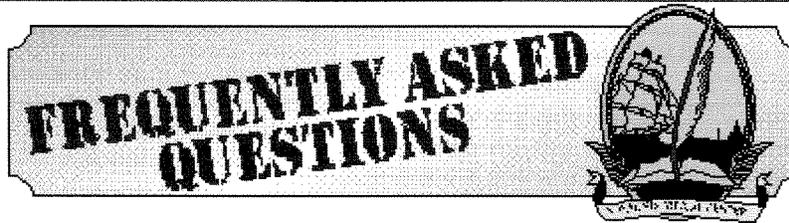


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## Ship Naming in the United States Navy

The Navy traces its ancestry to 13 October 1775, when an act of the Continental Congress authorized the first ship of a new navy for the United Colonies, as they were then known. The ships of the Continental Navy, and of the Navy later established under the Federal Constitution, were not named in any strictly categorical manner.

Ship names in the Continental Navy and the early Federal navy came from a variety of sources. As if to emphasize the ties that many Americans still felt to Britain, the first ship of the new Continental Navy was named *Alfred* in honor of Alfred the Great, the king of Wessex who is credited with building the first English naval force. Another ship was named *Raleigh* to commemorate the seagoing exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh. Some ships honored early patriots and heroes (*Hancock* and *General Greene*). Others commemorated the young nation's ideals and institutions (*Constitution*, *Independence*, *Congress*). A 74-gun ship-of-the-line, launched in 1782 and donated to the French Navy on completion, was named *America*. A Revolutionary War frigate named *Bourbon* saluted the King of France, whose alliance would further the cause of American independence. Other ship names honored American places (*Boston*, *Virginia*). Small warships-- brigs and schooners--bore a variety of names. Some were named for positive character traits (*Enterprise*, *Diligent*). Others had classical names (*Syren*, *Argus*) or names of small creatures with a potent sting (*Hornet*, *Wasp*).

On 3 March 1819 an act of Congress formally placed the responsibility for assigning names to the Navy's ships in the hands of the Secretary of the Navy, a prerogative which he still exercises. This act stated that "all of the ships, of the Navy of the United States, now building, or hereafter to be built, shall be named by the Secretary of the Navy, under the direction of the President of the United States, according to the following rule, to wit: those of the first class shall be called after the States of this Union; those of the second class after the rivers; and those of the third class after the principal cities and towns; taking care that no two vessels of the navy shall bear the same name." The last-cited provision remains in the United States Code today.

An act of 12 June 1858 specifically included the word "steamship" in the ship type nomenclature, and officially defined the "classes" of ships in terms of the number of their guns. Ships armed with 40 guns or more were of the "first class"; those carrying fewer than 40, but more than 20, guns were of the "second class." The name source for the second class was expanded to include the principal towns as well as rivers. The unprecedented expansion of the fleet during the Civil War was reflected--as far as ship naming was concerned--in an act of 5 August 1861, which authorized the Secretary of the Navy "to change the names of any vessels purchased for use of the Navy Department..." This provision also remains in current law.

Shortly before the turn of this century the legislation was changed to reflect the remarkable changes taking place in the Navy itself as wooden hulls, sails, and muzzleloading ordnance gave way to steel ships with breechloading rifles. An act of May 4, 1898, specified that "all first-class battleships and monitors [shallow-draft coast-defense ships completed between 1891 and 1903, armed with heavy guns] shall be named for the States, and shall not be named for any city, place, or person, until the names of the States have been exhausted, provided that nothing herein contained shall be construed as to interfere with the names of states already assigned to any such battleship or monitor."

As with many other things, the procedures and practices involved in Navy ship naming are as much, if not more, products of evolution and tradition than of legislation. As we have seen, the names for new ships are personally decided by the Secretary of the Navy. The Secretary can rely on many sources to help him reach his decisions. Each year, the Naval Historical Center compiles primary and alternate ship name recommendations and forwards these to the Chief of Naval Operations by way of the chain of command. These recommendations are the result of research into the history of the Navy and by suggestions submitted by service members, Navy veterans, and the public. Ship name source records at the Historical Center reflect the wide variety of name sources that have been used in the past, particularly since World War I. Ship name recommendations are conditioned by such factors as the name categories for ship types now being built, as approved by the Secretary of the Navy; the distribution of geographic names of ships of the Fleet; names borne by previous ships which distinguished themselves in service; names recommended by individuals and groups; and names of naval leaders, national figures, and deceased members of the Navy and Marine Corps who have been honored for heroism in war or for extraordinary achievement in peace.

