#243 - Navigating Hacker Summer Camp 2025

G Mark Hardy: [00:00:00] Hey, what are you doing this summer? if you're like a lot of us, you're gonna be going to Hacker Summer camp. And if you've never been there before, if you just want to get a refresh of what to expect, stick around. 'cause I'm gonna give you my book report.

G Mark Hardy: Hello and welcome to another episode of CSO Tradecraft, the podcast that provides you with the information, knowledge, and wisdom to be a more effective cybersecurity leader. My name is g Mark Hardy, and I'm your host. And today I'm gonna be talking about, one of the biggest things that we typically get in the hacker community.

we've nicknamed as well Hacker Summer Camp. So if you're watching on YouTube, you can see that I've got my, DEFCON hat from. 2000, no, I'm sorry, 1997. I think it was Defcon five when I bought this hat. And we're gonna be talking about Hacker summer camp. So here's my hacker Summer camp official shirt.[00:01:00]

It's the only yellow hacker shirt I've got. although I still had to dig through about four boxes of hacker shirts to find it. So at some point in time I'm gonna have to do something with literally hundreds of shirts that I've accumulated over the years at Defcon and other types of events. But until then, let's talk a little bit about the three conferences that make up Hacker Summer Camp in general, and why it's significant to you and what you could potentially get out of it.

So stick around. Defcon Black Hat and BSides Las Vegas in that order have cropped up as being some of the core events and activities ,to participate in the cybersecurity community. Now, a little bit about Defcon. Buddy Jeff Moss founded that back in 1993, and what happened was he ran a BBS up in the Seattle area and at the time, the bulletin board system where you dial in, and it was pretty much a text-based interface, was giving way to this newfangled thing called, the internet.

And so as a result they said, Hey, [00:02:00] let's just do one last party, get everybody together and it was gonna be cheap. It's gonna be in Vegas in August because it's about as cheap as you can get there. And it kicked off and it's got

about a hundred people showed up or he originally thought and they thought it was pretty good.

And listening to Jeff talk about it, he's at the end. He didn't think there's gonna be a follow on, but someone said, Hey, what are we doing next year? I guess DEFCON two was born. now we have done 32 Defcon and it s continues to grow. And where'd the name come from? Defcon is defense condition.

Those of us who served in the military are familiar with defcon. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, DEFCON one basically meaning you're at nuclear war, DEFCON five is chill out baby. Do we have no pure competitors? It was a kind of a cool name and it's continued as well. Now what's interesting is one of the things that took place there was spot the Fed, and it used to be that originally just the hackers would show up.

In some of the early days, we'd talk about the only reason you went to DEFCON was to [00:03:00] hang out with your buddies and trade zero days. that became rather interesting, and so law enforcement would show up and then the Bureau and then NSA and things such as that. I think it was that, Defcon four, which was my first one when I, I met a gentleman and we got to talking a little bit and then figured out that, yeah, he does work at Fort Mead.

was not working at Fort Mead personally at the time, but apparently I knew the secret handshake and things were that type of a community and we got to talking about what was going on. At Defcon five, ironically for me as a card carrying member of the US military, I ended up running Spot the Fed.

And that was fun in a way because you'd get these guys who would show up there and they would be with their golf shirt, their buzz cut and their Bermuda shorts, and they'd be getting dragged up in front of the audience by some guy who looked like he fell face first into a tackle box, all covered in black.

He's I got me a Fed. If you've ever seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail and how they are. How do you know she's a witch? That was pretty much how [00:04:00] the trial went. And people would ask questions like, do you print your own business cards and do you make less than $40,000 a year and can you carry a firearm legally to with your workplace and, things like that.

And so that was a interesting aspect of it, and it was a lot of fun. for years it was just a cash only. My first Defcon I think was $30. this year it's a little bit more. It was more if you. Paid at the door, but if you mailed a check to Jeff in advance, you got a discount. So those days are long, long gone, but if you come

to Defcon, you find out like pre COVID, I think we're almost a 30,000 people obviously had a crash.

