

**TOP SECRET**

By **PAUL TYSON**  
in Adelaide

★ THE ill-fated Walrus is hoisted on to the deck of a World War 2 navy ship in

# MISSION 'T' DISASTER

★ It was 4.30 on the morning of June 18, 1940, and people in the small French town of Ploudaniel were awakened by the sound of an aircraft flying close to the ground.

The aircraft appeared to be in some difficulty and flew around and around looking for a suitable place to land on the ground which was enveloped in a thick fog.

Finally it came down on the edge of a field but then struck an embankment and burst into flames.

Townfolk rushed to the scene to try to save the occupants but were driven back by the flames. All they could do was recover the burnt bodies of the four unfortunate crew, who were then buried in the Ploudaniel communal cemetery in the grounds of the St. Yves Church.

The aircraft concerned was Supermarine Walrus L2312 of No. 10 Squadron of the RAAF which was based at Plymouth, and two of the victims, Flight Lieutenant John Bell, the pilot and Sergeant Charles Harris, an observer, were Australians. In fact the town of Ploudaniel had just witnessed the first Australian RAAF casualties of World War 2.

The question was, what was an amphibian aircraft used predominantly for sea patrols doing flying kilometres inland on the western tip of France, with the victorious German army a day's march away?

★ LEFT: Path of the fateful flight from England to France on the left — the route that should have been taken is on the right. The de Gaulle family who were waiting at Carantec

The unusual circumstances deaths of those two Australians remained a mystery for the years. It was only in June of this year that all of the details of that mission have finally been made public and Bell and Harris are now receiving the acclaim their heroic but unsuccessful mission richly deserves.

Credit for uncovering the full story of their mission belongs to a young man, Lieutenant Baff, who has spent the past three years while on exchange with the Canadian Air Force writing a detailed history of No. 10 Squadron. His determination to unearth the squadron's first World War 2 casualties had occurred took him to France and the small village where the crash had occurred and the crew were buried.

*There, the villagers presented with the last remains of the pilot, an engine casing and a wing, Baff's ability to kick a few doors enabled him to piece together exactly what had happened.*

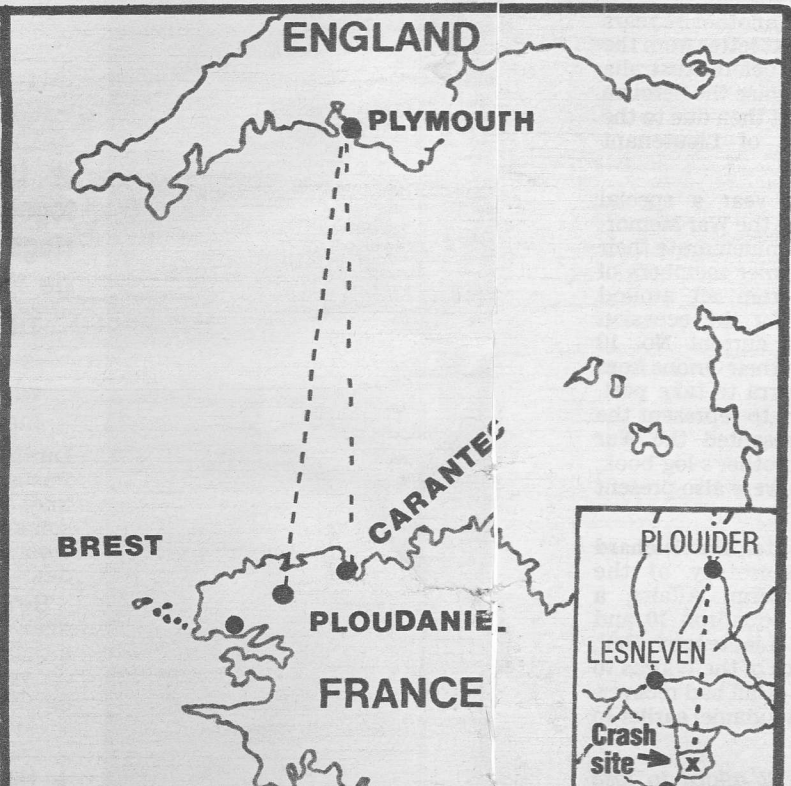
In June, 1940, French resistance fighters were being driven from their homes before the lightning advance of the German Army. General Charles de Gaulle, the French Under-Secretary for War had escaped to England and had made arrangements to leave his wife and children to follow.

