

Revetments

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association



"All Included - None Excluded"

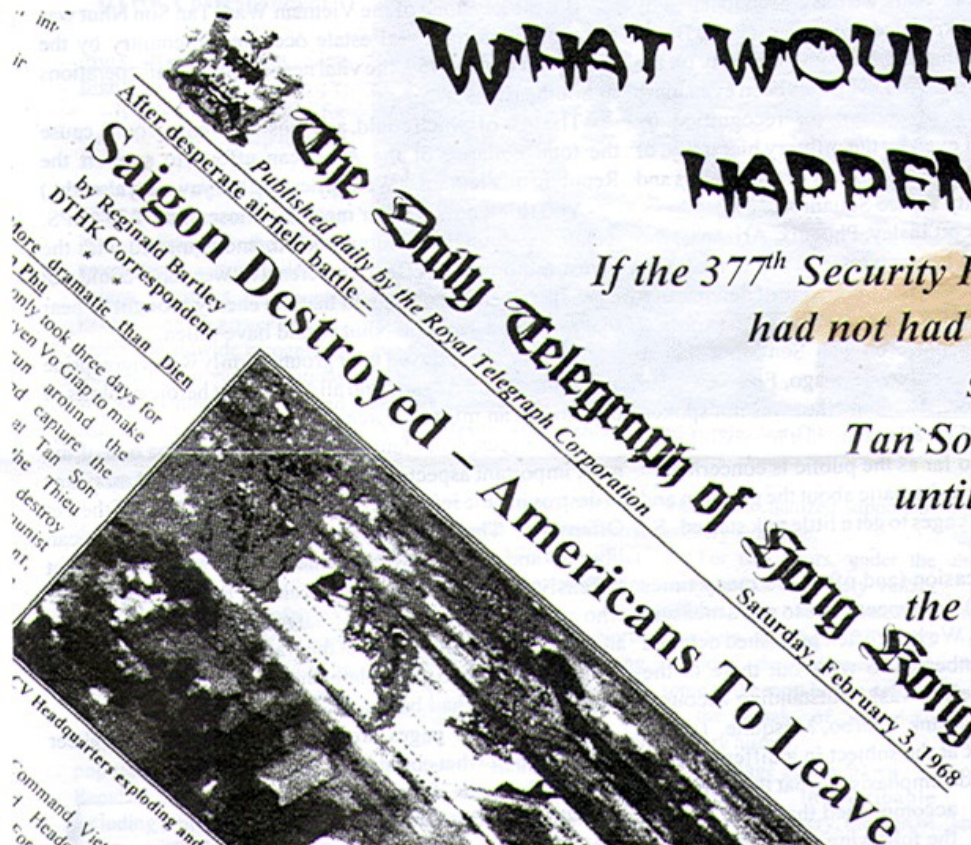
Volume 4, Number 11

The Tan Son Nhut Association, Washington, D.C.

August, 2002

WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED?

If the 377th Security Police Squadron
had not had the bravery and
stamina to hold
Tan Son Nhut Air Base
until reinforcements
arrived on
the dark morning of
January 31st
1968?



The Daily Telegraph of Hong Kong
Published daily by the Royal Telegraph Corporation
Saigon Destroyed - Americans To Leave
After desperate airfield battle -
by Reginald Bartley
DTHK Correspondent
more dramatic than Dien
Phu
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even Vo Giap to make
run around the
and capture the
at Tan Son
the Thieu
destroy
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CV Headquarters exploding and burning last Thursday morning Photo - Agence France Presse
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Armed at Pre-Dawn
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SPS were
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A Special Essay
by
Taylor McKinnon & Bob Need

Begins on Page 2

WHAT IF . . . ?

By
Taylor B. McKinnon
&
Robert S. Need

Over the past thirty-four years we have been irritated by the general public's lack of knowledge or interest in the Battle of Tan Son Nhut Air Base that began near three-thirty on the morning of January 31, 1968. And, what has been even more than irritating is the lack of concern or recognition by historians, the media, and even by the military hierarchy, of the heroic conduct and the ultimate bravery of the officers and airmen of the 377th Security Police Squadron.

