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What's in a Codename?

A Supplement for Spycraft By Robert Mueller

Introduction

Historically speaking, codenames only came into their own in the 20th century, with the rise of large-scale operational bureaucracies that grew around military and intelligence work. Previously, missions and agents were utilized too narrowly to warrant official monikers and counter-intelligence efforts were not organized well enough to necessitate a step between plain text and encrypted messages. Yet codenames have become a staple in popular media, as ubiquitous in movies, TV and books as spies themselves.

A codename is a compound of one or more phrases used as a single chunk of information, often as a single word. It refers to a person, an item, a location, an organization or an operation and it is almost always disconnected from the subject's real name and background. It is a shared secret that lets a closed group of people refer to the subject anonymously.

Building a Codename

An effective codename balances security with ease of use. When conceiving one, important factors include length, complexity, themes and rotation.

Long codenames are difficult to work with and memorize. Worse yet, they become a constant stream of repeated characters in encrypted messages, making them easier to decipher. Generally you want to use short codenames whenever possible.

Fortunately, a codename's security can be improved by increasing the number of words or phrases involved (otherwise called your "codename dictionary"). This can also increase the number of available options in a

family of related codenames. Memorization and ease of use suffer, of course and so few codenames exceed three words or phrases.

Codename families often revolve around themes, which makes them more memorable. For example, British Rainbow Codes used a two-part system, the first a colour of the rainbow and the second chosen from a list of nouns. NATO vehicle reporting names start with a certain letter (e.g. H for helicopter — thus the Hind, Hip and Helix). When considering a theme, keep length and commonality in mind. Does it require long and complicated words that are not widely used? Then it should be discarded for something easier.

Rotation is another concern and a common cause for confusion. When a codename family's options are used up, previously used codenames can be assigned to new assets. This can frustrate enemy intelligence but also increases the burden on intended users as well. In general the rotation in any codename family should be slow enough that the same assets are not using the same terms twice, at least not in the same operational theatre.

Given all these factors, it is a good idea to consider the number of codenames needed before settling on a family pattern. The Reservoir Dogs robbers got by just fine with colours as there were only a handful of them but the same scheme would collapse if used by the U.S. military. Not only would it result in constant rotation but it would demand much greater detail to keep operations straight, defeating the purpose of using a codename.

For a number of basic codename themes and words, see Table 1: Codename Themes .

Table 1: Codename Themes

Theme	Example Words
Anatomy	Shoulder, Foot, Finger
Birds of prey	Eagle, Falcon, Egrer
Bladed weapons	Kukri, Nodachi, Broadsword
Chess pieces	Bishop, Queen, Knight
Clothing	Hat, Coat, Boot
Colors	Green, Blue, White
Drinks	Screwdriver, Mojito, Vesper
Fish	Bass, Salmon, Tuna
Food	Lasagna, Steak, Noodle
Furniture	Table, Closer, Lamp
Months	February, June, October
Musical instruments	Guitar, Saxophone, Cymbal
Planets	Neptune, Venus, Saturn
Sports equipment	Football, Shuttlecock, Racket
Weather	Sunny, Cold, Foggy

Compromising a Codename

Codenames are not secrets; they are used in “casual” conversation, always with the expectation that the enemy is listening and keeping notes. This is why codenames should not contain sensitive information. They shield assets from discovery, acting like linguistic disguises and most of the techniques used to maintain a disguise also apply here. Avoid references to times, places and people when using a codename. Calling an Egyptian contact “Cairo” might be useful shorthand but it also gives listeners solid information about him. Similarly, a mid-day attack should not be codenamed “High Noon,” any more than an airborne attack should be codenamed “Skyfall.” Deliberately misleading references are helpful, of course and can help throw observers off your asset’s scent.

You might expect common sense to prevail but real-life codenames often have less obvious yet easily exploited flaws. Consider Nazi Germany’s predilection for Norse and historical codenames, which its soldiers could easily understand and spell. Unfortunately, this scheme also invited obvious applications, such

as Wotan, a codename used for a classified single-beam radar system. It was a cute name but also trivial for others to see through, given Wotan was a god famous for having only one eye.

Always consider how a codename’s use might compromise your asset, even just by sending a message. When a radio transmission is intercepted, those listening do not just learn what was said. They also know the frequency across which it was said and when, not to mention the area where, it was picked up. All of these details can betray obvious codename meanings, as can the sender and recipients of an email or the servers through which it was sent. Remember that no information exists in a vacuum — the same links that make a codename easier to remember also make it easier to compromise.

Operational Use

At least codenames are easy to use, right? Just replace the asset’s name with the codename and you are good to go. Sadly, this only works when a codename sounds natural in context. “Purple Duck met with Rotunda 7 at Bestseller” might be random enough to keep the assets disguised but the agents who just said it probably stick out like a sore thumb.

Deep-cover operatives in particular need to be careful when using codenames, as they cannot easily be replaced and frequently cannot cleanly withdraw either. It is generally better for them to fall back on pseudonyms and code phrases, which can be engineered specifically for their mission.

Another danger is that your Agency might become known for its codename system. It might not reveal every codenamed asset but it would certainly point them out, which can be disastrous.

