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## "The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow" featuring guest Dale "Curt" Hahn

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Armando F Sanchez Production

## **The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow**

Guest: **Dale “Curt” Hahn**

Interviewer: Armando F Sanchez

August 9, 2021

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Video Production: <https://youtu.be/ySkQSnkaLiE>

## **Dale “Curt” Hahn**

*Dale “Curt” Hahn, CEO S3 Productions*

*Dale “Curt” Hahn, is a veteran, US Navy 1973 to 1977 and Reserves 1978 to 2001. Hahn’s duties in the Navy included but not limited to operating a variety of computer-interfaced detection, tracking and height-finding radars, plotting a ship's position, heading, and speed, using computerized or manual trigonometric methods, maintaining a tactical picture of the surrounding seas by plotting and maintaining a visual representation of ships, submarines and aircraft in the area, including friendly, neutral, hostile and civilian contacts, using secure and non-secure radio in communicating, in plain voice or coded signals, with other air, sea or land units to coordinate tactical and combat evolutions.*

*He also worked at Ultra Tech, NCR Corp, Rockwell international, and NASA/ Jet Propulsion Laboratory.*

*Hahn recently retired as an educator in the secondary level. He taught electronics in a school district in the Los Angeles area.*

Video Production: <https://youtu.be/ySkQSnkaLiE>

Text of the interview:

**Armando F Sanchez:** Thank you for joining us again in this series about The Cold War: Living Under Its Shadow. Today's guest can tell us about his own experiences with Mr. Dale “Curt” Hahn. He is currently the CEO of S3 Productions, and he is a former teacher at the high school level. He is also a former member of many corporations: NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Rockwell International, and many others that he can probably not mention.

**Dale “Curt” Hahn:** Or, I say, or they won't mention me.

**Sanchez:** Or they won't mention you, and before that, he retired from the Navy Reserves as an Operation Specialist Senior Chief Petty Officer. So your background is tremendously long working in the world of electronics. We will talk about that today and then your experiences during the Cold War.

Let me start first and foremost. Let me take you back to your high school years when you were a student and beginning to think about you may be recruited, you may be drafted, and go to Vietnam. What were you like in high school? What was going on at that time, and you know the beginning of the thoughts of Vietnam?

**Hahn:** I graduated high school in 1973. The draft was still going on, but it was winding down. That's important because I would have gone to Vietnam just by definition if I had graduated a couple of years earlier. So about, I don't know, halfway through or so, somewhere during my senior year, let me back up for just a minute and take a slight detour. High school was something I endured, nothing I enjoyed! Okay, I lived in shop and science classes for my last two years, so be that like me. My counselor calls me into his office about a year into my senior year. He says, “Well, your life is over.” I responded, “Excuse me?” He said, “you have two choices in your life.” Yeah, I go, yeah. He says, “you're going to go to Vietnam and die, or go to McDonald's and spend the rest of your life surrounded by fat.” My response was, “wait a minute! I'm 17 years old and getting ready to graduate from high school, and you're telling me my life is over?” He said, “Yeah, because your SAT, ACT, PSAT, and some x-y-z test scores are pathetic. Your grade point average is pathetic. So your life is over”.

I'm thinking to myself, “Do I have a choice? Yeah, Vietnam and death or McDonald's. Okay, you know, stamp, Next!” He says, “You know, community college, you're not, well, you know, you're not going to college.” Forget, you know, well it didn't take long for me, remember I'm stupid, right? I was just told that if I went to Vietnam because the draft is still going on if I went into the Army, I would go to Vietnam and die in the dirt. If I went in the Marines, I'd go to Vietnam and die in the mud. If I went into the Air Force, I'm not smart enough to fly an airplane, so I'm going to die on some runway somehow. About this time, the Navy had a commercial on television “join the Navy, see the world!” I remember saying, “Let's think about this one...death, death, and death. Join the Navy, see the world!”

So as I pondered that for a minute, I thought, if I'm on a ship 20-30 miles off the coast, some guy can't shoot me with a rifle. Brilliant!