It was new member, Scott Insley, Phoenix, Arizona, who brought the pot to the boil when he wrote in a recent message, after a long account of serving on the main line of defense that night, that one of his main efforts still "is to bring to exposure the fact that a battle took place on Tan Son Nhut that is ignored in Vietnam history. A few days ago, Fox News had a story of the Tet Offensive. Tan Son Nhut was not spoken of. It bothers me that Tan Son Nhut may just have well have been a Girl Scout Camp so far as the public is concerned."

We decided to get a little dramatic about the problem and see if we can rattle enough cages to get a little talk started. So we started "what if-ing it?"

On every possible occasion (and often too many times according to some readers) *Revetments* tries to pay a measure of tribute to the 377th SPS. We have often published detailed accounts from many members who were out there in the middle of that hell, and hell it was! Outstanding accounts have been published from Frank Ybarbo, Mesquite, Texas.

So, we decided to look at the subject in a different light and thus might be able to add emphasis to what the 377th SPS accomplished that night and for the following weeks.

Take the Alamo—they put up a great fight against the thousands of Santa Anna's troops and lost. The nation was thrilled and the call, "Remember the Alamo" became a public battle cry.

Someone (they're not sure who yet) blew up the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana harbor which gave the public another great slogan and a "splendid little war."

But the keystone of the Vietnam War? Tan Son Nhut was the most important real estate occupied in-country by the Americans since 1959, the vital nerve-center of all operations in Southeast Asia?

The loss of which could, and most assuredly would, cause the total collapse of the American efforts to support the Republic of Vietnam. (We can hear the yawning already.)

You think not? Lesser men than those of the 377th SPS, exhausted, incredibly outnumbered, and equipped with the barest minimum of effective defensive weapons, could not have sustained the onslaught that the enemy brought to bear that night and Tan Son Nhut would have fallen.

The 377th SPS stayed their ground firmly with vigor, pride and courage equal to any and all of the great heroic exploits of our American military forces.

The successful defense of Tan Son Nhut was one of the most important aspects of the great victory of the Americans in destroying the initiative of the North Vietnamese in the Tet Offensive. The biggest lie and cruelest act by American liberals and the mainstream media was to label the Tet Offensive as a "defeat." NVA Colonel Bui Tin, the officer who accepted the surrender of Saigon in 1975, lives in Paris and has published his views of the war. He writes, "Our losses were staggering and a complete surprise. (General) Giap later told me that Tet had been a military defeat..."

The next two pages are a fictional account and sheer speculation of what could have resulted from the fall of Tan Son Nhut Air Base during the Tet Offensive.

Maybe, after the readers have finished, they will give serious consideration to joining many of our members, and thousands of others in moving forward to recognize the importance of a memorial to Tan Son Nhut Air Base and those who defended it for eight long years against all attacks.

Now let's go back in time and take a look at...what if....?



Major McKinnon was a field maintenance officer and is a columnist for *Revetments*.



MSgt. Need was a combat newsman/photographer and was with the B Sector SAT on Jan. 31. He is the Editor of *Revetments*.



The Daily Telegraph of Hong Kong

Published daily by the Royal Telegraph Corporation

Saturday, February 3, 1968

After desperate airfield battle --

Saigon Destroyed – Americans To Leave

by Reginald Bartley
DTHK Correspondent

* * *

More dramatic than Dien Bien Phu

It only took three days for Gen Vo. Nguyen Giap to make an end run around the Americans and capture the vital airdrome at Tan Son Nhut, eliminate the Thieu government, virtually destroy Saigon, install a Communist Provisional government, receive worldwide recognition from all Communist nations and the United Nations and thus checkmate any future operations by American Forces.

The drama of the last three days has far out-classed Giap's 1954 victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu.

