HiJaakie

Carl Lahser

*24 Feb 91*

*Hijaakie*

*Since you are not going to be busy next month, how about dropping by to see me at Bethesda Naval Hospital? They are shipping me there to fit me with a new left foot and some therapy. I hit a left over mine while road testing one of the Ranger’s’ four wheelers. The hospital is on the north side of DC.*

*Didn’t mean to be sarcastic about you and Sonny breaking up, but I hated him ever since he stood me up at the Junior High Christmas dance.*

*++*

Jaakie and I had been best friends since the third grade. We lived one house apart and walked to school together almost every day. We were totally different. She was a pretty blonde. In High School, she worked selling movie tickets. I was a tomboy and worked after school in my old man’s motorcycle shop. Approaching graduation, we both knew we were not headed for college. Jaakie married Sonny and I joined the Army to get out of town.

After basic training, they looked at my record and sent me to the motor pool at Ft. Irwin in the California desert. Ninety days later, I was transferred to the National Training Center at Ft. Irwin and got a couple years of desert warfare. During this time I got several special training courses on the M1 Abrams tank and the M2 Bradley fighting vehicle. I stayed out of trouble and in December 1990 the army shipped me to Dubai and made me Sergeant. I was assigned to the Embassy motor pool and loaned to the Rangers to maintain their vehicles, including their super secret super quiet four-wheelers.

The Rangers received a prototype SMSS (Squad Mission Service System) for evaluation. This was an eight-wheeled low-profile remote controlled jeep-like vehicle. There was a rumor of making it semi-autonomous. It could carry a thousand pounds of war toys or medivac two troops.

I hung out with the boys at the club and never left the compound except on official duty. In January, I was moved along with the rest of the Rangers to a forward operating area getting ready for the invasion. We took along a dozen Polaris MV 700s known as GMV-S for long range recon, and I was in charge of maintenance.

I was out on a test drive of some recent modifications to one of the four wheelers with a Ranger body guard when we hit a lost Russian mine left over from several earlier Iraqi incursions into Kuwait. The vehicle did a flip and landed on my escort’s chest. My left foot and ankle were crushed just above the ankle.

I strapped a tourniquet on my leg and called in on my cell phone. Ten minutes later a big helo popped over the hill with a couple medics to recover us and several Rangers to collect the classified dune buggy.

I had rolled the wreck off of the Ranger and did CPR until relief arrived. He pulled through and was on the next flight to Ramstein with several broken bones and internal injuries.

Back at the compound, I convinced the medics to let me look at the vehicle before shock set in. They gave me a pair of crutches and accompanied me to look at the wreck. It was not badly damaged except for the front tire that had hit the mine. The armor plating on the bottom had saved us. A couple days work and a little paint would see it in the field again.

The surgeon said he was sorry but my injury was beyond his resources. I was stabilized in the field hospital and scheduled for a Medivac to Germany.

*24 April 91*

*Hijaakie*

*I really appreciate your company. Mom dropped in for a couple days until we could not stand each other. I ran into a few troops I had met along the way. There was also a WAVE medic who had been in a helo crash. We got along pretty well. I’ll tell you some more war stories later.*

++

The major was told I had damaged one of the GMVs. I was informed that the prick had charged me with destruction of government property and recommended a general court martial and a Dishonorable Discharge.

This might sound harsh. The Major was a pompous ass, and I had pissed him off. He had asked me in for coffee a couple times, which I had refused. Then he had asked me in to discuss my evaluation. My marks had always been over the top. The Major said my military courtesy was below standard, and my appearance had declined. He said he bet I looked pretty good in civilian clothes and suggested that I get cleaned up and have supper with him some evening. I politely declined. He said the evaluation was not due for a couple weeks, so maybe I could improve things by then.

The day before the accident he called me in and said he was sorry if it had looked like he was hitting on me. As a born again Christian, he would never do such a thing. He suggested that I attend church with him and maybe discuss my evaluation over lunch. I asked for permission to speak freely and asked if he had heard of the Hereafter. He said he had not. I told him that I was not here after what he was here after and if I heard anymore about this his wife and superiors would hear about it.

What he did not know was that I normally carried a micro digital recorder to take notes on repair work. I had recorded everything he said. To hedge my bet after the first meeting I had let the Chaplain and the IG listen to the tapes and gave them each a copy. I said I did not want to cause him trouble, but I did not think he would back off. They both said to come back and see them if he said anything else.

 I never had much respect for guys who tried to exert their authority. In my old man’s motorcycle shop a couple mechanics had tried hitting on me and my father had reasoned with them so they both wound up in the hospital.

Jaakie’s brother had come home from his two year active Reserve hitch. Jaakie and I were both juniors in high school and he offered to drop us at school on his way to his job at Wal-Mart. After about a week, he asked if we would like a hit on his home grown marijuana cigarette. We went to class high and after a few days it began to show in our grades.

One morning, Jaakie was not feeling well and stayed home. Her brother took me on past school and parked in the Wal-Mart employee parking lot and tried to get in my pants. He was high and I smacked him with an empty Nehi bottle. He ran me back to school for the last time. Jaakie and I were back to waking to school.

Anyway, the Major charged me before he found I had been injured. The Chaplain and the IG had a little talk with him and his O-5 boss who gave him a verbal thrashing. All charges were dropped and the Major was one of the first to see beautiful downtown Bagdad.

After the medics stabilized me they arranged for a flight to the big hospital at Ramstein, Germany, on the way to Bethesda. The Ranger unit gave me a commendation letter, an MSM, and a Purple Heart. Since I was officially assigned to the Ambassador’s office, the Ambassador signed out a letter of commendation. My EOD friends sent a letter of appreciation with a recommendation to not clear anymore mines the hard way.

The medics at Ramstein looked at my foot and decided there were not enough pins and plates in town to fix everything that was broken. They removed the foot a couple inches above the ankle. Damn!!

After a couple weeks in Germany my parents had visited for a week and took another week to see Europe. After six weeks I was Medivaced to Andrews AFB. I checked into Bethesda Naval Hospital in the outskirts of Washington DC, for more surgery, a new foot, and therapy.

Bethesda was a scungy place. It was under staffed and needed major maintenance like paint and new light bulbs. Jaakie showed up for a long visit. She got an apartment and I became an outpatient and moved in with her.

I had taken a history course along the way on the Revolutionary War. A lot of people think our present military is getting the shaft, but we are eating high on the hog compared with our early brothers. Our Congress cut our forces in half after the first Gulf War. The Revolutionary Army was cut to 2500 just days after the armistice was signed. Then the Army was turned over to the individual states because the states did not trust the army or the federal government. Those poor guys never got paid.

