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COMMEMORATIVE FEATURE

HMAS Armidale – a story of survival

Captain B. S. Swan, AM, RAN (Retd)

This is a story of an Australian corvette and her company who, while doing their job in the Timor Sea on 1 December 1942, quite unexpectedly found themselves in an extraordinary situation. It tells of their courage and tenacity against the odds and how these young men rose above themselves to survive the most harrowing 9-day ordeal.

HMAS *Armidale* (ship J240), a Bathurst-class corvette, was built at Mort's Dock, Sydney, and was commissioned on 11 June 1942. Following a work-up period, it was brought into operational service and commenced convoy escort duties around New Zealand and New Guinea.

Bathurst-class corvettes [displacement 650 tons; length 186 feet; beam 31 feet; draught 8.5 feet; triple expansion engines, which developed 2,000 horsepower; two propellers] could achieve a speed of 15 knots, if the wind and tide were favourable. Their armament was one 4-inch gun, which could not elevate above 45 degrees and was left over from the previous war; three Oerlikons, which fired a 20mm shell; and numerous machine guns. They could be fitted with depth charges if required. They would roll on wet grass, yet they were the work-horses on the Australian station, where more than 20 of them were engaged in a variety of work, from chasing submarines, to escorting convoys and transporting troops.

Timor Bound

Armidale was sent to Darwin and arrived on 7 November 1942, eleven months to the day after Pearl Harbour. She was ordered to proceed to Betano in East Timor on 29 November 1942, with Netherlands East Indies (NEI) troops and stores embarked.

Although East Timor was Portuguese territory and the Portuguese were neutral in World War II, Japan had occupied West Timor and, as the Portuguese would be unable to resist any Japanese occupation, co-operation was their best course. Australia, however, had army units known as Lancer Force (2/2nd Independent Company and 2/40th Battalion) in the East who, together with forces from the NEI Army (Indonesians with Dutch officers) and numerous civilians, had been driven out of the West.

HMAS *Voyager* of Scrap Iron Flotilla and Tobruk fame, was sent to Betano on 22 September 1942 with the 2/4th Independent Company who were to relieve the 2/2nd Company. Unfortunately, *Voyager* went aground in Betano Bay after the 2/4th Company disembarked and was destroyed. The situation then

arose that the 2/2nd Company and a host of NEI troops and civilians had to be evacuated from Betano.

