

Hal-Hen History

Published January 19th, 2015

Alan Moore

The story begins over 70 years ago right after World War II when two young men were discharged from the Navy as radio and radar technicians came home to start two unique manufacturing and distribution companies which relied upon their backgrounds in electronics and radio technology.

Growing up in the Bronx and attending High School together, Harold Spar and Henry Meltsner, better known as Hal & Hen to the hearing industry, began their journey. After high school, both worked during the day, with Hen attending City College at night wanting to become an electrical engineer. The week after the Pearl Harbor attack, Hen enlisted in the Navy and, because of his interest in flying, applied for Aviation Radio Gunnery School. By that time, Hal had already been in the New York State Guard.

Hen kept in touch with Hal and encouraged him to join the Navy. Soon after Hal enlisted and eventually took a course in electronics to become an aviation radio serviceman. Hal was soon assigned as a radio service man at a Naval base in Suriname, Dutch Guyana, on the northern coast of South America where he would spend 2 years.

Hal's base helped protect the convoys going over to Europe which were essential in the war effort. Hen was assigned to Jacksonville, FL to attend the Navy's Aviation Radio Gunnery School. Soon after starting class, he was struck ill, forcing him to wait until the next training session. This turned out to be a stroke of luck; his former classmates all ended up flying deadly dive-bombing missions in the South Pacific. Hen and the servicemen with whom he graduated were instead assigned to a PBY squadron, versatile aircraft that resembled large flying boats, in Jacksonville.

By coincidence, it was during that time that Hal's squadron, which was en-route to Dutch Guyana, stopped there. As fate would have the two young men were brought together once more during the war. Hen's chief petty officer approached him saying, "We want one man in the state of Florida to go to a special electronics school, but I can't tell you what the school is." Of course, Hen had his eye on flight training and was reluctant to volunteer. But the petty officer prevailed and told Hen, "Look, you go to this school." So he did. Well, it turned out to be radar school and radar was top at that time. Henry spent 80 weeks in an advanced radar training program at Chicago, Texas A&M, and other bases. At that time you weren't even allowed to say the word 'radar' because it was top secret.

Hen finished his last training course in Corpus Christi, Texas, and by another stroke of luck, Harold's PBY squadron arrived there for refurbishment of their planes. Hal & Hen were reunited and met for a couple of days and talked about what they were going to do after the war. Hal suggested they go into business together. At that time, they were just two kids, and didn't know anything about business. But that's where the idea of their great partnership came from.

After the war using the \$200 they each received upon their discharge, the Hal & Hen opened a business in a small \$27.00/month office in the Bronx NY. Within a year, Hal-Hen would start

supplying receiver cords to the hearing industry, with many more products to follow. Ten years later, in 1956, they would go on to establish Widex USA. It was the beginning of a long and prosperous journey.

The two made good on their resolution. At first their service background didn't help them much, although they did repair radios for awhile. However, it was clear that radio repair wasn't going to be their main business. Hal & Hen were interested in the growing electronics industry and recognized the future potential but you can't eat potential. Their first products were coloured light bulbs. The War Department had restricted Westinghouse and General Electric from making these products and there was a great need so needless to say the bulbs were a hit.

Hal's cousin was involved in the American Earphone Co, a manufacturer of hearing aids during WWII. The body-worn hearing aids in those days were at least twice the size of a pack of cigarettes, and had a wire extending up to a receiver on the ear. The company was looking for someone to make cords for their hearing aids and Hal-Hen produced their first hearing aid cords for them.

As Hal & Hen spoke to dispensers around the country, they realized that each dispenser carried only one brand of hearing aid. That meant, if you were traveling and wanted to purchase a replacement cord but happened to be in a place that didn't offer that brand of hearing aid, you were out of luck. So they got the idea of making cords for all brands of hearing aids.

At that time, there wasn't a company in existence that serviced the hearing industry with supplies. The cords are what gave Hal & Hen the idea to expand on this idea of a company offering products that applied to all the hearing aid dispensers. The two men marketed their replacement cords for each make and model of hearing aid, traveling the entire country. In their conversations with dispensers, they were continually searched for other market niches for Hal-Hen to fill.

Many products followed. The company provided Dri-Aid® kits for controlling moisture in hearing aids. These were originally adapted from WWII desiccant pouches that kept maps and important papers dry. Hal-Hen modified and refined them for hearing aids, and they are still offered in a modern formula.

Likewise, Hal-Hen developed the hearing aid Stethoset that reduced teachers' hearing aid checks in classrooms from 90 minutes to as little as 5 minutes. Hal-Hen Stethosets remain on the market today in an updated form.

In the early 1950s, Harold received a phone call about a “future bride” who wanted to hide the cord of her hearing aid so that it would not detract from her wedding gown. He designed a cord that was disguised as a pearl necklace. It became a huge hit. From that point onward, it was easier for women with hearing loss to wear the off the shoulder fashions that were popular at the time.

It was these kinds of opportunities that made Hal-Hen prosper. Early in the 1950s, Hal & Hen saw the future, and they recognized that it would not include hearing aid cords which were then Hal-Hen's main product line and they started discussing the possibility of offering a hearing aid line.

