

CODE NAME ALERT: IS LIBERTY SHIP A NEW BIG SAFARI?



The [US Army](#) has Constant Hawk. The [US Marine Corps](#) has Angel Fire. Somebody has something called Highlighter.

What the heck are they?

Constant Hawk, Angel Fire and Highlighter are the names of manned, light aircraft that have been invented since the Iraqi occupation began to fight against the scourge of improvised explosive devices.

Public details vary greatly for each of these semi-classified aircraft programs. Thanks to funding and turf wars, we know quite a bit about [Constant Hawk](#) (a modified Shorts C-23B Sherpa) and Angel Fire. [USA Today article is [here](#). Great analysis by StrategyPage.com is [here](#).]

The US Army Material Command was even generous enough to post a photo of Constant Hawk on their [Flickr page](#).

All I know about Highlighter is that it was invented by the Joint [IED](#) Defeat Organization (JIEDDO), and it is an aircraft. (Dear Maj Gen Montgomery Meigs, Thank you for disclosing Highlighter's existence in a commentary you wrote to "correct" a critical Marine Corps Times editorial on April 16, 2007.)

We may -- finally -- have a clue about how all of these ideas were invented.

It could be a project office embedded in the Office of the Secretary of Defense [OSD] called "[Liberty Ship](#)".

Perhaps modelled on the US Air Force's famed [Big Safari](#) project office in Dayton, Ohio, OSD may be using Liberty [Ship](#) to skirt around the traps and tripwires of the military's acquisition system.

The code word Liberty Ship was first mentioned in a public forum earlier this week by General Norton Schwartz, OSD's nominee to become the next USAF chief of staff.

Before his nomination hearing, the Senate armed services committee posed written questions to Schwartz, including one query about how he would address the shortfall of spy aircraft in Iraq.

Schwartz replied in writing:

"By increasing the number of MQ-9 vehicles, pursuing the "Liberty Ship" construct for acquisition of more "light" manned ISR aircraft, and accelerating the development of the Wide Area Airborne Surveillance sensor system, the [Air Force](#) is working very hard to get more ISR capability to the combatant commanders in support of on-going operations. If confirmed, this will have my personal attention from day one."

For background, here's an excerpt from the Senate armed services report published in May on the fiscal 2009 defense budget request.

"The Army Constant Hawk and Marine Corps Angel Fire systems are current examples of wide-area collection systems. The DOD leadership requested funds for the Air Force to acquire a combined, enhanced system, currently called Wide-Area Airborne Surveillance (WAAS), to image a larger area than Constant Hawk or Angel Fire, enable night operations, real-time support to ground forces, provide a forensic capability, and support many simultaneous targeting and surveillance missions. It could cue and hand off targets to [full motion video] platforms for prosecution."

Liberty is not a common prefix for a code name. According to William Arkin's Code Names reference book, there are only two other known Liberty prefix's in the Pentagon's classified lexicon:

1. Liberty Shield, a Department of Homeland Security operation to increase security at the nation's critical infrastructure
2. Libertycap, a National Security Agency program to standardize all signals intelligence software

Clearly, these code names -- Angel Fire, Highlighter, Constant Hawk, Liberty Ship -- are the barest glimpse into the massive, multi-billion dollar and ambiguous effort to thwart the threat of IED attacks. I can't wait to read the book someday.

[[PS: Don't forget [Hunter Green Dart!](#)]]

-- [Steve Trimble](#)

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