

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

Nimitz Education and Research Center

Fredericksburg, Texas

An Interview with

Robert A. Rackerby

Novato, CA

November 16, 2015

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Mr. Misenhimer:

My name is Richard Misenhimer, today is October the 16th, 2015. I am interviewing Mr. Robert Rackerby by telephone. His phone number is 415-897-2281. His address is 228 San Felipe Way, Novato, California, 94945. This interview is in support of the National Museum of the Pacific War, the Nimitz Education and Research Center, for the preservation of historical information related to World War II.

Bob, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview today and I want to thank you for your service to our country during World War II.

Mr. Rackerby:

Thank you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the first thing I need to do is read to you this agreement with the museum to make sure this is okay with you.

(Agreement Read)

Is that okay with you?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah, they're not going to put my name or address or anything on that release are they?

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes they are, any problem with that?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh, I see. Yeah okay, no that's alright.

Mr. Misenhimer:

They're putting them on the internet. You can go to the internet.

Mr. Rackerby:

I don't want bad guys coming after us because of the publicity, you know.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yeah, right I know what you mean, right. Now the next thing I'd like to do is get an alternative contact, we find out that sometimes down the road we try to get back in contact with a veteran he's moved or something. Do you have a son or daughter or someone we could contact if we needed to, to find you?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah I do, but I don't have the name or address right now. His name is John Rackerby.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Or phone number?

Mr. Rackerby:

415-271-0320.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What is your birthdate?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh birthdate, September 20, '25, 1925.

Mr. Misenhimer:

September 20, '25?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yep.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where were you born?

Mr. Rackerby:

I was born in Sacramento, California.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yes, I had two sisters and two brothers.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now I've interviewed your brother, Archibald. Your other brother was he in the service?

Mr. Rackerby:

The other brother was in the Korean War, the Marine Corps.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Korean, okay. Yeah we're just doing World War II.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what were your mother's and father's first names?

Mr. Rackerby:

My mother's name was Estelle and my father's name was Archie.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you grew up during the depression, how did the depression affect you and your family?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well my dad was in business all during the depression and he was a kind of a pioneer in brake repair work on cars and wheel alignment. He was a real pioneer in that, I think. But he had a small shop with two or three employees and money was always tight. It was tighter and he was lucky you know to keep a business together in those years, I know that. So money was always tight, but he was always in business for himself the whole time, so that was good. And I worked, from the time I was eleven or twelve I was working in the shop with him.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did you live in town or in the country?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh this is in town.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you have a garden?

Mr. Rackerby:

We had a garden in the backyard. Yeah, we grew a few vegetables and fruit trees.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay that way you had that help with your food supply then. Now where did you go to high school?

Mr. Rackerby:

Marybelle Union High School.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what year did you graduate there?

Mr. Rackerby:

'42.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now on December 7, '41 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, do you recall hearing about that?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah I was up at Donner Summit skiing. And we were walking up the Highway 40 up there and a guy came running down the road hollering about the attack at Pearl Harbor. That was about four in the afternoon on a Sunday, I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Yes. Then when you heard that how did you think that would affect you?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well we really didn't know off hand, it was a bad thing now I know.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were seventeen about then. When did you enter the service?

Mr. Rackerby:

February 1943.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you volunteer or were you drafted?

Mr. Rackerby:

I enlisted. I was seventeen years and three months at the time.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You were seventeen years and three months?

Mr. Rackerby:

I think I was deprived of my childhood, I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now from the time you graduated from high school till you went into the service, what did you do, work for your father?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well I always worked for him after school, on Saturday . . . And no, then in September I started Junior College. I was there for three months and I quit and went to Marine Corps.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Junior College, okay. How did you choose the Marines?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well we figured it was an upscale organization and my brother was already in. And some other friends of mine were already in, I figured if they could do it, I could do it. I don't know what in the hell motivated me. Looking back you can't tell what kind of motivation there was that caused you to do these things, a reason I guess.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And where did you go for your boot camp?

Mr. Rackerby:

San Deigo.

Mr. Miserhimer:

And how was boot camp?

Mr. Rackerby:

It was tough and lonely. Tough and lonely I guess.