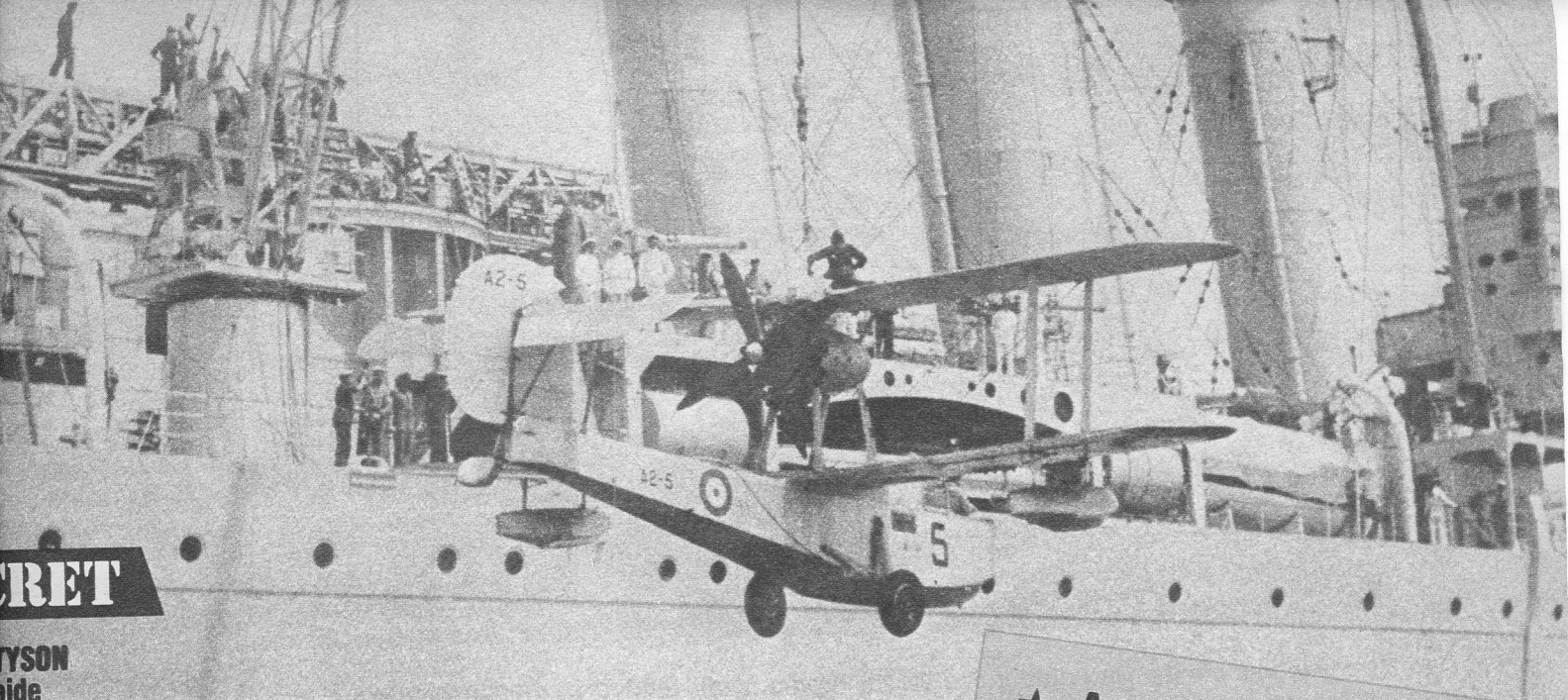
They had reached Carantec, on the northern coast of France, and were staying at the house of an Australian. German motorised units were about a day's march away. In desperation de Gaulle appealed to Winston Churchill to rescue them.

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★ RIGHT: Bruce Bell leaves

★ ABOVE: Fl.Lt. John Bell, the hero of the rescue mission ... his fate was a mystery for 40 years. Now it's known his plane crashed and burst into flames.