I thought Bethesda was bad, but the Revolutionary era had only two military homes or hospitals that had a capacity of a couple hundred vets total. These were hard to get into, and they were closed after the war dumping everyone on the street. Like after Vietnam the public ignored the vets. Local governments who had not paid the vets for their services had often confiscated the vet’s property for failure to pay taxes. Governments and civilians. Damn them all.

*1 Jul 93*

*HiJaakie*

*I’m happy you are happy being back with Sonny. Right after you went back home, I had a visit from some friends from the Rangers. They fixed me up with a job offer, so I took a discharge and found a new career.*

++

After a few months, Jaakie went back to her husband against my recommendation and moved back to Podunk. I kept the apartment and found a roommate – the WAVE who had a back injury in a helo crash. She happened to be physical therapist and with her help and the therapy at Bethesda I recovered pretty well. They had fitted me with a BK (below the knee) prosthesis with a suction cuff and got me assigned some therapy. They also got me in some therapy for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

About a year later, I got a visit from a pair of Rangers. They were dressed in civvies. “What tha hey?”, I asked. They said they had been chosen for special duty with the CIA and asked how I was being treated.

Truth was I got more PTSD help and physical therapy at my apartment than at the rehab center. Not only that, I was on a two year waiting list for a better prosthesis. My friends said they were not surprised. They had heard bad things about the treatment of amputees and other wounded troops.

Then one asked about my discharge. I had been fighting off a medical discharge and being turned over to the VA. I told them what was going on, and they asked why I did not apply for an Honorable discharge, forget the VA, and join them working for the Company. Then I could get disability from the VA. Don’t throw me in the briar patch, Sarge. Just make me an offer.

A young lady dropped by the apartment a couple nights later. We talked for a couple hours over a beer or three. I had some skills they needed and they offered training and a new state-of-the-art prosthesis. Then she broke out a stack of papers and asked me to sign several forms that had been filled in for me.

I set up an interview appointment at Langley for the next week. She took my finger prints and shot a couple digital mug shots and left. Her only comment was not to mention who I would be working for to anyone.

*1 Jul 93*

*HiJaakie*

*I can’t tell you who I’m working for, but they are sending me to lots of training. They even offered to fix me up with a fancy new foot. I will still be working as a mechanic. Say “Howdy” to everyone for me.*

*++*

I arrived at Langley by bus hopping along on crutches. A visitor pass was waiting for me with directions to the personnel office. I dropped off a stack of papers at Personnel and took a seat.

A couple minutes later one of my ex-Rangers friends came in with a big smile. I told him I was surprised to see him. He said they were waiting for us up-stairs so away we went.

A short elevator ride took us to the third floor. We entered an alphanumerically numbered door, and I was introduced to Mr. White. A couple hours later I walked out with a job and a schedule to begin a modified spy school. After I had finished training, my cover would be working in the motor pool as driver and mechanic.

Training at the Farm was interesting. It was a little awkward with my prosthesis, but I was progressing with the rest of the class. I got pulled out of class for a couple weeks to review some new specifications for a new system for armor plating embassy vehicles. The rest did me good, but I was set back to the next class.

After training was over, I was assigned to a lab where some medics and engineers looked at upgrading my prosthesis. Six little motors, three computers, and some fancy software, They looked at adding a sense of tough and tying muscle movements with mechanics of the fake foot. After a couple weeks while they continued working on the project, I was sent to language school. I had had high school Spanish, but this training was in Mexico City Spanish including slang and technical terminology.

During the six months of language school, I saw the engineers several times. They had added a foot specialist to the team. Progress had been made so that the toes and the arch were coordinated to act like a foot walking. They were working on getting the ankle coordinated with the rest and were looking at getting the leg muscles to tell the prosthetic foot what to do. I would have to retrain the muscles.

*1 Feb 94*

*HiJaakie*

*I just finished school and have a week to get to my next assignment. I will call when I get in town.*

*++*

School was over. I was still working on muscle retraining. I had a week to get to my next assignment so I made an overnight stop at home to see my parents. I called Jaakie and found she was expecting a little girl in a couple months. Like my pest management friends used to quote the old frog, “Time is sure fun when you are having flies”.

I arrived at the Centaury Security plant in Podunk where they took stock vehicles and turned them into armor plated vehicles. My orders were to review their processes and then help deliver a new model armored SUV to the embassy in Mexico City. The only authorized stops were for gas at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and the US consulate in Monterey, Mexico, about a day’s drive each.

I met the two agents who would be doing the driving. They were prepping the SUV for the trip.

The company owner gave me a tour of the facility where limos were changed into armored cars. Fascinating. They gut the vehicle and then cut armor plate to fit on the inside and reinforce the bottom. These are welded in place and the welds inspected. The glass comes in several strengths to resist several weapon sizes. The suspension and brakes are reworked for the increased weight. The ventilation system has filters and an emergency self-contained air supply. Various armament and vehicle protection systems can be installed. A variety of navigation and communication systems could be installed. Internal fuel bladders could be added to increase the driving distance. Conversion cost ranges from $100K to half a million. And my old man wants to fix motorcycles.

After I inspected the car, we buckled in for a nonstop eight hours to Fort Sam Houston in downtown San Antonio. We were waved in and directed to the base motor pool where we got gas. We checked in at the base transit quarters for a night’s sleep while a couple military police watched the car over night. Usually, armored vehicles are stocked with food and water and sanitary facilities and driven to the destination nonstop to prevent hijacking but since we had secure facilities with the US Army at Ft Sam and the Consulate in Monterrey we took advantage of it.

It was a drizzly, cold February dawn. Big, black birds called Grackles were noisily getting up and heading out to feed when we began another seven hour daylight drive to Monterrey. We crossed the border at Laredo along with a few hundred vehicles including a dozen other black SUVs that looked like ours. The toll road was lined with dormant yellow grass and scattered desert shrubs and toll gates every few miles.

It was late afternoon when we picked up a two car escort just north of Monterrey. They led us on a wandering tour of town before we finally pulled into the Consulate grounds just as the starlings and grackles were settling into the trees for the night.

The Consulate motor pool fueled the car and the consular staff brought us a big Mexican dinner. We ate one at a time with a two hour interval and then curled up in the car for the night.

The birds were beginning to stir when a staffer brought a jug of coffee and some breakfast tacos and sandwiches. We were escorted out of town shortly after sunrise. Breakfast and lunch were eaten one at a time as we flew down the toll road to Mexico City. We picked up another escort just north of Mexico City and were checking in at the Embassy motor pool by mid afternoon. Our security detail for a secure vehicle delivery was over.