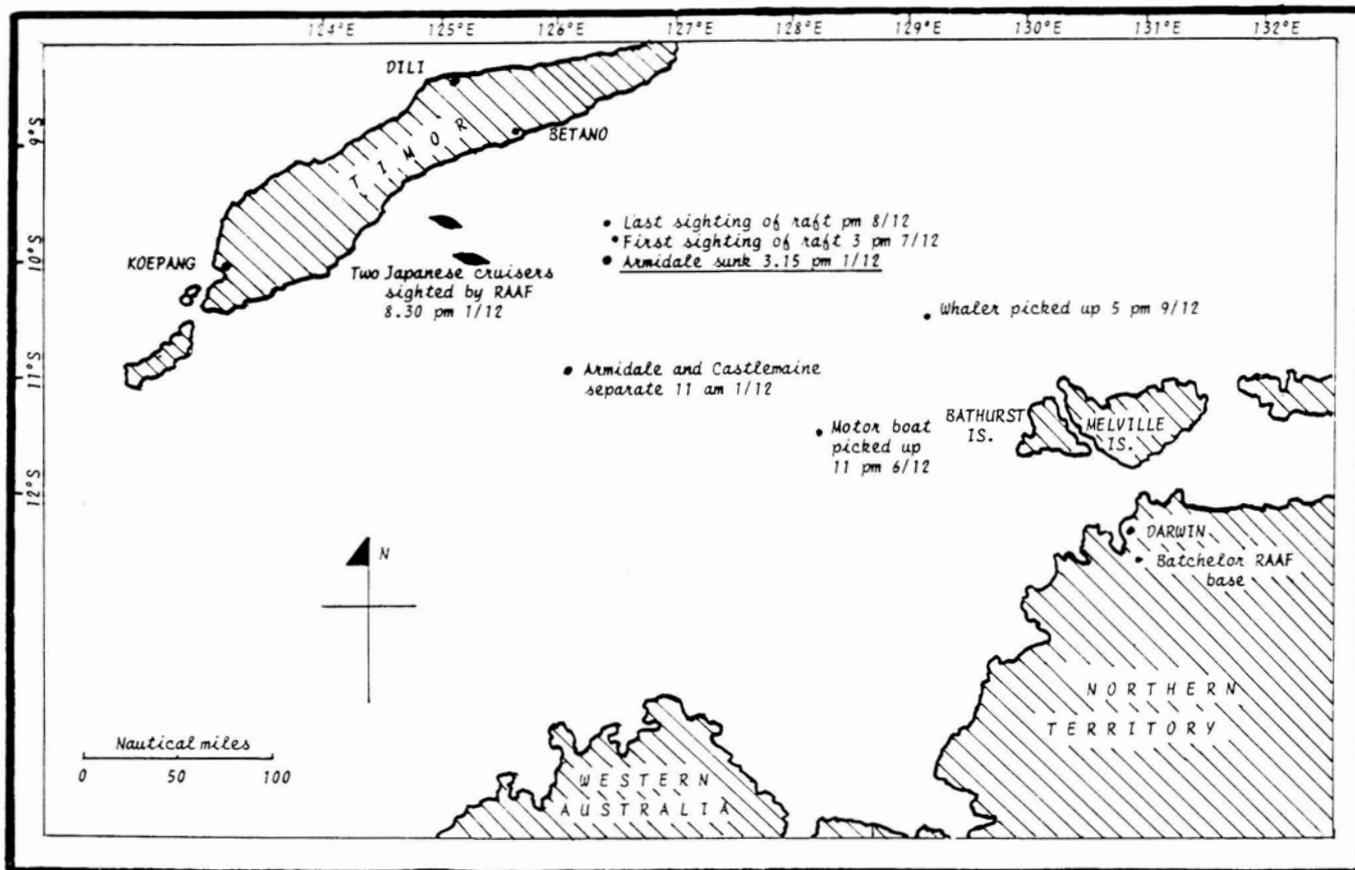
Thus, the purpose of *Armidale's* mission was, in company with her sister ship, HMAS *Castlemaine*, and an ex-government patrol boat, HMAS *Kuru*, to proceed from Darwin to Betano to evacuate some of the guerrilla force, Dutch troops and Portuguese women and children, and land the relief force. *Kuru* left Darwin the day before *Castlemaine* and *Armidale* and, despite harassment by enemy aircraft, made the rendezvous at Betano Bay on time. *Castlemaine* and *Armidale* were heavily attacked by bombers and had to steam away from Timor to avoid the aircraft.

Despite the absence of *Castlemaine* and *Armidale* in the bay, *Kuru* picked up women, children and some soldiers, and later met with *Castlemaine* and *Armidale* well off-shore to transfer passengers. *Castlemaine* took the women and children and, together with *Kuru*, headed for Darwin. *Armidale* with three Australian Imperial Force (AIF) soldiers, two Dutch officers and 61 troops of the NEI Army which she had embarked in Darwin, was ordered by the Naval Officer-In-Charge, Darwin¹, to head for Betano to complete the evacuation and re-supply mission.

***Armidale* is Sunk**

On 1 December, *Armidale* was on her way to Betano and, at 1515 hours, was attacked by nine bombers, three fighters and a float plane. After sustaining a number of near-misses from bombs, two torpedoes found their mark, both hitting on the port side. The first hit the aft mess deck where the NEI soldiers were, killing a great many of them. A piece of shrapnel the size of a bucket tore through the radio office and ripped the transmitting and receiving sets to pieces. The second torpedo hit between the boiler room and the engine room, breaking the ship's back. A bomb landed in the water on the starboard side and blew a large hole in the hull. The ship listed heavily to port. The order was given to abandon the ship, which was sinking fast. As the survivors swam from the ship,

¹Commodore C. J. Pope, RAN



Sketch map of the Timor Sea showing where the actions took place (from Walker 1990).

they were deliberately machine-gunned in the water by the fighters.

