily, attention was turned to an assault and advance through the boot of Italy. Operation BAYTOWN was to provide the Allies with free shipping access through the Straits of Messina. It was a fairly blatant reference, a fortified town in a bay. But the coded plans that preceded BAYTOWN proved more intriguing. These included BUTTRESS, the invasion of the Italian toe. Obviously this was derived directly from the dictionary: "any external prop or support built to

[5]Liddell Hart, Sir Basil, *History of the Second World War* (New Paragon Books, 1971), p. 277.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Partridge.
[8]Herbert Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Fought and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 105.
[9]David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: The World Pub. Co., 1968). Subsequently listed as *Dictionary*.

steady a structure by opposing its outward thrusts.''[10] Supplementary to BUTTRESS was GOBLET, the attack on the instep. Viewing a goblet, one can see Italian geographic similarities to the stem of the glass. The final portion was the assault on the heel, codenamed MUSKET. Though one might, at first, perceive this to be from the heavy, large-caliber shoulder weapon, ''musket'' has its roots in the old Italian *moschetto,* a crossbow arrow.[11] Allied planners, in likening the Italian peninsula to Achilles, carried off a great play on words.

At the same time, there were two other operations that were not implemented: BRIMSTONE, an invasion of Sardinia, and FIREBRAND, with Corsica as the target. BRIMSTONE, with its base in sulfur, fits into the usual notion of Sardinia. FIREBRAND, on the other hand, directly alludes to Corsica's famous son, Napoleon Bonaparte.

The September 1943 invasion of Salerno was codenamed AVA-LANCHE, for an ''overwhelming rush of (something)'' . . . in this case, an overwhelming assault by Allied troops.

After AVALANCHE, the British moved to capture Taranto, the largest seaport in southern Italy, under the codename SLAPSTICK. The port was thought out of air range, but the Allies decided to risk the action . . . and succeeded on 8 September 1943. According to one historian, the name was appropriate[12] . . . it was a ''broad comedy characterized by boisterous action, as the throwing of pies in actors' faces.''[13] But SLAPSTICK might have been drawn from yet another source: the word was used by World War I New Zealand troops for a battle or attack . . . a slap-up.[14]

The next year, the Allies decided on an amphibious landing behind the Gustav Line . . . at Anzio. The first reaction to the operational name, SHINGLE, would be typically American: a small, thin piece of building material used for covering roofs or building sides. That definition, how-ever, does not give an insight into the operation. A better form could be drawn from the English, whose ''shingles'' are ''small, waterworn stones or pebbles, such as lie in loose sheets or beds on the seashore—or a beach, riverbank, or other area covered with such small pebbles or stones.''[15] The English meaning is more appropriate and descriptive. ''Shingle is pretty dubious,'' General George S. Patton wrote in his diary, ''as the

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[10]Ibid.

[11]*Partridge.*

[12]A.J.P. Tayler, *The Second World War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Putnam, 1975), p. 176.

[13]*Random House.*

[14]*Partridge.*

[15]*Random House.*

beaches are bad and largely unknown.''[16] Loose stones on a beach provide poor footing for advancing combat troops.

By March 1944, the Allied offensive on the main Italian front was to be supported by over two thousand guns—with the air forces in the region striking heavily at the enemy's rail and road networks. It was not incongruous, therefore, to call the air operation STRANGLE, an effort ''to prevent the continuance, growth, rise, or action of (another).''[17]

In order to win the war, an invasion of the European continent was a necessity. For logistic purposes, the invasion had to be across the English Channel. The British began planning after Dunkirk for this eventuality. The buildup was codenamed BOLERO, after the throbbing music of Ravel—a very obvious reference. The actual cross-the-water attack was NEPTUNE, a reinforcement of the British desire to regain supremacy of the seas. Later, the coded operation became ROUNDUP, an appropriate description of the assortment of men, materials and weapons to be herded across the channel.

A smaller-scale invasion, tentatively planned for 1942, was called SLEDGEHAMMER, a joint Anglo-American strike against the continent. The sledgehammer was never wielded.

When the British—after Stalin sided with Roosevelt—agreed to an invasion at last in 1944, and Normandy was selected as the invasion site, the name was changed to OVERLORD, another Churchillian play on words. Overlord means to obey the will of one's sovereign. By this time in the war, it was apparent that post-war England would have to take a back seat in international politics and economy . . . a distasteful thought to the British.

As part of the aftermath of D-Day, the centerpiece of OVERLORD, the largely armored army of General Patton pushed down the bottom of the Normandy peninsula. At a strategic point, one corps split off and overran the weakly-held Brittany Peninsula; the other wheeled left and went to Le Mans.[18] The breakthrough out of Normandy by the First Army was named COBRA, for the hooded snake that, when excited, expands its neck skin by the movement of its anterior ribs. A look at the 1944 battlemap is a caricature of the snake.