I turned the car over to the Embassy motor pool and filled out the paperwork before checking in. They assigned me a room and made appointments for me for the next day.

Next day was spent getting checked in and being shown around and introduced to a lot of people as a visiting auditor for a motor pool inspection.

I met my agency boss. He invited me to supper with him and his family that evening. After supper, he told me I was to check out the motor pool equipment and procedures and get to know the locally hired mechanics and drivers just like I was a regular Embassy member.

The next three weeks were spent working on my Spanish and getting used to downtown. I rode with most of the drivers who taught me the customs and rules of the road and how to get to many of the local destinations. I had a GPS that covered the city and surrounding area and the major cities in Mexico should the need arise.

Two week after arriving I got a phone call from the foot engineers asking when I would be back in DC. My agency boss said I could fly back on the courier flight the following week, but he wanted a report on what I had been doing. He had also lined up some additional career broadening training.

I had been briefing my Embassy boss every evening. There was some equipment and training that would be useful to the mechanics. For my Company boss, I reported one driver that had a gambling problem and a supply person who was selling a few parts to outside friends. These might become assets.

*15 Mar 94*

*HiJaakie*

*I’m back in DC for a few weeks. A couple more weeks of training and some work with my prosthesis team I call Q, Q1, and Q2. I will call if I can get a break.*

Back in DC I checked in with my boss and found I had an appointment with my foot team the next afternoon. This team consisted of an orthopedic surgeon I called Q like James Bond’s chief of gadgets and an electrical engineer and a mechanical engineer I called Q1 and Q2. I thought what I had was pretty good but these guys wanted to improve my life with new refinements. Q said I was doing fine and the two other Qs said they would like to try out some new ideas.

Their first refinement was a gyro stabilizer to help walking on uneven surfaces. This new prosthesis was still in the development stage and lacked cosmetic touches. I put it on and Q2 turned on the power to the gyro. Q asked me to walk across the room. I tried and found the gyro would not let me pick up my foot. Q1 and Q2 made some adjustments and I tried again. This time precession took over and the foot moved ninety degrees from the way I tried to move it. The team had a conference and decided to do some further engineering before we tried it again.

Their next refinement looked like a sports version with a metal spoon-like foot. I asked what it was supposed to do. Q1 said he had heard that an athlete had been disqualified from several events because the judges and other competitors thought the prosthesis might give him an unfair advantage. So he and Q2 had decided to see what could be done. This new gadget would propel me several feet into the air. Q did not think it would work but was curious to see what would happen. I had my doubts but so long as I did not get hurt I would try it. Might come in handy.

I put it on and stood up. Q2 told me to keep my leg straight with most of my weight on it and try to keep my balance. Since it would take practice to control it myself Q2 hit the switch. My foot went almost shoulder high and I landed on my butt and bumped my head. They picked me up and apologized saying they needed to do some more research.

I spent three weeks in an interesting accounting class learning to keep multiple entry books and launder money. I also got a cram course on the Spanish terms I would need to operate in Mexico.

*15 May 94*

*HiJaakie*

*A couple days ago I got on a commercial flight for Mexico City. I was to have a week off to play tourist and then join a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was teaching English. Should be interesting.*

A connecting Fokker F-100 departed Houstin at 1020 on Tuesday. There was a layer of clouds below us until we were south of Brownsville. We flew down the Gulf coast crossing the Rio Soto east of Vincente Guerro dam and reservoir. We stayed well east of the Sierra Madre Oriental until, just east of Ciudad Valles, we turned southwest up the Rio Temporal Valley to Pachuca. About thirty minutes north of Mexico City, we crossed a range of mountains, and the clouds took on a gray-brown color. We had been in and out of the clouds several times when the snow covered peaks of Popocatapetl and Ixtaccihuatl came into view.

These mountains are both over 17,000 feet above sea level and have a permanent mantle of snow. In Aztec mythology, Popocatapetl was a warrior in love with Ixtaccihuatl (the sleeping lady) before they were changed into mountains.

We began our letdown through a white haze into the Valley of Anahuac (the Mexico City basin) passing over numerous suburbs for almost ten minutes. Visibility varied from two to ten miles. We finally flew over the downtown with almost 2000 churches, historic and modern buildings, buildings of pink and blue and orange and lavender, and numerous parks and boulevards just before landing at the Bénito Juarez International Airport on the eastern edge of the Federal District (D.F.).

We arrived in Mexico City at noon. From the ground the sky was clear blue with a temperature near 60ºF. I got off the plane and got into the interminable customs line behind a couple hundred people. An hour later I had picked up my bags and was in a cab to the Quality Inn Calinda Geneve in the Zona Rosa. I was checked in to the hotel by 1300. This was a medium priced old fashion tourist hotel in the relatively safe tourist zone.

The ride to the hotel provided an insight into the crowding in Mexico City. We passed “Sabor Bergerking” and several Dansea snack bar chain outlets on the way. Only one Pemex gas station was passed. Gas stations were not on every corner like in the US.

One of the largest cities in the world it is home to an estimated twenty-two million (22,000,000) residents. Most of the dirty industries, such as a PEMEX refinery, were closed or moved out of town. The intent was to clean up the environment of the Valley of Mexico and to attract skilled workers out of the city. The strategy helped somewhat, but people move in from rural areas faster than the far fewer skilled workers move out with industry. The sky was blue overhead but brown-gray with air pollutants up to about forty-five degrees above the horizon .

 Another strategy to move traffic has been to make many of the streets one way and reducing the lane width to 8 -10 feet. Most of the lane marks were obliterated so they drive if there’s room. The main streets have four or six sections of two or three lanes divided by tree planted dividers.

Mexico City drivers were patient and remarkably courteous considering their historic reputation of driving with the horn. They would be in deep trouble in any US city where every driver thinks he owns his lane.

The average speed around town appeared to be about 25-30 KPH, but with three or four lanes weaving about it looks like chaos. We, personally, saw no accidents and noted few dented fenders. Although none of the vehicles looked like a real air polluter, smog accumulates. It’s probably for the best that forty percent of the cars are inoperable at any one time. There was also a couple thousand pounds of untreated sewage volatized in Mexico City’s air.

The sky was grey with a small patch if blue directly overhead. Although most of the polluting industry had been moved out of town vehicular pollution was bad.

