

LOOKING BACK

Written by Raphael Czepkiewicz, 322nd Squadron

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On November 2, 1944 Captain Suther woke me up for the mission, my 22nd. At the briefing I found out we were going to Merseburg. We had a crew of nine, crew positions were, Pilot – Captain Roy Hammer, Co-pilot – 1st Lt. Ron Harper, Navigator – 1st Lt. Raphael (Zep) Czepkiewicz, Bombardier – 1st Lt. Mo Olivo, Radar Navigator – 1st Lt. Joe Young, Top Turret Gunner- T/Sgt. Bill Nagy, Radio Gunner – T/Sgt. Emile (Red) Freeman, Waist Gunner - S/Sgt. Mike Duran and Tail Gunner – S/Sgt. Oliver (K.O.) Birch. I thought about it a lot because of what happen there the last time. "The last time we flew to Merseburg was September 13, 1944, synthetic oil and fuel target. Approaching the vicinity we could see there was a lot of flak ahead, we were in it for thirty minutes. While flying through it a piece of it came through our Plexiglas nose. It cut off the wires to my throat mike and earphones. The crew had lost contact with me. Our Bombardier William Nocitra got word from our pilot Roy Hammer to check on me, he touched my shoulder, when I turned around to look at him, I saw he had pieces of Plexiglas in his face. He wasn't wearing goggles; miraculously none hit him in his eyes. I pulled the pieces out and wanted to put Band-Aids on the wounds. I ripped the canvas kit off the wall and got the Band-Aids. They would not stick because of the cold temperature at high altitude. I put them one by one under my armpit to warm them up, and then they adhered. I returned to my job working on my Log, I straightened up from the Log just in time because a piece of shrapnel came through my desk and Log and kept on going through the upper aluminum skin of our B17. On the way back we heard from the pilot that cables had been cut and had a leak in the hydraulics. What we didn't know was that we had a tire that had been punctured by the anti-aircraft fire. Our Pilot Roy Hammer brought the B17 in for a landing, we were coming in great and everything was fine until the weight of our airplane was on that wheel. The B17 spun around, it didn't feel good, we finally stopped and all of our crew got out. The chaplain was there with some others, he said that was a rough one. They were all glad to see we all came through it. I really appreciated the Scotch at the debriefing. It was reported that our B17 had an unbelievable amount of holes in it." Now back to November 2, 1944.

The chaplain waited for us this morning, we were quite merry because the co-pilot for this mission was Harper and he was on his last mission, we had another man who was new to our crew, he was Mo Olivo the Bombardier for this mission. The assembly was normal and it looked like a good mission, we were on course most of the way. From the I.P. (initial point) we started picking up flak. Bombs were away and we moved off the target. Lt. Brown's ship was hit and left formation. The flak was now widely spread, the tail gunner Sgt. Oliver Birch reported a lot of fighters out there, and they are coming in, they were M.E. 109's and Focke-Wulf 190's. I unlatched my guns and tried firing them. The right gun was okay but the left gun would not work, I could not cock it. The trouble with my left gun was the cocking lever was in the wrong position. What a time for something like this to happen. I took the back off the gun and corrected the problem. Our bombardier tried to fire the chin turret but it would not work, it must have been due to the cold temperature. We were flying at 27,500 feet and the temperature at that altitude was usually between 20 and 40 degrees below zero. We all had to work with gloves on; I used silk gloves because I did a lot of writing in my Log. Because the chin turret was not working Olivo took over my right gun. I peppered an enemy aircraft that was to the left and flying real fast, it