**Sanchez:** “Brilliant, brilliant,” you said!

**Hahn:** “Brilliant,” I said, and certainly better than death, death, and death at McDonald's! I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life asking, “Would you like cheese with that?”

So when I graduated from high school, I went to the Navy Reserves for those three months from high school to my birthday in September. My 18th birthday was on a Saturday. On Monday, I had my draft notice in my hand, and I was in Navy boot camp on Friday. I have no idea what my draft number was. We were in boot camp the first or second day, and the guy came on and said, “Who's got draft notices?” We all held him up. He collected them all, and that was the end of that. I often reflect on that.

**Sanchez:** You tell a 17-year-old kid, “Your life's done,” so what did the Navy say?

**Hahn:** You know what? They had to go back and find out what you're good at? Making hamburgers in the Navy?

**Hahn:** What the military does is when you show up at the recruiter's office, they give you a test. I think they call it the ASVAB test. Now I remember what they call it there. It's this test you take, and it's multiple choice. You fill it out, and it rates you on what you're good at and what you suck at. It gives them a score. Depending on that score, it tells you where you rated in terms of what training is available to you, and from zero to a hundred, you know if you're at 85, they don't want you chipping paint and painting decks. You know, because you're wasted talent. I don't remember what my score was. It was long ago and far away. When you get to boot camp, you take a long series of tests, and it defines what you want to take, so I took this test, and they said, "Okay, you can be one of five things. You can be an Operation Specialist or a Quartermaster, an oceans tech weather guy, or whatever the fifth one was. We'll guarantee you one of the five." Being 17 years old, I have no idea what they're talking about. I recall them saying that I could be one of the five. Again, I thought, "Okay, I'm not the smartest guy in the world, but I got five things to pick from. I said, "Okay, " so I enlisted. A week later, I was off and spent three months in boot camp. While in boot camp, one takes this long series of tests, and about a week later, they call you into the office, and the guy says, "Okay, you've decided that you want to be an OS. So you want to be an Operation Specialist. I asked, "What's an OS?" He said, "That's what you've decided to do." I asked, "I did?" "Yes," was his response, and he continued, "you did!" My response was, "I was thinking about getting into the weather." "No!" he replied, "You have decided here that you want to be an OS at our counseling session. I asked, "Do I get a choice?" His reply, "Yeah, Stan, sign right here." I thought, "Okay, I have no idea what an Operation Specialist is, but by god, I'm going to be one, and proud of it!" [laughter]

**Sanchez:** And proud of it, Yes sir Bob! So what does an OS (operation specialist) do?

**Hahn:** I had no idea what I was getting myself into. You work with computer equipment, communications equipment, radar equipment, and a vast data link system that ties it like an air controller. You are responsible for bringing in all this information and presenting it to the "powers to be" to go then and fight the war. We were playing video games long before video games became popular. You're responsible for various things, and it's all using intelligence, tools, radar, and radios. Think of it like an early internet combined with a video game. It's the best way I can describe it.

**Sanchez:** Now, doesn't that sound odd that after your high school counselor mentioned that you weren't really shaping up for anything, and now, suddenly, you're controlling information and databases from all angles and putting it all together and synthesizing a plan of action?

**Hahn:** My own belief, and I believe it still holds true today, is that if you're not going to college or some kind-of-a-loser and you don't fit this standard mold, they think you are not going to add up to much. I think that's part of what they were looking at in me. I don't fault the guy. Just remember, this was in 1973, so some 40-50 years ago, but I still think a lot of that mindset exists today. So, if you're not into a four-year institution track, you have no options in life.

**Sanchez:** So the world of technical, hands-on fields or trades are not on their radar, and they figure that since you're not a four-year graduate, then there's no future for you.

**Hahn:** So if you look at high schools, now I'm being very general partially based on what I saw in teaching, the military route is frowned on because you're considered a real loser even though getting

into the military is, in fact, harder to get into than it is to get into college, but that's a whole different story. But for me, it was the smartest thing I've ever done.