A short walk to the Grey Lines (Linus Gris) office and I was booked for a day trip to the El Rosario Monarch refuge. The 150 kilometer (about 90 miles) trip would leave at 0800 Wednesday. I also bookedtour afor the rest of the afternoon and evening to the pyramids at Teotihuacan and the Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a city tour of the Zocalo, national palace and cathedral and the “floating gardens” at Xochimilco were reserved for Friday.

A number of antique shops and art galleries were located along Lourdes Avenue near the hotel filled with continental antiques. I walked over to the Paseo de la Reforma passing McDonalds, Arbors, TGI Friday, and stopped for lunch at a taco stand. Two tacos and a cup of horchata.

A brown suited policeman asked if I needed assistance. He said he was assigned to the tourist office and offered to help arrange any tour I might be interested in. He told me that these officers had to pay for their job that made 28 pesos (less than $4) a day and they supplement their income in many ways.

We left the hotel at 1400 and drove northeast along the Avenida de Insurgentes, past the railroad station and on to Highway 85. Crossing the Rio de los Remedios we left the Distrito Federal and entered the state of Mexico.

The highway was lined with barrios containing numerous slump block apartment buildings that were whitewashed and covered with advertising. These structures housed a few of the new immigrants arriving daily that added to the seventeen million already in Mexico City. Several abandoned quarries served as dumps which were being picked over for anything of value. The hillsides were being covered by squatter settlements.

About fifteen miles north of Mexico City are the village of San Cristobal Ecatepec, a federal prison, and the restored Convent of San Augustine Acolman. Dry fields were being burned. The burning of dry corn and tomato plants, while returning nutrients to the soil, added pollutants to the air. Even the ground around agave and cactus crops showed the results of fire.

A male Scarlet Tanager, bright red with black wings and tail, sat on the fence along the road with its mate. These birds usually winter further south.

Mature maguey or green agave plants, *Agave americana,* grew in fence lines and were cultivated in fields. The plants mature at about eight years when they are sacrificed to produce refreshing light nectar which can be fermented into a light wine called pulque. This wine can then be distilled into mescal and a light sweet liqueur.

Crossing a small stream we entered the village of San Juan Teotihucan with two large pyramids in the distance. We stopped at one of the craft centers that demonstrated the uses of agave and the making of obsidian artifacts. One of the young people on the grinding wheel wore a bandana over his nose but most of the artisans had no eye, hearing or respiratory protection from the fine glass particles.

We were encouraged to sample the house pulque, mescal and tequila (with little salt and lime). After inhaling a canned Coke and foregoing the opportunity to buy lace tablecloths, obsidian jewelry and other wares the van took us to the southernmost gate into the Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc temple. We entered through an Avenue of Shops and crossed what the Aztecs had dubbed the Avenue of the Dead. A city of 125,000 inhabitants had existed between 300 BC and 800 AD The Aztecs had rediscovered the pyramids and ruins around 1000 A.D. The Aztec fear of and respect for the dead resulted in relatively little disturbance of the site until early this century.

The Quetzalcoatl temple was a walled quadrangle that covered about ten acres. Two small pyramids were located off center to the east side. The rounded Tlaloc mound was constructed in front on the older and more elaborate Teotihuacan pyramid. The older structure was decorated with seashell reliefs and serpent heads of the Toltec god, Quetzlcoatl. The smaller Tlaloc temple still retained some of the red plaster that had covered its exterior.

Leaving the Quetzalcotal temple we hurried north up the Avenue of the Dead. I had time to climb the 248 steps up the 216-foot Pyramid of the Sun before we returned to Mexico City.

We turned off of Insurgentes Norte on Calzada Misterios and drove along the abandoned aquacia. The hilltop site contained an old graveyard and the first chapel of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This chapel had been begun in 1532 on the spot of the appearance of the Virgin on Guadalupe. It was built on top of the ruins of the Aztec temple to Tonantzin, the mother of the gods.

The second structure (the first Basilica) and a convent were built in the early 18th century. Heavy use and several earthquakes damaged this structure. The new modern Basilica designed by Pedro Rameriz Vasquez has replaced it. The Basilica was completed and dedicated in 1976. The original miraculous picture of the patron saint of Mexico hangs behind the altar. It is viewable even during services from passages beneath the altar. A large square in front of the church rests over catacombs and parking areas.

We were back to the hotel about 8 PM, just in time for the Mexican dinner hour. Regional cuisine and Mexican beer. Mariachi music. Good omen for a new assignment.

The trip to the butterflies began at 0830 from the Grey Line office. The guide/driver was in his late twenties with a degree in economic geography. Even in the third world a college degree doesn’t guarantee a person meaningful work. He said he liked his job and had been to see the Monarchs several times. He was also my contact with the NGO.

Daily weather at the Monarch refuge ranges from near freezing to the low 60’s. Layered clothing and comfortable walking shoes are recommended. I also took along two 35mm cameras, a camcorder and binoculars.

After ploughing through rush-hour traffic west along Paseo de Reforma passing through Chapultepec Park, the Reforma became Highway 15, the toll road northwest to Toluca.

The first few miles passed through conifer covered mountains. The road descended into rolling farm land for about 20 Km. The 15,016 foot snow-covered volcano, Nevado de Toluca, dominated the scene to the south and west of Toluca.

We had climbed gradually to 8760 feet when we passed through Toluca, the capitol of the State of Mexico. It has grown from about 150,000 to a half million in the past several years. Manufacturing and other light industry were moved from Mexico City in an effort to reduce immigration and smog.

We continued on through the picturesque heartland of Mexico. Oxen were still being used to plow the fields and plastic jugs of drinking water and bundles of firewood were hauled on donkeys. Buildings were being built one block at a time of slump blocks were manufactured on site.

Corn was spread on the house roof or stored in prefab wooden frames stacked as high as anyone could reach. Shocks of corn stood drying in the fields for use as livestock feed.

A few of the old men still wore plain wool ponchos and sombreros but most of the men wore conventional jeans and work shirts with tennis shoes and ball caps.

A few kilometers north and west of Toluca the road entered the tree covered mountains. The road became sinuous with sharp hairpin curves. Many of the curves sprouted roadside shrines dedicated to crash victims.

Several signs for butterfly tours appeared as we neared Zitacuaro. We continued on another ten-km to the town of Angangueo where the road turned off towards the Monarch refuge.

Tours usually stop in Angangueo and you transfer to local transportation in the form of stake bed trucks or pickups for the ten-kilometer trip to the community of Ocampo. This Monarch refuge, El Rosario, is located on Campanario mountain and is the only one easily accessible and open to the public. It is the only one with so much as a logging road anywhere near it. Most of the other refuges require one or more days travel by foot or mule to reach the mountain top sanctuaries.

