

No. 331 (RCAF) Wing Tunisia 1943

In 1942, following Allied victories in North Africa, the Royal Air Force created **No. 205 (Medium Bomber) Group** within the Allied Mediterranean Command; operating out of bases in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. The objective of No. 205 Group was '*strategic and tactical bombing operations on targets in Sicily, Italy, the Balkans, and southern France*'. The Group was also tasked with *minelaying; supplying partisan operations; and support of Allied troops in ground combat in Sicily and Italy*.

Most of the Squadrons on strength of No. 205 Group were Royal Air Force, but in June 1943, three RCAF Squadrons were sent from England to Tunisia to support '*Operation Husky*' - the invasion of Sicily on July 9th, 1943. An **RCAF Bomber Wing – No. 331**, was created within No. 205 Group, with **RCAF Squadrons Nos. 420, 424, and 425**.

With strong support from A/M Harold Edwards, the Air Officer Commanding, RCAF Overseas (HQ London), No. 331 (Medium Bomber) RCAF Wing was formed at West Kirby, Cheshire, England on 7 May 1943; and on 16 May, 1943 HQ staff embarked by sea for Algeria, and Tunisia. The Commanding Officer of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing from May 1st to November 16th, 1943 was G/C C.R. Dunlap (RCAF).

By June of 1943, most RAF and RCAF Bomber Squadrons in England were in the process of converting to *Halifax* and/or *Lancaster* aircraft, but the three Squadrons designated for No. 331 (RCAF) Wing were still flying *Wellington B.Mk.III* aircraft. The three RCAF Squadrons were then re-equipped with *Wellington B.Mk.X (Tropical)* aircraft for the mission to North Africa.



The Vickers-Armstrong 'Wellington' B.Mk.X was the final development of that airframe. Fitted with Bristol 'Hercules' XVIII, air cooled engines, and light metal alloy construction. Maximum speed of the B.Mk.X was 255 mph, and cruising speed 205 mph. Range was 1,500 miles. Max T.O.W. 34,000, with a bomb load of 8,000 lbs.

The ground and support staff of all three RCAF Squadrons and the personnel of No. 331 Wing Headquarters, all sailed from England on two ships – SS. *Duchess of York*, and SS *Samaria* on May 16th, 1943. The ships arrived safely at Algiers, North Africa on May 27th, 1943.

The airfields assigned to No. 331 Wing in Tunisia (Zina airfield and Pavillier airfield) were still being prepared by the United States Army Engineer Corps, and so were not available until mid-June, 1943. All the Squadron ground crew remained at Algiers for two weeks, before assignment to airfields at Zina, and Pavillier, in Karouan Province.

The Wellington B.Mk.X aircraft of all three Squadrons were flown from England to Algeria, via Gibraltar - in early June of 1943. Both No. 420 and No. 425 Squadrons lost aircraft to enemy action over the Bay of Biscay enroute to Gibraltar. On the arrival of the aircraft in Algeria, it was discovered that the airfields were not yet ready, and the air crew and aircraft of all three Squadrons were held at Telergma airfield, Algeria until mid-June of 1943.



Telergma Airport, Algeria – a modern photo (Google Earth)

No. 331 (RCAF) Wing Headquarters was established at Zina airfield in Karouan Province, Tunisia on June 15th 1943, and the Wing was declared 'operational' on 26th June, 1943. The Wing HQ remained at Zina until September 30th, when all three Squadrons were relocated to Hani East Landing Ground, Tunisia.

The three Squadrons of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing and were then fully engaged in bombing operations across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy, until October 5th, 1943.

The 'Order of Battle' for No. 331 (RCAF) Wing in North Africa consisted of four phases:

1. June 26th to July 9th, 1943: Pre-invasion bombing of targets in Sicily.
2. July 10th, to August 17th, 1943: Support of Allied Ground Forces in Sicily.
3. August 18th to September 2nd, 1943: Pre-invasion bombing of targets in Italy.
4. September 3rd, to October 6th, 1943: Support of Allied Ground Forces in Italy.

The first Mission of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing was a nocturnal bombing operation on June 26th/27th, 1943. Five Wellington B.Mk.X aircraft of No.420 Squadron, and Ten of No. 425 Squadron bombed airfields around *Sciacca, Sicily*. One aircraft of No. 425 Squadron did not return from the mission.