**Sanchez:** You thought it through, and you planned it that way?

**Hahn:** I'm sure I did! [laughter]

**Sanchez:** I know what I'm hearing, and according to your comments, it is like everything else. Somebody planned every step!

**Hahn:** Probably not me, by myself!

**Sanchez:** So how did you get on the ship, and then where did you go?

**Hahn:** Well, the Operation Specialist (OS) is a very seagoing rate. I mean, that's where they do their job is out at sea, and I didn't like the idea of going, you know, enlisting in the Navy and sitting in San Diego (California) for four years. I mean, that's nice; I wanted to join the Navy and see the world. So I got out of OS school, and a week later, we deployed for eight months overseas. I got to go out and see the world.

**Sanchez:** Where did you go? Where did you start?

**Hahn:** We left San Diego and went to Hawaii, Japan, Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, Pakistan, Kenya, Mauritius, Rodrigues Island (Indian Ocean), and Taiwan, and that was the first time. The second time was the same place. We went to Korea and probably a couple of places I forgot about.

**Sanchez:** So, did you get to see all of them? I mean, did you get off the ship on each one?

**Hahn:** Yeah, Rodriguez Island is an English protector about the middle of Timbuktu, nowhere in the Indian Ocean. We pulled in there, and the ship's Chief came down to the berth and said, "Okay, you and you and you over there are going on liberty leave. Get your "whites" [formal Navy uniform] on!" I asked, "What do you mean we're going ashore? There's nothing to see here!"

The reply was, "You're going ashore!" "We are?" I asked." Chief said, "Yeah, get your whites on, and the boat leaves in half-hour. Be there!" I inquired "what's on the island?" His quick reply was, "Don't know, don't care, but you're going to go find out.

**Sanchez:** This is another decision you made!" [laughter]

**Hahn:** Yeah, you know, so here you. The scientific researchers greeted us on the island, and they took us to visit their "big" attraction. They took us to explore a cave. To enter, we had to carry a torch. Imagine going through this cave and "dress whites," no less. The torches were dripping some kind of black gunk, and the cave walls were also full of silt. It was next to impossible not to get our whites dirty. Nevertheless, we were getting yelled at for getting them dirty when we returned to the ship.

**Sanchez:** So did you find safety on the ship? Because here we are near Vietnam, somewhere out there, and you know the Russians are too since they are all over the oceans. Were you able to be in a protected area?

**Hahn:** Part of our mission of going into the oceans was that the Russian fleet was there. We were the first group of Navy ships that visited the Indian Ocean for who knows how long. So we left Pakistan and steamed down to the Gulf of Aden. That's where the Russian fleet happened to be anchored. We anchored right in the middle of the Russian fleet, and you're sitting there on duty as "the bridge watch," and every morning at 7:30, all their guns and missiles would point at you. You are sitting out there and thinking, "Well, hmm."

**Sanchez:** I think I would instead go back to the mud? I mean, this is your first thought as well?

**Hahn:** You know, I mean nobody was panicking, nobody was worried it was just you know what did we do now George [Laughter] you know and then but that would last maybe 20-minutes, and they'd lock up all their fire control radars on you, and you're thinking "Well okay, this would be a spectacular way to go!" You're not worried. This is what you've trained to do, but you're just thinking, wow, and then about 45 minutes later, they turn them off and ignore you. I mean, what's the word I'm looking for? I won't say scary but adventurous.

**Sanchez:** So it was just you guys and a series of other ships out there.

**Hahn:** It was just us.

**Sanchez:** And how many, approximately, Russian ships were out there?

**Hahn:** 15.

**Sanchez:** Ouch! If one of them had fired, you wouldn't have known. Anyone uh you would only have seen this puff of smoke. Then was that your only experience that something like that happened, or were there other incidents?

