

“Morse in a Day” or “Name that Navaid”

(or how a little bit of psychology can help you learn morse quicker and remember it longer)

Once having qualified for the PPL it is every pilot's ambition to go places, and this means learning to use nav aids: NDB, VOR and ILS. Of course, we are taught that we should always check the ident of the aid we are tuned to, and this means it is necessary to have some knowledge of morse code.

In my experience, some of the AWA pilots who use nav aids have quite a patchy knowledge of morse, and perhaps this reflects the piecemeal way we learn it. This usually starts with a gaining a fairly thorough knowledge of the local nav aids (CT, DTY and HON) during our PPL course, and then the other letters come in as the need arises, according to which nav aids we plan on using on a particular trip. The problem with this is that people tend to “hear what they want to hear” and this could lead to misidentifying a critical nav aid, with potentially disastrous consequences. There could not be a better reason for any PPL, at whatever experience level, to sit down and thoroughly learn the whole morse alphabet.

The good news is that, as far as pilots use it, learning morse is easy. The old telegraphists had to both receive and transmit morse, so they need to match the sound to the letter and vice versa. However, pilots generally only ever need to receive morse, and this is the easier part. Experienced morse users say that they listen to it “as music”. This means that they hear the dots and dashes in the same way as musical notes, and they are able to hear letters, words and even commonly-used phrases by the rhythms in their sound. Anyone who used to watch “Name That Tune” cannot fail to have been impressed by the human brain's capacity to use 3 or 4 notes to unlock the melody and lyrics of a popular song from possibly thousands in a person's memory. Advertising jingles work in the same way. During World War II, the association between the opening four notes (dit-dit-dit-dah) of Beethoven's “Fifth”, the morse for V, and the image of Churchill giving the “Victory” sign was one of the Allies' best remembered pieces of propaganda.

Learning morse is the same if we can learn the “tune” of each letter. However, there is an obstacle to doing this. On hearing a piece of music, we can easily visualise the object, person, place or emotion that it symbolises, but visualising an abstract concept such as a letter is more difficult. What is needed is some intermediate concept that we can use as a link to associate the morse sound and the letter more easily. The way to do this is for each letter of the alphabet we need to find a link word, something that starts with the letter and has the same rhythm as the morse sound.

If we listen to the vowels in a word, we can hear that there are “short” vowel sounds (hat, hit, pop, up ...) and long vowel sounds (bark, pole, pool, blue...). The list below gives some examples. What we need to do is, for each letter of the alphabet, to find a word that starts with the letter, and has vowel sounds that match the morse. For example, the morse code for “A” is dit-dah, and the word “apple” (ah- = short vowel, -pul = long vowel) has the required sound, as do “affirm”, “antique”, “attain” etc etc.

Short (dit)

It, at, end, operation, up

Long (dah)

Oh, arm, uniform, ache, ordinary, open, oil, aim, aero

Generally, an I is always short, other vowels can be short or long according to sound, and diphthongs are always long.

At this stage, I expect you are thinking I am going to give you a list of these words for the whole alphabet but you are wrong. If I did this, you might remember them for a short time, but would struggle in the longer term. That would be because they are not “your” words. We remember much better by doing that by listening, so the best way to learn the morse alphabet is to create your own list, by writing down each letter and finding your own word for it. This may take an hour or so, but it is fun, and I guarantee you will not forget it so easily.

If you are like me, you will find words for most of the alphabet but eventually you will find yourself stuck on letters such as Q, X and Z. There are just not enough words in the dictionary to find a good match. The answer is “break the rules”. As long as you, the user, understand it there is no need to use a proper word; you can use a phrase or just make up your own word.

For example, when I did this I found myself stuck in finding a word to fit the letter “H” (dit-dit-dit-dit). Now one word that fits this sound quite well is “Mississippi”, but this does not begin with an H. To overcome this I made up the word “Hippippi” instead, and this has proved to be one of the most memorable names on my list. As far as phrases are concerned, “Victory V” (dit-dit-dit-dah) is a very good clue for V and “God Save the Queen” (dah-dah-dit-dah) serves for Q, even though the Q does not appear at the beginning.

I hope you will all try this, and hope that it works as well and is as much fun for you as it was for me. It has helped me to remember my morse alphabet for more that 5 years now. Of course, there are times I get a little bit rusty. To overcome this, I keep a short list of the words on the top of my desk, and just need to glance at it occasionally to keep it fresh in my mind. If anyone tries it and gets really stuck, I would be willing to divulge the word I use, bearing in mind it may or my not work for you and will probably not be as memorable as one you made up yourself.

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