

# LA FAMILIA HAYBURG:



## ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE WORLD

**Beijing: The Great Wall/Great Wall Adventure Club/The Forbidden City/Tian'anmen Square/subway system/train station/international airport/other essential sites and activities; Xi'an: Terracotta Soldiers, International Train K3**

(ADDITIONAL PHOTOS AT: [www.juanitohayburg.com](http://www.juanitohayburg.com))

VOLUME TWO

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—EXCERPT: PART FIVE OF SIX—

The satisfying sleep was of inestimable value to my body, but it was too short as I awoke early on this, our penultimate day in Beijing. Katarena and Enrique were quite asleep, but I had decided to send several items back home to El Paso. Chief among them were our water buffaloes, and lots of cheap bric-a-brac, as well as yesterday's purchases in Xi'an, all collected since Amsterdam. The problem was not so much that it weighed down our packs as it was just taking up valuable space. I could see no point in continuing to carry the water bags as bottled water seemed to be available everywhere. Carrying the full shoebox, I retraced part of our route from last night, as I remembered seeing a Kinko's store along the way. Unfortunately, this outlet only handled domestic packages, and I returned to the hostel wanting.

"Juanito, the most reliable way to send things back to the states is by DHL," said one of our hostelmates.

"I've used DHL before, too, while staying here," Reginald, from Canada chipped in, "and you can go over to the hotel to the head concierge. He will summon DHL for you."

That clinched it. Where else other than an international youth hostel could an ad hoc group form to effectively resolve an issue? It was like a faculty meeting...!

I felt relief that I would soon have one less bulky item to care for, and hastily prepared it for the journey by wrapping more tape around it, covering up all the pinprick holes that could tear. I walked out and around to the front of the Great Dragon Hotel, and met the smiling concierge, who understood exactly what I needed, and arranged for DHL to meet me here within an hour.

I was ecstatic, but I had to make a quick withdrawal from an ATM at the Pacific Shopping Center. Inserting one of my VISA credit cards into the machine, I punched in what I thought was the correct PIN, but it was no good. I tried another possible PIN, likewise no good. I swapped it out for another VISA credit card, and went through the same routine, with the same results. I took the card out, put in my VISA debit card, punched in the different PINs, all having the same negative effect. I repeated this disappointing process with the other machines, all with the same outcome. I was reminded of a definition of Alzheimer's Disease: Forgetting what I had just done and doing it over, and over, and over, with the same result. Except this time I was sure it was more stupidity which only increased as I became more frustrated by my lack of success. How could I have possibly been able to obtain as much money as I did seventy-two hours ago, yet almost lose the cards in the ATMs now?

I judged that I must've spent near to an hour trying to get more money, so I returned to the lobby just as the DHL courier showed up. He had a portable scale upon which he placed my package, which read 1,435 grams. After tapping the numbers into a calculator, he produced a bill of 1,170 ¥ (\$141USD), which was probably more than the contents were worth. Miraculously, I had 1,200 ¥ (\$145USD) left in my wad, but I knew we needed more money before we left China tomorrow.

Returning to room 315, I found neither of my offspring. While I contemplated our planned activity for today, registering our passports with our embassy, they returned. Katarena fully clothed but with a wet head from showering and Enrique exalting about having updated his blog. We knew our route, and followed it as we had several times before, eventually arriving back at the Friendship Store, where I bought two more jars of peanut butter and two loafs of bread. (Just in case we needed a snack later!) I looked down the street that Andy had directed us the last time we were here, and saw the gate wide open.

We quickly walked to it, and this time the guards, after looking at our passports again, sent us through a barb-wire topped pedestrian gate. Walking along the tree-shaded lane, we came to a compound that had our flag flying above the largest building that had the seal of the embassy cemented to the side. We entered into an anteroom, where a camera inspected us, then we were buzzed into a large hallway with a Marine Sergeant blocking any further access. He used our passports to log us in, and we were directed through another door labeled

## **CONSULAR ASSISTANCE**

Inside were a few other people sitting in chairs lined alongside a wall, and at another check-in desk, I saw a smiling woman, sitting behind a bullet-proof glass partition, motioning for me to approach.

“Hi! We're from El Paso, Texas, USA, and we'd like to register our passports,” I told the woman.

She momentarily lost her smile, then drawled, “Welcome to the USA. Ah'm familiar with y'all from El Paso, which I do know is in the USA. I had worked for Ann Richards when she was Guv'ner. If you want to register your passports, you'll have to leave them with me for overnight. I'll have them back to you tomorrow by opening time.”