**Hahn:** The second time was 1976; we were down in Subic Bay (in the Philippines). I was standing on the "radio watch" in combat. All of a sudden, the radios all came alive. They call it, and I'll get this wrong, the Oak Tree Incident, where the North Koreans came across the border and interfered with the US Army cutting down this oak tree, and they killed two of the Army officers in charge. There's a whole story behind it. I don't remember all the details, but it was at the DMZ [Korean Demilitarized Zone], so they [US military] were notifying everybody, and his brother and I were on again. My job was to notify the command if anything happened. We were the duty task force, and our job was to respond to these things. You know you're saying you're hearing this live this isn't the News. This is real life, and they're running up the recall flags and bringing all the troops back unto the ship. Everybody's running around crazy, and a couple of days later, I forget how it ended. Still, the United States had this considerable task force off the shores of Korea saying, "We're going to cut that tree down, and you're not going to stop us. If you do, that's the end of that, and you guys [North Koreans] will not exist anymore".

We didn't have to go, but it was just that idea of hearing this live and notifying people and watching them all get it all freaking panicking. Again, I wasn't worried about it. I thought, "Well, okay, this is what I signed up to do!" You know, away we go.

**Sanchez:** Now, you were still in the Navy Reserves when the United States entered Iraq Desert Storm (August 2, 1990 - February 28, 1991). You shared a little bit of that with me once. Tell us about that.

**Hahn:** Well, you have to understand, I went to the Reserves in 1978. I retired there in 2001. When you spend most of your adult life practicing for the moment the flag goes up, and you have to respond, they were going to call my reserve ship up for active duty. We were going to South America's new drug and addiction work for six to nine months, and thus another ship could go to the Gulf and fight the great war. But they wouldn't tell us anything. It was until I cornered my counterpart into the corner, stood them up against the wall, and said, "You know what is going on?" He said, "Well, they'll call you guys all back to active duty." I responded, "Well, gee, it'd be nice if you told us. Now we're afraid half of you wouldn't show up". I said, "Dude, I got my stuff packed. I'm ready to go". You know, I mean, you know I'm not that stupid. I can figure out that something is going on. You know they're not telling us something! They would say, "Well, if you want to go, you have to volunteer. I said, "No," because if I do, I lose my reemployment rights, but I'm ready to go, so call me.

Anyway, the war ended. We were supposed to go on a Sunday. The war ended on a Wednesday. I was disappointed because that's what you spend your life getting ready for that moment. It didn't happen!

**Sanchez:** Now you knew that you weren't going into the Gulf War area. You were probably going to go down south, so you knew. Would the experience of going down there be the same as going to the Gulf?

**Hahn:** No, but it probably would help my career. I would have made E9 instead of retiring as E8 [pay scale]. Again, looking back in 2020 hindsight, it is what it is. Some people thought I was crazy because I wanted to go. But, I mean, you know, you have to understand that mindset. That's what you spend your life training to do.

**Sanchez:** You know the Cold War has passed (original Cold War 1947 to 1991), and you are aware that you experienced it from different perspectives. Most of them were in the Navy. How do you perceive all those years, both your experience in the Navy and what was going on around the world since you were in it rather than, you know, reading about it?

**Hahn:** Well, again, it's what I signed up to do. When I was in the Reserves, I had been to Korea; I've been to Japan, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, and places in between. We were up chasing this phantom Russian submarine off Alaska one time, one year. Interestingly, the ship I was on had a "Helen Keller" sonar. Here we are chasing a Russian submarine. I mean, it is what it is. My dad, like I was born in 1955, my dad was in the Army at the time. I didn't know this, but they would recall him in 1961 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I didn't know all this because I was only six years old. That came and went. I've learned more about the Cold War since I've retired and read about it. But I'm also young enough, or wreck and too old, to know how to do the "duck and cover" drills in school, civil defense, air raid warnings, and other kinds of drills.