In its final form, after consideration at the various levels of command, the Chief of Naval Operations signs the memorandum recommending names for the current year's building program and sends it to the Secretary of the Navy. The Secretary considers these nominations, along with others he receives as well as his own thoughts in this matter. At appropriate times, he selects names for specific ships and announces them.

While there is no set time for assigning a name, it is customarily done before the ship is christened. The ship's sponsor--the person who will christen the ship--is also selected and invited by the Secretary. In the case of ships named for individuals, an effort is made to identify the eldest living direct female descendant of that individual to perform the role of ship's sponsor. For ships with other name sources, it is customary to honor the wives of senior naval officers or public officials.

While the Navy has attempted to be systematic in naming its ships, like all institutions it has been subject to evolutionary change, and the name sources of the Navy's ships have not been immune to this change. Thus, an historical accounting of this evolution, as it appeared in modern times, may help the reader understand the ship naming process as it exists today.

The Civil War expanded the Navy to an extent undreamed of in prewar times. More than 200 new ships were built, and another 418 were purchased for naval use. Ironclads, including monitors, and shallow-draft river steamers fell into new classification categories, and their naming reflected the abrupt pace of growth. Names like *Hartford* and *Brooklyn*, *Ticonderoga* and *Monongahela* mingled with *Trefoil*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Penguin*, and *Western World*. Many ships, including gunboats and monitors, bore names of American Indian origin, such as *Owasco*, *Sagamore*, *Saugus*, and *Onondaga*. Four big monitors, laid down but never completed, were given such tongue-twisters as *Shackamaxon* and *Quinsigamond*. A large oceangoing ironclad was, fittingly enough, named *New Ironsides*. Ships acquired for Navy use were known by such strange names as *Hunchback*, *Midnight*, and *Switzerland*. In 1869 one Secretary of the Navy, who disliked the Indian names borne by so many Navy ships, renamed a large number of them, substituting names from classical antiquity such as *Centaur*, *Medusa*, *Goliath*,

and *Atlas*. A few months later, his successor changed most of the names back again!

As the "new Navy," the generation of steel ships that would mature into the fleet of the 20th century, took form the Navy's new ships were named in accordance with what evolved into a new system, tailored to the new ship types now developing. There came to be--then, as now--some duplication in use of name sources for different ship types. Names of states, for example, were borne by battleships; by armored cruisers (large, fast warships as big as, or bigger than, contemporary battleships but more lightly protected and armed with cruiser-caliber guns), and monitors (small coast-defense ships armed with heavy guns). As battleship construction went on through the early 1900s, state names began to run short. The law stated that battleships had to bear state names; to comply with this, monitors and armored cruisers were renamed for cities within their respective name states to free the names of their states for assignment to new battleships. The monitors *Florida* and *Nevada*, for instance, became *Tallahassee* and *Tonopah*, while the armored cruisers *Maryland* and *West Virginia* became *Frederick* and *Huntington*. By 1920, state names were the sole preserve of battleships.

In 1894 the famed Civil War sloop-of-war *Kearsarge* ran aground in the Caribbean and had to be written off as unsalvageable. There was so much affection for that ship in the Fleet that the Secretary of the Navy asked Congress to permit her name to be perpetuated by a new battleship. This was done, and *Kearsarge* (Battleship Number 5) became the only American battleship not to be named for a state.

From the 1880s on, cruisers were named for cities while destroyers--evolving from the steam torpedo boats built around the turn of the century--came to be named for American naval leaders and heroes, as today's destroyers are still named. Submarines began to enter the Fleet in 1900. The first was named *Holland* in honor of John Holland, submarine designer and builder. Later submarines were, at first, given such names as *Grampus*, *Salmon*, and *Porpoise*, but were also named for venomous and stinging creatures, such as *Adder*, *Tarantula*, and *Viper*. Submarines were renamed in 1911, however, and carried alpha-numeric names such as *A-1*, *C-1*, *H-3*, *L-7*, and the like until 1931, when "fish and denizens of the deep" once more became their name source. In 1931, existing ships were not renamed.