Mr. Miserhimer:

What all did you do there?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well boot camp was basic training, a lot of marching and training and rifle range. We had three weeks at the rifle range. Plenty of obstacle course stuff. And getting up early and staying up till ten o'clock at night every night. It was strenuous, but it was good.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Were your drill instructors pretty tough on you?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh yeah they had to be, they had to be tough. They were trained to be that way. Yeah, but it was alright, it was okay.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Then when you finished boot camp where did you go?

Mr. Rackerby:

I was sent to Pre-Aviation Radio School in College Station, Texas.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Now when you were in boot camp did you do any practice of landing on beaches, that sort of thing?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh a little bit, little bit of that. Not near the water, they did some maneuvers and that sort, bayonet courses and things like that. There were plenty of tough things like that, but we weren't

near any water at the time.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then you went to Texas A&M, what did you do there?

Mr. Rackerby:

There was three months I think of radio school and we learned the Morse Code and we learned how to operate Navy procedures, radio procedures and all that stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How long was that school?

Mr. Rackerby:

It was three months I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What did you think of Texas A&M?

Mr. Rackerby:

It was quite a place, I've never seen anything that nice. I guess the Marine Corps had the..., the college was under contract so they treated us just like regular students as far as housing and meals and all that stuff. It was pretty first class.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And was that school pretty tough?

Mr. Rackerby:

Uh no, I was able to handle it, but I came out on top of the class for some strange reason.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was it to learn Morse Code?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh no, that was alright you had to learn it, you had to do to graduate eighteen words a minute, no problem there. And it was a good thing to learn, pretty obsolete now.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How many words could you do a minute?

Mr. Rackerby:

Eighteen words a minute, we had to do that to qualify.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when you finished that school, then what happened?

Mr. Rackerby:

They asked me to stay on as an instructor and I stayed there about two months. They promoted me to Corporal because I graduated top of the class. And I was an instructor for about two months and then I went to the CO and said I wanted to go to the Pacific and join the real war. And they sent me to San Diego.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what happened there?

Mr. Rackerby:

I was at Camp Kearny Mesa, out in Mesa which is now a Navy Airbase I guess. And there was all muddy at the time. It was temporary war time buildings. That was a place where they put together, who they were going to ship out and what date they were going to ship out and where and where they were going to go and all of that kind of stuff. So I was there for probably two or three weeks until we boarded ship. We boarded ship in San Diego.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what ship was that?

Mr. Rackerby:

President Tyler and it was built in 1912. It was an old freighter, was built in 1912.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And were you assigned to that ship?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well we shipped on that ship. Yeah we were part of the troops, there were just troops aboard the ship. that's all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then where did you go on that ship?

Mr. Rackerby:

Nouméa, New Caledonia.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And did you stay at Nouméa?

Mr. Rackerby:

Very briefly, I think we stayed overnight or something and the next day we got aboard a Navy attack transport, the Pickney. And that took us up the Guadalcanal.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what did you do at Guadalcanal?

Mr. Rackerby:

We stayed there overnight it was just a place for temporary troops and transit stavs. And I think we were there overnight, the next day we got aboard an LST with a barrage balloon over it and in those days they put a steel cable with a barrage balloon above LSTs to keep enemy planes from strafing the ship. All of them had barrage balloons then. And from there we went up to Munda in New Georgia where I was assigned to the Marine Air Group 14. And that was..., I was only there for one week because Marine Air Group 14 was scheduled to ship up to Green Island which was in the northern end of the Solomons. And it was eighty miles from Rabaul and Kavieng which was a principal Japanese headquarters in the South Pacific. And we were going up there to neutralize them from Green Island. See I was in Marine Aviation, I was not in the field crew, you know. So on Green Island it'd just been secured from the Japanese by the New Zealand troops. They'd taken, they cleaned it out when they took it from the Japanese. And we arrived up there in a LST. And the LSTs were like a small ship, I don't know if you're familiar with them, but they were a ship but they had a, you're familiar with them. Anyway so they ran right up on the beach you know and that's what.... Green Island was pretty well secured the time we got there. But they had all of us standing by 50 caliber machine guns on deck and as we ran into the beach. They just ram it into the beach you know, open the front doors you know.