I thought for a second, then told her, “We can't do that. We have a train to Moscow the leaves tomorrow at zero seven hundred. Thanks anyway.”

We exited into the hallway, and I went to the Sergeant to find out where the head was located. He directed me to another door, which had a sign on it, stating in both English and Chinese, “DO NOT STAND ON THE SEAT”. I smiled, remembering the seats aboard the airplane. Going through the door, I was again faced by two more doors, but they were clearly gender-specific. After meeting my needs, I returned to the hallway to hear a the last of the Sergeant's reply to Enrique:

“...anywhere but here, Sir!” .

He buzzed us out of the hallway, into the anteroom, from where we went outside. A much smaller building with the “Starbucks” logo cemented on its side took up half of the parking lot. We went inside, neither inspected nor were our passports looked at, but the native cashier sincerely smiled at us, and took our orders. She happily accepted my VISA charge card, and commented that she'd like to “visit Texas sometime, but I'm overjoyed to be working here.” What a difference from the sergeant! We bid each other a good-day, parting with an polite bow of the heads.

Back outside, we walked past the guards, who had opened the menacing gate for us, and around the drive to a main road. We found the “Employees Only” gate, with a man just leaving. He was clearly an Anglo, who gladly stopped to talk with us.

His name was Joe, and he explained, “Well, actually, I work through the embassy as part of the remains unit, retrieving our soldier's bodies from sites in Vietnam.” Seeing the surprised look on my face, he continued his explanation, “My unit investigates areas where fighting occurred, but an inconsistency will appear in the records about how many of our troops went in and how many came out. I tell you, there are a lot of bodies still there, even though we left in 1975.”

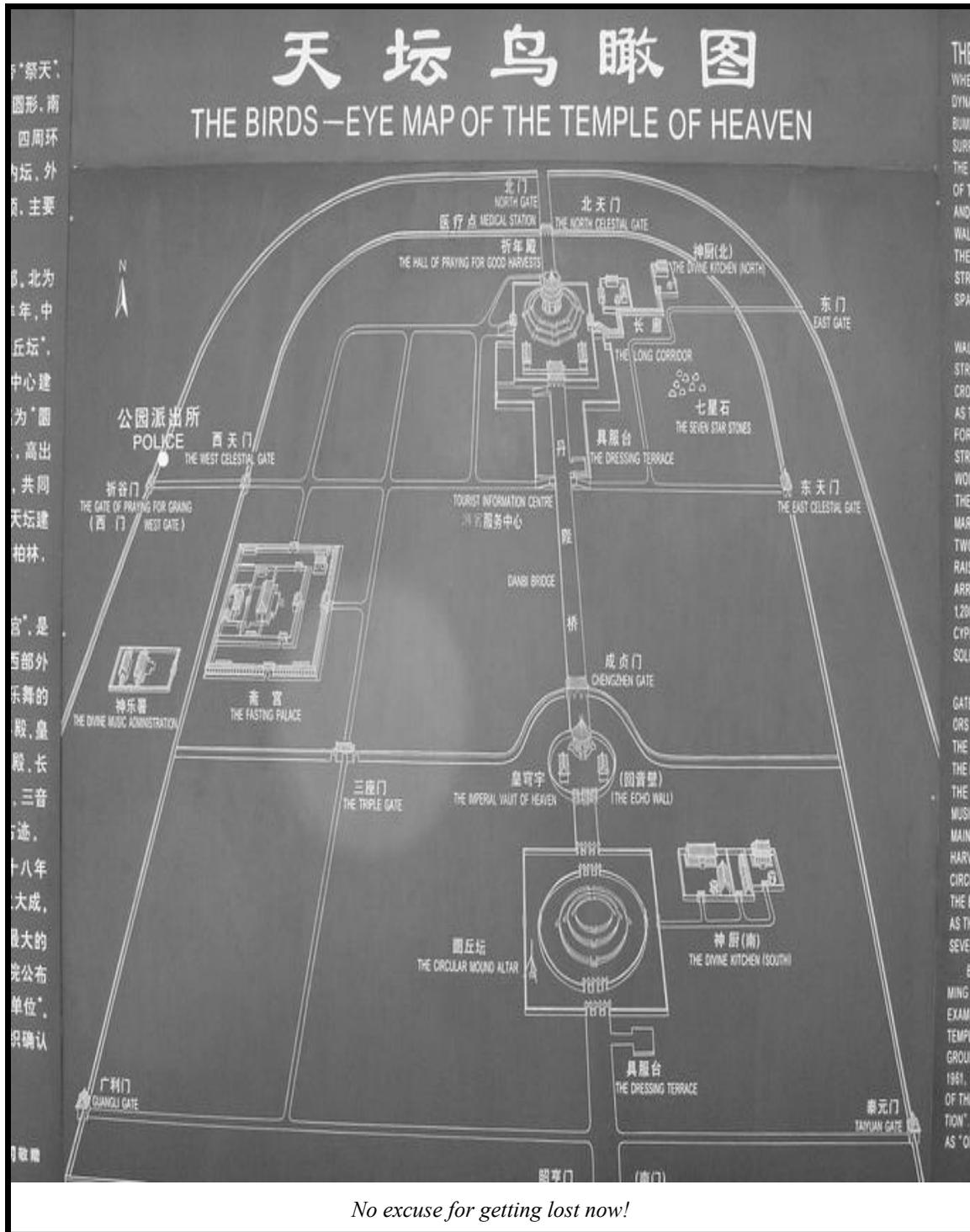
Vietnam. Combat. I became pensive, thinking about my own non-combat status. I had gone to the Indian Ocean, boarding my first vessel in Karachi, Pakistan in 1974. My first combat lessons came with my immediate boss, a lower-ranked Seaman (E-3) named “Tex.” This bitter person had some experience, mostly at getting busted, but little else. He and I did not see eye-to-eye; his record was more of getting high on weed than living up to high standards expected of Petty Officers (NCOs). Then I thought of two very good friends: a VietVet, Lt. Colonel (Ret.) GeeTee, who ran the drop-out recovery program on campus, and Major (Ret.) Kilo Jalisco (KJ), who had participated in the still unresolved Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict. They've told me on a few occasions about some of the firefights they'd been in, along with the gory details.