was German jet. We had never seen a jet before and couldn't believe his speed. I looked out my left window and saw an M.E. 109 hanging underneath us, spraying the radio room area. I wanted to shoot him down but my gun would not swing over far enough. I wondered why didn't someone from the other ships around us get him? I looked around trying to find some of the attackers, when I did this I could see one element was gone from our squadron after the first passes by the enemy. There was another pass and they took a few more of our group. The next attack passed and we only had six or seven ships left. Fire! Fire was in our bomb bay and spreading fast. Staff Sergeant William Nagy our top turret and engineer tried to put it out, but the small extinguisher had little effect on the fire because the fire was so large. Nagy came down and said "Aw Shit" and opened the escape hatch. We got the word to bail out. I only had on my harness; my chest pack was someplace on the floor this was common place because there is no way I could do my job with the chest pack on. Olivo was hurrying me, he said "I am bailing out!" I said wait a minute, help me find my chute. He was calm and found my chute for me, I hooked it on and looked up to check the bomb bay it was a blazing inferno. I decided to go and went out headfirst. The reason for going out head first was because we had heard stories of people going out feet first and if the bomb bay doors were not completely up, these people would receive injuries to the top of their heads. I felt if I was going to run into the doors I would rather hit my feet than my head. I never worried about my chute opening; I just wondered who would capture me? I looked up and saw the group leaving and our ship smoking, I thought, "I wonder if everyone will get out before the ship explodes?" Falling through space I seemed to be on my back I tried to turn over by could not accomplish this maneuver. I pulled off my flak helmet, my oxygen mask and goggles and threw them away I bailed out at 27,500 feet, so I knew I must fall down to the level of breathable air. I held on to the parachute handle so that I would not pull the ripcord too soon. Another reason was there were many enemy fighter planes in the area and I did not want to be a floating target for them. I tried looking at my watch trying to estimate how long it would take me to get down to about 5000 feet, which I figured was the level of the clouds below me. I finally reached the clouds; it seemed like a long time. I released the parachute handle and grabbed the ripcord. After I pulled the ripcord, up went the little chute, followed by the large parachute.

I got a sharp jerk when my chute first supported my weight. I seemed to float down very slowly; there was no sound except for the creaking of the chute cords. As I came through the clouds I could see two of my buddies, reaching the ground. The wind was taking me towards some high voltage lines, so I tried to spill my chute by pulling the lines of it on one side. It worked the first time I tried it, but the second time I almost collapsed the chute. My heart was in my mouth as I prayed for it to stay open. The chute swung me furiously from side to side. I was afraid to do it again. Now I saw a M.E. 109 fly in a large circle around me. Perhaps he was reporting my position. The ground was now coming up fast, I thought I'll bend my knee's so that I won't hit so hard. I tried to prepare myself for the hit, but there was very little wind and I dropped like a rock. I hit so hard that head went down between my knee's. On the way down I also threw away my flying boots, I should have thrown away my papers. Having hit the ground I unbuckled my chute harness and took off my Mae West. I started to run towards a wooded patch, perhaps I could hide there until dark, but it was only an elderberry patch of bushes. I went in and buried my Log, which I had from a compass swinging. I was going to open my escape kit, when I saw a man waving a long stick and he was coming towards me. I thought I could outrun him so I ran towards some railroad tracks that I had seen on the way down.

Maybe I would be lucky enough to jump onto a passing train? Now people were coming from another direction and there were others behind me. The ones that were behind me started shooting – I hit the ground to keep from being hit. I looked back they were also on the ground, I started running again and they started shooting again, I went down again and got up with my hands raised over my head. I

surrendered. That was when a large crowd of people, men, women, and children and soldiers gathered around me. A kid about 15 years old had on a Luftwaffe uniform, a man older than him had a uniform under his civilian clothes but he also had a pistol. They started asking me where I had hid my gun. It was hard for them to believe I did not have a gun. Then came two soldiers, they started searching me. One took my map, a candy bar and my pipe tobacco, I said to him "you are going to be in trouble for taking my things" he gave the items back to me. The soldier with the rifle came and took the map back. They started marching me towards a little village. The farmer with the stick gave me a kick to the side of my thigh. I put on an act saying he really hurt me, so that he wouldn't kick me again. I limped and the farmer left the crowd, some of the people yelled and spit at me. The people were really curious and kept looking at me. There were two boys about twelve dressed in black, with soot smudges on their hands and faces; they had on wooden soled shoes. They kept walking me down the road. A German officer came up to me, he took over. He said, "For you the war is over". Then he had them take me back to where they had caught me. Then he told me. "I am a German officer, a Major" his uniform was a lot nicer than the ones on the soldiers. He had a light green wool jacket with a darker green velvet collar. A white shirt with a dark tie and black leather boots. He said you are an American Aviator part of a bomber crew and you have killed innocent German women and children. I protested to this and said I didn't shoot anyone, I didn't carry a gun. Now he made the soldiers make a very thorough search of me. They took back all the items they took before plus my watch. They did not get my high school ring because I still had on my silk gloves. I had a cut on my hand; I must have cut it on the escape hatch opening.

