

"There's something for every sort of word collector in these pages."
— *The New York Times*

DICKSON'S WORD TREASURY

A Connoisseur's Collection of Old and
New, Weird and Wonderful, Useful
and Outlandish Words

WAMUS

BATHYKOLPIAN

JIRBLE

DOODAH

CUFFUFFLE

GILHOLIE

PEMPHIGOID

OOJAH

KYOODLE

FUSTILARIAN

PIGWIDGEON

JOBAM

BUMF

UMSLOPOGUS

WINDGE

HESTERNAL

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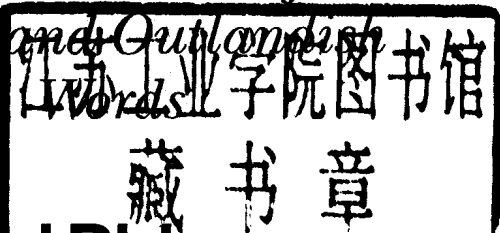
WAMU

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PAUL DICKSON

Dickson's **WORD TREASURY**

*A Connoisseur's Collection of
Old and New,
Weird and Wonderful,
Useful and Outlandish*



Paul Dickson



John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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*To my mother, Isabelle C. Dickson,
who first taught me there was no
such thing as "mere words" or, as a writer named
C. J. Ducac once put it, to speak of "mere words" is
much like speaking of "mere dynamite."*

In recognition of the importance of preserving what has been written, it is a policy of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., to have books of enduring value published in the United States printed on acid-free paper, and we exert our best efforts to that end.

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The poem by David Stern appears with his personal blessing.

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INTRODUCTION

I first became fascinated with words when I was a kid playing word games with my family at the dinner table. We would try to come up with a word that was obscure or long or hard to pronounce so that we could dazzle my parents. Because of these games, I know that there is a brook in Connecticut called the *Naramyacknowwhosankatankashonk* and that *mappula* is the name for the handkerchief used to signal the start of the action in Roman games.

This led me to word collecting, my adult hobby, and word collecting led me to a perhaps obvious conclusion, but one that escaped me for a long long time. It is that language is a great source of fun. The experts call this “recreational linguistics,” but that’s too stuffy for the pure, unadulterated fun I’m talking about.

I know, of course, that the primary function of language is communication, and there is nothing funny or amusing about a statement like, “Help, fire!” or “I think I’m about to be very, very sick.” Nor is there much joy in most of what passes by our eyes during the workday, especially when it is labeled “memo,” or “report,” or has the word “official,” or “federal,” or “policy” in its title.

I’m talking about the part of language that would appeal more to a den of Cub Scouts—jokes, puns, riddles, whacky accents, and word games—than to the folks who write the books people in the computer industry insist on calling “documentation.”

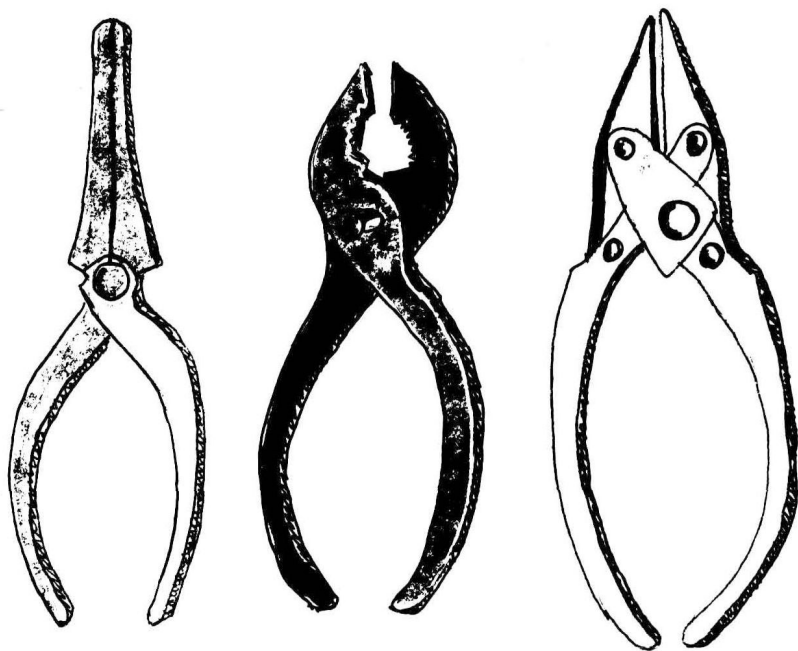
I’m also talking about many other things including crossword puzzles, the game of Hangman, Scrabble, dictionary browsing, and, of course, word collecting. I’m also sincerely fascinated with the fact that *typewriter* is one of the longest words that can be written using only the top letter bar of the typewriter and that recent words, like *raunchy* and *humungous*, drive the scholars crazy because they can’t figure out where they came from.