Operating conditions in Tunisia were very challenging. The RCAF Squadrons operated from remote, hastily prepared airfields – with no paved runways or permanent structures. Personnel experienced high daytime temperatures; blowing sand on those occasions that the strong dry, hot, and sand-laden 'Sirrocco' winds blew north from the Sahara Desert; and freezing temperatures at night.

Maintaining aircraft was difficult in the extreme; particularly as the desert conditions played havoc with aircraft engines. All ranks lived in tents, and were subject to plagues of flies - day and night. There were no off-duty amenities - such as 'pub's, and dances - that were known in England.

The majority of the operational bombing missions carried out by No. 331 Wing were 'nocturnal', over the Mediterranean Sea to Sicily and Italy, and with no fighter escort. Navigation to targets, and in particular the return flight to bases in Tunisia - was extremely difficult and hazardous. Aircraft of No. 331 Wing bombed targets in Italy as far north as Grosseto, on the Tyrrhenian Sea half-way between Rome and Pisa, , and dropped leaflets on the city of Rome itself – all missions at maximum range.

As the Allied ground battle in Italy moved further north on the Peninsula during early September of 1943, some RAF units of No.205 Bomber Group were relocated from North Africa to airfields around the city of Foggia in southeast Italy. The RAF units were joined there by Squadrons of the USAAF, and the bomb support of Allied ground operations intensified, as airfields were located much closer to areas of combat.



'Theatre of Operations' of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing in the summer of 1943.

The RCAF Squadrons were based near the city of Qairouan, Tunisia, in the lower left corner of the map. No.331 (RCAF) Wing aircraft bombed targets in Sicily, Sardinia, and the Italian mainland.

Royal Air Force Bomber Command had agreed in May, 1943 that No. 331 (RCAF) Wing would be assigned to the Mediterranean for the summer months, and that the 3 RCAF Squadrons would return to No. 6 (RCAF) Group in England by September of 1943. That time period had passed in mid September. The wet and cold winter weather conditions that were expected in North Africa from October, 1943 did not bode well for continued 'Wellington' operations from bare dirt airfields, and a decision was made to terminate the operations of the Wing; and return the three RCAF Squadrons to England.

The last Mission of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing was on 5 October 1943; twenty-one 'Wellington' B.Mk.X Aircraft of No. 424 and No. 425 Squadrons bombed the airfield at Grosseto, Italy – half-way between Rome and Pisa.

The Air Crew and the 'Wellington' aircraft of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing carried out more than 2,000 bombing missions during the four months of the summer of 1943, dropping nearly 4,000 tons of bombs – and surprisingly, ten million leaflets encouraging Italian capitulation.

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Satellite map of northeast Tunisia – showing the three airfields where Squadrons of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing were based; near the city of **Kairouan**, The airfields were **Pavillier**, **Zina**, and **Hani East** – all about 15 to 25 km from Kairouan City. In 2010, there were no visible remains of any of the three airfields. The distance from Kairouan, north to Tunis is approximately 180 km.

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On the 16th and 18th of October, 1943 - No. 331 Wing HQ personnel and the all the Ground and Air Crew of No. 420, No. 424, and No. 425 Squadrons, left the *Hani East airfield* by train. All

'Wellington' aircraft were left at Hani East airfield, to be taken over by RAF units. The personnel sailed from Algiers on the SS '*Samaria*' in late October, and arrived in England on November 6th, 1943.



No. 331 (RCAF) Wing was disbanded at Air Station Dishforth, Yorkshire, England on December 18th, 1943.