Collateral to COBRA was GOODWOOD, a British operation conceived by Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, which did not, in the

[16]Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers* 1940-1945 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), p. 400.

[17]*Random House*.

[18]James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 321-2.

words of Liddell Hart, correspond to the racy tone of the name donor, an English race course.[19]

As a diversion from Normandy, the Allies projected another invasion to the south of France, ANVIL. Anyone who has ever suffered a middle-ear infection, knows what the *anvil* or *incus* is. When the operation was finally implemented, over Churchill's opposition, it was dubbed DRAGOON. Churchill appreciated the new name because it symbolized his being "dragooned," forced, into submission by his Allied peers.

The British offensive through Bologna, Italy, in August 1944, was called OLIVE, after the fruit trees that provide some basis for the Italian economy . . . or possibly from the color of the woolen US Army uniforms.

General Patton called Operation MARKET-GARDEN the "greatest operation we have yet attempted." Conceived by Montgomery, MARKET-GARDEN—English for a truck garden[20] —was the plan to drop three airborne divisions from France to Holland (MARKET) to secure the area in preparation for an armored drive (GARDEN) which would link up the three landings and bridge the lower Rhine at Arnhem, Holland. The end result, as Montgomery saw it, was a clear Allied path to Germany. In other words, this operation would carry the produce from the garden to the market. And the ground elements—GARDEN—would go to the air elements—MARKET!

RUSSIA

By July 1943, it seemed the German hopes for Russian conquest were all but gone. The Germans closed with the Russians along the Kursk salient in what became the greatest tank battle of the war. Operation CITADEL might well have been a misnomer. Kursk became the graveyard of the great panzer armies.

The British bombing of the Caucasus in July-August 1943 was VELVET, a reference to the "cash or chips a player is ahead in a gambling game."[21]

To further destroy the German war machine—and to give the Poles a bargaining position when the Russians arrived—the Allies helped foment the Warsaw uprising, codenamed TEMPEST, for "a confused or crowded throng,"[22] a violent commotion.[23]

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[19]Liddell Hart, p. 556.
[20]*Partridge.*
[21]*Dictionary.*
[22]*Partridge.*
[23]*Dictionary.*

NORTH AFRICA

The German plan for the seizure of French North Africa went under another Hitlerian name: ATTILA, after the "Scourge of God." Again, it was unfortunate for himself that Hitler ignored the history behind the name. Attila was defeated by the Romans and Visigoths in 451 at Chalons-sur-Marne in France.

The British, in their usual abrupt manner, decided, after Rommel's efforts to capture Tobruk in May 1941, to try an offensive stroke with the few men they had. Since they lacked manpower and supplies for a lengthy clash, it seemed logical to call the operation BREVITY, the "quality of expressing much in a few words."[24]

A month later, the British launched another North Africa offensive, BATTLEAXE, to relieve Tobruk and drive Rommel out of Cyrenaica. The grandiose-titled plan was a failure, but it did cause the ax to fall on the man, Field Marshall Sir Archibald P. Wavell, who dreamed it up.

Cringing under embarrassing losses, the British developed another plan to oust the Germans. This time they called it GYMNAST, considering the desert to be a gigantic playing field. That plan was restructured after the Americans joined the war as SUPER-GYMNAST and adopted in July 1942.

Rommel was not to be stopped, however, so in November 1941-January 1942, Operation CRUSADER was unveiled. Like their 11th, 12th and 13th century predecessors, the British could not recover the Holy Land from the heathens . . . this time the ones wearing the swastika.

At the beginning of January 1942, the British considered their repulse at Agedabia as a momentary interruption in their drive toward Tripoli. The next plan, called ACROBAT, was also unsuccessful. "Before the month ended," Liddell Hart remarked, "they had done a string of somersaults."[25]

Perhaps the British problem rested in the less-than-exciting codenames. In October 1942, they tried again . . . with a more modern operational name: LIGHTFOOT. The costly, cautious protracted struggle in North Africa, near the Mediterranean, was a far cry from the springy step of the name.

SUPERCHARGE was next. It was considered a good name—meaning "to charge with an abundant or excessive amount, as of energy, emotion, tension"—to impress the people executing the plan. A modification of

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[24]*Random House*.
[25]Liddell Hart, p. 267.

LIGHTFOOT, it proved moderately successful. As a result, when they planned—in March 1943—a later North African campaign, they recalled the success and called the new operation SUPERCHARGE II. Montgomery's original plan for the Mediterranean thrust was called PUGILIST GALLOP, the fast legwork of a boxer going in for the kill. But SUPER-CHARGE had been successful, why try a new, untested name?

