

# A Tribute to Donn Parker

By Patricia A. Gilmore, CISSP-ISSMP

**A memorial service for Donn will be held Saturday, October 16, 11am, at St Paul Lutheran Church, 1075 El Monte Avenue, Mountain View, CA. Those wishing to remember Donn may make gifts in his son's name, David S. Parker, to the ALS Association ([donate.als.org](https://donate.als.org)).**

Remembering Donn Parker, identified in 1999 by Information Security Magazine as one of the five top Info Security Pioneers, our community mourns his passing at the age of 91 this past September. How do you pay proper tribute to a legend? Researcher, international lecturer, author, friend, colleague, a true humanitarian, and so much more; we will sorely miss you, Donn! No accolades are enough to describe you and your lifelong contributions to the profession.



My earliest recollections of Donn were from the mid 80's, when he was a member of the Information Systems Security Association (ISSA) SF Bay Area chapter, then the only Northern California chapter. Donn, along with some of his SRI International coworkers, would make the trek to San Francisco a least once a year from his Menlo Park, CA office, usually to attend our annual legal update meeting. Donn was a senior information

systems management consultant and researcher at SRI for 43 years until his retirement in 1997. When we saw the "Bald Eagle," as he was affectionately referred to, walking into our meeting room we thought it was the second coming! We were honored and awed to have such a highly respected member come to our humble gathering. In 2013, Donn was asked for a testimonial about being an ISSA member. He wrote: "My ISSA chapter membership provides me with the face-to-face contacts with fellow professionals that I need to go about my business, evaluate and benchmark the security of one organization relative to others, maintain my competency, and the opportunity to serve the profession."

Around this time in 1986, he founded the "International Information Integrity Institute" known as I-4, as an SRI confidential advisory service to collect and exchange such information and distribute it to large, international enterprises. As a testament to his forethought, I-4 still exists today and is now owned by KPMG. Several companies I worked for were members of I-4. I had the opportunity to attend a number of their Forums. I remember one Forum in particular, held at the Parker House Hotel in Boston. Donn's opening remark was: "Hi, I'm Donn Parker and I own this hotel!" As a frequent speaker and lecturer, he always attempted to meet one of his objectives of leaving his audience in stitches!

At another local I-4 event held at Schwab's main office auditorium, Donn was the only presenter. For visual effects, he used 8 1/2 x 11 transparencies with an overhead projector as this was back in the days pre-dating the use of PowerPoint with laptops. I recall that he had a very large stack of transparencies for his speech. Donn put the first transparency on the overhead and began to speak. He was on a roll and spoke for roughly an hour on just that one slide. Gene Schultz, who was Director of I-4 at the time, was sitting in the front row of the auditorium right in front of Donn. I thought Gene was going to come unglued that Donn hadn't gotten to the rest of his slides! I, on the other hand, was totally dumbstruck that Donn could speak for that length of time with no notes, and still convey all he wanted to

using only a single visual! That was before I knew just what an experienced master he was at lecturing.

If you'd like to see Donn actually get through an entire presentation deck, as he normally would, see his one-hour video presentation on YouTube recorded at The Naval Postgraduate Academy in April 2005, entitled: "[What's Wrong with Information Security and How Fix It](#)". In this video, he states that he then believed that after 40 years from its inception "conceptually, Information Security was an incorrect, incomplete, inconsistent folk art akin to witchcraft and Alchemy from the 14th century." He often stated that Information security has always been an art, not a science.

In Donn's last book, a roughly 400-page autobiography dedicated to his six grandchildren and three great grandchildren, entitled, "[Donn B Parker Himself](#)" he makes reference to, in his later years, attending the ISSA Silicon Valley Chapter lunch meetings as he loved schmoozing with his colleagues and friends. It was like old home week to spend an hour or two with fellow professionals while learning the latest threats, vulnerabilities, and the applications, products, tools to thwart them from vendors, practitioners, and other experts.

Donn was highly acclaimed through the years by ISSA, and many, many other prestigious organizations too numerous to note. He received the most awards possible in Information Security and computer crime research during 35 of his 50 years in the computer field!