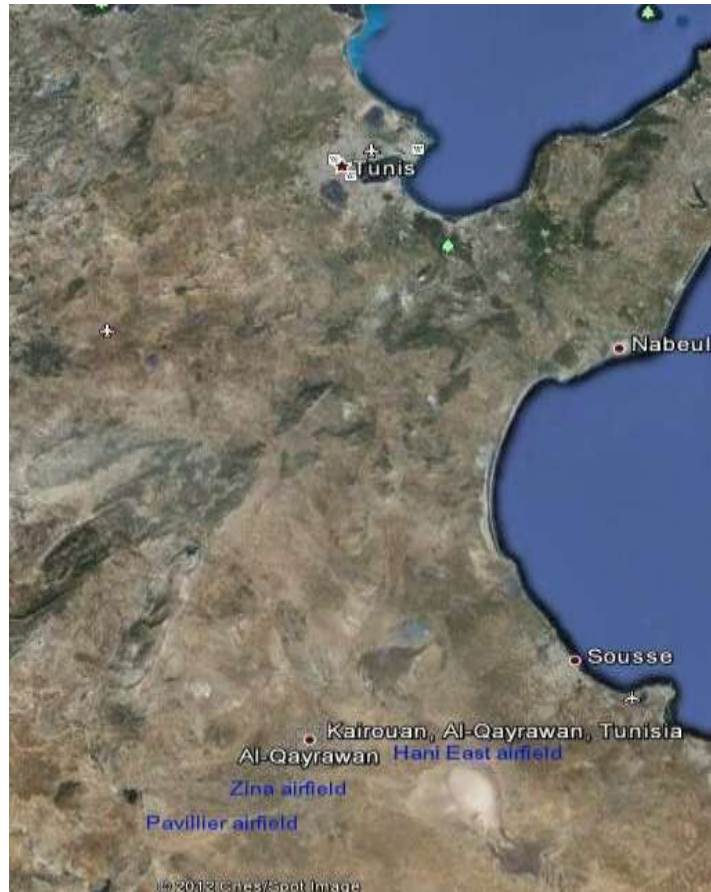
Sources/References:

<http://www.amazon.ca/Bombers-Over-Sand-Snow-Group/dp/1848845286>

'RCAF Squadrons & Aircraft' – Kostenuk and Griffin

Google Earth – Mediterranean & Tunisia

<http://manitobamilitaryaviationmuseum.com>



No. 420 (Snowy Owl) Squadron RCAF

Tunisia, 1943

From January 1st, 1943 to late April 1943, No. 420 (RCAF) Squadron was Operational in No. 6 (RCAF) Group; from the Air Station of Middleton St. George, Durham, England – with *Wellington B.Mk.III* aircraft. In early May, 1943 the Squadron was re-assigned as part of a new No. 331 (RCAF) Wing, and began preparations for a long-distance move to Tunisia, North Africa. A new Commanding Officer came to No. 420 Squadron in mid-April of 1943 - W/C D. McIntosh (Cdn/RAF) – who took the Squadron to Tunisia, and back to England, and remained as C.O. until April of 1944.



On May 16th, 1943 – Ground Crew and Support Staff of No. 420 Squadron left Middleton St. George, for embarkation by sea to Tunisia; and arrived in Algeria in early June of 1943. As the airfield assigned to the Squadron was still being carved out of the desert, the Squadron Ground personnel remained at Algiers for two further weeks.

The Squadron was re-equipped in early May, 1943 with *Wellington B.Mk.X* aircraft that were fitted for tropical conditions – additional air filters, etc. No. 420 Squadron aircraft then left Middleton St. George on June 5th, 1943; and after re-fueling in southwest England, flew over the Bay of Biscay, past the coast of Portugal, to Gibraltar.

(Two aircraft were shot down by German Fighter aircraft over the Bay of Biscay, fourteen crew members listed as 'missing in action').



On arrival in Algeria on June 8th, 1943, the aircraft and air crew were held at 'Telergma' airfield until the airfield at Zina, in the Province of Kairouan, Tunisia was completed.

RCAF Air Crew –accommodation and dining facilities - Tunisia 1943

No. 420 Squadron RCAF was officially 'on station' at Zina Airfield, Tunisia on June 19th, 1943; and one week later - on

June 26/27, 1943 - participated in the first No. 331 (RCAF) Wing, bombing operation to Sicily. The Squadron continued with operations to targets in Sicily – mainly seaports, until the Allied forces had fully occupied that Island. The Squadron was then engaged in (mainly nocturnal) bombing operations of targets on the Italian Peninsula.