I'm ambivalent. In some ways I'm glad I didn't go to Vietnam, nor have ever been in armed conflict. In fact, the only conflict I ever saw was with my supervisors, beginning with Tex. By the time I did get to the South China Sea, 1977, I was working with many VietVets, and, despite my great respect for their service, I just didn't care much for their personal characteristics of boozing (or worse), smoking, and womanizing.

I must have mentally telegraphed something as Joe abruptly shifted the topic of conversation, as if he might have said something unintended, and was now telling us, “You're timing is good. The Chinese guards are changing. Watch how they stop traffic.”

From around a corner on the opposite side of the road, a platoon of soldiers, marching in double-time, came to the traffic light. Without stopping, a guidon broke rank, raced to curb, whipped his red-disc'd baton out in front of him, and all motor vehicles screeched to a stop. He crossed to the center of the road when two other soldiers broke rank from the rear of the procession, raced to the middle of the roadway beside the first army man, who then raced across the rest of the street to our side, while the second pair put their own batons out to halt traffic. The dozen or so men marched between the two holding up traffic, and fell in behind the guidon. As soon as the mass had crossed, the pair stopping the cars put their batons down and raced back to their positions at the rear. It was an amazing, well-executed maneuver, just as practiced and precise as any of the other guard changes we'd seen elsewhere.

“So you've got a bit of time now?” Joe asked, then continued on, “The embassy may be closed, but, if you haven't already been there, I highly recommend going to the Temple of Heaven, in Tiantan Park, which won't close for another hour. The cabs here are cheap, and you won't pay much since we are already near.” We all bowed to each other, respectful of the surrounding culture.



We paid the cabbie 5 ¥ (\$0.57USD), which included a 1¥ (\$0.11USD) tip. Going to the entrance gate, we paid 35 ¥ (\$4USD) apiece for through tickets. The more expensive pass allowed us to visit not just the Temple of Heaven, but all of the other exquisite structures.

What is significant about these nearly perfect examples of Ming architecture is that they follow the old Chinese notion that the Earth is square and the Heaven is round. The buildings are square when in contact with the ground, but the structure on top, in contact with Heaven, is round. Looking at the tourist map, (second preceding photo) the park reflects that; a mushroom cap on top of a rectangular stem. It was a fast, satisfying and fulfilling visit.

With the Sun starting to hang low in the sky, we grabbed another cab to take us to the Workers Stadium. It was a good ways farther, and took longer, mostly due to the rush-hour traffic. We had no specific interest in the stadium per se, except that it served as a known landmark to direct the cabbie. Our intention was the grocery store across Workers Stadium Road, directly opposite the stadium, where we could buy provisions for tomorrow's train ride.