Step forward one Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean². Not yet 19-years-old, Sheean, a Tasmanian, made his way to the ship's side in readiness to jump in when he saw his mates in the water being gunned down. Uninjured at this stage, Sheean returned to his Oerlikon rather than take his chances in the water. Just getting back some 10 meters through the bullets raining down upon the ship was in itself no mean feat. He strapped himself into the gun and commenced to fire, pouring a stream of bullets at the diving fighters and sending one Zero cart-wheeling into the sea. Another fighter came in with guns blazing and slashed Sheean's chest and back open. Still he kept firing, forcing some of the diving planes to sheer away from the ship and, therefore, the swimmers in the water.

With water lapping around his feet, Sheean still kept firing. The men in the water gasped in amazement as the blood-soaked youngster wheeled his gun from one target to another, his powerless legs dragging on the deck. Then came the most incredible

sight of all. As the ship dipped under the water, Sheean kept firing his gun with bullets arcing up until the ship was out of sight. The ship was gone and so was Sheean.

Survival at Sea – Day One

Once the fighters left the area, those men in the water, having silently thanked Sheean for saving their lives, set about trying to assess their plight. They counted themselves fortunate that, before leaving Darwin, one of the older sailors, Leading Seaman "Bumble" Bool, had asked anyone going ashore to bring back some timber, if they saw any lying around. Consequently, all sorts of planks and baulks of timber were brought back to the ship. The timber was then lashed to the guard rails in such a manner that it could be easily released. So it was that there was plenty of flotsam in the vicinity of the swimmers.

Armidale carried two boats (a whaler and a motor-boat) and several carley floats. The 27-foot whaler had been on the starboard side of the ship and was riddled with holes. It assumed neutral buoyancy after the ship sank and was about three feet under the water. The 17½-foot motor-boat, although receiving some damage, had released itself from its davits and was floating.

²Ordinary Seaman Edward Sheean, RANR

Everyone in the water was covered with black furnace fuel oil, which kept coming to the surface. Many of the men were wounded and were being supported by their mates and their inflatable life jackets. Others were clearly dead. To make matters worse, sharks and deadly sea snakes started to come around.

It was late afternoon and the sea was calm – just like a mirror; not a breath of wind and the sun glowing like fire. Groups of men gathered together in the water as everyone tried to comprehend their situation. All that was left of HMAS *Armidale* was what they could see floating on the surface. It took two hours for the groups of men to gather around the motor boat. They dragged with them any flotsam they could find. Ten of *Armidale's* crew had been killed and 17 wounded; and 37 of the NEI soldiers had been killed. In the water were 102 men – 73 of *Armidale's* crew, three AIF soldiers, two Dutch army officers and 24 NEI troops.

The total supplies of food and water to sustain these 102 men were: one barrico (15 litres) of water; one lemonade bottle filled with water; one case of unsweetened condensed milk; one case of bully beef; and two tins of fruit. They did not have any form of shelter from the blazing sun. They had no medical supplies, no radio, and, in the case of the *Armidale* men, no weapons. The NEI soldiers were armed with knives and pistols – a situation which the Australian sailors noted with some concern.

The survivors were 110 km from the enemy-held coast of Timor; 400 km from Bathurst Island, the nearest Australian shore; and 470 km from Darwin. The motor-boat had petrol sufficient to take it only 160 km – if they could get the waterlogged 10-horsepower, four-cylinder Ford marine engine to start.

However, confidence was high that they would be picked up the next day because Darwin would realize that something had happened once the flow of signals from *Armidale* had ceased. They did not know that two Japanese cruisers were in the Timor area (Koepang) and, as a consequence, Darwin had ordered a complete radio silence. The headquarters assumed that *Armidale* was merely obeying the radio silence that had been ordered. Darwin would have assumed that had *Armidale* been sunk that it would have signalled accordingly. The last signal from the ship merely said that they were being attacked by aircraft.

As it happened, at 1900 hours the next day (Wednesday, 2 December 1942), the Naval Officer-In-Charge sent a signal to *Armidale* requesting position, course and speed. It was only when no reply was received that the search began.

Meanwhile, back in the water, the ship's Captain, Lieutenant-Commander David Richards³, had the wounded men placed in the motor boat and the carley float, and got the men to make rafts out of the driftwood and the two minesweeping floats. They had very little rope, so they unravelled the strands of what rope they did have. Not everyone could fit on the improvised rafts and those men still in the water clung onto the sides, well aware that they could be taken by a shark at any moment. Shark fins broke the mirror-smooth water as sharks circled the raft. Sea snakes up to 2 meters in length were just as frightening. Throughout the night the swimmers could hear the rustle of water as another of their number fell prey to the sharks.