Futile but heroic defense

Although North Vietnam's Tet Offensive was already in progress, having been initiated in the evening of January 30 with attacks on eighty major population centers in the Republic of South Vietnam, including initial attacks in Saigon, it was the battle for Tan Son Nhut Air Base that would spell victory or defeat for Giap's offensive.

The air base at Bien Hoa and the U.S. Army headquarters at Long Binh were attacked just after 3 a.m., January 31. It was at 3:29 a.m. that the first mortars fell on Tan Son Nhut.

Tan Son Nhut was the keystone of the American's operations in Southeast Asia, with both the Military

Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and Headquarters, Seventh Air Force, which commanded the theatre's entire air war.

Six battalions of North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers were committed to reducing Tan Son Nhut.

Due to conflicting intelligence reports, Tan Son Nhut had no main combat units immediately on or adjacent to the airfield. The assumption was that the base would only receive, in the words of one survivor, "A light tap."

The only principal defensive unit on the base was the Air Force's 377th Security Police Squadron. Small U. S. Army contingents lent their support and a few ARVN (Army of Vietnam) members were present.

Three ARVN tanks that were parked on the aprons were immediately disabled. There

was no mechanized support or artillery available.

For two hours, under the command of extremely valiant officers, the 800 combatant members of the 377th SPS provided the airdrome with some of the most heroic defense in the annals of American military history.

Carnage at Pre-Dawn

Despite indescribable courage and bravery, the men of the 377th SPS were being steadily decimated. Observation towers (tangos) were being captured and blown up. The enemy invested the great ditch that ran down between the length of the two runways and pounded the 377th MLR (main line of defense) into silence.

The 377th commander pleaded with outside units to relieve the base. But Saigon and the roads were clogged with insurgents and mechanized

units from Chu Chi could not make much progress towards the base.

Valiant air cover was attempted by Army helicopters. And although the base was well illuminated by Spooky flares, gunships and helicopters had difficulty identifying friends from foes in the murk, shadowy and smoking gloom below.

Early, helicopters had been able to make it in and supply ammunition, but as the NVA and the Viet Cong advanced, it became extremely dangerous and finally, impossible.

Just after 5 a.m., ammunition was nearly expended and close quarters hand to hand combat began to rage. As the enemy surged more and more reinforcements through, by now, eight gaping holes in the perimeter's defenses, they were able to begin (Continued, next page.)



MACV Headquarters exploding and burning last Thursday morning Photo - Agence France Presse

(Saigon Destroyed - Americans To Leave, Continued)

The Daily Telegraph of Hong Kong

Saturday, February 3, 1968

intrusion into the main base areas.

They invested the hangars and revetments on the aprons of the flightline. They came well prepared. After brave, but inconsequential resistance by the unarmed airmen and officers, North Vietnamese pilots and ground crews began arriving and taking over RF-14s and other planes.

As the flightline was being cleared, the 377th nearly completely decimated, several fighter planes with NVA pilots were able to take off. They headed directly into the surrounding areas and began to eliminate American units attempting to relieve Tan Son Nhut.

Rapid Mopping-Up

Apparently carrying out a preplanned program, the invaders, constantly growing in numbers, systematically began exercising control over the numerous sectors of the base.

Moving into the MACV compound, they carried out an immediate orgy of destruction and killing. Very few of the unarmed Americans at MACV survived. The massive complex was an inferno by 10 a.m. and continues to burn today.

Several attempt to deploy and land C-130s on the runway to relieve the base, by the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions were aborted by the heavy fire from the NVA and Viet Cong on the ground. Four C-130s crashed and exploded. One crashing into the civilian air terminal.

The last remnants of the 377th were slaughtered bravely attempting to defend Headquarters, 7th Air Force.

Tan Son Nhut Air Base had a military population approaching 10,000, with

another 8 to 10 thousand civilian workers, both American and Vietnamese.