**SECRET**

**RYSON**  
side

Walrus is hoisted on to the deck of a World War 2 navy ship in England.

# MISSION TO SASSTER

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The question was, what was an amphibian aircraft used predominantly for sea patrols doing flying kilometres inland on the western tip of France, with the victorious German army a day's march away?

★ LEFT: Path of the fateful flight from England to France on the left — the route that should have been taken

The unusual circumstances of the deaths of those two Australians have remained a mystery for the past 40 years. It was only in June of this year that all of the details of that fateful mission have finally been made public and Bell and Harris are now at last receiving the acclaim their heroic but unsuccessful mission richly deserves.

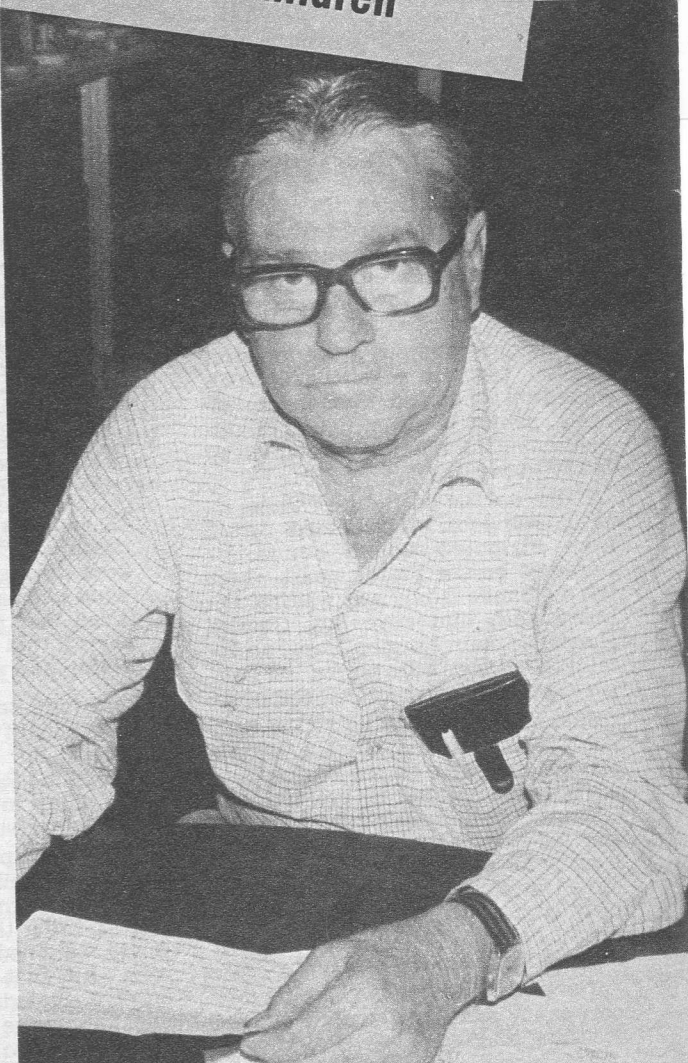
Credit for uncovering the full story of their mission belongs to a Flight Lieutenant Baff, who has spent the past three years while on exchange with the Canadian Air Force compiling a detailed history of No. 10 Squadron. His determination to unearth how the squadron's first World War 2 casualties had occurred took him to France and the small village where the crash had occurred and the crew lay buried.

*There, the villagers presented him with the last remains of the Walrus, an engine casing and a wing strut. Baff's ability to kick a few official doors enabled him to piece together exactly what had happened.*

In June, 1940, French resistance lay in ruins before the lightning advances of the Germany Army. General Charles de Gaulle, the French Under-Secretary for War had escaped to England and had made arrangements for his wife and children to follow.

They had reached Carantec, on the northern coast of France, and were staying at the house of an aunt but German motorised units were only about a day's march away. In desperation de Gaulle appealed to Winston Churchill to rescue them.