World War I sparked unprecedented naval ship construction, principally in destroyers and submarines, to protect a massive sealift effort--the "bridge of ships"--across the Atlantic to Europe. Additionally, the development of mine warfare necessitated the introduction of a new type of ship, the minesweeper. A new type of ship required a new name source. The then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, took a keen interest in amateur ornithology. This led him to select bird names as the name source for these new ships, and "F.D.R." signed the General Order assigning names to the first 36 ships of the *Lapwing* class. The ships that bore these colorful names served as the backbone of the Navy's mine force for the next quarter century; many earned honors in World War II.

Between the World Wars the Navy's first aircraft carriers came into service. Our first carrier, converted from the collier *Jupiter*, was *Langley* (CV 1), named in honor of aviation pioneer Samuel Pierpont Langley. Our next two carriers were built on the unfinished hulls of battle cruisers, two of a canceled class of six fast capital ships which had already been assigned the names of American battles and famous former Navy ships. These new carriers kept their original names, *Lexington* and *Saratoga*. The original battle-cruiser name source continued as *Ranger*, *Yorktown*, *Enterprise*, *Wasp*, and *Hornet* entered service between 1934 and 1941, and was carried on through World War II and into the postwar years.

As World War II approached, and ship construction programs began to include new types of ships, these required new name sources; others required a modification of existing name sources to meet a perceived shortage of "appropriate" names. Minesweepers were now being built and converted in large numbers. Perhaps fearing an exhaustion of suitable bird names, the Navy also used "general word

classification" names such as *Adept*, *Bold*, and *Agile*, for new sweepers. This began a dual naming tradition that extended beyond World War II. Modern mine countermeasures ships are intended to detect and destroy all types of mines; they bear such names as *Avenger*, *Guardian*, and *Dextrous*. Coastal minehunters, similar in concept but designed for use in coastal waters, carry bird names (*Osprey*, *Raven*). Some hundreds of small seagoing minesweepers, built during World War II, were at first known only by their hull numbers. After the war, those remaining in the Fleet were reclassified and given bird names; thus, the wartime *YMS 311* became *Robin* (AMS 53).

A new ship type, the destroyer escort (DE), retained the name source of its "parent" ship type, the destroyer. Most of these mass-produced antisubmarine patrol and escort ships were named in honor of members of the naval service killed in action in World War II. Some were named for destroyers lost in the early stages of that war.

Ships lost in wartime were normally honored by having their names reassigned to new construction. Names like *Lexington*, *Yorktown*, *Atlanta*, *Houston*, *Triton* and *Shark* were perpetuated in memory of lost ships and gallant crews. Unique among these names bestowed in honor of lost ships was *Canberra*, assigned to a heavy cruiser in honor of the Australian cruiser *Canberra*, sunk while operating with American warships during the Battle of Savo Island in August 1942. This was seen to be an appropriate exception to the custom of naming cruisers for American cities.

During World War II the names of individuals were once again assigned to aircraft carriers. A small fleet carrier (CVL 49), converted from a cruiser hull, was named *Wright* in honor of the Wright brothers, while a large aircraft carrier (CVB 42) of the *Midway* class was named *Franklin D. Roosevelt* soon after the President's death in the spring of 1945. That name was suggested to then-President Harry S. Truman by Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who would himself later be honored in the naming of our first "supercarrier," *Forrestal* (CVA 59). *Franklin D. Roosevelt* was the first aircraft carrier to be named for an American statesman; *Franklin* and *Hancock*, wartime *Essex*-class fleet carriers, honored the former Navy ships of those names and not, as many think, the statesmen themselves. A new *Langley* (CVL 27) honored our first aircraft carrier, lost in the opening months of war in the Pacific.

