

19 July 2008

10:15 AM

I was sitting at the table outside the gas station using their WiFi to finish our monthly finances when I first noticed it.

It was something on the underside of the truck. It looked like we picked up a branch somewhere and it hooked underneath with the end towards the back of the truck hanging down.

"Funny," I thought. "Neither of us saw anything on our walk around yesterday morning before we left the beach. We weren't in any brush there or since."

I closed my laptop and walked out towards the truck. The closer I got, the more it did not look like a branch.

I reached the side, bent down and examined it.

No, it wasn't a branch.

It was my worst nightmare.

The raw water tank bracket was broken. Again.

And there we were a couple of days short of crossing the border into Peru, the unknown, the undiscovered country.

I opened the camper door and shoved in my laptop.

"The raw tank bracket is broken." I told Steph.

She turned down from her side of the dinette and looked at me with the same expression I had when I discovered it. She couldn't believe it either.

"Didn't we just have that rebuilt in Linares when we had the raw tank reinforced?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied disgustedly.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I won't know until I get a closer look at it." I replied. "I need to move the rig back to the truck parking behind the station."

"OK, I'll pack up." she replied, as I shut the door and went up front to warm up the motor.

10:26 AM

I pulled on my coveralls and pulled up the zipper.

"I sure never thought I'd be putting these on again for this job." I thought to myself.

I grabbed the lower rub rail and slid myself under the truck.

The bracket broke cleanly at the lower rear corner. It was stretched thin there when bent to form the bracket.

I laid back on the oily truck lot looking up at the bracket and pondered my options.

If I patched the bracket together with scrap metal, bolts and nuts, the bolt heads, even button head cap screws, would quickly wear through the tank joint and ruin the tank. Patch with scrap and bolts - not a good option.

I knew from the last time the original bracket broke on Ruta 40 in Argentina that I could hang the tank back up with a ratchet strap. I could hang it up and spend the next couple of weeks looking for a welding shop. But, I could not fill the tank with water as long as just a strap was supporting it. That meant the loss of more than half our water supply just when we were moving into an area where we would need our own water more than ever. Hang from a strap and look for a welder – also not a good option.

What I needed to do was weld it back together while simultaneously reinforcing the corners. That was a good option. It was really the only viable option.

But where was I going to find a welding shop? Our Chilean friend Jorge flew out for Miami a few days before so I did not have any English speaking resources in the country who could research and refer me to a shop. I was on my own.

I laid there staring at the bracket. This was the fourth time I'd fixed the raw water tank. I was not happy about the repeat performance.

But, no matter what, I had to pull the bracket.

I could not even patch it together in place. I had to pull the bracket whether I was going to try to fix it where we were, Iquique, Chile, or wait until we got into a smaller town, probably in Peru, where it would be easier to find a welding shop.

We spent the previous day in Iquique, including the large industrial and docks areas. I did not look forward to wandering around either of those areas looking for a welder and trying to explain what I needed, even if I did it on the bike. The prospect of driving the rig down through there and trying to find parking again and again as I went from shop to shop was even more daunting.

But, I had to pull the bracket.

I rolled out from under the truck and opened the tool compartment. The driver of the truck next to us, a very clean Volvo from Brazil, walked around his tractor and I said hello. He answered and we exchanged typical greetings. He smiled. I smiled. We connected. What he didn't know was that I'd just used up a sizable chunk of the 23 Spanish words in my vocabulary.

I started pulling the tools and was struck by the realization I knew exactly what tools I needed for the job.

When I was 17 I bought my brother in law's 1966 Chevrolet Impala SS 396 for \$600. Very predictable results followed. While I only went through one motor, I churned through clutches, pressure plates, transmissions and U joints at a prodigious rate. It got to the point where I didn't even pick up the tools. I left them in position on the garage floor since I knew I would be back in there within days. I could drop the entire drive train from pressure plate to rear differential in 19 minutes. I know because we timed it.

In that time, in that place, in that chapter of my life, it was OK to know exactly what tools I needed to pull the transmission in a 1966 Chevrolet Impala SS 396. In this time, in this place, in this chapter of my life, I did not think it was OK for me to know exactly what tools I needed to pull the raw water tank support bracket. I thought it was sick.

