



Terry Cox

## PRIDE A JOURNEY THAT CHANGED MY LIFE



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In 1965 I made one of the most important decisions in my life. That decision was to join the United States Marine Corps.

Since I was a recent graduate of Oregon State University I was eligible for the Officer Candidate School in Quantico, VA. Vietnam was just starting to heat up in South East Asia and I knew a full-scale war was imminent. Not only did I want to be a Marine, but I wanted to go to Vietnam as well. I know that sounds crazy but at the time it was purely a romantic notion. I grew up watching

all the old war movies “Sands of Iwo Jima”, with John Wayne, “From Here To Eternity” with Frank Sinatra and the “DI, with Jack Web. Who wouldn’t want to be a Marine and fight in a war?

One day, just before graduation, I was walking across campus and passed a Marine Recruiter, who had setup a table. At first, I just walked by, but the dress blues and the sharpness of this young Marine Captain caught my attention. He was talking with a couple of other students at the time and when he had finished he turned toward me, introduced himself and proceeded to tell me about the Marine Corp Officers Candidate School in Quantico.

Since I liked what I had heard that day I made the decision to sign-up. A week later I was being sworn in.

Remember I said earlier, that wanting to go to war as a Marine was purely a romantic notion. Well that notion came to an end one day during boot camp at OCS. It was on November 10, 1966, and we were nearing the end of our training. We all had gathered on the parade field to “pass-in-review” for our Marine Corps Birthday celebration. As we stood around waiting to march on, our Drill Instructor turned to us and said, “Candidates listen up, in these few moments, while we have some down time, I want each of you to shake the hand of your brothers standing near you and wish them well on this our Marine Corps Birthday. This maybe the last Marine Corps Birthday many of you will ever celebrate”. He continued, “In a few months you will all, and I mean all, be going to Vietnam and according to statistics 20% of you will not be coming back alive, so take this moment and wish each other well”. It was at that very moment all the “romantic thoughts” I had about war disappeared. It was now replaced with a shot of reality and a little fear. Then this one thought crossed my mind, “*What in the hell have I done*”.

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## Aviation MOS

Little did I know that when I started my journey with the Marine Corps that I was also going to fulfill another lifelong dream of mine...becoming an aviator.

Becoming an aviator in the Marine Corps all happened to me by accident. After I completed my OCS training and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant I went onto my next field of training—Basic School. This took place over the next six months at Quantico, right up the road from OCS. Basic School was designed to teach us how to become Marine officers and a leader of men.

One day, while finishing up a training class in Basic School a Colonel walked in, took the stage and made an announcement that they were looking for more Marines to fly and if anyone was interested to raise their hand. This was an opportunity I had not expected; I raised my hand immediately and was pulled aside along with several other Marines and taken to a room for testing. I passed everything on the test with flying colors except for one portion...visual recognition. The visual recognition was an important part of the test if you wanted to become a pilot. I was disappointed but when they told me I could become an NFO (Naval Flight Officer) and fly in the back seat of the F-4 Phantom I was all in. And that's how I got into aviation as my MOS.

## Flight Training

At the end of Basic School I was assigned to Flight Training, Pensacola, FL.— “Home of the Blue Angels”—where I spent the next six months going through pre-flight, survival & navigation training. Then I was assigned to Glynco, GA for three months of intense intercept training and where I eventually received my flight wings as an NFO/RIO (Naval Flight Officer/Radar Intercept Officer).

Once I received my wings my job now was that of a back-seater in the two-man F-4 Phantom. My responsibilities were to handle radio communication, navigation, bombing calculating, intercept control and be a second set of eyes for the Pilot. My most important job however, was that of a partnership between me and my pilot. As in all good partnership the most important thing was to develop a trust between you and your partner. It was important that we could count on one another during the most critical of times.

I joined my first F-4 squadron on February 12, 1967 in NAS Beaufort, SC. Our squadron was VMFA 312 “The Checkerboards”. Our squadron planes were easy to identify because a large black and white checkerboard painted on the tail of the aircraft. Our commanding officer was Colonel Herb Lundin. He had a remarkable resume; he was credited with shooting down four enemy aircraft in World War II, fought in Korea and Vietnam, and received three Distinguished Flying Crosses. He was a great CO and a great Marine.