Amphibious warfare, long considered a minor function by navies, assumed major importance in World War II. An entirely new "family" of ships and craft was developed for the massive landing operations in Europe and the Pacific. Many types of landing ships did not receive "word" names, but were simply known by their hull numbers (*LST 806* and *LCI(G) 580*). Attack cargo ships and attack transports carried landing craft to put cargo and troops ashore on a beachhead. Many of these were named for American counties (*Alamance* [AKA 75]; *Hinsdale* [APA 120]). Some early APAs, converted from conventional troopships, kept their former names (*Leonard Wood*, *President Hayes*); many AKAs were named for stars (*Achernar*) or constellations (*Cepheus*). Dock landing ships, seagoing ships with a large well deck for landing craft or vehicles, bore names of historic sites (*Gunston Hall*, *Rushmore*). Modern LSDs are still part of today's Fleet, and carry on this name source (*Fort McHenry*, *Pearl Harbor*). After World War II the remaining tank landing ships (LST) were given names of American counties; thus, the hitherto-unnamed *LST 819* now became *Hampshire County* (LST 819).

As naval technology advanced after World War II, the fleet began to evolve much as it had after the Civil War. Old ship types left the Navy's roster as new types emerged. Nuclear power and guided missiles spurred much of this change. The first nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser, *Long Beach*, was the last cruiser to be named for a city in traditional fashion.

The next cruisers, also nuclear-powered missile ships, were given state names and became the *California* and *Virginia* classes. We had built no battleships since World War II, and these new ships were seen to be, in a sense, their successors as the most powerful surface warships afloat.

Nuclear-powered fleet ballistic missile submarines, built to carry the Polaris strategic deterrent missile, began to go into commission in the early 1960s. These were rightly regarded as ships without precedent. Thus, a name source of their own was deemed appropriate. Our first ballistic missile submarine was named *George Washington*, and the rest of the "41 for freedom" bore the names of "famous Americans and others who contributed to the growth of democracy." Some of these submarines were later reclassified as conventional attack submarines under the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) agreements. Though they lost their missile capability, they continued to bear such names as *Patrick Henry* and *Ethan Allen*. The newest Trident missile submarines of the *Ohio* class bear state names, one of the name sources originally considered for the first Polaris submarines. One of the class, *Henry M. Jackson*, honors a legislator who had a strong share in shaping American defense programs.

Into the mid-1970s attack submarines continued to be named for sea creatures, though a few were named for such legislators as *Richard B. Russell* and *L. Mendel Rivers*. Ships of the more recent *Los Angeles* class bear the names of American cities. One exception, *Hyman G. Rickover*, honors the man who has been called "the father of the nuclear Navy." The new *Seawolf* class has departed from this scheme, with *Seawolf* representing a "denizen of the deep" and *Connecticut* named for the state; the third ship of the class has not yet been named.

After World War II aircraft carriers were given a mix of such traditional carrier names as *Ranger*, *Saratoga*, and *Coral Sea* and names of individuals. The first of these, as we have seen, was *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, later followed by *Forrestal* and *John F. Kennedy*. All the ships of the current *Nimitz* class bear the names of such national figures as *Theodore Roosevelt*, *George Washington*, and *Ronald Reagan*.

The names of American battles have been perpetuated by the newest class of guided missile cruisers. The first of these was *Ticonderoga*; twenty later ships of this class honor actions fought from the Revolution to World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. One ship is named *Thomas S. Gates* for a statesman who served as Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of Defense.

*Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyers continue the tradition of honoring naval leaders and heroes. There are the typical exceptions; *Roosevelt* (DDG 80) was named in honor of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, while *Winston Churchill* honors the great war leader of World War II. Some destroyers bear names of recent heroes, while others carry on the traditions of distinguished former ships of the same name.

