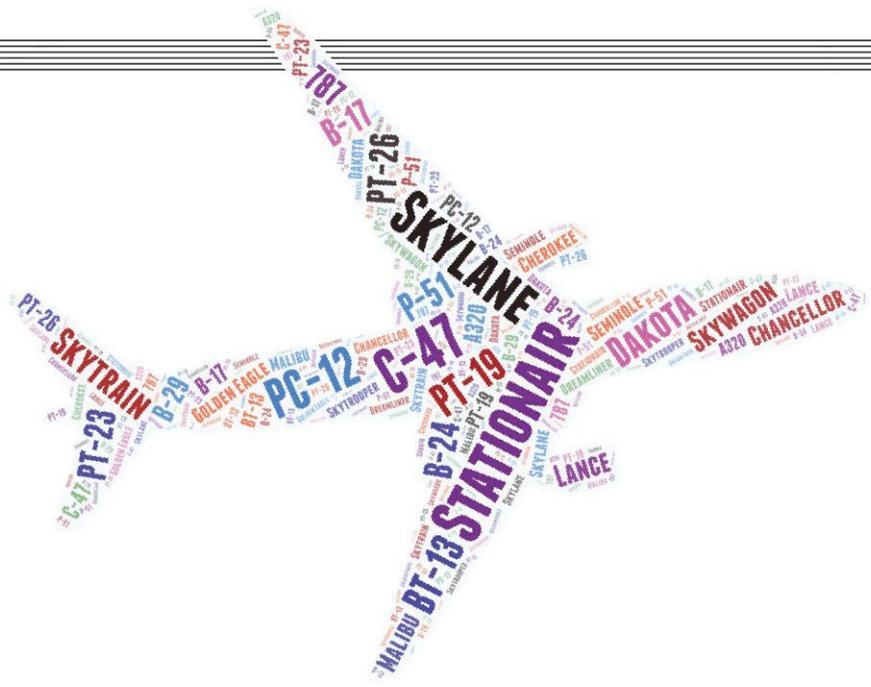




**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# What's in a Name

How ad men make our hearts soar

BY JEFF SKILES

**AIRPLANES SEEM TO BE** marked by a variety of brands, names, and designations — more than I find necessary frankly. Some seem apropos, an appropriate moniker, the mere sound of which lifts one's thoughts to the sky. The Wright Flyer, for instance, says it all. Or the Beechcraft Starship. Pure poetry. Others, however, seem to miss the mark, such as the Sopwith Cuckoo or the Martinsyde Buzzard.

My car is a Hyundai Elantra. That seems simple enough, manufacturer and model. My airplane, however, seems to require more individualization — a Cessna A185E Skywagon. The Cessna designation is obvious as is the 185 representing the aircraft design. The “E” is the rendition of the model, presumably better than the “D” but not quite as good as the “F.” The “A” is a designation Cessna used to differentiate two models of 185Es that it produced simultaneously. The 185E had an IO-470 engine. My A185E boasts a more powerful IO-520. The designation Cessna A185E was satisfactory for the FAA on the type certificate, but then the Cessna marketing department must have gotten involved.

## TOASTERS FROM A FARAWAY GALAXY

The need for marketers to put a catchy-sounding name on an aircraft seems to have really built up steam after World War II. Prior to that, aircraft of certain manufacturers often were identified only by make and model. No need for a nickname. Wacos for instance, or Howards, Travel Airs, and Fairchilds. But the era of marketing seemed to advance in earnest with the advent of peacetime. It became accepted that you could sell more toasters if they looked like they had just entered Earth orbit from some faraway galaxy. A product had to have panache. It was no longer good enough to produce a great aircraft and call it a Stinson A or a Waco YKC. Every product had to be a brand.

Clearly, something more was necessary to create excitement in the aircraft-purchasing public, so my Cessna A185E was dubbed the Skywagon. This was back in Cessna's “Sky” days — Skyhawk, Skylark, Skylane.

Cessna liked the name Skywagon so much that it used it on the Cessna 205 as well, calling it the Super Skywagon. At least there was a theme to this naming of product. But Cessna soon tired of this trend and moved on to other monikers, like Stationair for the 206, and Centurion for the 210. I assume Stationair was supposed to engender the idea of a station wagon, but what does a Roman officer from more than two millennia ago have to do with a retractable-gear Cessna?

## IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE?

In a departure from past practice, the Cessna 177 was named the Cardinal, presumably after the bird. There's a logical connection to flight with the Cardinal, but the only other bird to come out of the Cessna skunk works, aside from the last half of “Skyhawk,” was the 421 Golden Eagle. Birds were hardly thematic.