We drove over a rough, dusty road through candling Oyamel (Abies religiosa) trees. Several abandoned logging roads opened onto the main road. There were several small areas of reforestation and signs were posted warning against logging. Nearer the refuge clear-cut hillsides were divided into small fields lined with natural windbreaks and dotted with houses. Fence lines contained numerous maguey plants destined for the local pulque production.

The car forded a small river and entered a group of houses clustered around intersections of this road and smaller trails. About a mile from the refuge entrance we began seeing butterflies.

We shared the dusty road with a donkey loaded with firewood, several women and small groups of children returning home from the morning session of school. Houses were built of rough-cut lumber with corrugated tin roofs. Springs and seeps were channeled into ditches along the road. Power lines indicated electricity was available to at least some of the homes.

The rutted road and ditches immediately outside the parking area were covered with Monarchs soaking up the sun and drinking from standing water and wet soil (technical terms are basking and puddling). Some butterfly mating was taking place.

The air was thick with flitting wings. White noise, those low frequency vibrations that mute all man-made acoustic intrusions, filled the air like listening to the wind. Children’s laughter and raucous music from a cantina seemed to lose definition like sounds in a snowstorm.

We parked and made our way to a canyon of vendor’s stalls that lead to the refuge entrance. Two stake bed trucks from Angangueo, each with a load of school children, parked and unloaded their cargo. Teachers organized the kids into small groups for the hike. The kids had backpacks and sneakers and would have looked at home anywhere north of the border.

Many of the stalls were empty on this Wednesday afternoon. They would all be open for the weekend. Beyond the last stall and restroom a chainlink fence guided the crowd to the Center for Ecotourism's El Rosario Monarch Refuge. Thousands of Monarchs passed us along the trail and thousands more were puddling in wet areas beside the trail.

The driver paid the entrance fee of twenty pesos each and we were assigned a tour guide for the two-kilometer hike. My new guide appeared to be about 50 and spoke no English. He was dressed in denim work clothes, heavy shoes and a straw hat. On his hat was pinned a butterfly tag he had recovered.

 I signed the visitor log at the gate and were on our way. Several signs in Spanish were posted by SEDESOL (Secretaria de Desarrollo Urbano Ecologia or the Secretary for the Development of Urban Ecology). The signs described butterfly migration and life history, warned against catching or harassing the Monarchs, and exhorted the public to protect and conserve this treasure. Some of the Monarchs had traveled as much as 3500 miles to get to these mountains. The kids, shepherded by their teachers and guides, hurried up the path and were never seen again.

Monarchs buzzed by and ran into you and, if you stopped, they landed on you. Steps had been fashioned from split logs anchored in the ground. Split log benches were strategically placed every couple hundred feet for catching one’s breath. After all, the trail started at near 9000 feet and rose another 1500 feet before starting down.

Oyamel tree branches hung down loaded with hundreds of orange and black Monarch visitors. The sky was speckled with Monarchs. A background sound like a breeze or light rain pervaded the woods. Lichen covered tree trunks in the sun supported hundreds of basking butterflies. The occasional flowers were sampled for the thousandth time for nectar. Four species of Salvia and several tall composites with white or yellow flowers were in bloom.

Monarchs still a little too cold to fly littered the trail. It might have been too cold to fly but a few males took advantage of the situation to copulate. Statistically less than one percent of the population either mated or nectared at this time of year. The main mating frenzy would take place in mid-February. After mating, the males die leaving the gravid females to make the long trek back north at about 20 miles per hour looking for milkweed plants to lay eggs on.

Male Monarchs differ from the females by having a prominent black spot on the top surface of each hind-wing. These spots do not appear on the females.

We reached the top and the trail leveled off for a couple hundred yards. At this point we were above most of the colony. The descending trail skirted around the major concentration of the Monarchs. There were still plenty of butterflies and this area, with a southwest exposure, had more vegetation in bloom. The steps downward were not any easier than the steps coming up. They still required frequent huffing and puffing breaks.

Back at the bottom was a restroom for a peso fee and a place that sold big cold bottled drinks. We patronized these facilities and then hit the vendors for a well-deserved souvenir T-shirt to commemorate the trip.

The ride back to Mexico City was relatively uneventful. A milky afternoon haze shrouded the horizon. Clouds and haze hid the snow-covered volcano that had been so spectacular in the morning sun. The tour terminated back at the hotel about 8 PM.

A hot shower removed the dust from the trip and a Mexican dinner with optional Mexican beer finished the day.

A ceremony was taking place in the hotel lobby as I was leaving for supper. Military school cadets formed a corridor of crossed swords and numerous young ladies in formal dresses passed through on their way to waiting busses. This was a dining out and celebrated La Quinceañera (15th birthday) or coming of age for the group of young ladies from Columbia.

I was a little stiff but a hot shower and stretching exercises took care of most of the aches.

For *desayuno* or breakfast I stopped at a street vendor near the hotel who sold several choices. A hot drink is genericly called *atole.* Flavored with chocolate it is called *champurrado* made with masa harina, milk, water, cinnamon, chocolate and sugar. This lady also had a sweet rice water called *horchata*, fresh orange juice or coffee. Food consisted of chicken, red or green tamales served by themselves or, more commonly, in a sliced French roll called a torte or sandwich. Champurrado and a torte for six pesos cost less than a buck.

Wandering down the Reforma towards Chapultepec Park I passed the Independence Monument and the Fountain of Diana. At the entrance to the park I asked a policeman how to get to the Anthropology Museum. He called over a soldier with a flak jacket and M-16 but neither one knew where it was. They called to a man in a dark leather jacket talking on a cell phone. While this clean-cut newcomer was giving good directions in perfect English I noticed he had a shoulder holster under his jacket with a small machine gun. This was in a public park in the Capitol City at ten in the morning on a Thursday. I later noticed that two armored car deliveries were accompanied by several armed guards with flack jackets.

I wandered into the park and walked to the Chapultepec Castle. I passed a photographer that would shoot instant pictures of children on a wooden horse; fruit sellers that sliced and mixed orange slices and melon strips; and vendors of everything from toys to T-shirts to table cloths. Outdoor statues visible through an iron picket fence looked interesting so I visited the museum of art.

It was Thursday and I was up early. I would have been up shortly anyway because construction work began down the hall about 0700 and continued until about 2100. We had a continental breakfast and started a city tour at 0800.

This time it was another couple from the hotel and the guide and a driver. We went through the hotel dining room and out the back door across the street from the central police headquarters. About a dozen police were dressed in green uniforms with riding boots and spurs armed with flak jackets and automatic weapons. No parking was permitted and the police even looked carefully at vehicles that stopped to pickup or drop passengers.