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## First Flight

Before I could take my first flight in the F-4 I had to spend a month of familiarization with the squadron and learn about the F-4's characteristics. Then the greatest day of my life came...my first flight in the F-4. I put on my flight gear and walked out to the plane with my pilot. We did a walk around inspection of our plane and then it was time to board. I jumped from the outboard bomb rack, to the wing, to the intake manifold, to my seat. (I always loved those movements to the cockpit because it made me feel so athletic. Today, at 75, I would be lucky to even make that first move to get my foot up on the bomb rack).



**Terry - Climbing to the back seat**

Once I got to the cockpit one of the ground crew leaned over and strapped me in. He then pulled my ejection seat pin and showed it to me, so I knew my ejection seat was now armed and "Hot". As I was putting on my helmet he leaned over and said, "Have a safe flight Lieutenant". I was nervous but excited at the same time.

My pilot came on the intercom and said, "are you ready Lieutenant" ..." Yes, Sir Captain, let's do it". I called for taxi instruction and we taxied out to the end of the runway. Just short of the runway we closed our canopies and I felt like I was in a cocoon. I called for take-off instruction and we rolled onto the runway. As we started to roll, my pilot said, "going to afterburners" and 36,000 pounds of thrust came roaring out of our two engines. I felt a kick in my pants and my body was pushed back into my seat. Before I knew it we were airborne and climbing vertically to 10,000 feet; it only took seconds. I felt like I was in a rocket. The power of that aircraft was beyond belief. Now I was in a world that only dreams are made of. As I looked out of the canopy I could see all around me, the ground, the clouds, and the sky...I was in awe. That feeling has never left me, even today when I see a fighter jet overhead I get goose bumps...and want to be up there.

One of the highlights while being with the "Checkerboards" was getting the opportunity to take a speed run in the F-4. The F-4 has the potential of going Mach 2, twice the speed of sound.

One morning, when I walked into our squadron ready-room, Colonel Lundin called us all together. He told us all our aircraft were all going in for maintenance and would be out of service for the next few days. He said before we pull the aircraft he would allow us to take our planes up one more time and execute a Mach 2 attempt. We were ecstatic. We knew the chances of us reaching Mach 2, however, was not real high because the aircraft we flew were always hand-me-downs from the Navy. When the Navy was finished with them they gave them to us. It was kind of like being a younger brother.

I partnered with Captain Shortal that day. Captain Shortal was one of the pilots with whom I later would fly

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with in Vietnam. We went down to the flight line, boarded our airplane, taxied out and took off. After reaching an altitude of 40,000 feet Captain Shortal nosed the plane over and put us into a forty-five-degree dive. As we started down the chute, he kicked in the afterburners. Reading off the airspeed to my pilot was my job but because the speed indicator needle was moving so fast so I turned my attention to the Machmeter and started to read that off instead. I started counting off Mach 1, Mach 1.5, Mach 2...we had made it. Just then the plane started to shake...the Machmeter was fluttering on 2.1 and then it happened.

Suddenly a bang!!! It sounded like the plane exploded. Everything in the aircraft shut down. We were warned that such a thing might happen, but it still scares the crap out of you when it does—it was called a compressor stall. Too much air flowing through the intake manifold, causing the compressors in the engine to slow down or stall completely. In our case, the engines shut down completely and Captain Shortal had to restart them. Once the engines were restarted we gained altitude and headed back to base.

We were surprised when we got back to base and heard only four of the eight planes that day completed the Mach 2 run...our flight was one of them. They awarded all four of our flight crews with a Mach 2 pin. We calculated our ground speed that day at more than 1,700 miles per hour...that's fast!

## **Vietnam**

Most tour of duty in Vietnam was 13 months, mine only lasted 9. It all ended one night while we were on a routine mission over South Vietnam and our plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire. We were both forced to eject over enemy territory. We were rescued 45 minutes later and I was eventually medevac'd out of Vietnam due to a back injury I incurred during the ejection.

