The 'D' Word: What To Call a UAV

By ARAM ROSTON | Comments <http://www.defensenews.com/comments/article/20130326/C4ISR02/303260023/The-8216-D-8217-Word-What-Call-UAV>

A drone? Not according to Air Force officers.

A drone? Not according to Air Force officers. (Lt. Col. Leslie Pratt / Air Force)

Journalists who cover unmanned aerial vehicles wrangle endlessly with a very particular word choice. If you let slip the word "drone" in the company of Air Force officers, you'll have to figure out whether it's better to quickly settle the bar bill or head for the door before things get hairy.

A remotely piloted aircraft - a Predator or a Reaper - is not a drone, Air Force officers will tell you, and to call it that is practically like spitting on their shoes. A drone, the patient ones will explain, is a target for training. It's nothing like a complex weapon of war or surveillance.

But on top of this, one senses that the "D" word is pejorative because of its connotations. A drone is like a male honeybee: useless and without a sting. Or an office drone - a predictable suit-and-tie-wearing schlub.

Maj. Mary Danner-Jones, an Air Force spokeswoman, was diplomatic.

"There are some people," she explained, "who are offended by it."

So, for the rest of us, as we write and talk about these aircraft that fly around the sky while controlled by people on the ground - what do we call them?

Most of the military services and the manufacturers call them unmanned aerial vehicles. General Atomics calls its Predator an "unmanned aerial system."

The Air Force begs to differ.

"They are not 'unmanned,'" Danner-Jones points out. "There is that interface with the machine and the pilot. You have human involvement in every step."

So the Air Force, alone among the military services, uses the term "remotely piloted aircraft," or RPA. It's a tip of the hat to the pilots flying them from the ground.

But what we call these things is no longer solely the purview of specialists. White House press secretary Jay Carney talks about "drone strikes" and the "drone program." Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., droned on for 13 hours of filibuster talking about drones. And Time magazine featured "Rise of the Drones" on a February cover story, while National Geographic magazine recently ran a story called "The Drones Come Home."

Internationally, it is just as messy. The U.N. special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism specifically uses the word drones, but the U.N. undersecretary general for peacekeeping operations told reporters, "I would not use the word drones." He prefers "unmanned aerial vehicles."

The confusion over what to call a UAV goes back decades.

"In the 1940s and 1950s, unmanned aircraft were usually referred to as 'drones' or 'pilotless aircraft,'" Lt. Col. Lawrence Spinetta wrote in his 2012 dissertation, "Remote Possibilities: Explaining Innovations in Airpower." He goes on: "By the 1960s, the term RPV came into fashion. UAV appeared in the 1980s. For a while, the 'U' in UAV changed from 'unmanned' to 'uninhabited' before mutating back to 'unmanned.'"

A modern milestone in the changing vernacular came in 2003, when Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper stepped into the fray.

"We are going to take this whole notion of UAVs and remotely piloted vehicles and change the name to remotely piloted aircraft," Jumper told an audience at the Wyndham Palace in Orlando, Fla.

Ultimately, the Air Force may need to be forgiving about what people call RPAs. Even the "DoD Dictionary of Military Terms" mentions UAV and UAS and RPV. Interestingly, it does not reference RPAs.

And does it matter? Doesn't a Patagonian toothfish taste as good as a Chilean sea bass? (For the record, yes: They are the same fish.)

To those who fly them, it matters indeed. Clarity and precise language matter. But that's why it's not a simple puzzle. Language is not jargon. Spinetta, himself an RPA pilot, seems resigned to the "D" word.

"Drone," he says, inaccurate though it may be, has become "part of the lexicon."

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