

A History of Airport Identifiers, or How French Lick Became 414

By WILLIAM GARVEY / AOPA 480899

■■ Whoever assigns airport identifiers is schizophrenic, we all know that. Anyone who can assign DEN to Denver, PIT to Pittsburgh and MIA to Miami and then turn around and give UOS to Seawancee, Tennessee, has got to have a shortcircuit somewhere. Surely, one of our more interesting civil servants.

Well, her name is Nell Vetter. She is the acting chief of the codes and identification section within FAA's Flight Services Division and there's nothing at all wrong with her thought processes. The fault for improbable airport identifiers rests not with her faculties, but rather with our alphabet. It has just 26 letters and that is not enough.

At first blush the business of assigning identifiers appears to be patently simple and indeed at the beginning some 40 years ago it was. The airports just adopted the two-letter idents which had already been assigned to airport weather and aeronautical radio stations. That's how Chicago got CG, and Omaha got OM.

Then the tide of complexity began rolling in. More airports and more nav-aids appeared, flights increased and the air traffic control network blossomed. Two-letter codes were not enough to cover the burgeoning demand for identifiers. So, the United States adopted three-letter assignments and OM became OMA and Kansas City, Kan., went from KC to KCK.

Our alphabet can produce some 17,500 different three-letter combinations, a pool that seemed inexhaustible three decades ago. Then large chunks of it began to disappear. First, the federal government said no identifiers could begin with the letters K or W, since those letters were reserved for the commercial broadcasting stations. (Those airports already assigned such letters were allowed to keep them, however.) The letter Q was also verboten as an identifier prefix because it was the first letter used in a series of international telecommunication codes. Then since naval nav-aids moved with the ships, it was agreed that their idents should be made distinctly different to avoid any confusion. So, the Navy was given the entire

block of identifiers that begins with the letter N.

There was a lull in this letter thievery until Canadian aviation officials arrived in Washington asking that they, too, be placed on the dole. It seems their country's two-letter pool had been badly depleted over the years and they were in desperate need of more identifiers. The appeal was moving and in a show of atypical largesse, the FAA gave away the remainder of our Y's and Z's.

When this run on our rich three-letter bank finally petered out, we were left with just 13,000 codes, which may still seem like a lot. It's not.

You see, the codes are not assigned to airports exclusively. In fact, first pri-

orts have been legion; their logic, well, inventive.

Since the Navy owned all the N's, the selection of EWR for Newark International was an understandable choice. But how about BNA for Nashville Metropolitan? Well, before it was Metro, Nashville's airport was called Berry Field. BNA stands for "Berry, Nashville." Why YIP for Detroit's Willow Run? Well, they took some phonetic license with that; the field is located in the town of Ypsilanti.

SSI for Brunswick, Ga.'s McKinnon airport seems grossly illogical until you study a chart. The strip is firmly attached to St. Simon's Island. And even the choice of UOS for Franklin County Airport in Sewanee, Tenn., is the result of careful consideration, unlikely though it may seem. Guess where the University

three-letter codes, not airport names or cities. Today, if the flight plan says you want to go to TTD when you meant to say TTN, the computer will go TILT. TTD is Troutdale, Ore. TTN is Trenton, N.J.

General aviation has been relatively unaffected by designators. When you're VFR, flight plans aren't required and when IFR the full airport name was usually used because most general aviation airports didn't have identifiers. That's changing fast.

Mrs. Vetter's staff has just completed the herculean task of assigning identifiers to every public-use airport in the United States and is now hard at work assigning codes to all operating private use airports as well. This effort coincides with the increasing instrument flight activity within general aviation and is a part of the preparation for the day when pilots will personally manipulate the ATC computers through self-briefing terminals.

The new group of general aviation airport identifiers looks quite different than the LAX's and OAK's of yore. Of the 13,000 three-letter combinations available, FAA had already assigned 8,000 when Vetter and friends began their general aviation project. Obviously, the old three-letter system could not accommodate the sudden addition of thousands of heretofore code-less airports. Consequently another system was chosen, this one using numbers and letters.