## **Eject, Eject, Eject**

“Eject, Eject, Eject”...these are words the pilot uses to let the RIO know when the aircraft is in deep trouble and he needs to get out. As a RIO, when you hear that command, you better have pulled the handle by the second “Eject” or the pilot will eject before you and the blast from his seat will literally fry you in the back. If you get hit by an Air-to-Air missile or a Surface-to-Air (SAM) don't wait for the pilot to say those magical words, just get the hell out as quickly as possible and hope for the best. As they like to say in those circumstances, “Everyman for himself”.

On May 23, 1968 I went down to the hanger around midnight to meet up with my pilot, Jack Proctor. We took off for what we thought was going to be a pretty routine flight. These night flights were known as TPQ-10 missions or as we liked to call them “Milk Runs” because they were fairly routine and controlled by the TPQ controllers on the ground which were located on Marble Mountain outside of Da Nang.



As we approached the target area, I contacted Da Nang TPQ and let them know we could work with them for about 30 minutes. I told them we had 12 – 500lb. bombs aboard. TPQ control wanted us to make 3 runs over the target, dropping 4 bombs on each run. They would guide us in on the target and tell us exactly when and where to drop our bombs. Once this was accomplished we would head back to base and go to bed. The missions were not very hazardous because we usually dropped our bombs from 10,000 to 15,000 feet and were not in any danger of ground fire or SAM's.

**Pilot Jack Proctor – RIO Terry Cox**  
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SAM's were never used in the South but were extremely prevalent in the North.

We were at 14,000 feet when we commenced our first run, dropping 4 bombs over the target area which was located close to the Hoi An river, just southwest of Da Nang. After completing our first run we turned back and headed toward the Gulf of Tonkin to prepare for our second run. This time as we approached the target area; Jack pulled the trigger, but we didn't feel any bombs come off the plane. I told our controller we had a negative drop and we would drop our remaining 8 bombs on our last run. About halfway to the target on our final run my "SAM WARNING LIGHT" came on. I notified Jack immediately and we quickly assessed the situation. Since we knew there were no SAM sites in the area, we just assumed it must have been electronic interference coming from Da Nang. The "SAM WARNING LIGHT" went out and then came back on again but this time we felt a hard hit in our fuselage. Our plane went silent as the engines went dead and I lost communication with both Jack and the controller. As the plane was falling to the ground I looked through the small opening between our seats to see what Jack was doing. If he gave me a thumbs-up signal or moved his hands toward the ejection handle over his head, I was out of there. "FIRE WARNING LIGHTS" (meaning we had two engines on fire), I shut down both engines and restarted them.

Since the com was back online, so was the controller I was talking to before we got hit. "Lovebug 5-0-0 are you there? Lovebug 5-0-0 are you there?". I replied, "This is Lovebug 5-0-0 standby, we have an emergency in progress". He said, "Roger Lovebug, standing-by". I asked Jack if he wanted to head for Da Nang, which I could see off our right wing. He said, "No, I think we can make it back to Chu Lai, the "FIRE WARNING LIGHTS" are out and everything else seems okay". I called the controller back and said, "This is Lovebug 5-0-0, we've been hit and had two fire warning lights which are now out. Be advised we had two negative bomb drops on our last two runs. We would like a vector back to Chu Lai via feet wet (feet wet meaning over water)". He said, "Roger 5-0-0" and gave us a heading toward the Gulf then turned us toward Chu Lai. He said he would contact Chu Lai Tower and advise them of our emergency. About 30 miles from Chu Lai, the TPQ controller had us switch to Chu Lai Tower and wished us well. I contacted Chu Lai Tower and advised them of our state of emergency. They said all traffic had been cleared, crash crews were in position, and we were cleared for a straight in approach.

About 15 miles out, the tower gave us landing instructions and advised us that the emergency units were in place. Just then Jack came up on the com and said, "We have a "FIRE WARNING LIGHT" on the right engine and I'm securing it". I called the tower and said, "This is Lovebug 5-0-0 we have a further emergency, stand-by". Then I heard Jack say, "Oh, shit, there goes the left engine". I looked out the left side and saw the flames coming from the left engine. It did not look good at this point. Then Jack said, "We need to get out". My response was "are you sure?" The next words out of Jack's mouth was "Get out now". In case you're wondering those words work just as well as, "Eject, Eject, Eject".