The five or six thousand Americans living on the base were rapidly rounded up. Those offering resistance were immediately killed. Rounding up pilots, the NVA commanders gave them a choice of flying out survivors in cargo planes or death. A few refused and were summarily executed.

From noon on, into the late evening C-141s, C-47s (stripped of any ordnance), C-123ks, and many other planes took off bearing thousands of survivors of the Battle of Tan Son Nhut.

These planes dispersed to Nha Trang, DaNang, Phan Rang and Tuy Hoa. These bases had been under heavy attack all night, but as the situation developed at Tan Son Nhut, the enemy eased the pressure on them and made no attempts to interfere with the incoming planes from Saigon.

An Inferno Downtown

As the enemy tightened its grip on Tan Son Nhut, more NVA troops were being flown into Tan Son Nhut and immediately taken into Saigon.



The destroyed Caraville Hotel
Photo: Agence France Press

The stiff American resistance was finally overwhelmed and the Americans began withdrawal back to Long Binh, Chu Lai

and Chu Chi. The American Embassy was occupied and the ambassador and the staff were detained in their quarters.

Naval units on the shore of the Song Saigon were immediately occupied and destroyed. And a frenzy of explosions wrecked the Caraville Hotel, the venerable



Saigonese flee the burning city

Photo: Agence France Press
old Continental Palace Hotel. Tudo Street was an inferno that is still burning. Independence Palace was blown up killing many of its residents. The whereabouts of both President Thieu and Vice President Ky are not known at the time. Rumor speculates that they have been taken to Hanoi for trial. Both General Westmoreland and General Momyer (7th AF) had been apprehended and were confirmed yesterday as having been flown to Hanoi for interrogation.

Yesterday (Fri.) a provisional caretaker government was announced in the old Diem Palace. Under the Viet Cong political affairs chief, Duan dong Pho, this body will provide emergency control of the defunct RVN until appropriate provincial government control is established by Hanoi. By 5 p.m., yesterday evening, 17

nations had recognized Hanoi as the soul authority in Viet Nam, and offered military assistance if this status was contested by anyone. The United Nations General Assembly, by large majority, confirmed the sovereignty of Hanoi and abrogated the 1954 UN Resolutions.

Dr. Henry Kissinger advised President Johnson to accept the decision and cease all hostilities in Viet Nam.

At a meeting early this morning in Paris, Dr. Kissinger met with North Vietnamese Foreign Secretary Pham Van Dong, and reported that President Johnson had approved the cease-fire. Pham Van Dong agreed that there would be no further hostilities and that the Americans would be permitted six months to peacefully withdraw from Viet Nam.

General Giap, in Saigon, invited all foreign allied commanders to a conference in Saigon, next Tuesday.

The ARVN and VNAF are to have no standing, and it is indicated that considerable punishment awaits many of the ARVN and VNAF officers.

Giap has refused and has advised his staff, that there is to be no discussion of victory or peace. He has deliberately indicated his appreciation of American and allied valor and their bravery under intense combat conditions.

He especially recognized the heroic stand of the 377th Security Police at Tan Son Nhut. He said that if they had been able to hold out until reinforcements arrived that he would not have been successful in his mission. He said, "Tan Son Nhut is the key to Saigon. Who holds it rules the city."

* * *



Founded 1995
by Don Parker and John Peele

Revetments is an official publication of The Tan Son Nhut Association, Inc., 6203 57th Avenue, Riverdale, Maryland 20737. The Association is a non-profit fraternal organization incorporated in the State of Wisconsin.

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Revetments is published monthly at the Office of Public Affairs, TSNA, Suite 709, 330 West Brambleton Avenue, Norfolk, Virginia 23510. Telephone: (757) 627-7746; FAX: (757) 627-0878. E-Mail: hercules29@worldnet.att.net

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View of the U.S.S. Wisconsin from the balcony of the Public Affairs Office

A few weeks ago, as I pulled into the expansive parking lot of the apartment complex to visit the office of the Tan Son Nhut Association, I was overshadowed by an enormously tall building. As I walked to the entrance I noticed an American Flag flying on the outside balcony many stories up. I figured this must be the Tan Son Nhut office. As it ended up, it was.