If you thought UOS was impossible to decipher, how about D64, or 8S4? They're both airports, the former being Westhope, N.D., Municipal and the latter is Enterprise, Ore., Municipal.

This alpha/numeric system is a sad departure from the more meaningful three-letter codes, but it does the job and makes FAA's computers happy.

Airports can still get three-letter identifiers, but they've got to earn them. To qualify now they must either receive scheduled route, air carrier service or Military Airlift Service. French Lick, Ind., Municipal has neither, and so it got branded 414.

If you don't like the code you get, you can always try pulling strings in Washington. But Nell Vetter is no marionette.

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ority is given to navajds for which three-letter codes are required. Identifiers are also assigned to certain Weather Service offices and air traffic control facilities as well.

Compounding the problem of a limited letter supply was the fact that no identifiers may be duplicated, except when shared by airports and their on-field navajds, and that no codes may even appear to be similar to any other identifier within a 200-mile radius.

It is under these constraints that Mrs. Vetter and her staff must toil. Their ef-

of the South is located. Now guess who runs the field.

Nell Vetter runs a conscientious shop. And while we may regard identifiers as a trivial matter, she takes them very seriously.

"I call them the nickle bolts that hold the national airspace system together," she explains. "It just can't operate without them."

The hyperbole notwithstanding, she has got a point. The identifiers are the staple of ATC's machinery. Its computers route airplanes according to the

Ask the folks in Spokane or Baltimore.

Spokane International began life as Geiger Field and was duly assigned GEG as its identifier. The years passed and the airport grew and the movers and shakers in Spokane felt the old GEG should be replaced with an identifier more befitting their airport's lofty inter-

airline industry. Their reservation systems, cargo routing, accounting offices and bag tags all use the three-letter codes. Therefore, when a code is altered, the impact upon the airlines is substantial—one such change cost an estimated \$300,000.

But then some changes are necessary. In fact the most celebrated case, the one that cost 300 g's, was the result of an FAA snafu.

When FAA opened its Dulles International back in the early 60s, it assigned the sprawling Virginia facility the logical identifier DIA. What it really stood for was "Diabolic." It seems when the code was scribbled on flight plans and ATC strips, the "I" was often mistaken for a "C" and pilots found themselves vectored for Dulles' downriver neighbor, Washington National Airport whose identifier was DCA. Sometimes the "C" was written out of habit.

"Our controllers at Dulles almost wept," over the confusion, recalled Mrs.

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national status. FAA felt differently; GEG remained.

When Baltimore recently changed the name of its air carrier port from Friendship to Baltimore-Washington International, it asked that its code be changed from BAL to BWI. No dice.

You see, FAA has a thing about identifiers. Once they assign one, it stays. Period.

"We're very reluctant to change any three-letter identifier unless there's a safety hazard involved," said Mrs. Vetter. That official recalcitrance has as its basis both safety and money. Pilots and controllers are creatures of habit and, explained Mrs. Vetter, "these identifiers get fixed in their heads." Change the identifier and you may create a traffic problem unnecessarily.

Furthermore, Vetter said, the identifiers have been adopted in toto by the

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Vetter. "We did end up with a lot of scares, but there was never an unsafe situation."

Eventually, the Dulles code was changed to IAD and the crisis passed but FAA learned a hard lesson it would never forget. Now it makes changes reluctantly and assignments very, very carefully.

Still, Nell Vetter and her teammates are not without heart.

After a flash fire killed three astro-

nauts preparing for a Cape Kennedy launch, the Air Force rededicated one of its bases in memory of the flight commander, Lt. Col. Virgil "Gus" Grissom. The service came to FAA to see if the base's identifier might not also be altered accordingly.

If you're ever flying near Peru, Ind., tune in the Grissom VORTAC. Day and night, year in and year out it taps - - - ••• in tribute to a pilot named "GUS."

Said Vetter, "we try to be accommodating every time we can," but as a rule all assignments are final.

For those who are dissatisfied with their airport codes, she offers this bit of homespun solace: "Identifiers are sort of like children. You have no choice in what you get, but whatever you get you learn to love it."

Maybe. It's tough to get mushy over X18, but the folks in Brandon, Fla. are trying. □