We got back to the Elderberry Patch, the Major asked me where I entered, he asked me where my parachute was but I refused to tell him. They thought I buried my gun in these bushes. A party of about 20 searched the area; they found the Log from compass swinging. Then the Major ordered all the people to leave, after were gone he said "I will give you five minutes to tell me where you hid your pistol – if you do not tell me – you will be shot!" The Private had his rifle pointing at me, the Major walked away. I thought they were going to shoot me. I said my Hail Mary's; I had – had it! The Major returned and said your five minutes are up! I said I had no pistol, do you expect me to make you a pistol. He did not say anything. The civilians must be bitter towards us because he kept me in this area until everyone was out of sight. Then he had the soldiers lead me towards a little village, after a while a lot of children and woman followed us. Some of them spit on me. Finally we came to a house, I scraped the mud off my shoes and we went in. I was kept in a room set aside for soldiers. There were four triple-decker beds for the Luftwaffe. The solders had me sit, while two of them ate. They had black bread, potatoes and carrots. They must have been hungry they ate like they just returned from working all day. There was also a woman and girl there they looked like they felt sorry for me. Little children would pull themselves up on the windowsill to get a look at me. It seemed to me like anyone with authority has to learn to shout. One of the soldiers came over to me with a book, sort of a German English dictionary. I pointed to some words about getting a drink; I was not offered anything yet.

He offered me a drink; the woman got me a cup of black coffee. I didn't like it and asked for some water by pointing to it in the book. That was all I got that day. That night they led me out, the soldiers, who had first captured me, they took me to another house that had nicer quarters. Here there was a group of non-coms, a sergeant or higher was the big deal there and all the others clicked their heels and heiled to him. None could speak English and were surprised to find out that I was an officer. Shortly the Major came in with another officer and they started asking me questions. I wouldn't tell him anything but my name, rank and serial number. He then put all my stuff in a bag. He gave the other officer one of my escape pictures. He gave my gun to some of the soldiers and gave one of the men my pouch of tobacco. The little guy took me out and we got in a car, we rode and made a lot of stops. The

car had the headlights blacked out except for a narrow horizontal band about one half inch wide. At the stops people with flashlights would stare in at me. The old men of the people's army swore at me. At the next stop we picked up three men. They turned out to be Lt. Ron Harper our co-pilot who was on his last mission and Mo Olivo our bombardier and a German man. Harper had a cut on his chin, while we were moving he asked about the rest of our crew. I said I didn't know. We drove until we came to a big military installation. In the office a modern place, They asked Hammer and Olivo a lot of questions. At that time they didn't ask me anything. They probably talked to Hammer because his name sounded German, and of Olivo because he had a Spanish name. They said the Spanish soldiers are good fighters. Next they led us down to a cellar into a Red Cross room; this was where we were going to sleep. Some beds had straw mattresses the others had no mattress just metal strips held to the frame with springs. These were very hard. Here we saw some other people, one of them was our tail gunner Birch, he looked horrible, one side of his face was burned, and paper bandages covered his wounds. Two days later the pus was coming through the bandages, they did nothing for him in that time. Harper was his usual self, joking around. I met Brown's top turret gunner and Bunch was also there. They brought us some soup it looked awful; it looked like wallpaper paste with straw in it. Hammer said I am not eating that stuff. I said Roy we don't have much choice, who knows when they will feed us again. We picked out the pieces of straw and the soup tasted pretty good. Later on Katzman, Brown's co pilot came in. I did not get one of the beds with a mattress and slept on the steel strips. As it turned out this was not too bad. The guys with the mattresses were all flea bitten by the morning after. I tried sleeping but awakened by Ralph Caldwell who was a navigator on another crew. Later his top turret gunner was brought in. There we stayed for three days living on ersatz bread and black coffee, I heard it was made from roasted acorns, stinking cheese (probably Limburger) did it smell and dried fish. We left that place by bus. But before leaving we saw others in the courtyard. They were Joe Young our radar navigator, Mike Duran our waist gunner and Bill Nagy our engineer, top turret gunner and a few others. It was a big lift to see so many come through alive. WE rode to a railroad station and boarded a train. There was quite a loud argument between the people who were in charge of the railroad personnel and us. It seemed to me that the railroad people did not agree that we prisoners of war should be on that train. Another peculiar thing was they counted us almost every five minutes. The train was on its way and we arrived at our next destination, which was Frankfurt station. We got off and walked through the city, I never saw anything like it, it was completely destroyed and there were a lot of smells around, it smelled like gas and deteriorating bodies. The streets were all cleared away and all the rubble was put where the buildings used to be. We came to another train station, boarded another train and were on our way. In the morning we arrived at Dulazin. When we got off the train some military people come up and asked for Hammer, they took him away. I guess its because of his rank, he was the highest ranking officer of the prisoners in captivity.