A old rumor Defcon is canceled. it really did get canceled, at least the physical gathering. And today it's gonna be taking place at the Las Vegas Convention Center. It's had a number of. Homes over the years. But for those of us who are at the early DEF con's, we can remember that most of them had been blown up.

And so that was the history of Defcon, is that whatever convention center they would put [00:05:00] up with them, the next year, it wouldn't work. I think the first one I went to was at the Monte Carlo. They did not know who Def Con Communications was, but once they figured out it was hackers, they tried to get outta the contract, but it was already signed.

Anyway, DEFCON being the granddaddy of the mall has really kinda kicked off the cybersecurity hacker conferences. Now there are older hacker conferences, somebody that very name, but for those of us who know about it. It's the thing at the place, and we don't talk any further. If you're not, if fast forward a couple years.

I remember 1997, dt, dark tangent, that was his handle for Jeff said, Hey, if everybody will pay 40 bucks to do this suits IE the business people will pay about a grand. So said, Hey, let's go ahead and get similar talks and we'll hold them over it. Caesars Palace 'cause it's high end, looks fancy and figured if I get about a hundred attendees, we'd be doing well.

I think I got about 300 and I was there helping them run that first event [00:06:00] and I just thought it was interesting and some of the initial speakers there. It's interesting is that I knew and still stay in touch with almost all of them. Peter Zako, AKA Mudge, who of course went on to do a number of things with, darpa.

And I remember having lunch with Mudge 'cause he eventually went over to Silicon Valley and as we know, that didn't end very happily over there. So sorry about that. But I remember him telling me, he said, G Mark, I'm done with the federal government. I just wanna go back to Boston and I said, I got this incredible offer out here in California, and I said, there's no amount of money that would make me wanna move to California.

I said, you know what? That was wrong. Did really well after that. held to his guns. Smart guy, madam. Integrity, deep respect for, him. Dominique Rasinski

known him, Chris Goggins. He's, I watched the 2003 Super Bowl over at Goggin's house with, Wynn Schwartel, and so that's how far, back we go.

Ray, Kaplan [00:07:00] and I, we worked together at. Secure Computing Corporation back in the 1990s is along with, Jeff Moss. Jeff was also part of that group. The guy who had managed to herd a whole bunch of cats, had got some of the really big names in cybersecurity, including Sluggo, who's also there, speaking at.

Black hat one. And we were able to form a pretty unique group that then got bought out by a startup called Guardant. And then for the most part, we went different ways. other folks that were there. Pete Chipley, whom I still stay in touch with, I just did a talk with Pete up at Thought Con in Chicago, where we called it Gray is the New Black.

Why You should listen to the old guy in the room for those who are watching. You can see that. the gray beard is gone. I took that off. That was my prop that I took seven months to grow. Adam Shostack had him on the show. Sluggo. If you know who Mark is, then you know who Mark is. Richard Theme, whom I've had on this show and a dear.

Dear friend, someone whom I respect, IRA Winkler, who did Cruise Con. I've had IRA on here a couple times, Priest, [00:08:00] Hobbit. and, just these folks go on. So it was interesting that this very seminal event in terms of taking cybersecurity out of the hacker space and then making it into mainstream corporate space, after a little while, black hat really got some momentum.

A Jeff sold it out for an undisclosed amount, to a professional event. Management company who has then turned black hat into, if you will, the other RSA, you gotta be there, and things such as that. So it's got a corporate audience. It's a place to exhibit all your wares if you've got the showroom floor.

It's a great place to be in. The talks typically are very technical. And things such as that. And so if you're gonna speak at Black Hat versus Defcon, I've spoken to Defcon a number of times, but Black Hat, we always joke that you have to go ahead and find some sort of vulnerability where you have to dec cap a chip under the gravity of Mars using a left-handed device on a Thursday, and then your talk will get approved.

and Jeff, as I said, ran those for a little while, but he, subsequently went on to just doing [00:09:00] the Defcon, but he worked at the White House and he's worked at. And he's had a lot of really interesting life experiences. So good for

him. I spoke, I think at def com. One of the times was in 2008 and I gave a talk there and I was gonna speak again at Black Hat the next year.

