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Call Signs

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"Washington Center, Foot 34, flight level two-zero-zero."

"Roger Fool 34, ident."

"Foot 34 identifying, and Washington, that's Foot... Foot 34."

"Radar contact Fool 34... do you have a request?"

"Negative on the request, Washington; my call sign is Foot 34, copy? FOOT 34."

"Roger, FOOL 34, contact Washington Center on 253.1."

"NEGATIVE ON THE FOOL ... MY CALL SIGN IS FOOT ... I SPELL ... FOSCAR-OXTROT-OXTROT-TANGO ... uh I mean ... uh ... (Pause) ... Understand Center on 253.1."

CALL SIGNS

"United 721, you're cleared to land, runway 21 right."

"Unite ... (garbled)" (Pause).

"Uh ... tower; understand Unite 21 cleared to land 21 right; turning a short base."

"Neg ... (garbled)."

"Uh ... tower, what are the intentions of the airliner on about a three mile final?"

"Unite 21, you are not cleared to land; break out of traffic and reenter. United 721, cleared to land."

"United 721, understand, breaking out of traffic."

"Tower ... who is ... a Unite 21 breaking out of traffic advised tower, I'm submitting a near miss report."

"Roger, United 721, call reentering."

"Tower, that was Unite 21."

"Uh ..."

To the man in the cockpit there are many irritants that sit on the periphery and occasionally inject themselves into the situation, sometimes effectively muddling decisions and ripping away at the logic chain. These barbs of annoyance we'll call "Fuzz Factor," for lack of a better name, simply because they tend to fuzz up the situation. You've all experienced some form of fuzz factor such as the drop of sweat inside the oxygen mask that's tickling the whiskers and driving you straight up a wall, or the incessant buzzing of a poorly tuned UHF radio that makes clear thinking difficult, or a bulge in the seat cushion that's giving you a nagging pain in the posterior. There must be a million of the fuzz factor annoyances, most of them small, but one of them can assume gigantic proportions, such as a hard-to-pronounce, hard-to-understand call sign.

Call signs produce their share of incidents, sometimes amusing and sometimes downright hazardous. The amusing ones we can live with; they make good bar-talk fodder. The hazardous ones are something else.

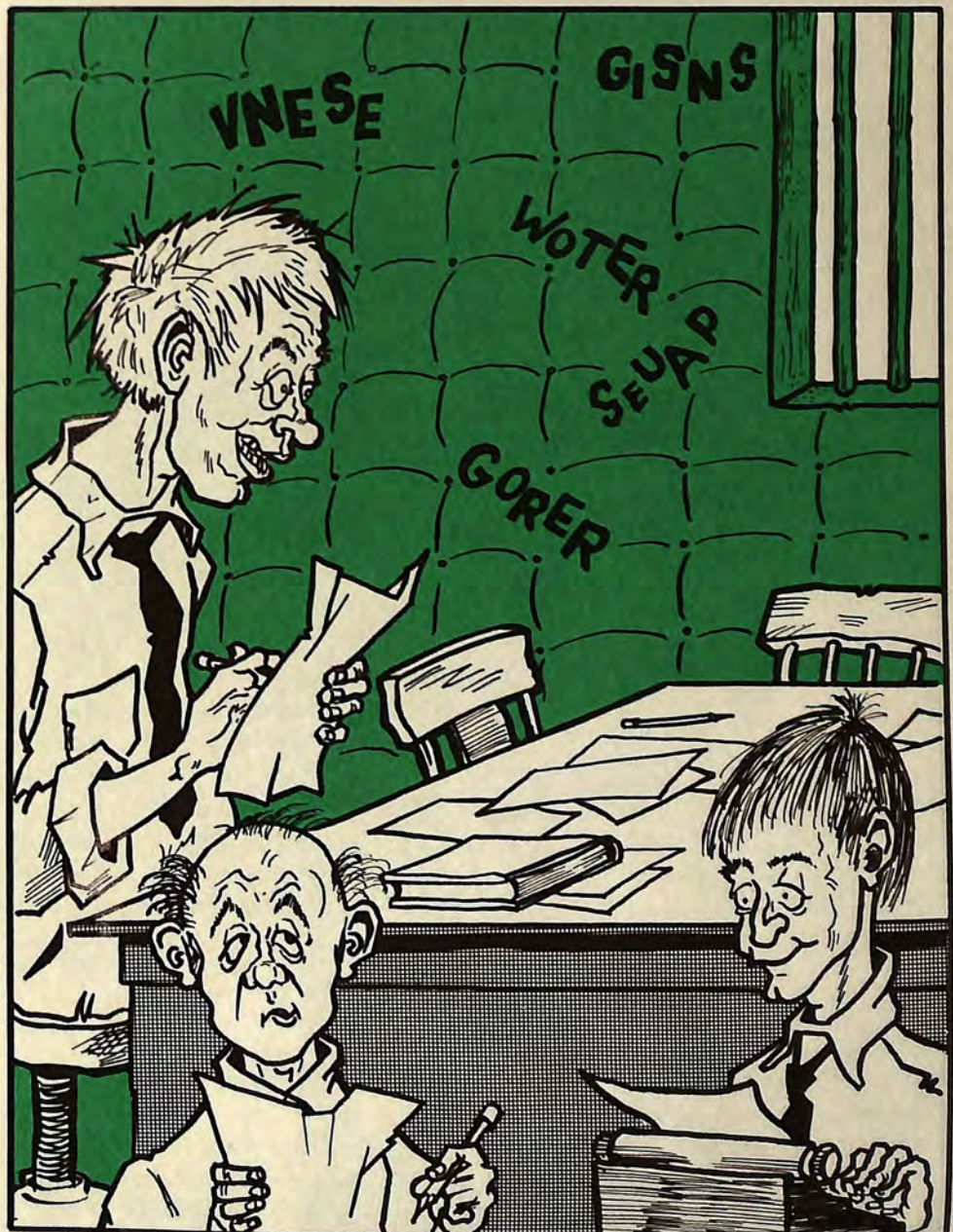
Many of you may believe that call signs are produced by a group of madmen confined to a padded cell and given their freedom only when they are able to come up with a four or five letter word that defies even the most gifted vocal gymnast. In reality, however, nothing is further from the truth, to which the program managers will certainly agree. Nevertheless, the thought does conjure up some interesting questions such as: Where do aircraft call signs originate? What are static call signs and how and when are they used? How can I get a call sign changed if it is hard to pronounce, hard to understand, conflicts with others, or in some other way either creates or may create a hazard?