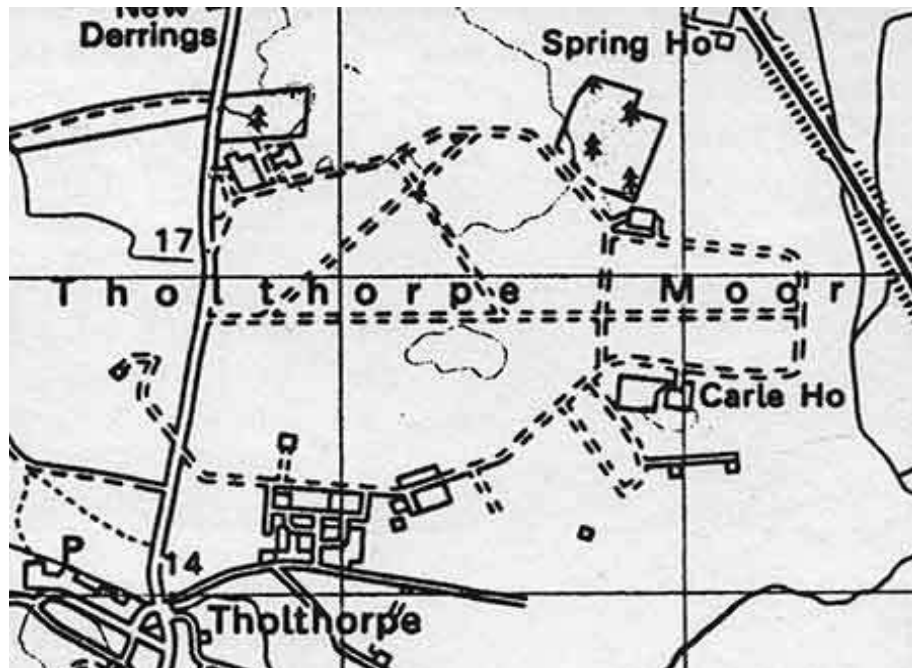
On 29 September 1943, No. 420 Squadron was moved to *Hani East Landing Ground*, Kairouan, Tunisia. – And remained in operations over the Mediterranean Sea to targets in Italy, until October 5th, 1943.

All personnel of No. 420 Squadron, Ground and Air – returned to England by sea from October 17th to November 5th, 1943 – leaving all their Wellington B.Mk.X aircraft in Tunisia for RAF Squadrons. The four months of continuous operations in desert conditions had taken a heavy toll on the serviceability of the ‘Wellingtons’, and a long, dangerous return flight to England in October was not practical. In any event, No. 420 Squadron was scheduled to convert to Halifax aircraft on return to England.

No. 420 Squadron was assigned to Dalton Air Station, No. 61 Training Base, No. 6 (RCAF) Group, from 6 November 1943 to 11 December 1943, where the Squadron completed the conversion to Halifax B.Mk.III aircraft.

On December 12th, 1943, No. 420 Squadron was transferred to Air Station Tholthorpe, Yorks., No. 62 Base, No. 6 (RCAF) Group Bomber Command; converting to Lancaster B.Mk.X aircraft in May, 1945.

The Squadron flew their Lancaster B.Mk.X aircraft back to Canada in the summer of 1945, in preparation for Pacific operations with “Tiger Force”, but with the end of hostilities in August 1945, the Squadron was disbanded.



No. 420 ‘Snowy Owl’ Squadron RCAF was disbanded at Debert, NS Canada on September 15th, 1945

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No. 424 (Tiger) Squadron RCAF

Tunisia, 1943

No. 424 Squadron RCAF was transferred three times in the first few months of 1943. The Unit began the year at Topcliffe, then to Leeming for less than a month in early April on Operations with Wellington B.Mk.III aircraft. On May 3, 1943 No.424 went to Dalton, No. 61 Training Base, No. 6 RCAF Group. The Squadron moved to Dalton to re-equip with Wellington B.Mk.X aircraft, and prepare for a transfer to North Africa, with No. 331 (RCAF) Medium Bomber Wing.



On May 16th, 1943 all No. 424 Squadron, Ground Crew and Support Personnel embarked from England, enroute by sea to Algeria; arriving at Algiers on May 24th, 1943. All personnel were then held at Algiers for two weeks, until the airfield at Pavillier, Kairouan Province, Tunisia had been constructed and stocked.