And I didn't get accepted and a lot of people didn't get accepted. And so a couple guys, Jack, Daniel, Chris Nickerson, Mike Don, a few other folks said, Hey guys, we're got good stuff, but somehow we didn't make the cut. So came up with a grassroots alternative. For speakers whom we all knew were really good, but for whatever reason just didn't get accepted to this one thing, and so thus, BSides was born.

Now, for those who don't remember the old days of 45 records, the A side of the 45, yeah. Record was a round thing that you put on a turntable rotated at 45 revolutions per minute, a little needle, which should have a crystal in there. EO electric charge would run to create the music. Yeah, go ahead and look it up on.

And [00:10:00] some historian channel. If you don't, if you didn't live those days. But anyway, B, besides that was the other side of the record, the one that nobody cared about. You got the hit on A, they had to put something on B, but every now and then you get a double sided where you value the record. Both of 'em would be really good.

I think Travis Goodspeed. He, I think he made the first badge. I remember when I did my ham radio. license. I think I did that at Skydog Con with Travis. I brought down the coffee machine from my room. We sat there and we drank coffee because I thought the thing was gonna be on a Sunday. Then it was actually gonna be on a Saturday, and we've already been up till three in the morning.

And so I think our call signs were about two letters apart. But BSides was interesting because it was set up from not just an event or an event in Vegas, but they created. A wiki to allow anybody else to run their own BSides. And so there's been over a thousand BSides around the world, and it's really a do it yourself.

You can create your own and as a result, it started, if you will, the grassroots type of conference. And I go and speak at [00:11:00] BSides when I can. I am a professional speaker, I get paid to do my stuff. People say how do you get paid to speak? I said, do it for free for 20 years. And then you build up the skill, the expertise, and the reputation nonetheless.

Especially if a BSides just getting off the ground and you want a headline or somebody like that, gimme a call. I fly out there and see what I can do to get

you on the map. Now, for those who have been there to one, two, or all three of these events, you're familiar with the differences, but if you're not, if you're relatively new or you just wanna review them, let me go through and tell you what to expect for each one of them.

Defcon, which is going to be in terms of chronological stuff, was the oldest one, but. When you get to Vegas, baby, you can start with Black Hat, then BSides, and then Defcon is at that closing weekend. It's hacker focus. It's informal, it's interactive. You get in a big long line. We just call it line Con. You pay your cash and it'll have hacking contests, experimentation.

A lot of hands-on stuff. One of the things that I thought was interesting was the voting village that we've had over the fall. Past few years, and also a car hacking village. And a lot of these things that are [00:12:00] hands-on, the voting village is quite interesting because people would bring in voting machines.

Now I gotta tell you, the vendors of these voting machines did not voluntarily participate, but these are people who, as citizens of their community, have properly volunteered to serve on whatever it is their local voter registration board. And when you're not using these voting machines, they're 364 days out of the air.

Why not take on a road trip to Vegas? And so what we find then is that a lot of the weaknesses that were discovered. Them that were then publicized, were not a result of vendor disclosures, but it was a result of the hackers at Defcon going ahead and saying, Hey, we're gonna find a way to make this thing do what the designers didn't intend it to do.

And so from that spirit of innovation, DEFCON had been fun years ago. We used to have something there that was called a wall of sheep. A buddy of mine named Riverside ran that and everybody would get on the wifi. this is pre Ed Snowden. And so most everything was unencrypted. People log into there.

Facebook page or [00:13:00] if they, I think if you even had Facebook back then, Twitter, your email account, and it was all in the clear. And so what he did is he basically had this scrolling window of all the IP address, the username, full username, and then the first few characters of the password with the asterisk, just to let you know that they got you, but they're not give the whole thing away.