He was recognized frequently throughout his distinguished career by ISSA; the first time in 1992, by receiving ISSA's *Outstanding Individual Achievement* award. Followed next in 2000 by his induction into its *ISSA Hall of Fame*, and finally in 2010 he became one of the first *ISSA Distinguished Fellows*.

In addition to his many ISSA awards, Donn wrote numerous articles for the ISSA Journal beginning in 2002. He also wrote a 500-word column for the Journal called "*Donn's Corner*" starting January 2014 and running for 18 months. Members have access to these archives through the ISSA Member Portal under the "Resources" – "Journal" – "Archives" tabs.

#### Donn's Corner: Information Security Maxims | Donn Parker



## Donn's Corner

By Donn Parker

A self-proclaimed contrarian and curmudgeon, Donn was also hailed as being "the Ralph Nader of computer security" because of similarities in style to Ralph's consumer protection activism, authorship, and public speaking. Another interviewer described Donn as, "Six-foot-six and husky, with a soothing voice and calm demeanor; Parker is the John Wayne of computer security, the weary veteran who shoulders responsibility for an often-ungrateful community of pioneers. That his badge is a clip-on

security tag issued by the company that employs him--the huge and hard-to-define SRI International--hints at the complexity of law and order in the information age."

Dr. Gene Spafford, Professor of Computer Science at Purdue University, and a leading computer security expert in his own right, recounts meeting Donn:

"I remember (imperfectly) first encountering Donn four times in the space of about a year. It started in 1990, when I was developing a class on computing ethics and my search for materials revealed a book and several articles by Donn. About that same time, Peter Denning put together his book "*Computers Under Attack*," which featured a chapter by me, and one by Donn. Nearly at the same time, as I was working on "*Practical Unix Security*," I chased down a reference on computer crime that I found ... by Donn Parker. And then, as a happy coincidence, I encountered Donn at a conference! I seem to recall making some comment about how the fates meant for us to meet. I don't recall his reaction, but he kindly engaged me in conversation about all these topics — the first of many valuable discussions in the following years. We didn't always agree on every point, but almost every conversation led to me having a deeper understanding of my field. I know my experience with Donn was not unique. Donn was highly focused, insightful, and full of wonderful anecdotes. He is acknowledged as a pioneer in the field not because he was there early, but because he addressed basic concepts that still concern us to this day."

During his long and illustrious career in Information Security, Donn is best known for interviewing more than 200 computer criminal hackers in the United States and Western Europe. The research took about a quarter of his time from 1971 to 1995 and was funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, Department of Defense, and Department of Justice. He also collected and documented information on a thousand criminal cases. He donated an impressive 33 boxes (33 cubic feet) of his archives to the Charles Babbage Institute (University of Minnesota) in July 2001. An index may be found at: <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/search?op%5B%5D=&q%5B%5D=Donn+Parker>.

Here's a link to an oral history interview with Donn conducted on May 14, 2003 for the NSF-sponsored CBI Software History Project by Jeffrey Yost, from the Charles Babbage Institute: <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/107592>

Donn was interviewed many times in his lifetime. In July 2018, he was interviewed by the ISSA Journal as an Information Security Pioneer. His closing remark and sage advice to the readers was, "Know your employer's enemies to defeat them."

No article on Donn's legacy would be complete without a mention of his perspective on the topic of Risk Management. His work, which began in 1970 and lasted over 30 years, resulted in more than 300 generally accepted safeguards. Donn explains these safeguards, referred to as "Baseline Controls," which are what "any well-run information sensitive organization with similar vulnerabilities should be using or have a good business