 As we drove north along the Avenida Insurgentes, the guide pointed out hotels and monuments. We turned on to the Paseo de la Reforma at the Glorieta Cuauhtemoc with its 31 gilded angels, passed the Glorieta Colo’n, then turned east on Juarez at the old art deco National Lottery. A block to the west was the Monument to the Revolution. Several hotels and other buildings damaged in the earthquake of 1985 were still standing awaiting demolition. They were filled with squatters from the countryside.

To the east on Juarez was the new glass and steel National Lottery building. We passed Alameda Park, the Belle Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) with murals by Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros, the Bank of Mexico and La Torre Latinoamericana (the Latin American Tower).

Avenida Juarez became Avenida Madero. At the intersection with Avenida Lazaro Cardenas was the Casas de Azuleos or House of Tiles. This colonial building covered in blue and white tiles was built in the late 1500s for the Counts of the Valley of Orizaba near Veracruz.

Further down on Madero was the Iturbide Palace. It was built for Don Augustin de Iturbide who proclaimed himself Agustin I, Emperor of Mexico in 1822. He reigned less than two months.

The Glorieta

At the Zócalo, we walked across a plaza that must occupy ten acres. The area got its name, Zócalo, from the Mexican word for pedestal. In 1843, a pedestal was constructed for a monument that was never built. As a result, the main plaza in many Mexican towns is called the zócalo.

Street photographers were taking pictures of people and their kids in the plaza chasing and feeding a flock of pigeons.

The zocalo and cpitol building

The National Palace, on the east side of the Zócalo, was begun by Hernán Cortés after he defeated the Aztecs. It was built on the site of the main Aztec pyramid using stones from the pyramids. Spanish viceroys and Mexican presidents lived in this structure until the Emperor Maximilian. He and modern presidents used it as an office building. Maximilian designed the Avenida de la Reforma leading from his castle in Chapultepec Park to the Zocalo after the Champs d’Élyées in Paris.

Inside the stairwell of the National Palace was a mural by Diego Rivera illustrating the history of Mexico completed in the 1950’s. A number of smaller murals were painted between the doors on the second floor porch around the central patio but Rivera died before completing all of the murals.

To the north of the Palace, the base of Templo Major, the Great Temple of the Aztecs, was recently discovered during some demolition. More excavation and some restoration will continue long into the future.

The Metropolitan Cathedral was also constructed from the stones of the Aztec temples. It had a number of chapels and outstanding carvings around the main altar. There were crypts below the Cathedral floor. Part of the problem with tours is they have their schedule to keep and ten minutes to walk through the Cathedral was much too short.

Beggars sat outside the door of the Cathedral. Around the corner, on Avenida de Cinco de Febrero, day workers patiently waited with signs advertising their specialty - painter, electrician, etc. Unemployment all over Mexico was high as was the rate of inflation. These combined to bring about a large underground business community that worked for cash or barter and rampant tax avoidance.

The van took us back to Reforma. We passed the Plaza de Garabaldi, known as the plaza of the mariachi. Groups and single singers and musicians waited for work. This was recommended for an evening visit for the music.

The next stop was at the Central Crafts Market. It was interesting but looked like the semi-permanent San Antonio flea markets. The prices and variety were little different from the Mercado in San Antonio where there was no duty and no shipping problems.

It was noon, and I told the driver we would like to find a place for lunch. Their reply was, “in a minute”. This must have been a Mexican minute because we went to the Museum of Anthropology for an hour. An hour allowed us to see the Aztec room only. The museum was a massive structure with separate halls for many of the cultures that originated in Mexico.

This was but one of a number of museums in Chapultepec Park. Others included the Museums of Modern Art, Natural History, Technology, National History and an 18th century Castle. There was also a lake, an amusement park and a zoo.

We managed to get a Coke before continuing our Mexican minute to Xochimilco. While we drank the Cokes we sat and watched a performance of the Totonac Indian voladores. It is originally from El Tajín between Tampico and Veracruz. Five men climb a 20-meter pole. Four of them sat on the edge of a platform while the fifth danced and played drum and whistle. The music stops and the four launch themselves backward into space and swing around thirteen times as ropes attached to their ankles unwound and the four approached the ground. Voladores was a fertility rite where four macaw-men make invocations to the four corners of the universe and bring the sun and rain with them. Back on the ground they hit the crowd for donations.

Our tour passed the Castle. The Castle was an Aztec fortress and built into its present form in the 1780s. It was used as a military college during the time of the Mexican War when the US Marines captured Mexico in 1847. At the base of Chapultepec hill, along the Reforma was the Niños Heroes, a monument to six cadets who jumped to their death rather than surrender to the US Marines. In the the 1860s, the Empress Carlotta would watch her husband, Maximilian, parade down the Reforma to the Zócalo. She also designed the grounds and gardens that surround the Castle. The Castle was still used as the official home of the president.

Our route passed University City, the former Olympic Village, and led down Friendship Boulevard lined with the statues donated by various countries after the Olympics. We flew past the exclusive Jardines del Pedregal (Lava Garden) protected ecological zone and residential area where the Xitle volcano erupted 2,000 years ago, the round Cuicuilco Pyramid near Tlalpan, the colonial community of San Angel and finally arrived at Xochimilco. The tour schedule did not allow time to visit these areas, but they were supposed to contain interesting features to be investigated during future trips.

Xochimilco or “field of flowers”, was fifteen miles south of the Zócalo. It is one of the few areas of the Valley of Mexico to survive from Aztec times.

A shallow silty lake was modified into floating gardens(las chinampas) began by 1300 B.C. and expanded by the Aztecs between 1300 and 1500 A.D.

There were five lakes in the Basin: Xaltocan, Zumpango, Texcoco, Xochimilco and Chalco. The swampy southern areas were changed into productive farmland producing up to 7300 kilograms per hectare of corn. The term chinampas came from the Náhuatl chinamitl or fence of cane and from chinampan, within the fence. Channels were dug by the young chinamperos, and the spoil transported on flat bottom boats to become piles used as garden plots. A chinampa was outlined with poles and reinforced with willow stakes and matting to retain the soil. This farming method has been studied by many countries.

The Aztecs were not pleasant landlords so the natives of Xochimilco supported the Spaniards in the final invasion that defeated the Aztecs.

The signs leading to the gardens read, “Los Embarcaderos”, the boats. We boarded one of maybe a hundred “Trajineras”, the hand poled tour boats. Tourist do not actually get to see the farming areas.