Some models were left nameless. The Cessna 310 was just that and no more. But when Cessna turbocharged the engines of the 310 it became the 320 Skyknight.

**Some names are so iconic that they are now accepted without question. But, imagine yourself in that first marketing meeting where a bunch of chain-smoking ad men sat around bandying about possibilities.**

I guess the turbocharged version was deemed worthy of a name. Or maybe Cessna realized it had simply forgotten to name the 310 and used this opportunity to rectify the error.

For a lesson in minutia, did you know that the Cessna 150 sported three names? It was called a Commuter, a Patroller, and an Aerobat in various upgraded models. However, the Cessna 152 had no name at all.

#### THE TRIBES OF PIPER

Piper had quite a run with Native American names beginning with the Apache. For a long period, Piper aircraft were adorned with the names of many noble Native American tribes — Aztec, Dakota, Seminole, Cheyenne, and, of course, Cherokee. The company must have run out of tribal names it liked, however, when the Lance and Archer came out. Near as I can research, there never was a Native American tribe called the Malibu, though the word itself does have Native American origins — in the language of the Chumash tribe, it means “loud, noisy surf,” which makes sense if you’ve been to the California city.

#### PTS, BTS, AND CS

Military designations can be both straightforward and quite confusing at the same time. The Army Air Corps PTs, of course, are primary trainers, just as BTs are basic trainers. B is for bomber, P is for pursuit (later F for fighter), and C is for cargo. But it gets a little confusing from there. The PT-17 is well known as the blue and yellow Army trainer of WWII. But the PT-17 is very specifically a Continental R-670 powered Stearman Model 75. The Lycoming R-680 powered version was produced in almost as many numbers as the PT-13.

Fairchild trainers come in three varieties: PT-19, PT-23, and PT-26. The PT-19 is the well-known Ranger inline engine variant that introduced innumerable aviators to the sky. But, for a period the Fairchild Corporation couldn’t deliver enough Ranger engines to match its production of aircraft even though it built both engine and airframe. So, a Continental R-670 radial was hung on the nose creating the PT-23. Another model, the PT-26, replaced the open cockpit of the PT-19 with a canopy. This variant was, not surprisingly, quite popular in Canada where the Canadians had the sense to give it a name like any other respectable airplane, the Cornell.

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SKYTROOPER?

The iconic DC-3 had several aliases. The basic DC-3 was designed as an airliner, but when it was adopted by the military it became the venerable C-47 Skytrain. But did you know that it was also known as a C-53? This model left the factory without the C47's reinforced floor and cargo door and was specifically designed as a troop transport. It was called the Skytrooper. The British, of course, had to create their own label for the DC-3 and dubbed theirs the Dakota. Back in the civilian world, the prototype of the DC-3 was equipped with sleeper berths and called the DST for Douglas Sleeper Transport, and the two variants were produced side by side.

For this article I have referred to military aircraft with their Army Air Forces designations; the Navy had its own unique classifications for all these same aircraft.

DREAMLINER

The two largest manufacturers of airliners today seem to eschew the need to christen their products. Airbus and Boeing are content with mere numbers for their airliners, as in Airbus A340 or Boeing 747. But that may be about to change. Boeing has thrown down the gauntlet with its latest airliner, the 787 Dreamliner. The name, and not the number, seem to have caught on quite effectively. I fly a 787 and regularly hear it referred to as a Dreamliner over ATC frequencies, as in, "United 347, you're following a Dreamliner on short final."

All these names can be confusing, but they certainly add spice to our aviation world.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A BONANZA?

Some names are so iconic that they are now accepted without question. But, imagine yourself in that first marketing meeting where a bunch of chain-smoking ad men sat around bandying about possibilities. Bonanza? What exactly is a Bonanza anyway? What does Bonanza mean? Great airplane, but where did the name come from?

This was an early foray into the name game by Beechcraft, however. After the Twin Bonanza and the Travel Air, it embarked on its royal model names and, for a period, were extraordinarily dutiful to the concept — Baron, Queen Air, Duke, King Air, and Duchess. Beech did fall off the wagon a bit with the Skipper and the Musketeer. Not to mention, Debonair sounds like an adjective and not a noun to me.

All these names can be confusing, but they certainly add spice to our aviation world. For every one that doesn't make much sense, there's one that speaks directly to our aviation hearts and sends us soaring in mind and spirit. For every F-111 Aardvark, there's an F-15 Eagle. Sometimes the ad men just get it right. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an airline pilot who also flies the B-29 *FIFI* for the Commemorative Air Force and owns a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.

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