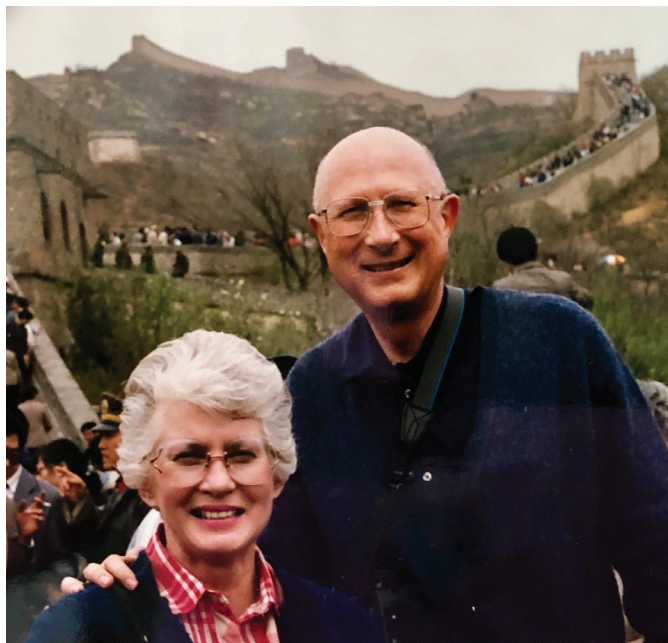
reason for not using.” The baseline concept and original 82 baselines were documented while Donn was at SRI in 1985, as part of a larger project conducted for the U.S. Department of Justice beginning in 1982.

By July 1997, “The Baseline Approach,” a primer on achieving due diligence was first made available to I-4 members. In June 2000, Donn wrote an article entitled, “Replacing Information Security Risk Reduction with Achieving Due Care and Good Practice.” The most important and timeless take-aways from this article are:

- “Security risk cannot be successfully managed since you don’t know and can’t control the often-irrational people who cause the risk and their plans. You cannot manage what you cannot measure.”
- “All information and information systems are at security risk, but the extent of the chance and size of loss are indeterminate.”
- “In addition, the past does not adequately predict the future in our fast-changing e-commerce and technology.”

### The ‘Other’ Donn Parker: Things you probably never knew about Donn

As inferred earlier in this article, Donn had a tremendous sense of humor! In fact, he had a Rolodex-like file of his favorite jokes, many of which can be found in his latest book referenced above. Both Donn and I were avid ocean cruisers and whenever we’d meet, we spoke of our latest adventure on the high seas. He told me once that he would often try-out for passenger Talent Contests on cruises so he could do his comedy routines. If you’d like to see a different side of Donn, you’ll find another YouTube video of his “[Sit-Down Comedy Routine](#),” a nine-minute routine recorded January 2018 at the Belmont Village in Sunnysvale, CA where he resided with his wife, Lorna, in his later retirement years.



Donn recounts many hysterical stories in this last book. Well, maybe not too funny to him the times that they occurred. But,

he describes in great comic detail being sick with the flu with its accompanying symptoms, away from home, and even being hospitalized a few times from his condition. It’s not the event that was so hilarious, as sickness is not generally a laughing matter, but it was just the way he told the story that forces a smile or chuckle.

He emailed me a few years ago to tell me of an outrageously amusing incident that occurred while on a cruise to Alaska. He told me that while in port one day he had to use the men’s room. Though not easy to find one in small Alaskan ports, he spied an old popcorn shop and asked the proprietor to use the facilities. He, then, goes on to tell of the disaster which occurred when the commode collapsed with him on it! With tears of laughter streaming down my cheeks from his side-splitting description of the event, I thought to myself, this guy is fearless!

### The Expert’s Number

Donn wrote: “You, too, can become an instant expert. Just use 85.4.” The following is a tongue-in-cheek rendition of one of Donn’s funny creations, the Expert’s Number:

“You can become an instant expert, establish a fact, and settle any argument by using my special number for any occasion. I have done considerable research to create 85.4 and can assure you that it works exceedingly well.” Donn goes on to explain:

“I became the world’s greatest expert on computer crime in the 1970’s and 1980’s. With grants from the National Science Foundation at SRI. I was studying the problem, interviewing the perpetrators, and publicly reporting my findings based on my collection of several thousand cases. It is only fair to say that I was also the world’s worst expert on computer crime since I was the only one. Dan Rather on CBS 60 Minutes, Tom Brokaw on NBC Today, Geraldo Rivera on ABC 20/20, and Joan Lundeen on CBS Good Morning, who did special TV segments on computer crime, and many other journalists in telephone interviews almost every day asked me the same obvious question: ‘How much computer crime is there?’ I got tired of saying that I had no idea (Victims mostly try to keep it secret); so I needed a number and invented 85.6. (I later changed it to 85.4.) I would answer their question with just, ‘85.6.’ And I could almost hear them salivate as they tapped it into their computers and then responded excitedly with, ‘85.6 what?’ And I would respond by saying, ‘85.6 whatever you want it to be: 85.6% of all business crime, thousands of cases per year, percentage more than last year, percentage of more trusted than not trusted perpetrators. Just use my number wherever you need it in your article, and it will satisfy your editor, make you an instant expert, establish a fact, and settle any argument.’

That seemed to satisfy some of them, and it caused the more perceptive ones to laugh, or become outraged when they caught on to my deception. But for several years, I could still read my standard answer of 85.4 printed in well-known newspapers and magazines. And anybody can become an instant expert. Just use 85.4.

Numbers have become mystical, and numerology has been on the rise ever since God warned us about 666 as the number of

the Devil in the Book of Revelations in the Bible. After all, 85.4 percent of us are innumerate, and the rest of us don't know what this statistic means."

President of the ISSA International Board of Directors, Candy Alexander, fondly remembers Donn:

"I often refer to Donn and others that pioneered the profession as the 1st generation of InfoSec, and I must say that all of us can learn a lot from those from "Gen 1." They understood the power of knowledge sharing to explore out of the box ideas and the passion to volunteer countless hours to growing the profession – all while staying humble. Donn, his life, and his contributions to our profession are to be celebrated, and I can only hope the generations after me will learn that he was more than a brilliant technologist, but an incredible man and human being. May we always remember 85.4."

Donn wrote an ISSA Journal article in July 2018 laying out 120 of his Information Security Maxims with the caveat that "For every maxim, there is an exception!" Here are some of his maxims:

- We are in the golden age of cybercrime between disaster and annihilation.
- Security awareness is less than useless without first achieving effective motivation. It is folly to think good security is when nothing bad happens, and when nothing bad happens, who needs security.
- Security is universally hated. We all hate the constraints of security on our work.
- The amount of money a wrongdoer steals through a computer doesn't matter because a few more decimal places doesn't weigh anything.
- Avoidance and deterrence are as important as detection and prevention.
- The security imperative: You only get one chance to improve security. If the stakeholders don't like a security constraint, they won't let you try again.

Below are a few of the many articles that Donn wrote for the ISSA Journal. His monthly columns can be found in the [Journal Archives](#).

*Lessons From 30 Years in Information Security, ISSA Password (January-February 2001); Motivation: The Most Fundamental Need for information Security, ISSA Password (December 2002); Learning from Our Enemies (April 2005); Protecting Talent, cover article (March 2006); Making the Case for Replacing Risk-Based Security (May 2006); A Diligence-Based Idealized Security Review (January 2008); The Great Debate: Security Spending (April 2008); The Dark Side of Computing: The Study of Computer Crime, Three Parts (January, March, and April 2009); Positive and Negative Security Methods (December 2009); Our Excessively Simplistic Information Security Model and How to Fix It (July 2010); Security Control Selection Principles, Parts 1 and 2 November and December 2010); Computer Abuse 1973 (September 2012, See this in the Appendix.); Computer Abuse: Computer Security Techniques 1983 October 2012 and in the Appendix.); Secrets of an Information Security Management Consultant (December 2013); and Donn's Corner (500-word Monthly column starting January 2014 and running for 18 months).*



## TRAINING FROM OCTOBER 3RD – 6TH, 2021

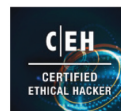
EC-Council is bringing Hacker Halted back and ISSA has secured discounted rates for our members!

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