I made one quick call to Chu Lai Tower to make sure they knew exactly where we were. I said, "Chu Lai tower this is 5-0-0, 15 miles northeast of Chu Lai punching-out, punching-out". The next words I did not expect... "5-0-0 where are you, where are you?" I'm assuming this was a young controller and got flustered because I had given him our position just moments earlier. Not wanting to be left down in bad land territory for very long and hoping Jack would hold on another second before punching-out, I leaned forward into my mask and said, "This is 5-0-0 we are 15 miles northeast of Chu Lai, punching out", and as the last words came out of my mouth I pulled the ejection handle between my legs. It was then I remembered I was leaning forward and should have had my head back against the seat to prevent a back injury, so I quickly tossed my head back and saw the canopy fly off; I heard the ejection gun fire and got the ride of my life. I don't remember much about the tumbling through space, because it all happened so quickly. I do remember a sudden jolt  
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forward and when I looked up I could see the open canopy of my parachute. There was a moment of “Thank You God” that crossed my mind.

As I was floating down in the darkness of the night, I could sense the quietness and felt very much alone. It was just minutes earlier were all kinds of chatter on the air and the engines were roaring. Several things were going through my mind at that moment; I looked around to see if I could see Jack’s chute to make sure he got out okay...I couldn’t see him. Then I saw this huge explosion going off on the ground that went for about a quarter of a mile and knew it was our airplane hitting the ground. I only hoped there were no U.S. troops or innocent civilians close by where it crashed. I looked around to see where I was going to land and see if there was anyone on the ground I needed to be concerned about. I felt I was coming down too far inland and knew my best chance for survival was going to be in the water, so I pulled one of the shroud lines to help me move in that direction. Thank God there was some wind that night because the canopy caught a gust of wind and headed me out toward the water. The one thing I do remember mostly was how slowly I felt coming down. I was concerned that I could be seen by every Viet Cong and their grandmother at that moment. The last 100 feet to the water, however, was much different. Now it felt like I was moving 100mph...no more time to think, now it was all about reacting.

As my feet hit the water I held my breath and pulled the toggle on my life vest to inflate it. As I went into the water, my feet hit the bottom almost immediately and there I was, standing straight up waist deep in water still holding my breath. I said to myself, “Now don’t panic, think what you have to do.” I knew the first thing I had to do was to release my chute and get away from it as fast as I could, so I wouldn’t get tangled in it. Next, I unhooked my oxygen mask and tossed it.

I looked around at my surroundings, to check out the environment and determine an escape route in case I needed one. I knew the best and safest place for me right then was to stay in the water and stay low. I looked toward the shore line and realized I was only about 50 yards away. I could see a line of sampans (small Vietnamese fishing boats) on the beach and a tree line just behind them. We were always taught to be very wary of tree lines because it was a place where the enemy liked to hide. As I looked out toward the ocean, I could see about 15 or 20 sampans with lights on. I figured these were probably fisherman preparing to get an early start. I decided to keep my eyes on them anyway because the VC liked to infiltrate our bases by coming in from the beach.

The very next thing I did was unstrap my 38-caliber pistol, which was hanging across my chest, and have it ready in case I needed it. Then I grabbed my radio in my survival vest to communicate with those looking for us. As I took my radio out of my pocket it slipped out of my hands and into the water. The problem was I still had my leather gloves on which caused my gloves to become wet and slimy from the water causing me to lose my grip. I attempted to dive for it but with all my gear on, I had a tough time getting under the water. Now I had to find another way to communicate.

