



ALPHA, BRAVO, CHARLIE: HOW WAS NATO'S PHONETIC ALPHABET CHOSEN?

News / Airlines



An older version began with Apples and Butter, while soldiers in the First World War preferred Ack and Beer.

Sixty years ago today, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) implemented the final version of the International Radiotelephony Spelling Alphabet – known to most people as the Nato phonetic alphabet, or simply the Alpha, Bravo, Charlie alphabet.

What is it for?

It was created as a standardised way for aircrews around the world to make themselves recognised and understood. All flights and planes are given names with identifying letters but characters such as M and N or D and B can sound very similar, even when said by someone standing right next to you.

Thanks to the phonetic alphabet, differences in accent, language and pronunciation stopped being a problem.

Radio communications have moved on in terms of technical sophistication since then, but the alphabet is still in place in case of confusion, error or bad reception to make sure the correct message is transmitted, received and understood.

Why did it need to be standardised?

During the First World War, the Royal Navy used an alphabet that began Apples, Butter and Charlie, while British infantrymen in the trenches had their own version, which started Ack, Beer and Charlie.

The RAF developed an alphabet based on both of these but when the US air force joined the war, all Allied Forces adopted what became known as the Able, Baker alphabet. This also came to be used in civil aviation, but confusion continued, not least by the use of a separate English alphabet in South America.

Who made it up?

As an agency of the United Nations, it made sense for the ICAO to create a standardised alphabet, one which – even if made of English words – had sounds common to all languages and so could be spoken and pronounced internationally no matter what nationality the pilot. Jean-Paul Vinay of the University of Montreal, a noted professor of linguistics, was charged with creating a new alphabet equivalency list and completed it in 1951.

That new alphabet hit a spot of turbulence, though, as many pilots disliked it and reverted to the one they had been using previously. Consequently, after further study and testing among the 31 ICAO member countries, the current alphabet was officially introduced on the 1 March 1956, with just five simple changes to Jean-Paul Vinay's earlier work – the words for the letters C, M, N, U, and X.

Adopted worldwide, those changes have remained in place ever since and are still in use.

The International Radiotelephony Spelling Alphabet:

A - Alfa (Alpha - the "ph" sound is not recognised internationally)

B - Bravo

C - Charlie

D - Delta

E - Echo

F - Foxtrot

G - Golf

H - Hotel

I - India

J - Juliett

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

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