And the first year he ran it, this thing just scroll and scroll and then subsequently. That has changed. I think he's turned that into security awareness

type of a tool that he can take on the road. But we pioneered an awful lot of stuff at Defcon. my contribution to Defcon was well, hacker Jeopardy.

I first played a game of Hacker Jeopardy in 1997 at Defcon five with Ira Winkler. and John Ira and Dead addict was on our team and we won it except for the fact that the scorekeeper was drunk and Wynn got the final hacker jeopardy. Question wrong, for those of you who are trivia buffs, what is the only version of Microsoft operating system, that had an orange book rating?

And let me know what you come up with. Send that to me a little, show notes and I'll tell you if you got it right or I'll tell you where the [00:14:00] error was. In any case. based upon that, I ended up working with Hacker Jeopardy for about 25 years. Somewhere in the background here. Yeah, there's my hacker.

Jeopardy. Podium. That was our 25 year anniversary, GA mc, and it's actually nix e tubes from the Soviet Union. That's a functional clock. Fired it up yesterday. But I found out that on the camera that I have, it just turns into big orange glow, so you can't play with it any case. DEFCON has always been a great place to go.

Good place to catch up with friends and what I call it my dysfunctional family reunion. black hat is the professional side of it. It's more corporate. It's structured, that way. The presentations are much more technical, but the showroom floor is a big deal and I'll go there from CISO Tradecraft and I will try to speak with a lot of different vendors, understand where they're going.

Some of them want to come on the show. That would be absolutely great. we don't have sponsored guests every week, but when we do, it helps us to pay the bills. And as we've never shielded for anybody, but we do try to ensure that our. [00:15:00] Audience here at CISO Tradecraft is exposed to some of the important information, knowledge, and insights that you need to help your career.

And sometimes we find that now it's premium cost. It's a little bit long line with RSA, except you don't have to pay San Francisco hotel prices. I was just pricing out my RSA trip for March because I'm putting in the call for papers, by the way, is out for RSA and in again, I'm.

You can do a little bit better here in Vegas and then BSides Las Vegas. And so BSides Las Vegas, it's really done quite well. And so as a result, if you go and take a look at it, if you're signed up, you're signed up for it, BSides lv. And what

you'll do is that, from that type of event, you'll have much less formal, type of a presentations.

It's more of a community. Event, you hang out with stuff and things like that. That's gonna be August 4th, fifth and sixth over at the Tuscany. And it's been at the [00:16:00] Tuscany for a number of years. And it's great for networking if you're new in the career. If you're new in cybersecurity, go to BSides Las Vegas.

Come out a couple days early and you're gonna make some contacts and some, connections there. And if you do all of them, then you get the T-shirt. As I said, I found my 2017. Hacker summer camp, which included DEFCON 25, black hat, EFF, tier Con, red Dirt Hackers, Q Con Hacker Summer Camp, and a whole bunch of other things like that.

So it's the only yellow hacker shirt I've got, so that's why I was able to find it, albeit, as I said, I had to look through a lot of boxes. So first time coming out here, what do you wanna do? Register in advance if you can. Black hat pay in advance. Besides Las Vegas, I think you need to have your tickets now already or else you might not get in.

But for Defcon, mostly you just pay at the door. Get an agenda and plan it in advance. It's really easy to get lost and wander around. And so what you wanna [00:17:00] do is get that agenda early and map out what you want to go and where you want to, to attend. There are a lot of parties, there are a lot of networking events.

I get invited to a bunch of them and I have to make decisions. Some of these are people that I like. I'm double and triple booked and it's guys, I can't be everywhere. I'm gonna try to show the flag and work your way around. If you're not so fortunate to have that problem, then potentially look around.

Don't crash somebody's party. But if you go to the vendor floor and you spend some time with them, you'll find that some of them will have after hours events type of activities, and that's another opportunity to go ahead. And be casual in terms of when you're meeting people. Also stay hydrated. If you're not used to Vegas, it gets very hot.