I approach my word collecting with a zeal that borders on the compulsive. I confess that in the name of collecting I have labored through the driest scholarly publications to find the odd gem like *nutation*, which is the wobble in the earth’s axis caused by the pull of the moon.

I candidly admit spending time that could have been used increasing the gross national product compiling totally useless, but altogether satisfying, col-

lections including 315 phobias and 74 gums (from *alk gum* through *zapota gum*). I have just started a nut list because so many of the names for nuts are just that: *guru nut*, *vomit nut*, *hiccup nut*, and *canary nut*, for starters.

I must report that in my hunt for words I have dug deeply into the trash barrels at the post office looking for odd catalogs thrown away by people picking up their mail. Had I been too proud to dig in the trash, I never would have found the tool catalogs that showed me there is really no such thing as a plain pair of pliers, but rather scores of differently named pliers, including nine that begin with the letter *L* (*lineman's side pliers*, *lock ring pliers*, *long-handled diagonal cutting pliers*, *long-nose pliers*, *long-nose side cutting pliers*, *long-nose tip cutting pliers*, *long-reach needle nose pliers*, *long-reach short-nose duckbill pliers*, and *looping pliers*).



The slightest nudge will set me off in a new direction. When I saw a sign in the window of a costume and novelty shop that proclaimed, "Yes, We Have Warts!" (presumably the kind you glue on), it got me to respond, "Yes, but what kind of warts?" With the help of my *Dictionary of Dermatological Words, Terms and Phrases*, I learned that one can grow an *acuminate wart*, *anatomic wart*, *common wart*, *digitate wart*, *fig wart*, *filiform wart*, *flat wart*, *mosaic wart*, *necrogenic wart*, *paraungual wart*, *periungual wart*, *plane wart*, *plantar wart*, *prosector's wart*, *senile wart*, *subungual wart*, *venereal wart*, or a *vulgar wart*.

Speaking of highly specialized dictionaries, I am obsessed with them. My hoard now includes such works as *The Dictionary of Paper*, *The Dictionary of Gambling*, *The Glossary of Meteorology*, and *The Dictionary of Magic*. I have three dictionaries of citizen band radio slang, and I am on the track of a second logger's dictionary.

Besides accumulating odd dictionaries and words, I have collected verbal and written oddities of every description—talk show euphemisms for death (“She was just coming into her own when she left us”), punny names for places that cut and dress hair (Hair Today, Lunatic Fringe, Rape of the Lock, Delilah), and newspaper headlines of parochial school football victories (Sacred Heart Slams Our Lady of Mercy, 38–6). I even have a small but prized collection of dictionary entries that lead you nowhere (one not very old dictionary explains that *halicore* is a noun meaning *the dugong*).

I also admit to using up other people's time in my endless quest for collector's items. I have imposed myself on army colonels, bartenders, and antique dealers in the hope of coming up with a great military acronym, drinking term, or name for an obscure piece of furniture. I always talk with people who sit next to me on airplanes, in the shameless hope that I might be able to exploit them for a few professional terms. This is how I found that computer workers use the interchangeable terms *abend* (abortive termination) and *abterm* (abnormal termination), and I have actually wangled several interviews with Frederick C. Mish, the editorial director of the G. & C. Merriam Company, to nail down the answer to such important questions as whether or not *angry* and *hungry* are the only English words that end in *-gry*. (The answer is on page 206.) My visits to the Merriam Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, also enabled me to see—and drool on—its files, which contain 13 million citations on the use of individual English words. Quite simply, it is the greatest English word collection in the world. There is a report on this fascinating American institution in the chapter entitled *Wordland*.

Finally, I confess that I am not only a word collector, but also a word exhibitionist who has spent much time displaying parts of his collection. This book is based on an earlier collection, *Words*, and includes many additions and new exhibits.