As I stepped off the elevator on the 7th floor, I was greeted warmly by Bob



Part of the work area of the Public Affairs Office. The "old" printer is bottom right.

Need, the newly elected Vice President and Public Affairs Officer. I first met Bob at the April reunion in Washington, D. C. He is a staunch supporter of everything that even remotely pertains to duty, honor and country. The office shows it. All the walls are covered with pictures and memorabilia - most of which is of military significance in one form or another.

There is a large portrait that I assumed was his late father, but I found out was of Bob, painted in Germany for his work in the German-American theater (while assigned to Wiesbaden). He did mention that his father was a

retired naval officer. He has many stories of his father's service, all of which are interesting. In fact, Bob has



Bob Need (l) and Wayne Salisbury (r)

many stories relating to the military. I found myself captivated by his ability to recall the details of his experiences. He has enough to write a book - and he should.

Up close to the couch are four leather chairs. A great place to sit with visitors and share experiences. One cannot help but feel at ease within the confines of the office. I felt I was in the right place.

I noticed the copying machine standing near the door. This is the machine that is on its last legs, worn out by the copying of thousands of pages of the *Revetments* newsletter. Bob has requested pledged donations to replace the machine. If not done soon we won't see anymore *Revetments* at our door. What a shame that would be.



One more tap,
and we off!

Editor's Note: Wayne and I are master sergeants, and if he doesn't outrank me, he sure is bigger than me. So when he said that I had to print his article, I just said, "Yes, Sir!"

Notes from Our Members at Large



In Memorial, Ted Williams

Friends,
As you know by now, the "Splendid Splinter" has left us. The most complete athlete Baseball ever produced. The man who said he could see the stitches on Bob Feller's fastball. (Feller did not dispute the claim.)

A citizen soldier who lost five years to the service of his country. A man who was John Glenn's wingman during air combat.

Someone who spit at fans - argued with reporters - and was, to say the least, a prickly human being.

But we fortunate few who watched him play were witness to something that transcends ethnicity, creed, and political affiliation.

We watched the greatest hitter of all time perform his magic.

I was at one of his last games in Cleveland - at the old Municipal Stadium - a cavernous place that had swallowed so many hitters before him.

I came to see him hit the ball. He did not let me down. My sixth grade teacher was not let down either. She had cut school also, sitting two rows apart on the third baseline - we ignored each other for three innings. We finally acknowledged each other with a nod and went on to enjoy the game. She even took my amateurish forged note the next day. At one time baseball and education were synonymous.

I once met Ted down in the Keys. We talked about bonefish. It was the best five minutes of my sporting life.

Thanks for the time, Ted. Semper Fi!

David L. Bolton
U. S. Navy (Retired)
Brewster, New York

Lunch With God

Member Colonel Harry Patterson, Shallotte, North Carolina, said, "This came to me at just the right time to brighten my day. I hope, by sending it along to you, it will do the same for you. In these terrible times when courts are trying to put God in a box someplace, where we can't get to Him, it is good to know that we are able to use His name without recrimination. Bless all.

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of root beer, and he started on his journey.

When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old man. He was sitting in the park just

Gift to My Husband . .

July 7, 2002

Hello,

I would like to see if I could give a membership as a gift to my husband, Larry Gene Porter. He served in the 19th Air Commando Squadron at Tan Son Nhut, 1968-1969. He received a

staring at some pigeons.

The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old man looked hungry - so he offered him a Twinkie.

The man gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer. Again, the man smiled at him. The boy was delighted!

They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave. But before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old man and gave him a hug. The old man gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? He's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"

Meanwhile, the old man, also radiant with joy, returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and he asked, "Dad, what did you do today that made you so happy?"

He replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." However, before his son responded, he added, "You know, he's much younger than I expected."

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around. People come into our lives for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Embrace all equally!

Share this with the people who have touched your life in a special way. Let them know how important they are. Have lunch with God!



Purple Heart, 6 Air Medals, and numerous other medals and unit citations. He is very ill and is being treated at the Portland Veterans Administration Medical Center for service connected illnesses. For the last three years he has been trying to contact other crew members he served with. He has several photos and lots of Air Commando memories he would love to pass on to others.

July 16, 2002

Thank you for the membership package. Larry was very surprised. The doctors at the Portland VAMC have been wonderful, as well as the enrollment office. They have helped me immensely.

Larry can be difficult at times, but given the hell he's been through I can understand to an extent. In December of 2000 we found out the hepatitis, cirrhosis and all the little disorders that follow the diabetes. The cirrhosis and hepatitis are in remission. His PTSD became out of control. He has just finished 30 weeks of classes to understand this disorder.

Aside from the diseases and all, the time he was an active duty Air Commando is what makes Larry a wonderful human being.

A little later, July 16, 2002

Larry received the Distinguished Flying Cross at Tan Son Nhut in February 1969. I am working on scanning his military photos. Most of them are taken from the deck of the C123 Larry flew in as a Loadmaster. He made up a bunch of patches "1,000 SORTIES" while he was at Tan Son Nhut. He was probably the only person who didn't get one - he gave them away. Thank you and (member) Skip Tannery for the "welcome home" for Larry.

Mary Porter
83890 Highway 103, Seaside, Oregon 97138
Phone: (503) 755-2598
maryporter@earthlink.net



Larry receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross





"Who'll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me?"

Australian Tan Son Nhut member, Phillip Greethead, and the Public Affairs Office having been trying for nearly four years to reproduce some of Phill's pictures from Vietnam. *Revetments* is more than proud to attempt to give our readers a glimpse of life with our staunchest ally, as we fought shoulder to shoulder in Southeast Asia. Immediately after September 11, 2001, Phill wrote *Revetments*. "I'm sure we will see American G.I.s and Aussie "Diggers" in action together again." Above, we quote the last line of the famous Aussie anthem/ballad. No one speaks the Australian language, except for them. We are told that many Germans came to Australia and from their "aus waltz" (looking for work) and Matilda referring to a Teutonic warrior, "waltzing Matilda" roughly means looking for, or going to war. If we're wrong Phil, we apologize.



Phill taking time off at Vung Tau



Ambush Patrol returning to camp at Nui Dat. I (Phill) took the photo.



A shot of me (Phill) at Ber Cat. The camp had come under attack earlier that day and the Americans were flying in supplies to the Thailand troop. I think most of the Thai troops in Vietnam operated from Ber Cat, but not certain of that. Another Australian and I were extra riflemen/escorts on the U.S. Chinook for the day.



Building a new camp at Nui Dat. A small section of us were clearing the land and erecting the tent lines for a new unit arriving. We were also involved in patrolling and ambush/early warning patrols in the area. I'm sitting on the ground holding the sign.



Perimeter guard duty, I am on the left.



Pledge for the printer and get "The Victors" free!

Those great members who have already brought us to nearly the half way point in our drive for pledges for a new printer, will soon be receiving their copy of Taylor B. McKinnon's moving tribute to military veterans and the 377th Security Police Squadron, the CD "The Victors." We are extremely grateful to McKinnon for this impressive contribution. You'll receive yours as soon as you join all these great people with your pledge. Please send in your pledge as soon as you can. Printing our membership forms, other administrative documents and our monthly *Revetments* is getting more and more difficult.



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- The Current Pledge List -

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For further information call Bob Need, (757) 627-7746 or Fax: (757) 672-0878

Mail pledges to: Suite 709, 330 W. Brambleton Ave., Norfolk, VA 23510

Thank you, please help us as soon as you can!

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