They took us to a building and put me in a cell with some other guys. They took me out for interrogation, I was in an office and the interrogator came in. The interrogator acted friendly and I had a pleasant attitude also until he started asking questions about mission, about our base and about our crew. Somehow he had information about our crew but could not figure out where Joe Young belonged. He said if you do not answer my questions you will never leave this place. Again I told him; all I can tell you is my name rank and serial number. We then heard the engines of a group of B17's he said you know its one thing to be up there but it is quite different being down here getting bombed. I did not talk and instead of remaining there, I got out the next morning with Joe Young, he was mad because they kept calling him sergeant. We were moved to Wetzlar, Caldwell came along. Once there we met Haneby, Stock and Kechler. The food at Wetzler was good and filling. It was composed of mostly potatoes, powdered milk and coffee from the Germans, most of the meat and cheese and good stuff was

from the Red Cross parcels. In addition the Germans gave us cabbage everything was appreciated. We stayed here three days before we left we were searched again and they tried nonchalantly to get more information out of us. They marched us at night to the station at Wetzlar. The rail coaches had the windows blown out, probably by bomb blasts. They gave us Red Cross parcels, which we split, and with the addition of German bread and sausage we ate pretty good. We rode in the coaches for three days before we arrived at the next prison camp at Sagan Germany. Here I saw a twin engine German jet flying around. We walked out to the camp and they took more pictures, confiscated pens and cigarette lighters. The German military personnel tried to get more information and fingerprinted us. We stood around and are finally led to the west camp. Here we get some processing and medical inspection by American Officers. We were assigned rooms and beds. We sleep fourteen in a room, the beds are constructed of ordinary wood boards, and the mattresses are cloth bags filled with wood shavings. The food is mostly from Red Cross parcels. Each room has its own cook; they have forty-five minutes with another cook to prepare the evening meal on one stove. The cooks do a good job. We manage to have dessert every day except Monday. It works like this; we have ersatz coffee and toasted ersatz bread for breakfast. For lunch we either have goon (German) barley or soup. The soup is mostly water with dehydrated vegetables, and for supper we have our big meal of potatoes and meat and desert. In the morning about 9:30 AM we have an Apel (count) also at 4:30 PM they are always counting us. There is a big field in one corner of the camp and here is where a lot of games are played especially touch football. I must mention there are two sets of barbed wire to keep us from escaping. One is the high fence about eight feet high and the second is about 18 inches high back from the high fence about fifteen feet. We are told that if we step over this low fence the guards in the towers have orders to shoot us. We wash and shave and bathe with cold water and with worn razor blades the shaving is painful. They allow us the privilege of having a hot shower once every two weeks, at that time we have to line up in two's and are marched out of our campground to the bathhouse. We have a limited time to soap up and rinse and must be ready when its time to return. Once in a while the Germans ask us to turn in our razor blades for sharpening. While I was there they never came back. We live about two hundred to a barrack, which is too many so when the lights go out the windows are opened regardless of the temperature so that we are breathing fresh air at night. During the day some guys smoke, it gets pretty polluted. I sleep with all my clothes and coat on, to keep warm. We receive cigarettes in the Red Cross parcels and we use these as money to buy things from our German guards. For instance you can usually buy a loaf of bread for two or three cigarettes or a small bundle of wood for a fire. Many tools and utensils are made out of the metal from the cans in which we get food. One day a truck that was powered by a wood burner stopped in our compound. It had some four inch round post material on it, while the driver was in the office building some our guys stole these wooden posts for firewood. When the driver returned to his truck he was really angry and reported the theft. A couple of the posts were already being cut up with saws made from tin cans. We were ordered outside and to line up. The German commander spoke to our American officer who represented us. Our commander told us that they told him that if the wood was not immediately returned we would have to stand at assembly until it was. The wood was returned some of it was shorter than before. Thanksgiving was a big day here we had a big breakfast or barley, coffee and the usual ersatz black bread. Our lunch consisted of fried Spam fried potatoes, sauerkraut and a raisin pie. For dinner we had a Spam loaf potatoes and peas, also crackers and cheese and a chocolate pie. After dinner we had cake and cocoa. It was possible to have all this because, for quite some time we saved something from all our previous meals and accumulated it for thanksgiving. During the day a lot of us watched a touch football game, it was very close. The game was won by a 40-yard dropkick field goal. In the evening we went to a concert of classical recordings. Life is going on as usual, I have written home but have not received any mail. I can not sleep well, I pass the time mostly reading and at times I kick a football. We receive the German version