What follow are 58 separate museum-style displays containing elements of the overall ever-growing collection. I hope not only that you enjoy them, but that you get hooked on words in the process.

Acronyms

An Assembly of Antic Abbreviations

Americans, as a rule, employ abbreviations to an extent unknown in Europe. Life, they say is short and the pace is quick; brevity, therefore, is not only the soul of wit, but the essence of business capacity as well. This trait of the American character is discernable in every department of the national life and thought. . .

*John S. Farmer, Americanisms—Old and New
(London: 1889)*

Although acronyms existed before World War II, they have proliferated in the period from 1940 to the present. Even their name is modern, having been coined under federal auspices during the war. The term *acronym* (from *akros*, meaning tip, plus *onym*, name) was first introduced to scholars in a 1943 issue of *American Notes and Queries*, which traced it to Bell Telephone Laboratories, which had created the word as a title for a pamphlet written to keep workers abreast of the latest initialized titles for weapons systems and agencies.

Acronyms are best described as pronounceable formations made by combining the initial letters or syllables of a string of words. Two classic examples are SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) and RADAR (Radio Detection And Ranging). These two have reached the highest status an acronym can reach: becoming so widely accepted that they are treated as

regular words. Both scuba and radar are now written virtually exclusively in lower case.

Beyond the pure acronym, there are two significant variations. The first is the initialism, which is a straight forward combination of letters rattled off as letters (ACLU, NFL, COD, etc.). The second is the portmanteau or telescope word, which is a blend of two or more words in which the roots are generally recognized. The U.S. Navy loves portmanteaus: NAVFORKOR (NAVal FORces, KOREa) and BUPERS (BUReau of PERSonnel) are two of many.

For the word collector, acronyms offer a fertile and fascinating area. For one thing, new ones are created daily. The Gale Research Co. of Detroit, which publishes the *Acronyms, Initialisms, and Abbreviations Dictionary* (AIAD), put out its first edition in 1960 with 12,000 entries. The seventh edition contains 211,000 entries; the eighth edition which came out in late 1982, easily broke the quarter-million mark; and the 1987 edition had more than 400,000 terms and weighed about 16 pounds.

I have collected acronyms for more than 20 years. These are my favorites:

ABBA. Swedish pop group whose name is an acronym made from the first names of the members of the group: Agnetha, Benny, Bjorn, and Anni-frid.

ABRACADABRA. The name of a pioneering listing of 400 "space-age" abbreviations first published by the Raytheon Company in the early 1960s, when a collection of 400 was sizable. ABRACADABRA stood for ABbreviations and Related ACronyms Associated with Defense, Astronautics, Business, and RADio-electronics.

ABSCAM. The famed code name for the FBI foray into the murky realm of congressional ethics. Early stories said the name stood for AraB SCAM, which disturbed some Arab-Americans. The FBI claimed it stood for Abdul Enterprises, which was the name of the front group for the operation.

ACNE. Action Committee for Narcotics Education.

ACORN. ACronym-ORiented Nut.

ACRONYM. Allied Citizens Representing Other New York Minorities, and the fictional Acronyms Can Really Obsess Neurotic Young Man.

ADCOMSUBORDCOMPHIBSPAC. For a long time the longest acronym in captivity. It was, for instance, the longest of 45,000 entries in the 1965 edition of the *Acronyms, Initialisms, and Abbreviations Dictionary*. It is from the U.S. Navy and officially stands for Administrative Command, Amphibious Forces, Pacific Fleet Subordinate Command, although it is derived from ADministrative COMmand, SUBordinate COMmand, amPHIBiouS forces, PACific fleet. It still has not been bettered in English, although if it ever is, the new champion probably will come from the Navy, which seems to have a special penchant for long acronyms. Another Navy creation: COMSERFORSO-PACSUBCOM for COMmander, SERvice FORce, SOuth PACific SUBordinate COMmand.

According to the 1989 *Guinness Book of World Records*, the longest acronym is a 56-letter monster from the Soviet Union describing a scientific laboratory.

ALOHA. Aboriginal Lands Of Hawaiian Ancestry, the name of an effort to compensate aboriginal residents for lands taken from them in the nineteenth century.