Their first day in the water had ended in misery but rescue was surely at hand?

Survival at Sea – Day Two

As the sun came up on day two, the men were too dazed to do much about protection from its burning rays. Those that could tore off pieces of clothing and had a scarf for their head. But their sense of humour was still there. Breakfast comprised of a spoonful of bully beef and a sip of water as Stoker Phil Osborn of Adelaide celebrated his 21st birthday.

The captain now had to wrestle with a most difficult decision. He realized that Darwin probably did not know that they had been sunk and so they would have to help themselves. He knew that they were 250 km from the area regularly searched by reconnaissance planes. The obvious course of action was to load the motor boat with as many injured and some uninjured men (these would have to row when the petrol engine ran out of fuel), and head towards Darwin. Richards called the men to him and outlined his plan and, to a man, they agreed.

With Richards as the only uninjured officer who could navigate, some 22 souls were placed in the motor-boat. It was heavily overcrowded but, with some of the badly wounded in a dreadful state, there would obviously be more room soon. And so it was that they commenced rowing the motor-boat to Darwin. That afternoon a young sailor, barely 19, died from the nine bullets in his chest and stomach. After a short service for their departed mate, one of the engine-room sailors tried to get the boat's engine going. But as darkness fell, he could not make it work.

As Day Two began, the rowers had pulled the motor-boat out of sight of the raft and floats. Lieutenant Palmer⁴, as the senior officer in the water

³Lieutenant-Commander D. H. Richards, RANR(S), Commanding Officer, HMAS *Armidale*

⁴Lieutenant Lloyd Palmer, RANR, Gunnery Officer, HMAS *Armidale*

HMAS *Armidale* about to berth at Port Moresby in 1942
after ferrying troops from Australia
(Australian War Memorial negative 26612)



near the raft, sensed the anxiety as the motor boat became a speck on their limited horizon. Some men trod water above the sunken whaler; others clung onto the side of the raft, while the lucky ones in the raft were only waist deep in the sea.

Friction soon began between the Australians and the Dutch and Javanese troops. The NEI soldiers refused to take their turn in the water and to give those in the water, including the wounded, a rest from treading water. The language barrier added to the tension. The raft kept breaking up, because of the lack of twine. That night one of the NEI troops died from a suspected sea snake bite. After 1½ days in the water and two more deaths, nerves were jaded!

Survival at Sea – Day Three

On Day Three, Darwin suspected, for the first time, that something was wrong and an air search was initiated. In the motor-boat, there had not been any sleep for its motley crew and, at daylight, the business of reassembling the motor recommenced. They tried and tried to get the motor going until the crank handle broke. Then, by wrapping a piece of rope around the fly-wheel and giving an almighty pull, the motor spluttered into life.

Now, with a greater speed through the water, holes in the hull, made by machine-gun bullets, took in water. Pieces of clothing were used to stem the

flow and bailing was a constant requirement. Even with his jaw shattered, the smell from which was making others sick, one sailor insisted on taking his turn to bale.

Back at the rafts, things were no better. After so long in the water, the men's skin was hypersensitive. The slightest bump caused untold agony. Breakfast consisted of a teaspoon of bully beef and a teaspoon of water. The Australians decided to give the carley float to the NEI soldiers and gather together on their own. The float was just big enough for the NEI lads, although it needed constant repair. Dead bodies seemed to hang around the gathered men and, every now and then, one would disappear in a flurry of splashing as another shark struck.

The Australians had now been in the water for more than 50 hours; their arms were puffing up and their skin was cracking. Blood oozed out from the cracks and their arms stung from the salt water. The oil that clogged their hair had gone hard, their scalps were itching and they felt as if they were on fire. Hallucinations were common. During the night sleep attacked them and, if they fell asleep, their head would hit the water and wake them up.

Survival at Sea – Day Four

On Day Four, the motor-boat engine pattered along sweetly, but that was the only good news for the

21 men cramped into the boat – no rescuer in sight and only a piece of carrot for breakfast. A flying fish landed in the boat and was promptly cut into 21 pieces. It tasted terrible, but at least it was nourishing.