of the news. I keep hoping the war will be over soon. I wonder if my money at Bassingbourn will get home, (It didn't) also my clothes (They did) I thought the war would end in February, it did not end until the end of April. We have to pass word amongst the prisoners to let all know that one of the guards is approaching it is "tally ho" one time the guard heard it and asked "Vas is Los this Tally Ho?" The later part of January 1945 we could see the Russian Artillery flashes at night, they were getting closer. We were told to move out, early January 28 we were on the road. It was supposed to be a three-day trip. It actually lasted nine days. We walked most of the time, one night I slept in a mortuary, one guy slept between the angels on the marble surface where I suppose they would put the casket.

Some slept in the cemetery, they people were mad because the prisoners shit that area. There were no toilets what else could they do. One night we stayed at a brick factory it was warm because the fires for making bricks were going. The floor I was on had round covers in the floor just like on a coal stove I was able to cook some oatmeal over one of these holes. I was running out of food, while passing through a town I saw two women; one of them had a loaf of bread. I spoke to them in Polish hoping they would understand. The Polish lady traded me the loaf of bread for a bar of soap. She was amazed, she said to the other woman this man is from America and can speak polish. While we were traveling it snowed and it was cold. One night we slept in a barn, there were spaces in the roof and you could see the stars through them. The only thing that was a problem was if you had to go to the bathroom you had to crawl over the other prisoners then try to find your way back in the dark. We traveled for a time in the 40 and 8 boxcars. They were made for 40 men and 8 horses. We had so many prisoners in these cars that only half could sit on the floor. While the train was moving it you had to go to the bathroom you would lower your pants put your butt out the door while two others held your arms so that you wouldn't fall out. When we arrived at our destination they gave us cheese that came in round tin cans. I do not know how old it was but I got diarrhea from it.

I stepped out of line and told the guard I had to go. He said "get back in line" so I went to the other side of the ranks and relieved myself. We walked for a while, thousands of us; the columns went back as far as you could see. We arrived at Moosburg, Stalag # 7. They searched us again and took us into what looked like a large paint booth, here we got disinfected and deloused. It was said there were 110,000 prisoners of all nationalities in this camp. I had lost forty-eight pounds in three months. After being there a while and outside, Roy Hammer looked at me and said it looks like you have Jaundice you better go on sick call. I never heard of it I thought I was starting to get a tan. I went on sick call, the medic said you better wait for the doctor. The German doctor came I tried to tell him what I had, he said do not tell me anything. Let me look in your eyes, check your fingernails and try to have a bowel movement. I will check that. He checked everything and said no more black bread for you. You are going to the hospital. After a few days of medications and a better diet I felt pretty good. I must tell you here that the Russian prisoners received no Red Cross parcels. Their government told them to go down fighting. A Russian prisoner came into the room with some potatoes; he wanted to exchange them for cigarettes. I offered him three cigarettes, he gave me the potatoes and I gave him the cigarettes. This is when he started yelling the cigarettes are no good, English blend. They were Philip Morris cigarettes. Another man in the room said what is the problem, I said he does not want the Philip Morris cigarettes, he said send him over here. He gave the Russian three German cigarettes and told him to leave. Now that I had the potatoes, I decided to make some potato pancakes. While I was eating this big guy comes over to me and says I am an American general. I graduated from West Point. I want you to make some pancakes for me. I said I do not know you, you could be here spying on us. If you want pancakes you will have to make them. Later a male nurse came in and said that I should not be out of bed. He said I had a serious illness and to stay in bed. A few days later they released me to the barracks