ALTAIR. A third-generation acronym from the Pentagon that contains two earlier acronyms: ARPA (for Advanced Research Projects Agency) Long-range Tracking And Instrumentation RADAR (Radio Detection And Ranging). Such acronyms embedded within other acronyms have been termed *tour de force acronyms* by Kenneth H. Bacon in an article on the subject in *The Wall Street Journal*. Bacon used the Army's SCAMPERS as an example: Standard Corps Army MACOM (for Major Army COMmand) PERsonnel System.

APPALLING. The creation of the late Theodore M. Bernstein, *New York Times* editor and expert on English usage, for Acronym Production, Particularly At Lavish Level, Is No Good.

APPLE. Advanced Propulsion Payload Effects. NASA.

ARISTOTLE. Annual Review and Information Symposium on the Technology Of Training and LEarning, an Air Force formulation. ARISTOTLE is but one of a number of classic acronyms. Among others, PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Training Operation), ADONIS (Automatic Digital ON-line Instrument System), SOCRATES (System for Organizing Content to Review And Teach Educational Subjects), and CASSANDRA (Chromatogram Automatic Soaking, Scanning AND Digital Recording Apparatus).

AWOL. Absent WithOut Leave. Armed Forces. The author has encountered several applications of AWOL including American Way of Life and, from an ad for a furniture company, Almost Wholesale Or Less.

BEDOC. BEDs OCCupied. Army.

BESS. The official acronym for no less than three NASA satellites: Biological Experiment Scientific Satellite; Biomedical Experiment Scientific Satellite; and Biomedical Experiment Support Satellite. The confusion this must generate may be incalculable.

BICYEA. Top-of-the-line ice cream from Bresler's. The name is an acronym for Best Ice Cream You Ever Ate. It is pronounced *bye-che-ya*.

BIRD. One of many examples of what happens to the names of prestigious international organizations when their names are (1) translated and (2) acronymized. BIRD stands for *Banque Internationale pour la Reconstruction et le Development*, or the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

BIRDDOG. Basic Investigation of Remotely Detectable Deposits of Oil and Gas. U.S. Geological Survey experimental satellite project.

BOGSAAT. Acronym cynically applied to the preferred technique of high-level

decision making in America. It stands for a Bunch Of Guys Sitting Around A Table.

BOLTOP. Better On Lips Than On Paper. It is one thing to write SWAK on the back of a sealed envelope, but if you really mean business, write SWAK-BOLTOP!

BOMFOG. Brotherhood Of Man, Fatherhood Of God. Term that journalists have attached to the pious, homily-ridden blather of politicians. It is often referred to as *bomfoggery*. Garry Wills traced the origin of the term in a column in the *Washington Star*. He said it dates back to when Nelson Rockefeller was on the campaign trail: "When Nelson was winding up a campaign speech, he liked to orchestrate the coda around 'the Brotherhood of Man Under the Fatherhood of God' and that phrase was a signal to accompanying journalists to sidle back toward the campaign bus."

BURP. BackUp Rate of Pitch, a NASA term for a type of spacecraft motion. It also stands for Brewers United for Real Potables, an association of home brewers of beer.

BUSWREC. Ban Unsafe Schoolbuses Which Regularly Endanger Children.

BX. According to NASA Reference Publication 1059, "Space Transportation System and Associated Payloads: Glossary, Acronyms and Abbreviations," published in January 1981, BX stands for box. What's more, FLG stands for flag and FLP for flap. One is hard-pressed to think of a situation in which an abbreviation that saves only one letter actually saves time and causes less confusion. The Army uses BX to refer to Base eXchange—an updated version of the PX, which stood for Post eXchange.

Cabal. There is a legend that this word is an acronym for the names Clifford-Ashley-Buckingham-Arlington-Lauderdale, who were conspiratorially inclined cabinet members in the court of Charles II. It actually derives from the Hebrew *cabala* ("full of hidden mystery"), but makes a nice story anyhow.

CAUTION. Citizens Against Unnecessary Tax Increases and Other Nonsense, a group formed in St. Louis in the early 1970s to oppose a large bond issue.

CHAMPION. Compatible Hardware And Milestone Program for Integrating Organizational Needs. Air Force.

CHASE. Cut Holes And Sink 'Em, a Navy Ammunition Disposal System.

CHRIST. Christians Heeding Righteousness Instead of Satanic Tyranny, a conservative religious organization.

CIA. Not only the Central Intelligence Agency, but the Culinary Institute of America, California Institute of the Arts, Computer Industry Association, and Cotton Importers Association.

