

Aircraft Designation Systems

Aircraft designations are based on the primary mission of the airframe and the type of aircraft. For example the F-4 Phantom was designed as a “fighter” aircraft. Prior to 1947, the designation “P” was given to aircraft that are now classified as fighter aircraft. The AH-1 Cobra was designed as an “attack helicopter” (AH). Some mission specific aircraft also have two-letter designations (e.g., KC135 – a transport aircraft specifically designed for aerial refueling).

Basic Mission

DESIGNATION	EFFECTIVE YEARS
A Attack (Note 1)	1942-1947, 1962-
B Bomber (Note 1)	1925-
C Transport (Note 1)	1925-
E Special Electronic Installation	1962-
F Fighter (Note 1)	1948-
K Tanker	1949-
L Liaison	1942-1962
L Laser	1997-
O Observation (Note 1)	1924-1942, 1962-
P Pursuit (to F)	1925-1947
P Patrol	1962-
R Reconnaissance	199?-
S Antisubmarine	1962-
T Trainer	1948-
U Utility	1962-
X Research	1948-

NOTE 1: The numbering systems were reset in 1962

Aircraft Type

G Glider	1962-
H Helicopter	1948-
Q Unmanned Aerial Vehicle	1997-
S Space plane	?-
V VTOL/STOL	1954-
Z Lighter-than-air	1962-