The Navy is not only made up of combatant ships. Throughout its history it has depended on its auxiliary ships, a generic term used in referring to the many different types of ships used to support the Fleet. Auxiliary ship types are numerous and varied, and display many different name sources. Submarine tenders, for instance, are "mother ships" to submarine squadrons and bear the names of submarine pioneers (*Simon Lake*, *Hunley*, *Holland*). Ammunition ship names are names of volcanoes or words denoting fire and explosives (*Suribachi*, *Pyro*). Fleet tugs, big seagoing ships capable of rescue and firefighting as well as towing, bear American Indian names (*Powhatan*, *Navajo*), while salvage ships have names indicating salvage (*Safeguard*, *Grasp*). Ocean surveying ships have been named for individuals who distinguished themselves in ocean sciences or exploration (*Maurycy*, *Wilkes*, *Bowditch*); the name of one, *Pathfinder*, points to its role at sea. Oilers, large tankers fitted to refuel other ships at sea, are named for rivers (*Monongahela*, *Patuxent*) or for famous ship designers or builders (*Joshua Humphreys*, *Benjamin Isherwood*). Fast combat support ships provide fuel, ammunition, and other supplies to aircraft carrier battle groups. The newest class of these ships honors the names of honored supply ships of former years (*Supply*, *Arctic*).

How will the Navy name its ships in the future? It seems safe to say that the evolutionary process

of the past will continue; as the Fleet itself changes, so will the names given to its ships. It seems equally safe, however, to say that future decisions in this area will continue to demonstrate regard for the rich history and valued traditions of the United States Navy.

### A Note on Navy Ship Name Prefixes

The prefix "USS," meaning "United States Ship," is used in official documents to identify a commissioned ship of the Navy. It applies to a ship while she is in commission. Before commissioning, or after decommissioning, she is referred to by name, with no prefix. Civilian-manned ships of the Military Sealift Command (MSC) are not commissioned ships; their status is "in service," rather than "in commission." They are, nonetheless, Navy ships in active national service, and the prefix "USNS" (United States Naval Ship) was adopted to identify them. Other Navy vessels classified as "in service" are simply identified by their name (if any) and hull number, with no prefix.

Into the early years of the 20th century there was no fixed form for Navy ship prefixes. Ships were rather haphazardly identified, in correspondence or documents, by their naval type (U.S. Frigate \_\_\_\_), their rig (United States Barque \_\_\_\_), or their function (United States Flag-Ship \_\_\_\_). They might also identify themselves as "the Frigate \_\_\_\_\_," or, simply, "Ship \_\_\_\_\_." The term "United States Ship," abbreviated "USS," is seen as early as the late 1790s; it was in frequent, but far from exclusive, use by the last half of the 19th century.

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt issued an Executive order that established the present usage:

In order that there shall be uniformity in the matter of designating naval vessels, it is hereby directed that the official designation of vessels of war, and other vessels of the Navy of the United States, shall be the name of such vessel, preceded by the words, United States Ship, or the letters U.S.S., and by no other words or letters.

**--Executive Order 549, 8 January 1907.**

Today's Navy Regulations define the classification and status of naval ships and craft:

1. The Chief of Naval Operations shall be responsible for ... the assignment of classification for administrative purposes to water-borne craft and the designation of status for each ship and service craft. ....
2. Commissioned vessels and craft shall be called "United States Ship" or "U.S.S."
3. Civilian manned ships, of the Military Sealift Command or other commands, designated "active status, in service" shall be called "United States Naval Ship" or "U.S.N.S."
4. Ships and service craft designated "active status, in service," except those described by paragraph 3 of this article, shall be referred to by name, when assigned, classification, and hull number (e.g., "HIGH POINT PCH-1" or "YOGN-8").

**-- United States Navy Regulations, 1990, Article 0406.**

Some, but apparently not all, other navies also use prefixes with their ships' names. Perhaps the best known of these is "HMS" (His or Her Majesty's Ship), long used by the Royal Navy. In earlier times this was also seen as "HBMS," for "His Britannic Majesty's Ship." British Empire/Commonwealth navies used their own versions of this, inserting their own nationalities, such as HMCS for Canada, HMNZS for New Zealand, or HMAS for Australia. The Royal Saudi Naval Forces also use "HMS." Argentina uses "ARA" (Armada de la Republic Argentina); the Philippine Navy identifies its ships as "BRP" (Barka ng Republika ng Pilipinas). The Imperial German Navy used "SMS" (Seine Majestäts

Schiff); the World War II Kriegsmarine does not appear to have used a prefix, but the modern Bundesmarine uses "FGS" (Federal German Ship). India and Israel both use "INS" to mean Indian Naval Ship or Israeli Navy Ship. Lebanon and Tunisia, on the other hand, do not use any nationality prefix.

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