Just Ask

I pulled the tools and prepared to crawl back under the truck.

Just as I bent down another trucker walked through. He and the Brazilian driver exchanged greetings and discussed the showers. I recognized the word for shower. It was one of my 23.

As I watched them talk I realized that this was probably my best chance to ask.

So many times in life opportunity is missed just because people are afraid to ask.

Young people miss out on the advantages of a mentor because they are afraid to ask anyone to be theirs.

Many first time entrepreneurs fail simply because they never figure out in time they must ask for the business, ask for the sale.

Countless people live a life of solitude because they were afraid to ask the person they were interested in for a date or a marriage.

Much of life is just about asking for what you want, what you need.

When you are in a foreign country and don't speak the language, well, any more than 23 words of it anyway, it can be even more intimidating to ask for what you want, what you need.

But, that moment was probably my best chance to find out if either of those two guys knew of a local place where I could get something welded.

"Hola," I said to the Chilean trucker. Now I was down to 22. I worked through the regular "How are you doing?" greetings, etc. Now I was down to about 15.

I spent a lot of time around truckers while moving around South America. When we moved from one place to the next we sought out places where the trucks clustered. While on the main roads driving from place to place we liked to be in and around them at night, protected by the herd.

Because I'd been around their trucker tribe I felt confident I could pull it off. I just needed to ask.

With a combination of 25% of my remaining vocabulary, pantomime worthy of a game show and some pointing and sound effects, I got the message across of what I wanted, what I needed.

"Ah!" the Chilean truckers face lit up with comprehension of the challenge. He stood up and rattled off about nine yards worth of typical Chilean machine gun verbal communication.

Chileans don't really speak in Spanish, as you would know it from high school, college or training courses. In typical conversation Chileans use about 60% colloquial terms and phrases, completely unrelated to formal Spanish. The remaining 40% is loosely related to Spanish but delivered with a heavy regional accent depending on where you are and what part of Chile they are from. They deliver the whole package in a rapid fire stream that is equal to any native New Yorker. With anything less than a decade or two of acclimation it is challenging to even feign comprehension, much less actually understand it.

I did pick out one of my 23. He said a word that was some form of telephone. Mercifully, he ended with "Un momento," (one minute). Those two were on my list. I didn't know for sure what his asking for one minute implied, but things were looking promising.

He disappeared into the station and I crawled under the truck to begin pulling the bracket. I managed to assemble the socket on the ratchet and loosen one lock nut by the time he returned.

He let out another verbal fire hose on the Brazilian, who, by all appearances, was managing to follow along.

I rolled out from under the truck as the two of them looked down the road to the West. The Chilean was pointing. I caught "izquierda" (left). That was on my list too. I felt like I hit the jackpot. I knew a word! I puffed out my chest appropriately.

They turned to me and the Chilean blasted me with another 3" hose high pressure stream.

I responded with "¿Habla English?" (Do you speak English?). He shook his head and said, "No." I knew that word too.

The Brazilian then turned to me and said "¿Habla Aleman?" (Do you speak German?)

My heart skipped a beat. I don't speak German. Well, I do know probably eight, maybe 12 words of German. Most of them relate to how to order a beer and how to get rid of it after I rent it. However, I know someone who is conversational in German. I live with her. I fix her truck for her. I figured she owed me some German.

My eyes lit up. "Mi esposa habla Aleman." (My wife speaks German.) I said, barely concealing my excitement. I was deep into my Spanish vocabulary now. I only had a handful of words left.

I pounded on the back door of the camper. It opened slowly. Steph's spousal long range over the horizon radar had already detected Husband Need Bogies, closing fast, six o'clock low. "Yeeessss?" she asked expectantly.

"I need you to speak some German out here." I said.

She looked at me like I had asked her to perform a circus acrobatic act in a flaming yellow tutu - on demand.

"What?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"The Brazilian guy speaks German. The Chilean guy speaks Spanish. I need you to find out what the Chilean guy is saying. I think he found a welding shop." I answered in one continuous stream, the entire statement consuming less than two seconds. I closed the door.