Reporting Names

Similar to codenames, reporting names are official nicknames, often given to weapons and vehicles. For example, efforts were made during the Pacific Campaign of the Second World War to compile a definitive list of Japanese aircraft. Fighters were assigned boy’s names and though there was little accounting for variants and widespread mislabelling the system led to spotting guides that made identification of enemy aircraft much easier and faster. Operational planning greatly improved as a result.

Another system of reporting names started with the foundation of NATO, this time focusing on Eastern Block equipment. The scheme utilized both themes (starting letters for equipment types) and versions (appended letters in alphabetical order for vehicle variants). The scheme was not perfect; it relied heavily upon observation and had little official nomenclature to fall back on. Variants were lettered in order of their discovery, not when they entered service and different variants wound up with the same reporting name.

History lesson aside, reporting names can inject a little techno-thriller flavour into modern campaigns. You could use existing names or just make up your own system following the NATO standard. Just take its category and follow

the formula. A compact overview of important categories can be found on Table 2: NATO Reporting Names.

Example: A new Russian anti-tank missile has been discovered. It is a surface-to-surface weapon, so its reporting name should start with S. You might call it “Skylight.”

For added authenticity, lists of known NATO reporting names are freely available on the Internet. Using one not only expands your options but also avoids doubling up with a historically accurate name.

Table 2: NATO Reporting Names

Category	Theme	Examples
Aircraft — Bombers	Name begins with B	Bear, Badger, Blackjack
Aircraft — Cargo	Name begins with C	Cart, Cooker, Colt
Aircraft — Fighter	Name begins with F	Foxtrot, Fulcrum, Fishbed
Aircraft — Rotary-wing Aircraft	Name begins with H	Helix, Hook, Hokum
Aircraft — Other	Name begins with M	Maxdome, Mermaid, Mystic
Missile — Air-to-Air	Name begins with A	Acrid, Aroll, Arrow
Missile — Surface-to-Air	Name begins with G	Gecko, Gaskin, Gadfly
Missile — Air-to-Surface	Name begins with K	Kingfish, Kangaroo, Koala
Missile — Surface-to-Surface	Name begins with S	Scud, Surgeon, Switchblade
Most submarines	NATO Phonetic Alphabet	Golf, Juliet, Papa
Radar systems	Two one-syllable words	Tomb Stone, Land Roll, Fire Dome

I Need a Codename Now!

When you are in desperate need for a codename without any preparation, just roll 1d100 twice and find each result on a different column of Table 3: The Codename Generator. This quickly produces a two-word codename.

Example: With rolls of 43 and 50, Operation: Hungry Justice can begin!

You can of course build your own codename generators using whatever scheme works for your organization. Aim for short, clear, unmistakable words. Vocabulary lists for English learners make an excellent source of widely-used terms.

Signs & Portents



Table 3: The Codename Generator

Line Number	Code Word	Code Word
1	Able	Acre
2	Alert	Anger
3	Alpha	Archer
4	Angry	Asset
5	Argent	Ball
6	Beta	Basket
7	Big	Beach
8	Blue	Bike
9	Bold	Budget
10	Bright	Cake
11	Broken	Cheese
12	Brown	Cinch
13	Calm	Concrete
14	Charlie	Corporal
15	Cheap	Desert
16	Cool	Dial
17	Cream	Disco
18	Yellow	Doodle
19	Dark	Door
20	Delta	Dusk
21	Direct	Elk
22	Down	Exchange
23	Eager	Exile
24	Early	Extra
25	Easy	Falcon
26	Echo	Fish
27	Empty	Five
28	Evil	Flow
29	Fake	Form
30	Far	Fort
31	Fit	Game
32	Found	Garden

Line Number	Code Word	Code Word
33	Foxtrot	Gas
34	Gamma	Ground
35	Gnarly	Gun
36	Golf	Harp
37	Great	Hitch
38	Green	Hole
39	Harmless	Hook
40	Hidden	Horror
41	High	Hound
42	Hor	Idea
43	Hungry	Idol
44	Ideal	Industry
45	Ill	Information
46	India	Ink
47	Instant	Jerk
48	Iron	Journey
49	Jive	Jump
50	Jubilant	Justice
51	Juliet	Karma
52	Just	Kick
53	Kilo	Knowledge
54	Lost	Lark
55	Long	Light
56	Lucky	Link
57	Maroon	Lord
58	Mighty	Master
59	Mike	Microphone
60	Mixed	Monk
61	Naughty	Mortgage
62	Nice	Mouse
63	Night	Nemesis
64	Old	Nicotine



Signs & Portents

Line Number	Code Word	Code Word
65	Only	Night
66	Orange	November
67	Original	Oil
68	Pink	Online
69	Peachy	Owl
70	Quantum	Papa
71	Quiet	Parade
72	Red	Park
73	Righteous	Pilgrim
74	Rich	Pork
75	Zesty	Power
76	Short	Quebec
77	Sierra	Rear
78	Silent	Record
79	Sunny	Rice
80	Super	Rigor
81	Tough	Road
82	Thin	Saw
83	Thirsty	Shame
84	Tight	Shark
85	Timeless	Sister
86	Top	Sugar
87	Torn	Target
88	Ultra	Tile
89	Uniform	Tourist
90	Vague	Trouble
91	Zulu	Trust
92	Venerated	Uncle
93	Victor	Vice
94	Vigorous	Void
95	Yankee	Wall
96	Wild	War
97	Wicked	Water
98	X-Ray	Wolf
99	Vital	Year
100	Young	Zebra