WHERE DO AIRCRAFT CALL SIGNS ORIGINATE?

A voice call sign is defined as any combination of characters assembled into pronounceable words used to establish and maintain voice communications. Aircraft call signs cannot exceed five characters and normally precede a two-digit number. The five character limitation is necessary due to FAA's computerized flight following system which allows

only a seven digit call sign. (Example: Horse 52.)

There appears to be a fallacy here. How do the airlines get away with it? In other words, how can United 701 use a call sign composed of nine characters? The limitation is on the ARTC computer data and not on the spoken word. United 701 files as U-701 on his flight plan. The controllers are aware that "U" is an accepted abbreviation for United, just as they know when we file A-45678



CALL SIGNS...

on the DD-175, the spoken call sign is Air Force 45678.

The entire call sign program is administered by HQ USAF (PRCOC) which establishes doctrine and policy for the USAF through AFR 100-26. They, in turn, have tasked the Air Force Cryptological Depot (AFCD) with the responsibility of assigning and maintaining control of USAF voice call signs.

All words used as voice call signs by the Air Force are derived from and authorized by the Joint (Services) Voice Call Sign Book, JANAP 119. From this publication the words are extracted and fed into a computer maintained and operated by AFCD. Each major command submits its requirements, in number of words, to AFCD which, in turn, assigns to each command a series of block and line numbers. The computer then randomly selects and assigns words to the block and line numbers. As the saying goes, "untouched by human hands." After the computer selections are made, the call signs are printed in a confidential document that is published monthly and carries the moniker of AFKAI-1 (USAF Voice Call Sign List - VCSL). Units then extract the appropriate call sign from this document for missions both in and out of the local area.

CHANGING CALL SIGNS

Changing call signs are necessary for security reasons. The movement of combat aircraft outside the local area of any given base is the kind of information that foreign agents obviously relish. It is necessary to change the call signs periodically to prevent the free release of information. Each unit refers to the AFKAI-1 for the appropriate call sign to be used at the appropriate time.

Due to the confidential nature of this document, very few specifics on its use can be listed in this article.

STATIC CALL SIGNS

Static call signs, as the name infers, are assigned call signs which are rarely changed. They are also found in the VCSL and are assigned to specific units to be used only in the local area. The current list of words used in TAC was implemented by message in December 1971 and will be included in the 1 June 1972 edition of the AFKAI-1. Originally, TAC was assigned 1750 words. The list was whittled down to only 940 words by manually removing the worst of the lot. These remaining words were then given to the intermediate commands for unit assignments. Needless to say, many units still found some of the words unpalatable, to which the number of letters and hazard reports received at Hq TAC attest.

Perhaps a small explanation is necessary here. Every unit would like to have TIGER or SHARK or some equally descriptive static call sign as their very own; unfortunately, in most cases, it's not possible to assign such words, simply because TAC doesn't own them. Problems still exist with call signs that are hard to pronounce, hard to understand, or conflict in some way with other users of voice radio. In order to resolve some of the problems with static call signs, the entire list of call signs is put through a procedure called "soundexing."

SOUNDEXING

Soundexing is a computer program which compares the call signs against each other to remove sound alike,

such as Moose and Noose. Also, any words which would be associated with an aircraft in distress, such as Fire, Eject, Help, etc., are removed. Additionally, any words which indicate an aircraft component, such as Flap or Gear are removed.

At the present time, only static call signs are soundexed; however, plans are afoot to use the procedure for all call signs, both static and changing. Undoubtedly this will help, but it's highly unlikely that all poor words will be eliminated, and this is where you can help.

GETTING THE CALL SIGN THROWN OUT

Prior to the expiration of the current month's AFKAI-1, the edition which is to be used for the next month is distributed. Units should review the call signs that are to be used to identify any hard to pronounce, derogatory, or potentially hazardous-use call signs. Should any of the call signs fall into these categories, steps should be taken to notify TAC/DCONF (procedures in TAC Sup 1 to AFR 100-26) in order to have the words replaced. This will reduce the number of tongue twisters and hazard producers. However, it is still possible for a potentially hazardous call sign to slip by and to be put into use. If this occurs, at home base or otherwise and either creates or appears to create a hazard, the individual who uncovers the hazard should contact his unit and explain the problem. The unit can then telephone TAC/DCONF, Autovon 432-2021, to have the problem immediately resolved.

While all of the problems with call signs may never be completely solved, progress is being made. With your help, the fuzz factor caused by call signs can be reduced. If that happens, the men in the padded cells will have to look for work elsewhere. ➤