After an appropriate "Then I'll need to get ready if I'm going outside in public." female time block, she dutifully appeared. Thus began the U.N. General Assembly in the truck parking of the Iquique eastbound Copec parking lot.

The Chilean trucker delivered a burst for 30 or 40 seconds. That's enough time for about half the Encyclopedia Britannica for a Chilean, so there was a lot of information there. The Brazilian then translated that into the 14 German words of 238 syllables each required to communicate those concepts. Steph then put that into a wife to husband, cut to the chase, summary form along the lines of "There's a welding shop down the road."

This went on for about 15 minutes until we did the linguistic Tango back and forth enough times to confirm that there was indeed a repair shop just down the road that should be able to do the job. I was overjoyed. It was within walking distance. Amazing.

But, I still had to pull the bracket.

I crawled back under the truck as the Brazilian trucker and Steph chatted in German.

The Chilean went to his truck and then wandered back over. I could tell by the extra pair of feet hanging from the sky of my inverted world under the truck.

A mini breakout session of the U.N. ensued.

I managed to get another lock nut off.

Steph asked, "How long will it take you to get the bracket off?"

I thought to myself, "At this rate, about two days." but, and young men considering marriage should pay close attention here, I DID NOT say that.

Instead, I said, "About 30 minutes."

They resumed their U.N. session. I hoped they would address the glaring shortage of current year white Range Rovers for U.N. officials in developing nations. The last ones we saw were a year out of date. How are U.N. officials supposed to retain their dignity when forced to drive \$60,000 luxury SUVs that are a year out of date?

I returned to my task. Now I had a goal - 30 minutes. "I can beat that time," I thought to myself in true male fashion.

In less than three minutes the aft stub of the broken bracket slid out from under the truck.

The Chilean trucker picked it up and examined it carefully, like it was evidence of a lost civilization that had cable TV 4,000 years ago, and then handed it to the Brazilian. Guys handle mechanical things with reverence, especially mechanical things that are the cause of the current quest. Nothing is more important to a bunch of guys than the quest.

I was on the quest. The easy part was over. Now I had to go after the forward bracket mount.

Because of the way things worked out, the forward raw water tank bracket mount was the third most difficult thing to access on the entire rig. The 30 minute goal was at risk. It all depended on how those three bolts went.

I spun off the lock nuts. All was good so far. Now, if I could only get the jam nuts to break free without having to feed an open end wrench up into the frame rail...

One by one the first two jam nuts spun off. I could smell victory. One more nut to go. I placed the socket drive against it tenderly. As softly as a safecracker, I gently applied torque.

"Easy, easy, easy," I reminded myself. This reward was better than any bundle of prairie sodbuster bank safe money. This reward was beating a time. I was at 11 minutes and counting.

I shortened my grip on the ratchet. I was so choked up on it I looked like a scrawny shortstop trying to bunt for a hit on Roger Clemens.

"Easy, easy, just a little bit," I thought.

It gave, the bolt held, the jam nut loosened.

"Ha!" I rejoiced to myself. "Victory is mine!"

I spun off the last jam nut with my finger in one quick continuous move, lowered the bracket and slid it out from under the truck. It was scooped up and passed back and forth between the truckers in the Latin version of the male review and grunting ritual. I liked their version; it had more rhythm, more flair.

I ziplocked the nuts and washers and gathered my tools. I was floating. I was levitated above the tawdry world below. I turned the key on the tool bin at 14 minutes. I beat my time by 16 minutes.

The truckers and I exchanged knowing glances. They gave me appreciative nods. The guys knew. I beat the time.

The Chilean let out another burst of a language vaguely resembling Spanish. I didn't catch a single word.

The Brazilian looked at my dazed expression and then back to the Chilean. He turned to Steph and said something in German. It sounded like four words of only 100 or so syllables each. She looked at me and said, "He's going to drive you."

"Wow!" I responded. "Way cool."

I climbed up into the Freightliner and we rolled down the frontage road. It was just me, the Chilean and 90,000 pounds of tractor, trailer and tomatoes. Oh, and the bracket, of course.