We didn't have toilets in our rooms; you had to go to a building that had a room with lots of toilets all in the open. The only problem was the toilets had no plumbing. The setup they had was the toilets were over a big collecting chamber and every so often a big siphon truck would come and siphon all the stuff out. One time they did not siphon it out soon enough, The crap was to the top of the toilets. So the American Officer who represented us told the people in charge that we were not going to line up for Apel (count) if the collecting chamber was not cleared of the crap. The guards came to the barracks and ordered us out, no one moved even though they were screaming at us. Then they came with guard dogs and threatened us. We went out but would not line up to be counted. This was a tense time, all you could hear was yelling and the dogs barking. There were a lot of arguments, but finally they announced that they would have the collecting chambers siphoned. We lined up were counted and returned to the barracks. The trucks came in and did the siphoning; this material was mixed with water and chemicals and sprayed on their fields. On April 29, 1945 another man and I were walking to church, when all of a sudden we heard machine guns firing and low flying planes, I look up and see a ME 109 that was flying very low. He passed overhead and after him was a P51. I said to my friend we better get back to the barracks something is going to happen today. We were in the barracks for awhile, then we could hear rifle fire. So we lay down on the floor so that stray bullets would not hit us. When the rifle fire stopped we went outside. We saw someone taking down the Nazi flag. They hoisted up the American flag in its place. We felt great, finally. We were going to go home! I looked in the direction of the gate and saw a big American tank coming through; the soldier on top was smoking a cigar. When he got close to me I asked him if he had a spare, he threw one down to me. My first cigar in six months. We heard that when the people guarding us heard the American troops were coming. They moved out. The Hitler youth were assigned the job of keeping back the Americans, they fought down to rifle fire but were defeated.

The next day some people from Washington came to check out our camp and living conditions. They said these conditions are disgraceful, we will get you all out right away. We remained another week, then we were taken by truck to Ingolstad airfield which had been bombed in the past. It had some huge bomb craters. Around dusk we could see this twin engine plane making a run over the field, so we dropped down past the edge of the crater. We could hear our antiaircraft guns shooting at him. When he passed I said that is a British plane. He passed the field turned around and started making another run over the field. Our antiaircraft fire hit him and you could see smoke coming from the plane. Shortly we saw a single parachute open up. We heard later that the other person in the plane did not make it. They asked the survivor why were they flying over the field. He said the war is about over and we were just looking around. The next day a Stuka dive-bomber was coming in our direction. A lot of guys were yelling shoot him down. Some one else said he is dipping his wings, he wants to surrender, let him land. Well he landed okay and a lone aviator got out he surrendered. We thought we could search him and take his stuff like they did to us. Our MP's protected him and took him away.

The following day the c 47's came in, we were packed like sardines into the c 47's. The people in charge would not let us take everything we had with us. We were flown to France then driven to Camp Lucky Strike. Here we were given excellent food and vitamins until we put on some weight. When we were looking better, they told us we were going home. WE were driven to a dock and boarded a big ship. I believe it was the Argentina. I wound up on the bottom deck in the front of the ship. Our bunks were three high and I was assigned the top bunk. I could hear the waves crashing against the ship day and night. We had wonderful American Food, turkey, capons, steak, and ham and all kinds of deserts. The ocean was rough, the ship was rocking up and down, a lot of the guys got sick, I was okay, I ate almost every meal. I went up one day to look at the ocean, and I could see one minute the front of the ship was covered with water, the next minute the water was running off it. I went back down to my

bunk, most of the time we played cards to pass the time. One day I did not go for dinner, I was enjoying the card game. The waiter who normally served our table came down looking for me. He said we don't have too many people eating because of the rocking, you seem to enjoy the food. We want you to come and eat.

We docked in Boston, Mass. Then I was on a train back to my home state of New Jersey. When I got home my family said they expected me to be thin, I was not, thanks to the food in Camp Lucky Strike, and the wonderful food on the ship coming home. I must confess most of the information in this story is from notes that I kept in the German prison camps.

I found out later that our radio/gunner T/Sgt. Emile (Red) Freeman was killed on the Mission the Mersburg. I am sorry that happened.

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