It was Thursday and only a few of the boats in the passenger fleet were occupied. However, the canals seemed crowded with boats - boats with troubadours; boats that sold food and jewelry; water-borne photographers with old, hand made cameras that waited along the water’s edge; boats with old women who sold flowers. A few boats were hauling laborers as well as cement and other construction materials.

The banks extended three to ten feet above the water level and were interlaced with tree roots and other vegetation. These gardens are not floating by any means.

A pleasant hour on the canals returned us to the docks.

Another thirty minute ride took us back to the hotel by 1530. The Mexican minute was over, and I was starving.

Lunch was of regional Mexican food at one of the hotel restaurants. I intended to go out for supper later, but a couple hours later I had a bout with enteritis which lasted most of the next week.

Friday morning I was still feeling bad and went to see my contact at Grey Line before he left on a tour. He got me into the Embasy on the Paseo de la Reforma without being seen and made it back to work with a Mexican minute to spare. The dispensary gave me some pills and my boss arranged for me to meet my NGO on Sunday morning. I went back to my room and crashed.

Saturday was down time so I went museum hopping. Museo Nacional de Arte displaying only Mexican art. Museo Franz Mayer with antiques and a display of gold and silver items. Then to lunch and back to my room.

*22 May 94*

*HiJaakie*

*This past week was a blast. Butterflies. Museums. Historical sites. The whole tourist trip. Tomorrow morning I meet with my new boss. I will be reaching business in a local high school. Maybe you could come down some time after I get settled.*

I was up just after the sun and went for a walk. I had a taco and a cup of Mexican chocolate with a *churro.* I sat on a bench watching the town wake up. Delivery trucks with howling brakes. Street sweepers scraping up yesterday’s pollution. Hotel maids wrapped in *chals* against the chill in the air.

The tourist policeman I had met was beginning his shift said, “Good morning”, to practice his English. I told him I would be teaching business in high school and he wished me, Good Luck.

After the tide of church goers had slacked I began waking the two blocks to the Pizza Real to meet the NGO representatives I would be working for.

It must not be quite pizza time. There was just one couple sitting against one wall. I started in their direction. They told me to have a seat and introduced themselves. She was named June, in her twenties, from California. He was called Brad, in his thirties, from upstate New York. He said he hoped I did not mind a pizza place since they had not had a pizza in months.

We ordered the Mexican special with chorizo and jalapenos with pablano sauce. Heartburn city!

They discussed their work and working conditions. He was the NGO supervisor of six teachers in central Mexico and taught Industrial Arts in Mexico City. She was an elementary teacher-trainer in Cuernavaca. They had never had a business teacher before but thought that Puebla would have enough students to support a course in general business practices and business law. Puebla had received some of the industrial operations that had been moved out of the Mexico Valley to reduce the smog in the Valley of Mexico. They had contacts that could find me a place to stay near the school where I would be working. We decided to drive down and meet their contacts.

After I checked out of the hotel, the drive took us through interminable city then into dry desert hills. Puebla is 130 km southeast of Mexico on toll road 190D. The trip should take about two hours including getting out of Mexico, but there was an Army road block collecting funds for a church school damaged by an earthquake. This unofficial coercion by the military was common in the rural areas as were bandit roadblocks that often took hostages for ransom. This was the reason for cars and trucks driving in convoys. The green government courtesy patrol was supposed to reduce this activity as well as help with flats and running out of gas.

Approaching the outskirts of Puebla we began passing pottery shops and the ubiquitous green and yellow vehicle repair shops that seemed to specialize in brakes and tire repair thanks to the rotten roads. A divided boulevard led into town. We finally reached the old town with walls and narrow sidewalks. The cobblestone streets were about 30 feet wide which made parking in the streets difficult. Along the streets were occasional large gates called zaguans. These were large enough to allow cars and vans inside as they had once allowed wagons and cattle inside for protection. The zaguans often had a personnel door for household members and visitors.

We found the proper street and bounced along for a couple blocks before pulling in through a gate into a courtyard parking area. The courtyard was landscaped with tropical vegetation and contained a large *hacienda.* I was surprised to see a cluster of antennas sprouting from the roof. Apparently this NGO had some unofficial backing, more than just a private high school.

After a public greeting for any neighbors’ benefit were ushered into the big open kitchen and served a round of *Tecate* Mexican beer. A few minutes later I got a call from my boss at the Embassy who explained where I fit in this group. They only knew that I was a teacher of business, that they were to help select highly qualified students, and that I was assigned a private room upstairs. Pretty classy for an old farm girl.

After a quiet night, the sky began to turn white and a Mexican Mockingbird began to sing the Aggie fight song. (I later found that the bird was kept in a cage and the owner was a Texas Aggie.) I had expected the room to be a typical Mexican bedroom but was surprised to find a typical US motel room complete with TV, minifrig and microwave. I was up and dressed and heading down stairs when several students dressed in uniforms came waltzing into the dining room. This was a boarding school and the spring term still had a week to go.

 Once breakfast was over and the kids were in class, there was a meeting with the head master and I plus a phone conference with Langley. I had a week to get my teaching plans in order for basic business principles and business math. My class would be five high school students who were the kids of Mexican politicians from the President down. During the student counseling meetings with the parents the benefits of business courses would be hinted at such as employment opportunities and the value of personal accounting. Second semester courses would include accounting practices and case studies. Students with a firm grasp of basics could be offered advance courses like auditing and forensic accounting. Some of the interested politicians might like some of the advanced courses themselves and, of course, this could be arranged. The whole idea was to educate and recruit a work force to monitor political spending, big business corruption and drug dealings. Students would get job placement assistance and be encouraged to work for us part time.

 The meeting adjourned for lunch where I was introduced to the students as a new teacher. After lunch all the students came by and introduced themselves. Well mannered group. Not at all like my high school mates.

I spent the next week getting my lesson plans in order and getting to know my fellow teachers. Four males and three females (all US) plus three local admin and athletic staff. There were also three Marines in civvies and two Sheppard guard dogs. I also had walking tours of the immediate area with highlights like museums and restaurants.

*6 Jun 94*

*HiJaakie*

*I’m finally working for a living. Never thought I would be teaching school. I have my lesson plans ready for my first course starting tomorrow. I will only have five high school students for fundamental business practices.*

*This is a nice place so far. I am getting acquainted with downtown Puebla. Maybe you could drop down. We have July and August off with various national, local and religious holidays. I may be back for a few days Christmas.*

Over all Mexico the public elementary schools educate over 90% of the kids 6 to 14 with a completion rate of 62%. Higher education (middle and high school students 15-19) accounts for about 50% of those eligible with about 50% completing school.