As I looked up, I could see several aircraft circling above me. I assumed they spotted the burning aircraft and felt we were close by. I reached into my survival vest, pulled out a strobe light and turned it on. It didn’t work, so I turned it off (dumb idea) and put it back into my pocket. I couldn’t think of what to signal with next, but I knew I needed to come up with something quick before the bad guys starting showed up. I pulled out my strobe light and tried it again. This time it worked. I found out later that the strobe needs time to warm up and I just didn’t leave it on long enough the first time. I pointed the strobe light straight up to attract attention to the aircraft above. There was a piece of electrical tape wrapped around the clear head of the light to prevent the light from shinning to the side. The problem was when the tape got wet it  
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slipped off. That left me very vulnerable, so I had to cover the sides of the strobe with my hand. It worked, because a small O2 Cessna, known as the "Duck", flew over my area and dropped several parachute flares. Even though that is procedure, I didn't like it at all. I was somewhat hidden from the enemy in the water, but when the flares went off, it became almost daylight and I knew the whole world could see me now –especially "Charlie". I felt like diving into the water to hide but I knew that wasn't going to work.

Then as I was watching the tree line on shore, I saw a Huey Gunship helicopter come up over the horizon and circled around me. One of the gunners hanging out the side door spotted me and gave me the thumbs-up sign. I replied with one of my own. The Huey made a couple of low passes up and down the beach to check for the enemy and find a good place to land. They landed up the beach about 100 yards away because there were so many sampans and didn't want them flying into the rotor blades.

When I saw the Huey land on the beach, I started wading toward shore, still with my 38 in my hand. One of the door gunners jumped out of the Huey and started heading my direction. He had his 45 pistol out and was facing the tree line, walking sideways with his back toward me. When he reached me, he turned and asked if I was Okay. I told him I was, and he said, "Let's go, Marine".

As we started moving toward the helicopter, all hell broke loose. The gunner pushed me to the ground, my 38 flew out of my hand and onto the sand. I reached out to pick it up and turned to see why the gunner had pushed me down. He was in a kneeling position shooting his 45 into the tree line. I whipped around and started to fire my 38 in the same direction and the gunner was yelling at me to get moving toward the helicopter. I started to run, zigzagging up the beach. I could see the sand kicking up all around me from the bullets (man they must have been lousy shots). I remember thinking to myself, now I know what it's going to feel like to get shot in the back. I finally reached the helicopter and dove into the open door headfirst. The gunner was right on my butt and landed on top of me. The gunner had one finger up in the air and circling it around like a rotor blade telling the pilot to get us out of there.

The Huey pilot looked at me and asked, "Are you the pilot or the RIO"? I told him I was the RIO and he asked me if I knew where my pilot was. I told him he would be south of my position and most likely in the water. He gave me a thumbs up and said, "Don't worry, we'll get him". I sat in the center of the Huey and the pilot attempted to get us off the ground. He had to bounce the helicopter on the sand a couple of times, leaned it sideways and dragged one of the skids through the water. I knew at that point this ordeal wasn't over yet. Then we were airborne.

As he headed south over the water one of the gunners spotted Jack sitting in a one-man life raft in the ocean. He was much further out in the water than I was. He looked fine, almost as though he was having a good time, sitting in the raft paddling backwards toward the shoreline. The Huey pilot made a couple of passes up and down the beach like before, then landed. The same gunner that jumped out to help me, then jumped out to help Jack. The other gunner turned to me and said, "You took a lot of gun fire back there, didn't you?" I told him we had. He said, "Do you know how to use an M60 machine gun"? I said, "Yeah, I got it". He jumped out to help his buddy and I got behind the M60. I looked up the beach expecting to take fire but nothing happened. To be honest I was somewhat disappointed because I wanted to fire that sucker.

I saw both gunners running back with Jack between them. They jumped in the helicopter and took their positions; Jack sat down next to me in the center of the aircraft and we were both soaking wet. The pilot, once again struggled to get the Huey off the ground but made it again...we were airborne. We found out later that we were a secondary mission for these guys and they had a full load of mortars aboard they were  
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taking out to some troops near Con Thien...this explains why he had such a problem getting us off the ground. I got to hand it to those Huey drivers; they are good at their jobs.

After we got airborne, Jack and I looked at each other. He was smiling, and I asked "You okay?" He said, "Yeah, how about you?" About 15 seconds went by then Jack said, "Wasn't that the bitchenist ride you've ever taken?" We both started to laugh, and I said, "Yeah, but do you realize you just dumped a 2-million-dollar aircraft? We laughed again. The Huey pilot looked down at us again shaking his head with a smile on his face and said, "You jarhead zoomies are all alike".