And so we were there at the time early on and at that time the Navy Seabees were building an airstrip out of coral. And until the airstrip was finished we were pretty well living in lodging tents and things like that. So I can't remember, it's a month or two the airstrip was finished and the first squadron started flying in. And we had our tents set up in the jungle. It was all over, there was mud everywhere. They actually issued rubber boots to all the troops so they could get around in the sludge, in the mud you know. But anyway it got operational pretty quick. And the squadrons started coming in. And well they built shops, you know we had shops built for service and everything else to fix all the airplanes. Anyway they had us for about, I would guess for almost a year. And in that time there were, I don't know how many squadrons, six or eight squadrons. They'd come in and they'd go out. There was a lot of airplane types we had Navy SBDs and Marine SBDs and TBF torpedo bombers, fighter planes, fighter squadrons and we had Navy squadrons off of carriers. And we even had a New Zealand squadron there one time. We had Army Air Force B-26s and B-25s. So it was quite a... it was very active place, I mean there's, Rabaul I think was eighty miles away, so all day long there were flights going out. Yeah but that's what it was like for most of the year we were up there. And we, I think it was about December that year we boarded a liberty ship. Green Island was a coral atoll surrounding a lagoon, a large lagoon. And there were PEY squadrons based on the lagoon and they had a mother ship where they had their meals and things like that. About December we boarded a liberty ship, it'd been converted to carry troops down in the hold you know. We boarded that and went to Samar in the Philippines. So that took two or three, two months or something like that, I don't..., seemed to take a long time. And on Samar we got the military, the Marine squadrons were already there, the strip was already built when we got there. And that was pretty uneventful there mostly. So that was about it. In May of '45 I got aboard the Admiral CAPES to come home to the States. And then I was attached to a, I was sent to Marine Corps air station at Mojave attached to Marine Air Group 51, which was scheduled to go aboard an aircraft carrier to make the assault on Japan itself. We were supposed to go to Japan. But that was about the end of it. And August of '45 they blew up the bombs in Japan and the war was over. And all I know

about that is, that all the troops went to L. to get drunk or something. The Beer Steub at the Marine Corps air station in Mojave had about a foot of broken beer glasses all over the next morning, I know that. But that was about the end of it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now back to Green Island, what all did you do when you were on Green Island?

Mr. Rackerby:

I was part of headquarters squadron and I was a photographer basically. I had a Speed Graphic camera, I was attached to the photo lab and we processed all the activity on the airbase there. And the pictures were all sent to Washington, I guess the Navy department to tell them what was going on out there. That's about all I did was, I had a Speed Graphic most all day, everyday while I was there. That was it and then we processed everything of course.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now with your Speed Graphic what did you take pictures of?

Mr. Rackerby:

All the operations of what was being done to the aircraft and everything else on the island.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You didn't work as a radio man then?

Mr. Rackerby:

No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So what you learned in radio school you didn't use?

Mr. Rackerby:

No sir, no. They didn't need any radio operators, they needed a photographer I guess. That's how I got that job.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you ever attacked by the enemy at any time?

Mr. Rackerby:

No, we arrived at Green Island shortly after it'd been secured by the New Zealand troops. So we didn't have any problems. There were snipers on Green Island while we were there, I think. But we didn't have any problem. When we were going up from Guadalcanal to Green Island somebody fired a torpedo across our bow but it missed us, there was no problem. So no, we had it pretty easy, no problems.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Were you ever attacked by Japanese airplanes?

Mr. Rackerby:

Once or twice, I think Rabaul was pretty much subdued then. A couple of nights "washing machine Charlie" from Rabaul would come over and drop one bomb and go home or some damn thing. But no we had no real attack. When I was on Munda in New Georgia that place had been bombed the previous week or so, but not while I was there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

I'm sorry where was that in New Georgia?

Mr. Rackerby:

Munda. It was a Marine airstrip.

Mr. Misenhimer:

What would you consider your most frightening time?

Mr. Rackerby:

I don't know. You pretty well geared yourself to take care of everything, no problem. You had to take whatever came along.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now there at Green Island what did you live in?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh we lived in tents. We had a fox hole of course dug in the coral. And we lived in tents.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You lived in tents and then what?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah and then we had a chow hall, well they built a chow hall out of wood back then and you had to walk to that. Everything was alright, they knew what to do, how they were doing it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the food there?

Mr. Rackerby:

The food? I can't remember, we had a lot dehydrated potatoes, things like that. Dehydrated eggs and uh..., it was good stuff.