With the introduction of the Americans into the war, and their demand to defeat Germany first, thought was given to a cross-Channel invasion, but British leaders wanted a peripheral, not direct, strategy. The British demanded a joint landing in North Africa for November 1942 . . . code-named TORCH.* The most frequent interpretation alludes to the handcarrying of the "torch of freedom" to the North African shores. However, if one looks further, the correct meaning emerges.

"To torch" is "to point (the joints between roofing slates) with a mixture of lime and hair."[26] TORCH makes much more sense in that context: a solidification of the "limes" (British) and the "hairs" (Americans).

Another North African campaign, planned by General Harold Alexander, was conceived as a breakthrough by hammer-blow . . . appropriately named VULCAN.

SOUTH PACIFIC

There was no shortage of codenames in the South Pacific either. The Japanese, as far as research now shows, had at least two, both of which defy direct interpretation. A-GO was a long-planned counter-offensive against the Allies following the bombardment of Saipan and Tinian in June 1944. It is possible A-GO meant the *A*llies must go.

SHO-1 was another Japanese plan that led to the battle of Leyte Gulf. It has been deciphered as "Victory Plan Number One."

A determined Allied ground offensive in North Burma was proposed, using Chinese, British and American troops. That offensive, aided by amphibious operations against the Andaman Islands, would be called BUCCANEER. Though the operation was scrapped, the name was a veiled reference to Chiang Kai-Shek, considered by many as just another Chinese warlord. It is also possible the name was adapted from the then-popular comic strip, "Terry and the Pirates."

The November 1943 Allied attack on the Gilberts was codenamed

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*It should be pointed out that TORCH was originally SUPER-GYMNAST.
[26]*Random House*.

GALVANIC. The operation lived up to its name and introduced a direct current of electricity into the South Pacific campaign.

Using an alternate meaning for the word ''rashness''—quickly effective—the British and Chinese developed a plan to march overland from the Chinese interior and gain control of the Canton/Hong Kong area. Operation RASHNESS was close to being effective.

The 1945 amphibious American landing at Okinawa carried a strange codename: ICEBERG. But the landing craft, separated from the troop carriers, could—by a stroke of the imagination—be likened to ''a large floating mass of ice detached from a glacier.''[27]

In the later days of the Pacific war, the Combined Chiefs of Staff wanted to broaden the airlink to China and exploit the land routes. The two main plans considered by Lord Louis Mountbatten in May-June 1945 were CAPITAL, an overland thrust to recapture north-central Burma—an area considered of great importance—and DRACULA, an amphibious attack to southern Burma which would suck the blood from the Japanese war machine.

The final codenamed plan was MAGIC CARPET. To those involved, it did have a magical quality to it. MAGIC CARPET was the massive movement of American troops from distant battlefields home. The pleasure of American—not Arabian—nights awaited them. Part of the romance of that name might be diminished by considering another definition. In railway parlance of the 1920s, a ''magic carpet'' was a fast freight train.[28]

In many respects, it seems strange that the intelligence officers of the belligerent nations did not decipher the meanings behind the codenames. But they did have other things to keep their minds occupied.

Before one thinks that national security is in jeopardy, let us remember that World War II taught the world many lessons.

A Marine colonel who was responsible for naming Vietnam operations indicated the codenames he supplied were irrelevant to the strategy. He assigned designations because he felt he owed it to history.[29] The debt is repaid, but the aura of mystery and intrigue is gone.

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[27]*Dictionary*.

[28]*Partridge*.

[29]Interview: Col. Herbert M. Hart, USMC, 6 December 1980, Washington, D.C.

REPRESENTATIVE CODENAMED OPERATIONS
OF WORLD WAR II

Axis:
1940:   Sea Lion.
1941:   Attila, Barbarossa, Isabella.
1942:   Hercules.
1943:   Citadel.
1944:   A-Go, Greif, Sho-1.

Allies:
1941:   Battleaxe, Brevity, Supergymnast (formerly Gymnast).
1942:   Acrobat, Bolero, Buccaneer, Lightfoot, Neptune, Sledgehammer, Super-
         charge, Torch.
1943:   Avalanche, Baytown (including elements of Buttress, Goblet and Musket),
         Brimstone, Firebrand, Galvanic, Husky, Pointblank, Pugilist Gallop, Slap-
         stick, Supercharge II, Velvet, Vulcan.
1944:   Cobra, Dragoon (formerly Anvil), Goodwood, Market-Garden, Olive, Rash-
         ness, Shingle, Strangle, Tempest, Overlord (formerly Roundup).
1945:   Capital, Dracula, Magic Carpet, Thunderclap.

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If we may accept the idea that the Puritans labored to found the kingdom of
God, we must concede that in their establishment of a name-pattern they were, to
a remarkable degree, successful in that endeavor.

George R. Stewart, *American Given Names*, 1979.