In the store, we found plenty of inexpensive bottled water (four 3-liter jugs!), lots of dehydrated meals, and a few sweets. Loading the water into our recently-acquired green net bag on top of the elevated entryway, I reached over my shoulder with both hands and pulled it up my back while stepping away. The weight was phenomenal, and I staggered, falling to the cement below. Fortunately, the plastic bottles didn't burst even though they had tumbled at least a meters (three feet). Many people, including the beggar we'd been feeding the past few days, rushed over to me, concerned that I might have hurt myself. I slowly got up, repeatedly bowing to all around me as I regained my feet. Katarena and Enrique, although initially alarmed, quickly understood that I had tried to carry too much concentrated weight, and each took a jug of water while I took some of the much lighter dehydrated food.

We stopped at KFC for an extended break and to enjoy a good meal. A large Coca-Cola was my beverage—I needed a boost from its caffeine for my sore feet! Returning to walking, Katarina and Enrique showed what strong pedestrians they are, carrying more and slowing to my pace. It took us a bit longer to reach room 315, where I heard Katarena suggest: “Dad, you were pretty slow walking back. I think you need to rest. You snooze here, and I'll join Enrique below to use the computers.”

I offered no contradiction to her logic.

“Thanks, Katarena. I'm not totally wiped out, but I will take a break. I want us to go to the acrobatic show tonight—it is highly recommended by LP, which has been excellent for us so far.”

I had read in LP about how we ought not miss the 2,000-year-old acrobatic show. We had passed their showroom the previous night while walking back from where airport-to-downtown bus had dropped us, so I knew it was pretty close. Entering the hostel a short while ago, I had seen a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board for it, and added our names.

The performance of the Beijing Chao Yang Theater Acrobatics World was to begin a (19:00), and the shuttle to it was run by our GWAC friend and guide, Joseph. He dropped us with other passengers in the front, where we bought tickets from the box office. Inside, we sat on the balcony with a good view, but the place was packed. I presume the fire code was being adhered to because I didn't see any aisle-sitters or doubling up in the seats.

What we did see, when the performers came on stage, was fantastic. I've been to circuses in the states and have seen outstanding performances, but they paled in comparison to the Chinese. I couldn't imagine how long and hard they must practice to accomplish their stunts. What was even more amazing was that lack of safety nets. I can only guess that they use some kind of safety devices when developing their routines to perfection. After the show, we went into the gift shop, extremely wound-up and excited, buying a CD, ties, and other small items. This time, I did remember to bargain, but, even though I could have gotten a better price, I didn't want to. It was my way of contributing to the highly

hazardous job of the performers.

We skipped our way back to 315 in the hostel, thrilled by the acrobats *and* the anticipation of tomorrow, when we would leave on the international train to Moscow. We wrapped up our final night in Beijing by carefully repacking our bags. I inserted the green net bag, which held our water, inside a large, black plastic garbage bag along with the dehydrated food. Aligning our backpacks and the black food bag on one rack for easy pick-up in the morning, leaving will be easier. Sleep should have come quickly but each of us had some difficulty going to sleep—we were excited to be getting underway within half a dozen hours. Every half hour or so, the silent darkness was broken by:

“Dad! Are you asleep?” Katarena would ask.

“Not yet.” I'd reply.

“Me neither.” rejoined Enrique.

Sleep did eventually overtake our exhausted bodies. As always, I was the first to wake and I crept outside to check the guard's timepiece, afraid that I'd overslept. I was relieved to find that it was barely (05:00), and planned to wake the other two up within a half-hour. I went back to 315 and was pleasantly surprised to see that both Katarena and Enrique were already up and in the bathrooms. They returned shortly, dressed and ready to go. Today was the seventh of July, and we were at the furthest East of our odyssey—we were at the midway point. Geographically, we were on the opposite side of the World.

We hated waiting until (06:00) when the kitchen opened, and, in fact, did not wait. We went by the check-out desk, left our key in a box, carrying for the first time in a week, everything we owned on our backs and in our laden-jackets. I carried a lightened net bag with fewer liters of water, too. We walked around the hotel to a taxi-stand and attempted to negotiate a quick-trip to the train station, but the *taxisto* wasn't interested. (It reminded me of some Colombianos, who do nothing until they had had their *tinto*!) My headband returned, making me ever so slightly aware of our need for punctuality. The *taxisto* did, however, hail a cab from the street, who accepted us, which caused an ever so slight reduction in the tightness around my head. Hurriedly piling our consolidated goods into the trunk of an excruciatingly small cab, we sat in the same pattern we as we had in Xi'an, me in front, them in back.

