

## Interlude – A Brief Encounter With The Mexican Army

I'd originally intended to have an interview with a Mexican army officer, but after this experience, I was too embarrassed to ask one. While this is a little different than the rest of the book, it does break down a couple of stereotypes, which is what this book is all about. Some people may even find it entertaining.

[CELIA – if you see that any of my Spanish is *pobre*, please correct it].

### Story

“*Estamos perdido*,” I shouted at the two young soldiers approaching the car.

Moments before, Nicki had noticed them marching towards the car, which was stopped on the side of a Mexican secondary road. “Mike, why are those soldiers carrying rifles coming towards us?”

“Maybe they’re lost too,” I said, barely looking up from the travel guide (the Sanborn’s *Travelog*) I was studying. “We must be close to the intersection with the San Luis Potosí highway,” I muttered. “This stupid book is outdated.” Actually I had had my doubts about taking a left instead of a right back in San Miguel de Allende half an hour ago, but was darned if I was going to admit it now. After all, even though I was checking a map, I was still a guy. To make matters worse, I had written that book years ago. It was probably out-of-date then too.

“Mike, they aren’t lost. They’re heading straight for us.” From the tone in her voice, I could tell that she knew I had done something wrong to get us into this predicament.

Sometimes even the great “Mexico” Mike doesn’t think clearly. When confronted by rifle-toting soldiers in a foreign country on a lonely road, playing ostrich and pretending they don’t exist isn’t the wisest move. Starting the car and taking off may rank even higher on the stupidity scale. So naturally, that’s what I did.

The soldiers quickly moved to opposite sides of the car. The one on the left motioned for me to stop. The one on the right un-shouldered his weapon. I got the picture.

Telling them we were lost didn’t seem to impress them.

“¿A donde viene?” one asked.

Why they always ask where we were coming from has always amazed me. So has the fact that I always answer, “McAllen, Texas.” Perhaps it’s perversity. More likely it’s stupidity. I guess in the big picture, we were coming from McAllen, depending on their time frame. Three weeks ago we were. I might as well have said we were coming from

the moon or the womb, for all the good it did. The end result is they always looked pissed off or confused.

“*Queremos revisar su coche,*” the unsmiling one said. Actually neither was smiling, but I thought I detected a smirk on the face of the one with the weapon. At least I hope I did.

“*¿Como no?*” I answered. That means, “Sure, why not?” It’s always a good response when there is no choice in the matter.

I got out of the car waving a map. “*Buscamos por la carretera a San Luis Potosí,*” I told him. He pointed with his rifle in the direction we were going. Sure enough, just beyond the checkpoint that all but the most oblivious (read me) driver would have seen. “Duh,” I said chagrined. At that point, it didn’t matter if I spoke Spanish or Swedish. Stupidity is a universal language.

There are random military checkpoints on every major and many minor highways in Mexico. Tourists have nothing to worry about from them and nine times out of ten, you will be waved on without further ado. When you are stopped, you will seldom be searched. That is, unless you act suspicious, as I had just done.

In Spanish I said, “Oh, I see the checkpoint now. I guess you got suspicious when you saw us pull off just before we got there.”

“*Si,*” was all he said. He was probably thinking, these have to be the stupidest *contrabandistas* in the world to pull off a hundred yards from a military checkpoint.

The searcher was uncharacteristically thorough. He was also very polite and put everything back where he found it. He did seem interested in my pipe tobacco, at least until he smelled it. He dropped it like it was going to bite him. Gee, I didn’t think it was that bad. I wonder how he would have reacted to my cigars, if I’d still had any. When he got to my computer case, he seemed absolutely fascinated by my AA batteries. I couldn’t fathom why. Tired of being mystified, I tried talking to the other guy.

“We’re looking for a *balneario* (literally a bathing place, but in my hopes, a hot spring) named Lourdes. Do you know it?”

“No.” Chatty guy.

After about fifteen minutes, the searcher decided that we had no contraband, drugs or weapons of mass destruction and nodded to his *compadre*.

“*Gracias por su tiempo*” Then in perfect English, he said, “When you get to that big highway just beyond our very large and hard-to-miss military vehicles, go over the bridge, take a left, double back and get onto it. That will take you straight to San Luis Potosí, or McAllen, if you wish. I don’t think it goes to France.”

I got back into the car, avoiding looking at my companion. I felt I had let my sex down. Men catch heck from women for not asking directions or checking maps and there I had done the second and attracted the attention of the Mexican army. Guys, we just can't win.

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