

## ITU Phonetic Alphabet By KI5LNM

The short history of the ITU/NATO Phonetic Alphabet is that when the radio was created, the military needed a way to make what was said clear so they started using a phonetic alphabet. In 1927, the International Telegraphic Union established the first phonetic alphabet for general use. This beginning was to change quite a bit till the 1950s when a common international phonetic alphabet was adopted. This alphabet has also been called telephone alphabet, Radio alphabet, or voice-procedure alphabet.

The purpose of the phonetic alphabet is to avoid ambiguity. It helps to make a letter clear to the listener regardless of language differences. This is helpful in situations such as static or background noise on the radio, but also just that some letters sound so similar and in many situations you need the listening party to catch the first time what is actually said. But then there are the less serious situations when you are needing to read off a long list that includes numbers and letters. Do you want to read your VIN number two or three times because the other person never gets the letters right?

Think of the sounds of “th” and “f”. How similar are they? Well, think of thin mint and fin on a fish. Such small change between them with the tongue and mouth. This is also an issue with the letters “m” and “n”. Both are nasal sounds with just a little change of the mouth and tongue. In an emergency it may be critical that the one listening catches the first time which you mean.

So it is easy to see why a phonetic alphabet would come about. But why did it end up with the particular words we use today for the letters?

The first alphabet was based on the names of cities and countries, but this didn't last long. The US military in WWII established what is known as the Able Baker alphabet. Many organizations that are about aircraft were also devising phonetic alphabets to better communicate with aircraft over the radio. Also, many nations created their own alphabet. But there would need to be a consensus of letters and the most used ones did have a problem as they were very English centric and when used across different language speakers, it could sound different and be interpreted differently. An example is that the Spanish sound for the letter “P” is similar to our English letter “B”. This has a potential for problems in interpretation. In this case the solution was for “Papa” to represent the letter “P” and “Bravo” the letter “B”. Two words that are distinct and unmistakable as to which letter is meant. So, we see that there was a need to find words that were easy to pronounce the same across all languages and be recognizable by most all speakers.

In 1951, a new version of the alphabet was needed for the International Air Transport Association. They came up with one that had words familiar to English, French and Spanish. Alas, this still had words that didn't quite make sense. Such as “eXtra” for the letter “X” but didn't actually begin with an “X”.

By the mid-1950s, NATO saw a need for a phonetic alphabet that would work beyond what was done so far. There was much debate especially over the letters “C”, “M”, “N”, “U”, and “X”. Tests were done to be sure any similar sounds or confusing letters could be determined and said easily by all. An example here of why a change in these letters was that “N” was “Nectar”, but Nectar could be misheard as Victor and vice versa so “N” was changed to November.

Another example of choosing the right phonetic word would be for the letter “Z”. It needed a word that could not be mistaken for another. Hence, the reason that just the American name of the letter would not work. “Zee” could be easily mistaken for the letter “C”. Zulu is a very distinct set of sounds that are unlike any of the other letters so makes it quick to recognize. Also with its association with Zulu Time, The word was familiar to many.

Now when you come to numbers, you will hear the number 9 called out as niner. One reason for this is that just 9 sounds like the German word for no, nein. That can be a problem in conversation.

By 1956, most official bodies that were using a phonetic alphabet all adopted this revised version.

We have included here three examples of why certain words were chosen. It would be interesting to learn the reasons each one.

I want to end with one joke that I find funny. Henry Cho is a comedian that has a story he tells of talking to customer service. The gal totally doesn't get a phonetic alphabet as he is reading off his confirmation number. He decides after a short conversation and repeats with her to have fun and says, 2, 0, r-robert, p-pterodactyl. At that point the lady hung up on him.