40, 45 degrees Celsius, 105, 110 degrees. Fahrenheit, depending upon what your favorite flavor is, stay hydrated. Bring some snacks, make sure you stay charged and, with your electronics, because there's a lot of walking around that takes place over [00:18:00] at the Mandalay Bay, convention Center and you're probably easily getting 10,000 steps.

I think I got 20 some odd thousand the last time in per day now for def. Find something you wanna do, either capture the flag if you're really good. That's an intense type of a competition. We got some really amazing stuff there. perhaps participate in some of the villages. Find something that you're interested in and ship in that's casual and so you don't have to dress up fancy and things such as that.

Get interactive and hang around with people. The crowds are big crunched in there a lot, but there's a lot to do. Black hat as they say. Go to the vendor halls, get look at the solutions, look at the demos. There's a lot of tchotchkes. People walk out there with bags full of stuff and things like that, and they say, besides just hanging out now, there's some things that someone would reno recommend that you do, for example, on your cell phones.

Is that. Don't just bring your corporate device and things such as that. Bring a burner phone. where's my burn? Yeah, here's my [00:19:00] burner phone. It's right here. And it's getting charged. And so what do I mean by that? It means that you're not gonna have your Bluetooth turned on. You're not gonna have your wifi turned on, your neo fear communications turned on.

You basically turn off all those antenna. Just stay on the cellular network because there's a lot of people who will, have a little bit of fun with you. Less so at Black Hat then. BSides, BSides less so than Defcon, where it's basically wild, west. be careful of social engineering attacks. Do not use that ATM that's on wheels.

Okay. That just wheeled into the, and you can see the streaks on the floor. There's all kinds of fun stuff that takes place and things like that. Although the black badge contest has been around for a number of years, and that is actually a very interesting type of an event. I think they're also giving out cards this year, so they have the black.

A badge contest collectors card, you'll find a GA card in there. If you have one and you get one, look me up and I'll sign it for you. Apparently that's worth something to solve, folks. So things you should be doing, network, [00:20:00] engage deeply at defcon. You get the grassroots insights, you get some hands-on skills, you can immerse yourself and just work on something for hours and hours I went ahead and I figured out how to go ahead and. Wire Cat, six cables. Now what do I need to do that as a ciso? if I got people who are wiring, crimping on the ends of the cables and things like that and testing it, I've always liked to lead by example. I'm not gonna go ahead and do all the cables, but you gain credibility with your team, even your technical team, even the vendors,

when they're doing stuff, if you know what they're doing, you've done it once before.

At Black Hat. It's the vendors. It's all about the vendors, in my opinion, for the networking. But also you can learn some amazing stuff up there from some of these well vetted presentations. There's an awful lot of people who submit to Black Hat. Then BSides. Also great talks, not as crazy technical at Black Hat, but some really good networking opportunities.

Figure out among the list of all those things, all those presentations, all those talks, which ones are gonna help you in your career. In the early days, it was all about cybersecurity and you [00:21:00] had to learn it all. Today, you can't know it all. It's just too big. But then also at the end, be willing to run up perhaps with a business card.

Can I get a copy of your slides? What? You don't have business cards? go ahead. If you're on LinkedIn, I actually print up my business cards and the QR code on there is my LinkedIn page. So now I can just hand somebody, they don't have to wait around to scan my phone, things like that.

It's a little piece of, dead tree. But it's still so quaint and it works and people are able to follow through with me and, stay up to speed on that to catch up with me out there at any of the conferences. Happy to give you a card or if you're a sticker person, I printed up a thousand CISO Trade craft stickers.

I'll be bringing those as well, but I say follow up with some of the speakers if you have something interesting and especially if you have something to add. and then if you've never done so before. Put in to present repo, respond to the call for papers. Now, I've never spoken before. No one knows who I am.