Mr. Misenhimer:

One of our complaints was the SOS for breakfast.

Mr. Rackerby:

Ah there was plenty of SOS, yeah, yeah. That was the same, yeah. So anyway it was alright, but I wasn't part of the troops, the line company. They had a lot of SOS that's for sure.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now the people in the airplanes, the fighter pilots and all others, did you ever get a chance to meet with any of those, talk with them?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh yeah, we lived among them. They were, yeah. That was part of the aircrew. It was all part of the same unit they were real friendly, you know. It was all part of the operation.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did they have any good stories to tell?

Mr. Rackerby:

Ah, I can't recall too many. I mean they'd come back shot up a lot of times, but other than that.... Anyway that's about the size of it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did they lose many planes there?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well yeah, I'm sure they lost planes, yeah, yeah. They lost plenty of planes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

How was the morale in your outfit?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh it was always adequate. You got trained to keep the morale where it belonged. I was alright. Later on when we were about to leave Green Island a lot of B-24 bomber squadrons came in there and I don't, they were probably bombing up Truk or flying north. But they came back pretty well shot up, an awful lot of them. But we left, that was when we were leaving.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever hear Tokyo Rose on the radio?

Mr. Rackerby:

No, no.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you hear of her?

Mr. Rackerby:

We heard of her, yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you crossed the equator did you have any kind of a ceremony or anything here?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah the..., what ship was I on? I guess that was on the liberty ship going to the Philippines.

Wait a minute, no I was on the President Fryer going down. Uh yeah, the crew they had a regular thing they did. They squirted you with a firehose and sprayed you with soap and they put you in an electric chair and tried to electrocute you and every other damn thing to scare the hell out of you. They had a ceremony they did and they gave me a card that said I was a whatever the card said. Anyway that's about it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Do you still have your card that made you a Shellback?

Mr. Rackerby:

Somewhere, if I had to look for it I'd find it maybe, I don't know it may be gone now.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what did you think of the officers you had over you?

Mr. Rackerby:

They were all sharp and intelligent I think.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Any problems with any of them?

Mr. Rackerby:

No, no. No, we had good ones, yeah, no prob'lem.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now April the 12th of 1945 President Roosevelt died, did you all hear about that?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah we did.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what reaction did people have?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well I couldn't tell you much, they were sad about it. But they were glad they got Truman in there, he was a good guy.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then when they dropped the first atomic bomb did you hear about that?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh yeah.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what was the reaction to that?

Mr. Rackerby:

I couldn't tell you, it was a bad thing.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Then on August the 15th of '45 when Japan surrendered, have any kind of a celebration then?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well that was a big relief of course, that was a large relief.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you get home from World War II with any souvenirs?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah we picked up a...., well in the Philippines the poor people out there they wanted to sell stuff. So I got Filipino hats and they made little Bowie knives, I got some Bowie knives, I don't have them, I don't know where they are now.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when you were overseas could you get your mail with any regularity?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well it took a few weeks for mail to get out there.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But you could get it?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh yeah we got it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever have any experience with the Red Cross?

Mr. Rackerby:

When we got back to San Francisco when we shipped back the Red Cross people were at the dock or off the dock and they gave us coffee and donuts, that was it then.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did they charge you for them?

Mr. Rackerby:

Donuts before that I'll tell you.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did they make you pay for it?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh god no, no. No.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see any USO shows anywhere?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah on Green Island we had a pretty good bunch of those. We had, Jack Benny came on his tour and Bob Hope came out on his tour. We were lucky in that respect. They arrived by PBV and got ashore. They had a little separate stage rigged up where they put on shows. So we got a couple of them. We saw one New Zealand show I think it was just like a vaudeville show.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Did you ever see that sign, "Kilroy was here?"

Mr. Rackerby:

No, no that came later or some damn thing. That was in Europe I guess.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now when did you come back to the States?

Mr. Rackerby:

It was April or May of '45.

Mr. Misenhimer:

April of '45 or '46?

Mr. Rackerby:

'45.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Well the war didn't get over until August of '45.

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah, but from May until August we were attached to Air Group 51 which was supposed to go

to Japan.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh okay, you were back in the States then?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah I was training at Mojave.

Mr. Misenhimer:

So you were back in the States when the war ended?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now you stayed in the service, is that right?