We drove down the rough dirt lane fronting tire shops and scrap yards until we came to a fenced lot with a dozen semi trailers in various stages of repair and disassembly. There was a straight truck backed into the gate with an assortment of legs protruding from underneath. Vital liquids formed pools beneath it. It did not look good. We stopped and gave the requisite low grunts and head shakes of the male last rites ritual, and then moved on.

We were passed off to a young but willing apprentice. He quickly scrounged some appropriate scrap metal and promised the job in 40 minutes for 6 mille (6,000 Chilean pesos, or about \$12 USD). I nodded. Now he was on the clock.

The Chilean trucker and I walked back out to the semi and proceeded to have a wide ranging discussion for the entire 40 minutes. I learned some new words of Spanish and realized I might, just might, know a few more than 23.

At exactly 40 minutes the young kid came trotting out of the gate holding the repaired bracket out like a baton to be handed off to the anchor leg at the Olympic 400 relay. He delivered it to the Chilean who examined it carefully, but neutrally. He passed it over to me without a word or a glance, in true male, non-committal, no-expressed-judgment, no-infringement-on-your-turf, fashion.

I turned it over in my hands, reviewing each of the welds and joints twice.

I looked at the Chilean, who moments before I had been discussing Chilean national energy policy with, and raised my eyebrows. "¿Este bueno?" (This good?) I asked him. In the male group approval process, this was an important step. I passed the call on the job back to him.

"Si, bueno." (Yes, good.) he replied. I turned to the kid and smiled.

I told him, "Muy bueno." (Very good.)

The kid beamed. It was probably the first job he'd ever done on his own, from initial customer contact through estimation, pricing, execution, quality assurance (such as it was) and customer review.

Just Ask

I pulled out a 10 mille bill (10,000 Chilean pesos, about \$20 USD) and handed it to him.

“Para usted,” (For you.) I said. The smile spread across his face. I thought his cheeks were going to rip.

We loaded back up into the truck and headed back.

When we arrived I asked the Chilean, “¿Para usted, este vino bueno?” (For you, is wine good?).

He gave me a sideways glance and replied, “Si, si.” (Yes, yes.)

He flipped the gearshift into reverse and nonchalantly backed the 40 foot / 12.2 meter trailer into the narrow slot, perfectly aligned, in a single shot. After 18 years at the wheel he drove the semi as casually as a VW Beetle.

Before I went back to work I opened the door to the camper and asked Steph for a couple of bottles of wine. I gave one each to the Chilean and the Brazilian, who both unsuccessfully protested the gift of thanks.

By the time I crawled under the truck to reinstall the bracket the Chilean was already rolling, headed into Iquique to drop his load of tomatoes and then drive the long haul back to Santiago.

I had the bracket on and the tools stowed at 2:30 PM, four hours and 15 minutes after I first noticed the broken bracket.

In those four hours and 15 minutes I made two new friends; learned a lot about Brazil; learned even more about Chile than I knew after six months of being there; picked up a few new words of Spanish; got the bracket welded, repaired and reinforced; and the raw water tank repaired. Again.

And all I had to do was ask.



My initial view of the broken raw water tank bracket.



Broken corner detail.



Steph chatting with Juan, the Brazilian, with his truck's field kitchen open in the background. Juan is fluent in Portuguese, Spanish and German. He's been driving for 28 years and does the run from Iguazu Falls, Brazil to Argentina, Chile and back.

His father's family is German and, in true German fashion, his semi truck and trailer were immaculate. He spent nearly his entire day off at the station reorganizing storage compartments and cleaning. Steph approved. The order-cleanliness force field was so strong between the two of them I was afraid to approach lest I be toasted by the flux.



Repaired and reinforced bracket.



Smoothing off the welds so they wouldn't wear through the tank. I thought the vise would be dead weight and one of the first things we ejected to reduce weight. As it has turned out, I couldn't begin to count the number of times I've used it.



Aft end of the repaired and reinforced bracket.



Forward end of the repaired and reinforced bracket.

Just Ask

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>