★ An air force sleuth has finally solved the 40-year-old mystery of Australia's first RAAF deaths in the Second World War and uncovered a daring plan to save General de Gaulle's wife and children



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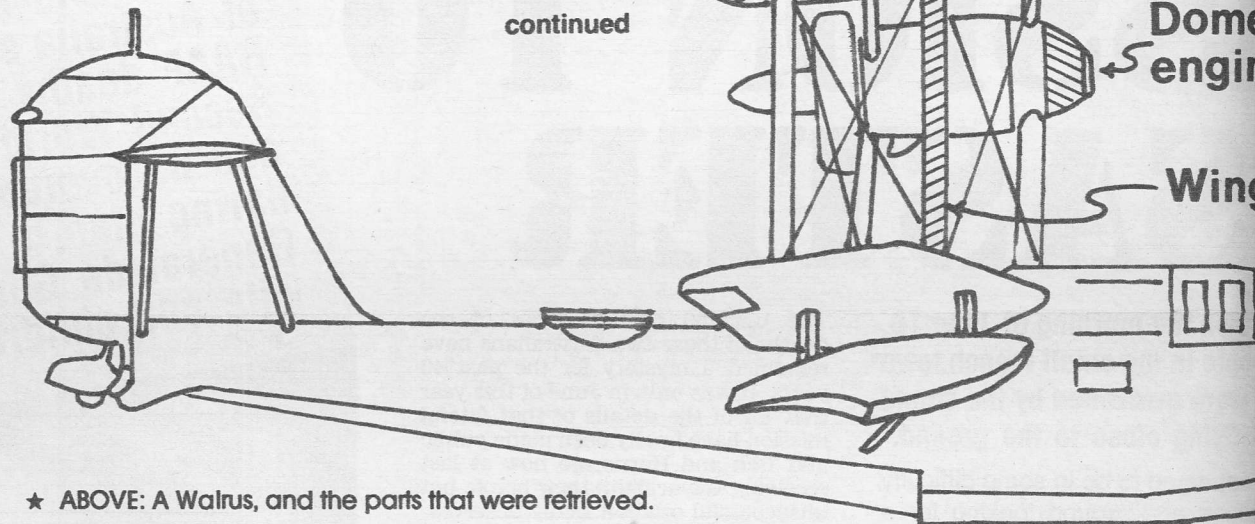
L2312



★ GRAVES of the four airmen who died in the Walrus inferno ... still tended by French villagers.

## MISSION TO DISASTER

continued



★ ABOVE: A Walrus, and the parts that were retrieved.

Churchill, realising the pressure that could be applied to de Gaulle if his family were captured by the Germans, ordered the British Special Operations Executive to organise a rescue attempt.

The highly dangerous and top secret mission was given to the RAAF's Squadron No. 10 and it was the squadron's senior Walrus flyer, Flight-Lieutenant John Bell who volunteered to try to pull it off.

Early on the morning of June 18, 1940, Bell took off in Walrus L2312 from Plymouth Sound bound for Carantec on the French coast where the de Gaulle family was waiting. On board with him were Sgt. Charles Harris, Captain Norman Hope, an Intelligence Corps officer from the British Admiralty and an RAF corporal.

Just what went wrong in the next hour is not known but the Walrus drifted off course in the darkness of early morning as it crossed the Channel. Bell desperately searched the fog-covered French countryside looking for a suitable place to make a forced landing. Just as he appeared to have successfully brought the Walrus down he ran slap bang into an embankment hidden by the fog.

The plane broke in two and its four occupants were incinerated in the resulting inferno.

The only bright note to this most

*Brest and arrived safely in England.*

It was in search of some background information to this intriguing episode that I visited John Bell's brother Bruce in Windsor Park, in Adelaide.

"We had absolutely no idea of the mission that John had been on," Bruce Bell told me, "until a newspaper reporter rang me late in June to say that a story had appeared on the front page of a Melbourne newspaper giving details of the mission.

"It came as quite a shock," Bruce continued, "because the family has been trying to find out exactly what had happened all these years since that first telegram arrived saying that John was missing in action and presumed to be dead."

In 1935 John Bell had been one of only 20 men out of 800 applicants to be accepted for the official training course in the RAAF. He graduated as a pilot officer in 1936; then served on a variety of warships.

In 1939, just prior to the outbreak of war, John Bell was despatched to RAAF Squadron 10 at Plymouth to help to bring the Sunderland Flying Boats stationed there back to Australia. All that changed when war erupted. Squadron 10 stayed to conduct submarine patrols in the English Channel and so did John Bell.