CINCUS. Short-lived U.S. Navy acronym for Command-IN-Chief U.S. Fleet, which was dropped in 1942 because it was pronounced *sink us*.

CLAIM. Chemical Low-Altitude Missile. Air Force.

COBOL. COmmon Business Oriented Language. A disproportionate number of names for computer programs, like COBOL, are acronyms or portman-

teaus. For instance, FORTRAN is a compression of FORMula TRANslation, and JOVIAL stands for Joules Own Version International Algebraic Language. SNO-BOL stands for StriNg Oriented symBOLic Language, a language used in manipulating strings of symbols.

COED. Computer Operated Electronic Display.

COLA. Cost Of Living Adjustment, but also Maine's Congress of Lakes Associations.

COO. Chief Operating Officer, as in a January 30, 1990, *USA Today* headline: "Spindler named COO at Apple."

COYOTE. Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics.

CREEP. Committee for the RE-Election of the President. This acronym is infamous in politics as it stood for the group working for President Nixon during Watergate.

CROC. The Committee for the Recognition of Obnoxious Commercials, an ad hoc group that provides toilet bowl-shaped awards to reluctant Madison Avenue winners.

CRUD. Chalk River Unidentified Deposit. From the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's *Handbook of Acronyms and Initialisms*.

DACOR. An IBM product DATA CORrection system that had to be renamed when the acronym for its first name was figured out. It was originally called the Forward Error-Control Electronics System. Then there is the certainly apocryphal story that Tiffany's once refused to inscribe the silver collection plates of the First Unitarian Church of Kennebunkport with initials.

DASTARD. Destroyer Anti-Submarine Transportable ARray Detector.

DIED. Department of Industrial and Economic Development (of Ohio). Now defunct.

DIMPLE. Deuterium Moderate Pile Low Energy reactor, a British nuclear reactor.

DISCO. Defense Industrial Security Clearance Office.

DONG. Danish Oil and Natural Gas, according to *Platt's Oilgram News*.

DUA. Acronym that shows how acronyms have created confusion even on the other side of the moon. During the Apollo 12 mission while astronauts were making their seventh lunar revolution, there was some minor trouble with an emergency light in the spacecraft. Controllers in Houston diagnosed the problem and said,

"We think we've figured it out, your DUA was off."

After a few seconds of silence, the response from Apollo 12 was,

"What is a DUA?"

"Digital Uplink Assembly," replied Houston.

DUMB. Deep Underground Mountain Basing. Department of Defense missile acronym.

- EGADS.** Created for the signal used to destroy a missile in flight: Electronic Ground Automatic Destruct System.
- EIS.** Environmental Impact Statement. This is the kind of acronym that bureaucrats and members of Congress use every day and expect the rest of us to understand. A few years ago a Massachusetts congressman proclaimed in a headline in a newsletter to constituents, "Air Force to do EIS on PAVE PAWS." PAVE PAWS is an Air Force radar system that stands for Precision Acquisition of Vehicle Entry-Phased Array Warning System. EIS is pronounced *ice*, which makes it even more confusing.
- FADD.** Fight Against Dictating Designers, one of several groups that sprang up to protest changes in fashion in the early 1970s. Another group whose sole purpose was to fight the turn from mini to midi was GAMS, for Girls/Guys Against More Skirt.
- FAGTRANS.** First Available Government TRANSportation, term used in military transportation orders.
- FASGROLIA.** The FASt GROWing Language of Initialisms and Acronyms, term created by *Time* in 1966 to describe the phenomenon.
- FIDO.** Freaks, Irregulars, Defects, Oddities a coin collector's term for a minting error.
- FROG.** Free-Rocket Over Ground, a U.S. designation for a Soviet missile system. (Author's note: When I first heard this acronym, I was a reporter covering military appropriations hearings in the late 1960s. Until I was told what FROG stood for, I was stunned by what seemed to be undue congressional and military alarm over small Russian amphibious animals.)
- FUBAR.** One of a series of military acronyms for things that are less than 100 percent perfect. FUBAR, which stands for Fouled-Up Beyond All Recognition (in the cleaner of two explanations), dates back to World War II. See also FUBB, FUMTU, JANFU, NABU, SAPFU, SUSFU, TARFU, and TUIFU. Snafu is the granddaddy of them all.
- FUBB.** Fouled-Up Beyond Belief.
- FUMTU.** Fouled-Up More Than Usual.
- GASSAR.** General Atomic Standard Safety Analysis Report. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
- GLCM/SLCM.** Respectively, these stand for Ground-Launched Cruise Missile and Sea-Launched Cruise Missile and often have been discussed in Congress in recent years. They are pronounced *CLICK-em* and *SLICK-em*.
- GODORT.** GOVernment DOcuments Round Table, a librarians' organization. It underscores the fact that even librarians can create awkward acronyms that resemble sounds made by someone with severe indigestion. It is hardly an aberration, as the "Acronyms Appendix" to the American Library Association's publication list also features such units as MAGERT (Map And GEography Round Table) and LIRT (Library Instruction Round Table).
- GOO.** Get Oil Out, the name of the citizens' group formed in California after an oil slick appeared off Santa Barbara in 1969. GOO was such an appro-