About mid-day, the motor ran out of petrol and died. The engine-room artificer took the carburettor off, poured oil into the engine and ran it as a diesel for an hour or so. Then it stopped for good and the rowers took over.

A slight breeze sprung up so a make-shift sail of overalls was hoisted to help power the craft along. That night another one of the NEI soldiers died. The motor's battery was tied to his feet and he was eased over the side.

Back at the raft things were going from bad to worse. More men had disappeared during the night; breakfast was miniscule portions of bully beef and water and there was no rescue in sight. The men had been in the water for over 68 hours and, prior to the sinking, they had been at action stations non-stop for two days. They were absolutely spent of energy, tired, sore and hurting. But they were very determined.

They decided to try to re-float the whaler. Whilst the boat had been peppered with machine gun fire, their biggest concern was a hole 25 cm x 30 cm in a vital position near the stern. They had a make-shift raft built around the two Para-vanes used for mine sweeping. By gathering all the men around the submerged boat, they somehow managed to force the raft under the boat's stern and, when they jumped off the raft, the boat's stern floated. Their next task was to try to cover the large hole. They found a piece of canvas large enough for the job, but the problem was how to fix it in position. Using a sailor's knife, they removed screws from fittings within the boat which were no longer required and used them to secure the canvas in position. Imagine not only the state of the men but trying to insert screws into timber without a drill, using a knife and with hands which were like pieces of blubber. But they did it!

The next stage was to get the water out of the boat and they achieved this by placing the two smallest men inside the boat. The remainder of the men blew their May Wests up as much as they could, gathered around the gunwale, and lifted. Wonder of wonders, the gunwale came just above the water. After bailing like crazy, the whaler floated on its own after 24 hours of consolidated, and at times, frantic effort. They had achieved the impossible and now at least they were dry and safe from sharks and snakes.

Survival at Sea – Day Five

Day Five brought no relief to the inhabitants of the motor-boat. No rescue was in sight; food and water were almost non-existent; and morale was at rock bottom. They had rowed all night and Lieutenant-Commander Richards calculated that they were still

160 km from Darwin. The sea was like glass; the sun shone like a furnace; and the overalls in the sail flapped limply.

Someone said that they heard an aircraft and an RAAF Hudson flew into view at 1015 hours. It dropped tins of water, but these broke open so it parachuted some down, together with a tin of asparagus and the crew's own lunches – sandwiches which landed in the water. They were the best sandwiches that the sailors had ever tasted, even though they were soaked in salt water!

The aircraft signalled Darwin and HMAS *Kalgoorlie* was immediately dispatched at full speed. Two more aircraft came later that day and they too dropped food, water and a note saying that a ship was on the way.

Back at the whaler, things were not good at all. The men had been in the water for over 90 hours. Food, water and morale were at the lowest ebb and the physical and mental state of the men was of great concern. Lieutenant Palmer decided to separate from the men in the raft and row the whaler towards Darwin. The whaler contained 25 sailors and 3 AIF soldiers in an 8-meter patched-up boat where, if a decent wind sprung up, it would have shattered the craft. There was no more chance of the whaler being picked up than the raft, but at least it gave the men something to do. The raft party, under the command of Sub-Lieutenant Jim Buckland⁵, consisted of 27 unarmed Australian sailors and 20 armed NEI troops. It was left with as much food and water as could be spared.

Rowing in relays the whaler made good progress, but had a lot of trouble staying on the course indicated by a tiny compass taken from a dead soldier. With a lot of initiative and a very sharp knife, they soon made a rudder. When a slight breeze sprang up during the afternoon, they quickly tied three pairs of overalls to the boat hook to form a jury-rig sail. That evening they had their first meal since leaving the raft – one teaspoon of unsweetened condensed milk. All that remained were two tins of bully beef. This was their fifth night without sleep and they had reached a stage of exhaustion where sleep was impossible.

Survival at Sea – Day Six

At the start of Day Six, *Kalgoorlie* was at the area where the motor boat had been sighted by the aircraft, but nothing could be seen. It was not until 1130 hours that the masts of a ship were seen by the motor-boat. But *Kalgoorlie* had also been sighted by a Japanese plane, so rather than lead the enemy to the helpless men in the motor-boat, the ship headed

⁵Sub-Lieutenant Jim Buckland, RANVR, a former student of The King's School, Parramatta

away. Just as well, because that afternoon the Japanese attacked the ship. Fortunately, the nearest bomb fell a meter or so from the ship.