In 1952, Raytheon introduced the junction transistor, paving the way for hearing aids that used only the A-battery pack. In the two years that followed, Maico, Microtone, RadioEar, Unex, and others started introducing all-transistor hearing aids. The first ear-level hearing aids began to appear around 1955, replacing body-worn aids with BTEs and ITEs.

In 1956, ten years after Hal & Hen had established Hal-Hen, they founded Widex USA by sending a check for \$21.00 to Topholm and Westermann for their first hearing aid. One advantage Hal & Hen had was that few people knew how to repair hearing aids, and with their backgrounds in electronics, they were able to make hearing aid repairs themselves.

Hal-Hen had one bookkeeper, with Henry and Harold taking care of the rest of the business. All of the sales and marketing fell upon the two men having North America as their quite a large sales territory. When a new hearing aid was introduced, Hal & Hen traveled the country to present it to dispensing offices and convince them to take on the product line.

At that time, each office represented only one manufacturer. Beltone offices sold only Beltone; Qualitone, Acousticon, and Zenith offices sold only their brand of hearing aids, etc... It was Hal-Hen's objective to convince dispensers to take on another line which, due to the franchise system, was very difficult at first. But, finally, there were businesses that started to become independent offices.

Everyone now recognizes that there isn't just one hearing aid that fits everyone, as time went on, Hal-Hen had more professional people dispensing hearing aids, including audiologists and hearing instrument specialists, all of whom were better informed and who could analyze a hearing loss and then fit the patient appropriately. The field became far more professional in all disciplines.

Now, when you visit dispensing offices throughout the United States, you will generally find them carrying several brands of hearing aids. Hal & Hen were really among the first to break the barrier on single-line dispensing, and in some senses, which was the start of today's modern, independent dispensing office. But the road was far from easy, taking them years to break down the barriers, but they persevered.

The company's origins have formed the basis of its character and philosophy. Hal & Hen's overall philosophy still sets the tone for us today, a strong, old-fashioned work ethic and a vision in that they knew, even in their early years in business, that the best future for this industry involved encouraging hearing care professionals to educate themselves about a multitude of products. They essentially said: You're the professional, and you should recommend whatever product is best for your patient. We still believe in their vision that it's more advantageous to the consumer when an independent professional provides them with the best product for their specific needs. And, we also do our best to help get the word out there in the media about breakthroughs in hearing technology that can benefit millions of adults and children.

You don't find many friends who were as close to each other as Hal & Hen in fact, you don't find many brothers who are as close. The two had witnessed a lot of history. Anyone could instantly recognize the bond that Hal & Hen shared, as they've worked, sold products, and told stories together for more than 70 years; often finishing each others' sentences and quickly moving to reinforce and enhance each other's stories.

Now just North of his 93rd birthday, Hal has fond memories of his childhood friend and business partner. It was a great loss to everyone at Hal-Hen and to the hearing health care industry when Henry Meltsner passed away last year after a long illness. Truly the passing of a giant who is greatly missed. Hal continues to be active coming to the office three days/week offering his valuable input and wisdom to the Hal-Hen team.

The Hal-Hen philosophy is championed by Hal and Hen's sons, Ron Meltsner and Eric Spar, who have both worked for the company over 30 years. Both men point out that their fathers played key roles in teaching them the business. Hal & Hen always had confidence in their abilities, and showed them the important facets of the business. They taught them how to work with people, demonstrate products to hearing care professionals, and how important it was not only to be a good "explainer," but also to be a good listener. Hal & Hen taught the importance of trying to develop, not just good business relationships with people, but also real friendships. In other words, you should genuinely enjoy what you do and care about the people to which you are dealing.

The company has earned a reputation for fostering close, personal relationships with hearing care

providers, and leveraging experience and technical know-how to provide high-tech hearing solutions. They have done this through the hard work and hands-on approach of co-founders Hal and Hen, and also in a large part through this same dedication to the field by their sons, Ron & Eric, who have succeeded them in running the businesses.

In some ways, we're really the opposite of other companies, we have a lot of experience here. We're not in the world of public companies, and our management is not going to be changing. People know that Eric and Ron are always going to be here, and they can always count on them."

Hal-Hen has also earned a reputation for knowing the market and coming out with innovative technology. Both Ron & Eric have the hearing business in their blood, and in their view; it all begins and ends with a successful customer support.

We don't run our company like some other companies are run, we believe in giving people responsibilities and possibilities, and in allowing them to be creative. It's a philosophy that has worked for 70 years. Hal-Hen has thrived on a people-oriented management approach which has yielded a wealth of staffers who offer decades of experience Hal-Hen remains committed to honesty and integrity.

Canadian Connection

In the mid 80's a young company called Dahlberg Sciences, decided that it seemed very time consuming and somewhat complicated, for Canadian hearing health care professionals to have a consistent source for their supplies that functioned in Canadian currency and didn't require a customs nightmare.

We approached the partners, and they agreed that it was simpler for them to deal with 1 shipment a week to Canada, with all the paperwork involved. We had a customs broker in Kitchener who handled, and still does, all necessary documents.

It seemed a win-win situation. We could support the Canadian health care professionals, and they could simplify their export business to Canada. They also appreciated the lack of collection problems that occasionally occurred.

So here we are 30 years later, and still growing together with the second generation Hal Hen partners and the Canadian company, now called DiaTec Canada.