- priate and memorable acronym that it may have helped the group gain prominence.
- GOOBS.** Going Out Of Business Sale. This acronym is used by Washington, D.C. area consumer groups that act as watchdogs over stores that are regularly going out of business.
- GWIBIT.** Guild of Washington Incompetent Bureaucratic Idea Throatcutters. The term was coined in 1943 by Representative Karl E. Mundt, who explained at the time, "A gwibitizer is not to be confused with a kibitzer; the latter merely stands on the sidelines and watches while the former sits in the path of progress and trips those who traverse it."
- HADES.** Hypersonic Air Data Entry System.
- HAIR.** High Accuracy Instrumentation Radar.
- HAL.** A crypto-acronym from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film's demonic computer, HAL, reveals his true identity when each letter of the acronym is advanced one letter to IBM.
- HAWK.** Homing All-the-Way Killer, an aptly named missile. HIP in the context of this weapon stands for HAWK Improvement Program.
- HINT.** Puckish TV news talk for Happy Idiot News Talk. HINT takes place, for instance, when the weatherperson is thanked for providing a nice weekend. "I'll see what I can dish out for the next few days," is the common humble reply.
- HO.** Habitual Offender in police acro-jargon.
- HOLLAND.** Home Our Love Lasts And Never Dies or Have On Little Lace and No Drawers. An envelope acronym and an alternative to SWAK for Sealed With A Kiss. A naughty cousin to HOLLAND is NORWICH (Knickers Off Ready When I Come Home). Such envelope notations were popular during World War II.
- HUT.** Television business term for Households Using Television. This sets up situations in which neighborhoods are described in terms of their "HUT percentages."
- Iacocca.** Writer Ed Lucaire reports: "Many workers in Detroit . . . contend that Iacocca really does stand for I Am Chairman Of the Chrysler Corporation of America.
- IGOR.** Intercept Ground Optical Recorder. NASA.
- INFANT.** Iroquois Night Fighter And Night Tracker system. A Vietnam-era weapons system produced for the Army by the Hughes Aircraft Co. Martial acronyms like INFANT and BAMBI (Ballistic Anti-Missile Boos Intercept) are among many innocuous or innocent-sounding names for fearsome realities. These fly in the face of Winston Churchill's admonition that military things should have military names and that he would never send British troops off to fight in something called Operation Begonia or the like.
- IRAN.** Inspection and Repair As Necessary. NASA.
- JANFU.** Joint Army-Navy Foul-Up. World War II. Not to be confused with

JAAFU (Joint Anglo-American Foul-Up) or **JACFU** (Joint American-Chinese Foul-Up).

Jeep. Name derived from GP for General Purpose, which was the vehicle's original designation. Jeeps—now being phased out by the Army—are being replaced with High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (words that do not lend themselves to an easy nickname).



JOOM. Junior Observers Of Meteorology. During World War II, JOOMs were trained to replace Weather Bureau staff who had gone to war. The JOOMs were one of a number of wartime four-letter personnel including British FANYs (First Aid Nursing Yeomanry), WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Services), and WASPs (Women's Auxiliary Service Platoon, an American unit in the Panama Canal Zone).

JUMPS. Joint Uniform Military Pay System.

KISS. Keep It Simple Stupid. An acronym used when things are getting too complex.

LANTIRN. Low Altitude Navigation Targeting InfraRed system for Night. Air Force.

LEGO. Building-block toy that got its name from the Danish *leg godt* for "play good."