Another RAAF aircraft sighted the motor-boat that evening and signalled that *Kalgoorlie* was on the way. Later, to show the ship their location, the motor-boat crew set fire to some paper and packaging. Then a booming voice came over a loud speaker and said: "Put that bloody fire out or we'll leave you there." As *Kalgoorlie* edged alongside, it was obvious that the men in the motor-boat did not have the energy to climb the ladder on the ship's side. Crew from the ship had to get down into the boat and very gently help these injured and exhausted men to safety.

Kalgoorlie's captain was then faced with an agonizing decision: should he take these men back to Darwin or steam 300 km to rescue the remaining survivors. He reasoned that it would be suicidal for him to pick up the others as one ship had already been sunk in that area, the Japanese knew where he was and a RAAF flying boat could pick them up far quicker than he could. He returned to Darwin.

For the 29 men in the whaler, Day Six brought no relief. They were thirsty, so very thirsty. They even sucked buttons to try to generate some saliva. The sea remained glassy and the sun was intense. There was no rain. Their mid-day meal consisted of a piece of bully beef as big as your thumb nail. Signalman George Devlin reckoned that it was alright for everyone else, but as it was his 21st birthday, he should have a proper celebration. Lieutenant Palmer told him and any other Melbourne blokes that, if they got out of this lot, he would buy them all lunch at the Menzies. As things turned out he was as good as his word.

Survival at Sea – Days Seven and Eight

Day Seven for the men in the whaler was terrible. Overnight, someone had stolen what little water remained and they had to resort to drinking their own urine. Palmer decided not to issue any bully beef because it had too much salt in it. By nightfall, they were in a crazed state.

In the morning of Day Eight, things were a whole lot worse. With little or no sleep, precious little food and no water, their future was indeed bleak. The rowers could hardly lift their paddles and no rescuer was in sight, so Palmer decided to issue the last of the bully beef. Finally, it began to rain. They collected as much water as they could and licked every last drop of water off the boat and even the backs of the men near them.

The water changed everything and gave them a renewed spirit. Then one sailor said that he could hear a plane; then another sailor joined him, and another. A Catalina flying boat came into view and dropped a blanket containing a note which said: "Your

captain is safe. We have found the raft and dropped them food and water; and are now returning to Darwin to send a ship for you."

Rescue – Day Nine

Another anxious night went by, but at 0900 hours the next day, a squadron of Hudson bombers (13 Squadron) led by Squadron Leader Jock Whyte, hove into view. They circled dropping parcels of food and water. They also dropped a note saying: "Merry Christmas boys. Thirteen Squadron takes its hat off to you." Another note said that a ship would pick them up in three hours. It was *Kalgoorlie* again.

When she came alongside, the sailors, who were unrecognizable even to those they knew in *Kalgoorlie's* crew, were helped onboard, one poor soul losing the skin off his arm in the process. When the survivors were safely onboard they tried to hoist the whaler out of the water but it broke apart. How slender had their life support been!

Despite searching the area where the raft was last sighted, neither the men nor the raft was ever seen again. One may speculate that they were taken by the Japanese, but no one really knows.

Conclusion

This rescue was truly marvellous and was a credit to everyone involved. The survivors, though, were treated shamefully when they reached Darwin.

Poor rationale had led to HMAS *Armidale* being sent to occupied Timor and it resulted in 40 Australian naval personnel (two officers and 38 sailors) losing their lives out of *Armidale's* crew of 83 (five officers and 78 sailors). Of the NEI troops evacuated from Timor, two officers and 58 soldiers died.

Teddy Sheean was mentioned in dispatches for his efforts. In other circumstances and in other navies, he would have been awarded the Victoria Cross. His actions, which led to his own death, saved many lives. Belatedly, the Navy recognized his valour by naming a Collins-class submarine, HMAS *Sheean*, in his honour. Other ships and submarines have been named after officers, but this was the first warship to be named after a sailor. He was not ordinary in the normal sense of the word, he was an extraordinary seaman.

As a final recognition of HMAS *Armidale* and her crew, the current generation of Australian naval patrol boats has been named the *Armidale* class.

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