But then that fateful telegram

This was followed a few weeks later by a letter from Squadron Leader Pearce: "I cannot tell you about the particular job on which he went and from which he did not return," it read. "It was not a case of him being sent because he elected to go... and if he had carried it out it would have reflected great praise on him."

"My brother Alfred arrived in England with the Australian Army at that time," Bruce said "and went to Plymouth to see John only to be told that he was missing in action." Alfred himself was later to lose his life in action at Lae in New Guinea.

The Bell family continued their efforts to find out how John had met his end and on March 15, 1946, received a letter from the Secretary of the Department of Air. It told of how John had volunteered for a secret special mission but had crashed near the town of Ploudaniel.

Then on June 1, 1946, the Bells received a particularly touching letter from the French Mayor of Ploudaniel himself giving details of the fateful crash.

The mayor concluded by saying, "In spite of the presence of the Bouche the graves were always very well tended and always covered with flowers. The photograph which I send you was taken during the occupation. It is, for us, a duty

ITEMS R

Dome engine

Wing

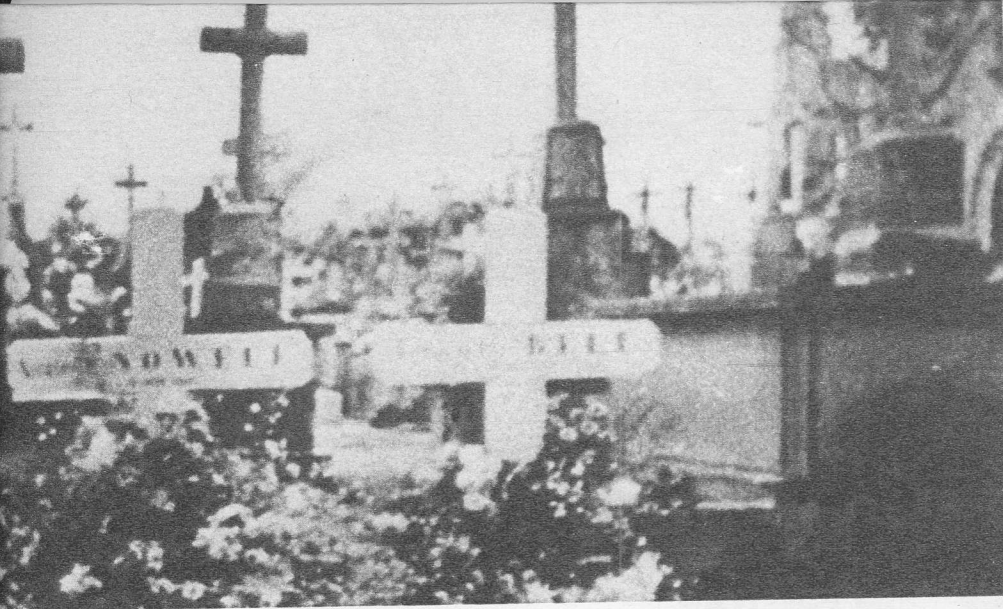
sympathy assured them sleeps his foreign lan

However, it was after the receipt of the Mayor of Ploudaniel was to officially of Bell and Harris' investigative staff.

On June 2 a ceremony was held in Canberra for the mission. Seven No. 10 Squadron Australia gate and a crew of Squadron flew to Edinburgh to see Bruce Bell and his family a Memorial with Harris' wife and at the ceremony

In a fitting Kingsland, the Department of Air former member personal friend gave the last of the War Memorial the parts for the year.

