

# Pilot's (Phonetic) Alphabet

In the beginning of aviation, pilots yelled and waved at each other in open cockpits with the engine roaring, the wind howling. To communicate with people on the ground, pilots wiggled the wings or flew low and buzzed them. Pilots quickly learned to communicate by throwing things out of the aircraft -- things that contained written messages, things in packages, or, during World War I, things that exploded.

When newly invented radios were installed in aircraft, aviation communications truly began. Most pilots were still operating in open cockpits, but even enclosed cockpits were noisy. The radios were noisy, too. Bad weather interfered with signals. Birds, other airplanes, rapid weapons-fire -- all distracted. Signals were lost, words chopped off. Pilots had to find a way to work around these problems.

So they invented the Phonetic Alphabet.

When we say certain sounds or words, they often sound alike at a distance -- in a noisy room, *five* and *nine* might sound the same. Or the letters *b*, *e* and *d* might easily be confused at a distance.

In the Phonetic Alphabet, a code word is used for each letter. These words are chosen because they can be understood even with poor transmission or distance.

The phonetic alphabet is still used today in voice communications around the world. It is often used in television and films, especially about aviation during war. Many military units are also called by the alphabet rather than the shorter letter designation (Company Charlie, instead of Company C).

Most of the time, the alphabet was not used for entire conversations because it would take too long. Instead, it was used for the more important parts -- dates, times, locations, or other critical facts -- to make sure these were clearly understood. They memorized the alphabet by setting it to a simple sing-song tune.

## The Pilot's Alphabet

A = Alpha

B = Bravo

C = Charlie

D = Delta

E = Echo

F = Foxtrot

G = Golf

H = Hotel

I = India

J = Juliet

K = Kilo

L = Lima

M = Mike

N = November

O = Oscar

P = Papa

Q = Quebec

R = Romeo

S = Sierra

T = Tango

U = Uniform

V = Victor

W = Whiskey

X = X-ray

Y = Yankee

Z = Zulu