[00:22:00] Things like that. We get that, but you gotta start somewhere. As I've shared before on the show, when I first got in the consulting world back in 1985, went to work for Booz Allen. There's a lady there, Lorena, who gave me some advice. My first week. I said, G Mark, speak every chance you get. Okay, so 85, there's no internet, there's no Zoom calls.

You write things and you mail them in terms of your abstracts and stuff, and who are you? Or nobody know, who are you? And nobody know finally got accepted. And for those who've been following the show, you know that my first talk, I got a chance to do a 1986. Admiral Grace Hopper was the keynote speaker.

I was one of the warmup speakers, but it's still pretty cool being on the same platform as her. So you gotta start somewhere. Don't worry about imposter syndrome because a lot of us say, I'm not good enough or whatever. you know what? You get up there on stage, you got something interesting to talk about.

You're gonna put a lot of time and effort into making it a good presentation and you might be surprised how motivating you are for other people to say, I wanna learn stuff at things such as [00:23:00] that. How about hacking contest? Could these be a sign of future direction? Future vulnerabilities? Future attack vectors that might take place?

So as we saw a few years ago when the Voting Hacker Village came online, and then some issues with voting machines, the. Self-driving vehicles and things such as that. The and now ai, I think you're probably gonna see that. So the stuff that takes place there is gonna be leading edge for what you might start to see.

And also at Black Hat, you might find some new security frameworks, some new threats. People will release tools and things like that. Tools are also released at Defcon and you can walk out with that. So come to Hacker Summer Camp if you haven't done so before. This would be my, I dunno, 30th year in a row at least.

And. So is you like, wow, that many years. I go, yeah. And so you, do get some gray hair. At least I still have my hair. some of it's going away, but not all of it. And what you do [00:24:00] however, is you build some lifetime long relationships. You gain some insights in the community. If you're willing to go ahead and step up and speak and present and give back to the community, you can earn a place among others who have chosen to return to.

Our group of security professionals and people trying to become professionals. Something of value. Part of the reason I'm doing the podcast is my, I dunno if it's my end stage in my career, but it's my. Effort to try to go ahead and create a body of knowledge that's gonna help people in their careers be proactive, look for learning opportunities go through, and when you develop friends, someone say, Hey, we're gonna go see this talk or go see this presentation, but roll up your sleeves and go to one of the villages and just do something.

And if you're bored after 20 minutes, stop it. But you might say Wow, this is fascinating. I could do that. And then afterwards follow up. You're gonna meet a lot of people. You're gonna gain 'em a lot of contacts, however you wanna do it, whether it's on Mastodon or on LinkedIn or X or just the old fashioned business cards.[00:25:00]

But build your network. You're gonna find out that over your career, the people you meet and get to know and whom you can add value to. Don't make it one way you don't want it. Just a diode where you're just taking, you wanna be able to contribute back, is gonna be able to allow you to do better in your career.

You helping somebody else today might allow them to help you in the future, and so make it something meaningful when you're done, come back. Think about it a little bit, plan out the rest of your year. Some companies will go ahead and pay for one conference here. I think that was the brilliance of Jeff with Black Hat.

He said, Hey, I got a self priming pump. People come to Defcon. 'cause back then it was 40 bucks. But now they get a job in the corporate world. Company's gonna pay for them to go to a professional conference. They'll come to Black Hat so they can stay for the weekend on their own nickel and hang out with their buddies.

So Defcon primed the pump for black hat. At which both of them grew quite nicely. [00:26:00] So I'll look forward to seeing you come looking up. I'm gonna go ahead and I'll be walking around.

I'll have my CISO Tradecraft gear on, and for those of us who don't wanna get ahold of us or drop me a line on LinkedIn or connect with me if you got something you wanna say or something interesting. Or if you're doing a big reveal and you want us to talk about that, I'm also gonna be walking around.

With my recording equipment, and I've got my CISO Tradecraft official microphone here, so we'll be able to go ahead and do some interviews, so look forward to it. Hope you have a great time at Hacker Summer Camp. Until next time, this is your host, G Mark Hardy. Thank you for listening and or watching, and stay safe out there.