Every new president swears he will do better and some have been better than others. One problem has been teacher unions going out on strike every year for better conditions. This has been a visual thing with both the government and the union leadership winning a little based on the level of corruption. Over the past few years, remote teaching using TV and a teaching aid in remote villages has increased availability and quality of education to a greater number of students but not made the teacher unions happy.

Talking with some of the local teachers, a long-term project has presented itself - infiltration of the teacher unions. Curriculum development and technical assistance could be useful. I will see how thing progress over the next year.

The school had a small gym for staff use. I made use if it regularly for therapy. My superior jumping ability was my secret. I mastered the spring loaded foot and could routinely clear three feet straight up.

The school day and year are set by the national Public Education Secretariat running 200 days from the end of August to the first of July. Secondary students would get seven hours classes per day. Obligatory holidays were New Years Day, February 2 (Constitution Day), March 16 (Benito Juarez birthday), May 1 (Labor Day), September 16 (Independence Day), November 16 (Revolution Day), and Christmas. Other holidays were Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in April, May 5 (Battle of Puebla), Day of the Dead on November 2, 12 December (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe). There were two weeks each for Christmas and Easter.

Instead of waiting until August we scheduled a surprise evening class to introduce the subject to a dozen upper level students. At the end of the first class they all seemed surprised that there was a system involved in business and that the math they had been studying had applications.

The next evening the word must have spread. Twenty students crowded in the classroom and the 40 minute session lasted almost two hours. We set up a demonstration business with a boss and workers and a few customers. This demonstrated how wages, taxes, inventory control, sales and other simple practices worked.

By the first of July, when summer vacation began, there were five students from South American countries that would be in residence for the summer. They seemed interested so we decided to continue the business training during July and August working on examples in banking and manufacturing. I arranged to get some expert assistance from Langley. It was interesting that the son of the presidents of Peru and Paraguay were among those staying with us. The others were sons of business interests in countries with unstable governments.

July 3rd was Election Day in Mexico. It was on Sunday and everything was closed. Voting is compulsory in Mexico and most of the rest of the world with fines and possible imprisonment for not voting. Voting figures often run 90% or more. Maybe the US will join the majority someday.

When July 4th arrived, we sponsored a fiesta for students and staff and their families. American style burgers, BBQ, with lemonade, beer and fireworks. The students were impressed. Latin American countries are full of fiestas but this kind of celebration did not occur. Usually the saint or hero of the day was celebrated. The hero of the day was usually forgotten when they left office.

On July 5 the class discussions were about recent elections and how spread sheets and accounting practices might apply. The students had some interesting inside observations on coups, bribery, coercion and corruption. We discussed accounting applications and I assigned homework to see how these students would apply them to elections.

The classes over the next two months were interesting. We discussed different types of businesses and uses of bookkeeping and accounting. Sales. Banking. Ranching. Construction. Someone brought up how this would apply to illegal operations like drugs and smuggling. Procedures appeared to be about the same until someone brought up bribery and money laundering and asked how they fit. This was followed by a free-for-all discussion of illegal operations. This discussion continued for several days including a couple of our “guest” speakers discussing smuggling and drug trade.

By mid August two students were ready to graduate and return home. After a graduation trip to Europe they would be apprenticed into the family business. As a graduation present they were given an Apple computer with some basic programs with a secret key-stroke recorder built in. Since these were local students we arranged for them to bring the computers in every month for upgrades. This would give us an opportunity to harvest the key-stroke information. This would be a pilot program to see what the computers would be used for and what information we could extract without turning the students into spies.

The first of September rolled around and the students were all in place. There were nine days of class until Mexican Independence Day on September 16. This was on Friday so we had a three day weekend.

Classes were routine until the week of 2 November when the Day of the Dead was celebrated. Many of the kids went home for the week to honor dead relatives with a family night in the cemetery, family built temporary alters and fiesta food. Some of the kids could not go home so several alters were built and the kids held a night vigil. A few of the parents visited and participated in the celebration

Revolution Day was celebrated in November 16. It was marked with s few demonstrations and minor clashes with the police or army. None of our students were involved.

We looked at the computers of the two recent graduates and found they were writing stories and letters but that they were not connected to the telephone system. One of our technicians went home with them to talk to their parents and get everything hooked up to the internet. The second month was different with chat rooms, pornography sites, and diaries. Even the parents were writing letters. The kids were both working so we discussed applications of the computer to their jobs. One was a travel agent and the other had a apprentice position in his father’s lumber business.

My private life was rather tame, but my dance card stayed pretty full. Museums. Sightseeing. Evening discussions. All the good restaurants. There were a lot of technical discussions with Langley and several business trips to the embassy.

*1 Dec 94*

*HiJaakie*

*Teaching has been interesting. Living in a colorful old colonial town and using Spanish almost full time has been a challenge. Interesting men but nothing to write home about. We will be off for two weeks for Christmas break. I will fly to Washington and drop by to see everyone for a couple days. Throw some more water in the soup and I will see you day after Christmas.*

December was cool and there were even a couple snow showers. The Orizaba volcano was covered with snow. Many species of northern birds had migrated to or through the area. Inauguration Day had come and gone with no major problems. December 12 was the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Mexico Coty was crowded with visitors. Highway traffic from all directions was slowed by processions from all over Mexico heading for the Basilica located in the zocalo. Several students went home and would not be back until after New Years.

We had six computer and accounting students including one President’s son. Several parents had visited to see what computers could do. We could have done pretty well if we had a franchise. As it was both of our techs were hired to install computer systems over the Christmas holiday. We would keep on eye on the businesses computer applications.

I flew out of Mexico City for Dulles on the 14th. There was a week of intensive briefing and debriefing and tune-up of my prosthesis before I left for home on the 21st. On the 26th I flew to St Louis to pick up another armored SUV loaded with computer hardware for the school. We were in the school yard on the 31st. Classes began on January 3rd.

Classes went smoothly for the spring term. The six accounting students were getting some computer programming and computer system maintenance. The father of one student had been identified as a big time drug smuggler in Chiapas who was interested in the computer applications his son was learning. Our tech was hired to install a computer system and his son was given some extra instruction on system management. A monitoring post was set up to keep them under surveillance. I hope none of these students gets into any difficulty.

I spent some time getting to know local teachers and getting acquainted with their teacher’s union. The union leadership was more radical than the teachers although some of the teachers were concerned about the management of the union funds. They asked if I could help them over the summer. The union president seemed to be relatively honest and hired me to set up a computer accounting program for the union. The union also contracted for an annual audit of the books to be made public to the members.

.