On the way back to Chu Lai we flew over our crash site and there wasn't much left of the plane. When we landed at Chu Lai an ambulance was there to greet us along with the big brass to welcome us back and shake our hands. They took us to the infirmary and the flight surgeon looked us over. The first thing he did was hand us each a shot of whisky. Trying to be polite and somewhat macho, I declined saying, "I'm OK". He said, "Take it Captain, trust me, you'll be glad you did". They split Jack and I up and de-briefed us separately.

After about an hour of debriefing Jack and I started walking back to our respective hooches which were right next door to each other. As we were walking back Jack said, "Weren't you scared?" I said "No, I was too busy thinking of what the hell I needed to do to survive". He said, "No, I mean weren't you scared of the sharks?" I said, "What sharks?" He said, "The gulf is loaded with them". I said, "No shit, glad I didn't know that". When we reached our hooches we looked at each other, shook hands and Jack said, "A good night for us. Be safe, see you tomorrow, we have the day off". I said, "You know why we have the day off don't you? As he looked at me I said, "They don't want you flying again; they can't afford to lose another 2-million-dollar airplane in two days". We both laughed again and went our separate ways.

When I walked into my hooch one of our pilots was just getting up for his flight. The hooch was dark except for the light in his cubical. He saw me and said, "Hey Cox, just getting back?" I said, "Yeah". He said, "How was it". I said, "Same ole, same ole". Then he looked down and saw the water puddling on the floor. "Where in the hell have you been"? I said, "Jack and I took a swim tonight". He looked at me strangely, "With your flight suit on...were you drunk"? I told him the story and he couldn't believe it. He asked where we got shot down and I told him around Hoi An, which happen to be where he was going that night. I got out of my wet clothes, slipped into some dry underwear and hit the rack. I fell asleep right away...I guess I didn't want to think about what just happened. The doc was right; the whisky helped.

They grounded Jack and me for the next two days to make sure we were both alright. The next morning, following the ejecting, I was in the "ready-room" because I was the Briefing Officer. When each of the crews came in for a briefing, they already knew what had happened to Jack and me the night before. The word gets around quick when one of our own gets into trouble. They asked me a lot of questions and I showed them on the map exactly where Jack and I were flying when we got hit. We were the talk of the club the next night as well. The next day, things went back to normal. That's the way it was. On to the next mission!

While we were grounded from flying, the CO said he wanted us to go out and check the crash site and to make sure everything was destroyed. He arranged a helicopter for us. On our way out to the site, I could see we flew up the Gulf and I could see what Jack was so concerned about. I spotted about three schools of shark swimming up and down the coast. Jack said, "See, I told you". When we reached the crash site, there wasn't much left of our plane, it was pretty well incinerated. We did not hit anything in fact it landed in a Vietnamese graveyard. We got back in the helicopter and headed home. More shark sightings...damn, am I  
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glad I didn't know about the sharks. I had enough to think about that night without having to worry about that. The next time I jumped into the back seat of the F-4, I felt a little strange. I felt nervous but by the time we were airborne I was back to normal.

I flew another 30 missions and then one morning I started to get out of bed for a flight and fell on the floor. I couldn't stand up and I was in terrible pain. One of my hooch-mates helped me over to the infirmary. They took x-rays of my back and it showed I had ruptured a disc. The Doc said, the ejection most likely caused a slipped disc in my back and on my last mission, which we pulled over 7 1/2 G's evading what we thought was an enemy aircraft, must have ruptured the disc. The doc said, "you won't be flying for a while, I'm sending you to Guam for further evaluation". I was medevac'd within an hour and out of Vietnam the next day. While I was in Guam they notified me that my Dad had passed away, so they flew me home to the good old USA. After being in the Hospital at Camp Pendleton for a few months they decided to operate on my back.

My Vietnam tour was over. I was satisfied with the job I had done. I had flown over 300 missions in 9 months, that's more than a lot of guys flew in 13 months. I loved my time in Nam, I loved my time in the F-4 and I loved my time in the Corp, it left me with a lot of memories, But the most important thing, I loved the most was I came back alive and that's what counts.

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