The new Squadron aircraft; Wellington B.Mk.X (Tropical), departed Dalton on 5 June 1943; refueled in southwest England and in Gibraltar, and arrived safely in Algeria on June 8th 1943. All Ground personnel then travelled by rail, and by road convoy to the airfield at Pavillier – located about 25 km southwest of the city of Kairouan, Tunisia.

No. 424 Squadron was declared operational at Pavillier on June 26th, 1943 – remaining there until moved to Hani East airfield, Karouan, Tunisia on September 30th, 1943.

The Squadron flew operational missions to targets in Sicily from airfields in Tunisia, in support of 'Operation Husky' – the Allied invasion of that island on July 10th; and to targets in Italy until October 6th, 1943. On October 18, 1943 all Ground and Air Personnel returned to Algeria, and sailed back to England (minus all Wellington aircraft,

that were left in Tunisia) – arriving at Liverpool on November 5th, 1943.



Vickers-Armstrong 'Wellington' B.Mk.X
Aircraft No. LN423 - Code QB+S
No. 424 Sqdn, RCAF
Kairouan/Pavillier, Tunisia - July 1943

*Wellington
B.Mk.X aircraft –
No.424 Squadron
RCAF. Bomb
Aimer: Neil
Hamilton - author
of "Wings of
Courage"*

*(1/72 scale model
– W. Cameron)*

No. 424 Squadron Commanding Officers: (During No. 331 RCAF Wing).

- 17 April 1943 to 2 October, 1943 – Wing Commander G.A. Roy, DFC.
- 3 October 1943 to 29 November, 1943 – Wing Commander J.P. McCarthy.

On return to England on November 6th 1943., No. 424 Squadron RCAF was based at Skipton-on-Swale, No. 63 Base, No. 6 RCAF Group, where it completed the conversion to Halifax B.Mk.III aircraft in December 1943, and resumed bombing operations to target on the European Continent.

The Squadron converted to Lancaster B.Mk.I and III aircraft in January of 1945, and remained at Skipton-on-Swale to the end of the War in Europe. After VE-Day in May of 1945 No. 424 Squadron participated in the repatriation of Allied Service Men from Italy to the United Kingdom (with No.1 Group RAF command).



No. 424 'Tiger' Squadron RCAF disbanded at Skipton-on-Swale on October 15th, 1945

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No. 425 (*Alouette*) Squadron RCAF

Tunisia, 1943

No. 425 Squadron RCAF was based at Dishforth Air Station, Yorkshire, England – from January 1st to May 15th, 1943 – on bombing operations to targets in Northern Europe with ‘Wellington’, B.Mk.III aircraft. In the first weeks of May the Squadron began preparations for a transfer to North Africa, as part of a new No. 331 (RCAF) Medium Bomber Wing – within No. 205 Group, Allied Mediterranean Command.



The Squadron was re-equipped with new Vickers-Armstrong ‘Wellington’ B.Mk.X (Tropicalized), and all Ground and Support personnel departed by ship for Algeria on May 16th, 1943, arriving in Algeria on May 27th, 1943.

The airfield assigned for No. 425 Squadron operations was not completed or provisioned on the arrival of the Ground Personnel in Algiers, and there was a two week ‘hold’ before they could proceed to the new airfield site in Tunisia

No. 425 Squadron ‘Wellington’ aircraft left Dishforth on June 7th, 1943 – and after fueling stops in southwest England flew non-stop to Gibraltar, avoiding the coasts of France and of neutral Portugal.

Unfortunately, German fighter aircraft intercepted some of the No.425 ‘Wellingtons’, and shot down aircraft HE268 over the Bay of Biscay. The seven man crew of the ‘Wellington’ did manage to bail out over Portuguese territory, and were interned. The remainder of the No. 425 aircraft arrived in Algiers on June 10th, 1943.

There was a one week ‘hold’ of the No. 425 Squadron aircraft on the airport at Telergma, near the city of Constantine, in Algeria. – due to the Zina airfield not yet completed. Ground crews and support personnel then travelled by train, and by road convoy with fuel tankers and other vehicles, and the aircraft were flown to Zina airfield, 15 km southwest of Kairouan, Tunisia – all arriving by June 15th, 1943.