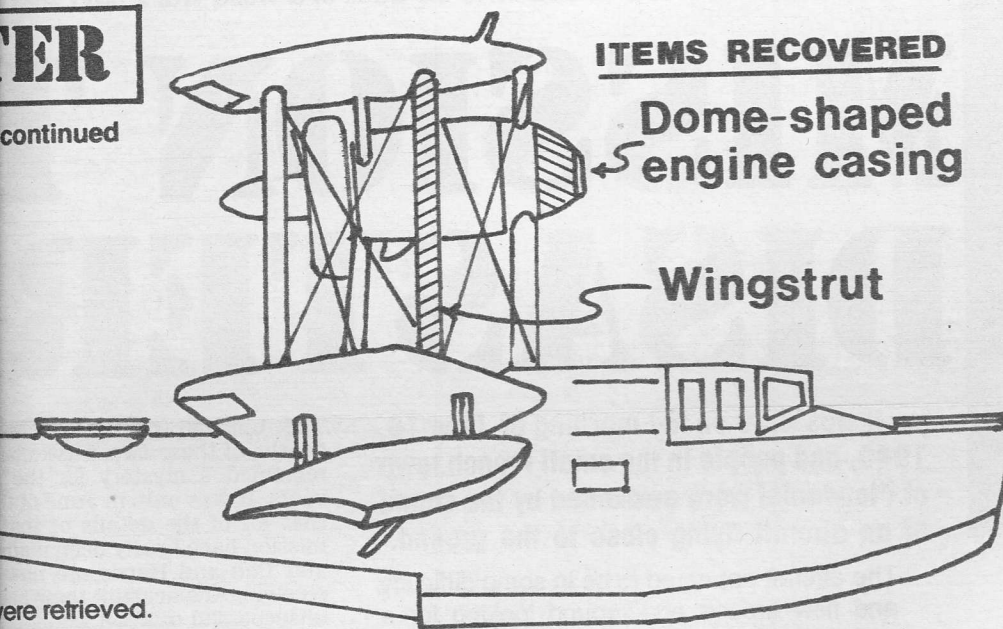
"Australia



... still tended by French villagers.

**ER**

continued



**ITEMS RECOVERED**

**Dome-shaped engine casing**

**Wingstrut**

were retrieved.

in England. background ing episode 's brother Adelaide.

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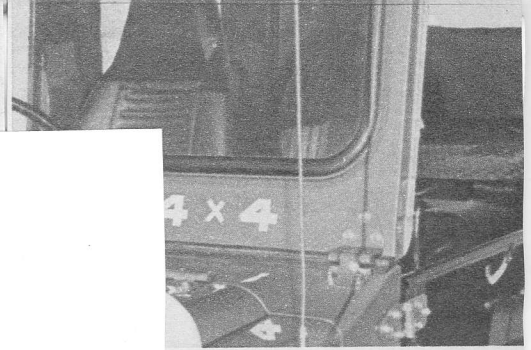
sympathy to Lt. Bell's family, and assure them for me that their son sleeps his last sleep, not in a foreign land, but in friendly soil."

However, it was to be another 34 years after the receipt of that letter from the Mayor of Ploudaniel before Australia was to officially recognise the heroism of Bell and Harris and then due to the investigative efforts of Lieutenant Baff.

On June 25 this year a special ceremony was held at the War Memorial in Canberra to commemorate their mission. Seventy former members of No. 10 Squadron from all around Australia gathered for the occasion and a crew of the current No. 10 Squadron flew one of their Orions from Edinburgh to Canberra to take part. Bruce Bell was there to represent the Bell family and presented the War Memorial with his brother's log book. Harris' wife and son were also present at the ceremony.

In a fitting tribute, Sir Richard Kingsland, the Secretary of the Department of Veteran Affairs, a former member of Squadron 10 and personal friend of Lieutenant Bell, gave the last remains of the Walrus to the War Memorial — Baff had recovered the parts from Ploudaniel earlier in the year.

"Australia could ill afford to lose people of this quality and we could



GHT: Map-reading skills of life-or-death importance to Denis outback.

is, "that I would only stop when i and I could go no farther". en he arrived at Cape Byron, rly exhausted, he had set a new rk for the solo west-east crossing, astonishing 6 days, 23 hours and inutes.

et myself a target of seven days ime but secretly I was hoping to n five. But for the incredibly wet tions I reckon I might have been to achieve the mark, though I nly won't be trying again. It's oo demanding." (That all might e if someone beats his record.) arse this has not meant the end is Bartell's outback adventures. have simply taken on an inter- new dimension.

ave always had a tremendous nt of respect for our Australian ers," Denis said. "Whenever I had any spare time over the past e of years I have tried to faithful- nact the expeditions of some of e explorers. Using the original nts of explorers Denis carefully

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