**Sanchez:** Was there any talk or dialogue in the Navy about the Russians and the Cold War?

**Hahn:** Well, again, the Russians were the bad guys. Back when you had a clearly defined bad guy. Not like we have today. So everything endeared with gear to do was against the Russians. Well, you've been to the Caribbean? Do you remember the Bear Bombers [Russian aircraft]? Every time a Bear Bomber would have our way, we'd go to full combat alert a whole nine yards getting ready for this airplane to fly us, which you couldn't see except on radar, but by God, it's coming, so we got to go to battle stations.

**Sanchez:** Now, was there ever any talk about comparing the equipment of the US Navy versus the Russian Navy?

**Hahn:** The Russians, primarily how they built their warships, filled their decks with massive amounts of missiles and weaponry. The Russian philosophy at the time was, we're going to hit you with this. We're going to smash you with a sledgehammer. So if our accuracy is off by a little bit, nobody cares. We're going to launch so many missiles that we'll just take out a mile to a square ocean, and you'll be in that spot someplace. Whereas with the US Navy, everything was internal, hidden away, put away, you know, very careful targeting, in the "whole nine yards." But the Russians were, "we know you're in this circle, so we'll just blow up two miles of ocean and take you out that way, or if we can't do it that way, we'll take three or four ships, and we'll take out eight square miles of ocean we know you're in there someplace. Right, none of this. You're going to launch one tactical missile. We'll just launch 40! Yeah, go ahead. Shoot down 30 of them! Everything we did was against the Russians, and the Navy had to relearn how to fight a war when they started all the anti-terrorism, anti-piracy, anti-this, and anti-that. The military had to learn a whole new way to fight a war that was long after I left. The military's always been very good at fighting the last war.

**Sanchez:** What does that mean?

**Hahn:** When I was in the 1970s. We were still fighting Vietnam, a conventional war, against the conventional enemy via the Russians. Nobody ever thought about launching a hundred small boats against a US Navy warship as they would now, right? It was just a different mindset.

**Sanchez:** You know, given all your Navy experiences, you traveled a great deal. What would you say is the greatest lesson that you still keep today in your life?

**Hahn:** Taking what I've seen around the world and knowing there's a bigger world out there and other ways of doing things, then to say, "this is the only way." You go to other countries and see what they have done. And again, I'm based this on years ago, or what they're thinking, "Yeah, there's more than one way to do something." To say, "This is the only way!". It's kind of silly.

There's an old saying, "You can make the best-laid plans for waging war, but the enemy has a vote in what you're doing." Nothing holds until the first shots are fired, then all your plans are going down the tube because the bad guys aren't going to fight against the same rules you are. Today, you can take that same philosophy and say, "You can do all this stuff," but the bad guys will not follow your rules.

**Sanchez:** It's not a boxing match where both sides are the same height, weight, and reach. There's a referee in the middle making sure everybody's following the rules. You're saying that you know everybody's got their perspective, and you know it's whatever works out.

**Hahn:** It's like a football game." Tweet" goes the whistle. You know, "Illegal use of hand grenades, back five yards!" [laughter]

But again, I don't ever regret going into the Navy. I don't ever regret doing what I've done. But I've learned there are other ways to accomplish the same thing. It may not be the right way or the wrong way, but there are different ways.

**Sanchez:** Well, as you say, I'm taking what I hear from you. It may work over here, but now that you're over there. It won't work because of the weather or the culture of the environment, whatever it might be. So now you got to try something new. You have to be thinking out of the box constantly.

**Hahn:** Yeah, it's like the poor guy sitting in a foxhole with a rifle and some guy on the radio talking to some guy in Washington DC, and the guy in DC is telling the guy in the foxhole to shoot to the left. You know the guy's saying, " Well, I got 40 guys to the right. You have to shoot to the left. Well, I got three bullets left.

You know you micromanage things; you know. Let me know what you want to do to get out of my way and let me go. [laughter]

**Sanchez:** Well, it's a thinking world. Yeah, as you know, during the Cold War, it was huge numbers on both sides. Now it's very strategic. Are they in the right place? Do you have the right equipment? It's a whole different ballgame now.

**Hahn:** And then again, you still have people very high up who sometimes make the wrong decisions, and the trouble is that it is the guy at the bottom who pays the price. It happens because they say, "Well, I've studied this, and I am the expert. Therefore, I know best".