No. 425 Squadron was declared ‘Operational’ at Zina airfield on June 23rd, 1943 and ten aircraft of the Squadron took part in the first Mission of No. 331 RCAF Wing on June 26th – a bombing raid on the port city of Sciacca, Sicily. One ‘Wellington’ did not return. After three months of flying bombing missions from Zina airfield to targets in Sicily and on the Italian peninsula, No. 425 Squadron was moved, along with the other two RCAF Squadrons of No. 331 (RCAF) Wing – to Hani East airfield, 25 km east of Kairouan – on September 30th, 1943.

All No. 331 (RCAF) Wing Operations were terminated on October 6th, 1943 – pending a transfer of the three bomber Squadrons back to No. 6 (RCAF) Group in Yorkshire, England.

All personnel of No. 425 Squadron – Ground and Air Crews – departed Hani East airfield in Tunisia on October 26th, 1943 and embarked by ship at Alger for return to England – arriving at Liverpool on November 5th, 1943.

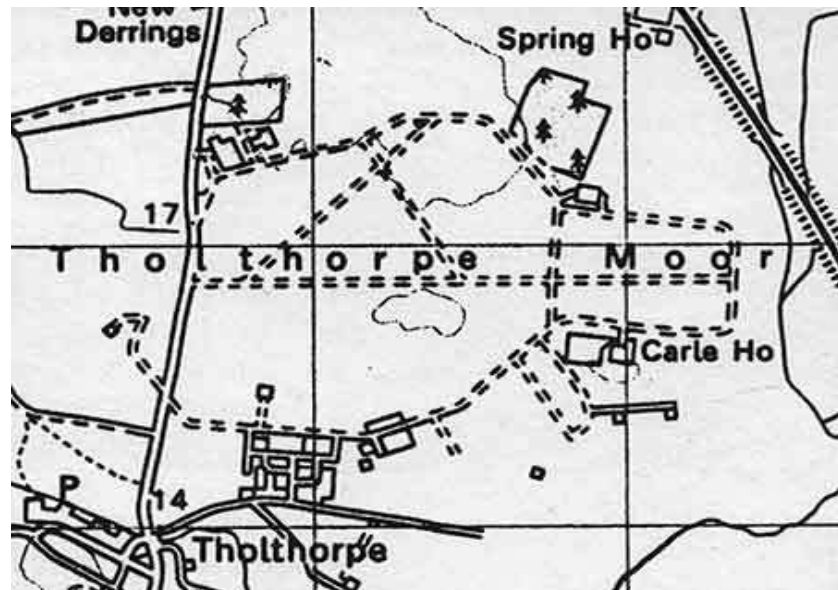


The 'Wellington' B.Mk.X aircraft of No. 425 Squadron all remained at the Hani East airfield in Tunisia, destined for service with other RAF Units if required.

Nose Art:
Wellington Mk.X- HE457
"The Fiery Queen"
No.425 Squadron
Zina, Tunisia – July 1943.
(by J. Ferguson)

No. 425 Squadron returned to Dishforth, Yorkshire - No. 61 Training Base, No. 6 (RCAF) Group - the Air Station from which it had departed in May, 1943. The Squadron then proceeded on conversion to Halifax B.Mk.III aircraft, from November 6th to December 9th, 1943.

After conversion to the Halifax B.Mk.III, the Squadron became 'Operational' again at Tholthorpe, Yorks., Air Station on December 10th, 1943, and remained at Tholthorpe until June 12th, 1945. No. 425 Squadron converted to Lancaster B.Mk.X aircraft in May 1945, but flew no bombing operations with that aircraft type. On June 13th, 1945 flew the Lancaster Mk.X aircraft back to Canada to be part of the proposed RAF 'Tiger Force'.



- ** Commanding Officers of No. 425 'Alouette' Squadron – in Tunisia, 1943.
- 25 June 1942 to 30 September 1943 – Wing Commander J.M. St. Pierre
 - 1 October 1943 to 3 April 1944 – Wing Commander J.A. Richer, DFC.

No. 425 'Allouette' Squadron disbanded at Debert, NS, Canada on September 5, 1943.

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