Mr. Rackerby:

Well i.... When the war ended in August and actually I got released from the Marine Corps in November. I got out fairly early compared to most service people probably.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And when you got released then what happened?

Mr. Rackerby:

I went home and February I think I went to UC Davis, I studied Agricultural Economics.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And did you graduate there?

Mr. Rackerby:

No I was entered in Agricultural Economics and the senior years you had to go to Berkeley where they taught all of the Ag. Eco. senior courses. I graduated in '49.

Mr. Misenhimer:

But you stayed in the service, is that correct?

Mr. Rackerby:

Oh no. No I was released from the Marine Corps in November '45.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Oh okay, November '45 you were discharged then?

Mr. Rackerby:

Yes.

Mr. Misenhimer:

When you got out did you have any trouble adjusting to civilian life?

Mr. Rackerby:

No no problem. Big relief is all.

Mr. Misenhimer:

And what was the highest rank you got to?

Mr. Rackerby:

I was a Staff Sergeant when I was released.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now did you use your G.I. Bill for anything?

Mr. Rackerby:

It covered UC. Covered university pretty well, except for it wasn't cheap of course but I had savings from the military and that thing and got through. The best part of the G.I. Bill I guess is about '55, I was married at the time and had one child even, and we bought a new home in Pedro Valley, which is south of San Francisco. And the G.I. Bill financed that thing and I don't think they ever lost a dime guaranteeing loans, I don't think the government ever lost a dime. So that was pretty easy. So we got that.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you had any reunions since you've been out?

Mr. Rackerby:

No, no I haven't, no.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Have you kept up with anybody you were in the service with?

Mr. Rackerby:

Not too much. No, no, not really.

Mr. Misenhimer:

Now what ribbons and medals did you get?

Mr. Rackerby:

Just campaign badges for the Pacific Theatre of Operations and the Bismark Archipelago, and the Philippines Campaign and I think that's about it.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You probably got the World War II Victory medal.

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah, yeah, everybody got that one.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You got all the regular standard medals.

Mr. Rackerby:

Yeah that's all I got, nothing else.

Mr. Misenhimer:

You didn't get any battle stars?

Mr. Rackerby:

I had two battle stars, on the Bismark Archipelago ribbon and one on the Philippine Island ribbon

Mr. Misenhimer:

Okay, alright you got three battle stars then. Anything else you recall from your time in World War II?

Mr. Rackerby:

We went to the Philippine Islands on a liberty ship that had been converted to hold troops in the hold, you know. And I guess our officers associated with the ship's officers a little bit. They played cards at night or whatever. When we went ashore in Samar and some of the officers

were getting loaded in landing barges and the Captain who was up on the bridge and he hollered down at some Captain, there was a Marine Captain in the barge below him, he said, "Goodbye good luck, and to hell with you." And then he'd blow the ship's horn, the whistle like crazy I guess they were good friends I always remembered that, I don't know why but it was funny - unmilitary.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Now when you were there in the Pacific did you ever get together with your brother Archie?

Mr. Rackerby:

On Guadalcanal. I was only there for one day and two days, but the night before we went ashore there were a bunch of Seabees aboard, you know we're sitting out on deck at night talking. And you know it's pitch black. And these Seabee had been up north or something and my brother was in the 3rd Raiders up there, and he said oh they'd been wiped out. And I said well that was pretty shocking. But what was remaining, he said the 3rd Raiders had been transferred down to Guadalcanal into the 4th Marines. So the next day I found out that the 4th Marines were camped up on Guadalcanal about twenty miles away and I got permission to hitchhike up there and I hitchhiked up there. And it was all military, but I got rides I got up to the 4th Marine camp and found his tent and I went down, somebody told me he was on the beach taking a bath. So I went down to the beach and my brother came walking out of the surf stark naked, honest to God.

Anyway I did see him on Guadalcanal. That's about the size of it Richard.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Well anything else you've thought of, Bob?

Mr. Rackerby:

No, no. That was about the size of it, it's kind of boring really, but we were busy everyday.

Mr. Miserhimer:

Well everybody's job was important. Not everybody got into combat. Only about a fourth of the people in the service actually got into combat, but everybody's job was important cause you had to have people supporting those in combat. So it was that way. Well Bob thanks again for

your time today, for your service to our country.

(End of Interview)

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