Our trip was quick—many motor vehicles were not out that early—and we arrived at the Beijing Railway Station by (06:27). My headband tightened a bit more, because the driver was unable to get us closer than the far side of the road. We solved that problem by immediately getting out, retrieving all our worldly goods from the trunk and, not bothering with the underpass, we virtually ran across the road as some cars swerved to miss us. We helped each other across a low fence, skirted around another, and entered the main section of the station.

But we couldn't, stopped short by guards. My headband tightened again. We had to show our tickets, put our luggage on a conveyor belt that took the articles through an x-ray machine, and get ourselves scanned as we passed through a gate. We went through amazingly fast, and picked up our packs on the other side.

Now that we were cleared to go inside, I wasn't totally sure of where we should go, but I figured that the soft-seat lounge was the best place to start. After all, we did have tickets for deluxe, which is the best! Inside, we sought information from an official, who, after looking at our tickets, directed us up the stairs. We high-stepped around slower moving people, reaching the stairwell to ascend it two or three steps at a time, even though we were burdened by our load.

We walked into the same hallway above the tracks that I had when I first came here several days ago, vainly seeking a way out for us. All of the doors still chained and locked! The band was around my head wrenched tighter—we didn't have much time left before our train departed! We moved back toward the stairwell, passing by an information desk. We put our bags down as I saw the same agent I had seen before at this same desk, except this time she was being verbally abused by and especially loud, vociferous, and, I thought, a rather obnoxious native. She sat there, completely ignoring the yelling man, but then gave rapt attention to another woman who had stepped around the man.

An epiphany struck, loosening my headband as I cracked the code of effective communication in China. Inspired, I too, stepped around the shouting man, being careful to first bow. She looked at my ticket, and directed us to waiting room #2, just around the corner, "...and be quick about it!" My headband slacked a bit as I gave another quick bow, choosing to not strangle the raving man as that would have broken the Chinese code of civility, possibly endangering our immediate task. We raced into the room, with me pulling our weakening black bag along the floor. When I saw other passengers crowding through a door at the other end of the waiting room, I had a gut instinct that they were heading to our train. The biggest clue was that it was a throng of non-Oriental folk pressing through the opening.

Crowding in also, I saw another stairwell that had been roped off, with access strictly regulated by one uniformed woman. We had to show our tickets again, and, shunted off to the side, were given a Chinese declaration statement. I was startled to see that *this* time, they were inexplicably written in Chinese *only*. I felt the band around my head draw tight.

It made absolutely no sense to me to fill this bloody thing out, especially since we were so far from the border and **SO CLOSE TO OUR TRAIN!** Another pair of backpackers like us had also been shunted as well, given the same documents, but they jumped the railing, onto the stairs, and vanished below.

"That is exactly what we are going to do!" I frantically said to Katarena and Enrique, who understood me perfectly. I lept over the railing onto the stairs, and stood there while they passed me our ripping plastic bag. After setting it beside me on a step, I then helped bring their packs over, and they followed. We began hustling down the stairs, and, while hoisting our black bag to my shoulder, a small hole opposite the tear opened up.

My tightened headband spasmed when an elderly woman called to us in a high-pitched Edith Bunker voice, "Long walk to go!"

We almost fell to the platform, where we met a conductor, who, after looking at our tickets, pointed way the heck far down the platform, to wagon #9. Now running, we met a large attendant filling the doorway. *Again*, we had to show our tickets. We were gasping for air as our bodies consumed voluminous quantities of oxygen, but as he deliberately inspected the tickets, our eyes were fixed on him, we held our breath, the whole world stopping.

Then, his dour lips slowly bent upward into a smile, and he stepped aside.

After ensuring that Kataren and Enrique were in, I threw in the black bag, causing it to split open, spilling the contents on the floor, and finally pulling myself up the short ladder. A shrill steam whistle pierced the air, and the train jerked, causing me to fall onto the carpeted floor along with my glasses making a soft landing beside me.

The tourniquet about my head completely disappeared.

We had made our train.

Then the train came to a dead stop!

Was that convulsion some kind of loss leader?

Had we been discovered?

Were we going to get booted?

Were we going to continue being guests in Beijing, like it or not?