Yeah, but you're not the poor schmuck slogging around the mud trying.

**Sanchez:** You know, this sounds like Vietnam. They were giving policies of what to do or what not to do from DC, but by the same token, it wasn't applying down there as they were in the middle of the Vietnam deltas.

**Hahn:** It's like telling your Special Forces units, "Okay, we want you, the unconventional warfare units, to follow this conventional plan, you know, because we know what's best!"

Again, I'm not bad-mouthing anybody or anything.

**Sanchez:** I pick it up as being the experiences of what you know, having seen and having traveled and having seen different areas and how things evolve. They made you Chief Petty Officer, so you could see both sides the people at the bottom and the people at the top are trying to sort of translate in the middle.

**Hahn:** Well, that's what I did. When I was there at my last command, I was attached to Commander Naval Forces Korea (CNFK). I was a senior enlisted guy in that unit. My job was to take care of the enlisted members, and being in a unit that was extremely top-heavy with officers, none of them cared about the enlisted guys because they were all worried about their careers. My job was to take care of the enlisted guys! Needless to say, that created a lot of friction. It is probably one of the reasons I didn't make E9, but that's neither here nor there.

You know well, getting past the Cold War and in 2001, when we were going back to Iraq for the second time, 9/11 hit in September, and my first thought was, "I'm going to be here two more years. I'm going to be here. I'll be here and complete my 30 years because the country's at war; they will not let me retire. I went into the office, and they said, "well, you're going to retire in December. You're old; you're fat and high year tenure, so you're out of here!"

I mentioned, “Yeah, well, we're at war.” Their response, “That's nothing for you to worry about. You're old; you're fat, high year-ten years. You're out of here!”

**Sanchez:** Right, fatter or outdated? Probably everything that you knew switched over with the technology; thus, rather than train you guys, I guess letting you go was the option at the time.

**Hahn:** Well, that was a good thing or not, I don't know. It just was what it was; it was what it was. It was what it was.

**Sanchez:** Mr. Hahn, we're unfortunately approaching the end of the show, but I can't thank you enough, first of all, for your military service and for that and all the excellent choices you made as a 17-18 years old. They were brilliant.

**Hahn:** They were brilliant! Yeah, it's been a genius back then. [Laughter]

**Sanchez:** But I'm glad you moved away from being a hamburger flipper and look at all the great things you did serving the country. You became an educator, so I applaud what you've done, and I wish you continued success in everything you do.

**Hahn:** I thank you very much. It's always great fun to come to talk to you on a show.

**Sanchez:** Thank you for sharing how you experienced it. I have to tell you; you made me laugh. I also want to thank you for that.

**Hahn:** Well, I got to close with this. I do have my dad's Cold War Veteran Certificate. I have mine if you go out to the Patton Museum in Chiriaco Summit (Colorado Desert of Southern California). They have different walls for different eras, and my name is on three of those walls. My name and son's name are on the Global War on Terrorism Board. I know it's not much, but I never quite fit in anyone's category.

**Sanchez:** It's a wonderful story because I think it's something in the record of what you've done of the great work you've done. I want to thank you for that.

**Hahn:** You know, but anyway, I'm not a big war-mongering fan; I just did it because I wanted to.

**Sanchez:** Sure, that was the time that was the whole idea that you know, we didn't choose the circumstances. We were experiencing it from our perspective, given what we were given at that time.

Mr. Hahn, thank you very much. I look forward to doing the show, and I want to say that we will do another show shortly. Talk about the flags you send around the world. I don't want to get too heavy into that one because I think that's a great project, and we're going to talk about that unto itself.

**Hahn:** Okay, I'm ready whenever you are.

**Sanchez:** Soon. Thank you for being on the program, Mr. Hahn.

Contacting Armando F Sanchez at [AFSanchez66@gmail.com](mailto:AFSanchez66@gmail.com)

The transcript includes edits for clarity.a