

# Larry Hahn

## The Happy-Talking, Baja-Loving Aviator Likes Putting People First

Honestly, laughs Larry Hahn at himself, "Who is this character?"

Tell us.

"Nothing about my life makes any sense."

You mean, senseless as wild success?

"I'm just a fantastic dreamer who knows when to shut-up and listen. Listen," he says. "For me, it is all a matter of using your imagination and having fun while you're at it."

Larry Hahn, as everyone who knows him knows, is at it. Always has been. The "character," an accomplished aviator who lives in Santa Teresa, NM, was at it for years when he and his buddy Glen Bell built Taco Bell from one bitty burrito stand in Los Angeles to...well, to the taco megalopolis that in 1978 PepsiCo took over for "a jillion million dollars," according to Hahn. But never mind that. The guy who jokes that his three kids grew up on nothing but tacos may have told PepsiCo, "hey, get out your checkbook, we want to go fishing," but he is not about the jillion-millions. In fact, the 71-year-old former farm boy from Imperial, CA whose dad grew cotton and sugar beets, and whose mom baked cherry pies while he milked cows and thought not much of school but for its football, is not about bottom-lines or business or even, for that matter, success.

Larry Hahn is about people. Larry Hahn loves people. Larry Hahn loves people a lot. And if it is one thing the life of Larry Hahn proves, it is this: the feeling is mutual.

"The only thing I ever was any good at was talking to people," he says. "I like to dwell in the fact I could not have achieved the smallest fraction of what I have been lucky enough to accomplish without the

help of a lot of nice people. It's the only thing I preach," he adds: "If you want to be super successful you can't forget who has helped you. You can't forget where you're from!"

And if you are savvy like a talk-loving, people-hugging aviation nut, you get it all



host of wild 'n crazy "Hahnian adventures" the duo have enjoyed flying in Baja, Mexico. Baja is where 80 percent of Hahn's 150 yearly hours left-seat in his 1977 Aztec F Turbo (call sign: Six Two Seven Taco Bell) take flight, mainly in fantastic golf and sportfishing escapades.

"We old Baja farts still flying Baja" is Hahn's 40-year fantasy in action, the dream made real of a 14-year-old "airport bum" who worked Imperial Valley crop dusters until earning his private license at 17. Not long after when he conscripted his dad and cruised a \$300 Aeronca Chief over the border to far-flung San Felipe in the first flights of a lifelong Baja love affair, the "hotshot pilot who takes no chances," in the words of Silagi, again was at it: fusing imagination and fun into a passion that today makes Hahn a majo domo authority on flying – and fishing – Mexico, as well as the popular, jokester host of [www.bajadreams.com](http://www.bajadreams.com), a website devoted to Baja adventures, Hahnian style.

Bahia de Los Angeles. San Francisquito. Gonzaga Bay. From Don Johnson's Hotel Serenidad to Hotel Las Palmas de Cortez, the once tiny and remote villages and

fish camps served by short, dirt strips that Hahn has visited since the '50s welcome him still. Incredible, says Silagi, how Hahn-o "is loved on both sides of the border. He can sail through customs without a hitch, working the agents on both sides like a family reunion."

"It's the donut holes," corrects Hahn, diverting the compliment. You take them donut holes and before you know it, ah, life is good. He says: In Baja, "I just love to trawl the beautiful ocean and have a big 'ol fish strike my plug and go crazy, coming up only to spit in my face before I

get totally pooped reeling him in."

The exhausting life-and-death struggle of Hahn vs. a feisty Mexican marlin (caught and released, he insists) might be a metaphor for the taco king's career trajectory from its earliest days. Not so. Then, the junior college graduate excelled at selling fertilizer for Ortho before making an enthusiastic but doomed go at the cattle business. "It got too big too fast," he says. "But you have to make mistakes. You work your way out." But his next effort, meeting Glen Bell through friends and eventually taking on the task of franchising Bell's little L.A. taco stand in El Paso, TX, was not tiring, as impossible and hopeless as the whole thing looked – often. ("Mr. Bell didn't have any money and I didn't have any money.") It was, says Hahn, "a big kick." Why? Because when the talker par excellence retired as owner of 15 Taco Bell franchises and various other steakhouses and what-have-you throughout the Rio Grande Valley, he feels his trail was charmed: it sparkled with people, people, people, all to love and appreciate.

"It is the burning thing in my mind," says the aviator. "When you take a little out, you've got to put a little back." Help as you have been helped. Especially in aviation. So when as a kid you crash-land a Taylor Craft into smithereens and a benevolent friend pieces it back together for free just to keep you flying, you don't forget. Says the farmer's son who felt blessed to have grown up "knowing I don't need a lot to be happy": I promised then that I, too, would make sure someone else would start or keep flying." Hahn's "someone else" is now, besides his father, Rue, and son, Jerry, "a lot of friends, a lot of guys," with whom he has shared his beloved Baja and inspired to take to the air in pursuit of their own "Baja dreams."

Indeed, from the bankers during the



Taco Bell years whom "we begged our way with," to every face ever met in Mexico since the '50s, when for \$5 Mama and Papa Dias of Los Alamos Bay would offer a cot, three meals, and a dirt landing strip so he could fish, you definitely don't forget. Not if you are Larry Hahn. Because if you are Larry Hahn, and Hahn-o himself will take a tiny bit of credit for this – very tiny – I am not on an ego trip. I just talk, and that's about it." Everything else...well, he says, "it's just this character, doing a bunch of goofy things. It's all about having fun!"

Larry, Val and the Aztec (above) before a "Hahnian" Baja adventure; (below) Hahn-o, left, and friends display the "big 'ol fish" he thrills to trawl for in Mexico