



<< COVER STORY >>

A Question of Conscience

by KEVIN TAYLOR

It happened on the firing range one blinding day in California. Sgt. Brent Carey, an Arab language interrogator in a military intelligence battalion, hefted the M-16. It was hot to the touch. He slapped a magazine of ammunition into place and looked downrange at his target, the human silhouette on paper, and he froze.

"I was suddenly overrun with images of using that weapon against actual people," Carey later wrote. "I did not want to shoot."

How many times had he hefted a weapon just as he was doing now, ready to swing it to his shoulder? Hundreds and hundreds of times, probably, ever since learning to shoot bow and arrows with his dad while growing up in Deer Park.

In the little town north of Spokane he grew up around kids and guns. The opening day of hunting season, he says, was an excused absence at the high school. Carey was never a hunter but he enjoyed plinking and target shooting and was good at it. And in this, his second time around in the military, he still looked forward to going to the range, where he would practice with a variety of weapons until he was rated expert for each.

This blazing April day, something was different. For the past few months, the trim, graying interrogator was wrestling with a hell of a question for a soldier: Could he take part in war?

Carey had a growing sense that he could not. On the other hand, he thoroughly enjoyed his first enlistment with military intelligence, calling it "a MASH 4077 experience." After 10 years away, Carey had joined a second time because he was outraged by the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, with an anger likely more focused and profound than yours or mine.

"All the more so because it was my job," he says. Carey was trained as an interrogator and was good enough that he trained others. And here he was, watching the apparent meltdown of interrogators on TV, with the pictures of the snarling dogs, the hooded man on the box, and all the other humiliations and torture to "soften up" Iraqi civilians for questioning.

"I was outraged. I couldn't believe they were violating the Geneva

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Convention. I couldn't get my brain around it," Carey says. "Chances are, I either trained some of those guys or trained the guys who trained them."

Carey had become a practitioner of Theravada Buddhism in his decade away from the military, and he struggled with his desire to re-up. His fury over Abu Ghraib tipped the scale.

"I never agreed with this war, but I said to myself, 'I can go over and fix this one thing and lead by example,'" Carey says.

He called his old unit, the Washington Army National Guard's 341st Military Intelligence Battalion, and asked if they had any openings.

And here he was today, this blazing April day, at Fort Hunter Liggett in California, a 36-year-old sergeant acting as an RSO, or range safety officer, helping roughly 140 young soldiers learn the finer points of aiming, breathing and squeezing off bullets at paper targets.

"It was an all-day affair. It was hot, bloody hot," Carey says. "What really struck me that day is these were not the little round targets with bulls-eyes you shoot at with bow and arrow — it's a human-shaped target and you're trying to hit center mass.

"Most of the people out there were 19, 20 years old — in my mind, they were kids," Carey says. "There's been a lot of discussion about child soldiers in Africa, and I was thinking how absurd this was that we had these kids out here practicing how to shoot at and kill people."

He felt more and more disjointed, he says, as he walked around, hopping into the shallow foxholes to talk soldiers through the techniques of breath control or trigger control.

"It was like an out of body experience for me watching myself do this," Carey says.

Eventually the crack of rifle fire petered out and the troops sought shade as they cleaned weapons and got ready to board buses for the two-hour ride back to the Army's Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, Calif. There were a few magazines of ammo left over and someone asked Carey if he'd like to shoot. He picked up the M-16, hot from the sun and extended use, and jammed home a magazine.

"I'd done this for years. It was very natural for me," he says. "I knew I could pick up the rifle and shoot it. I was trained to do it, but it just wasn't who I was any more."

And so Carey froze in a terrible, torn moment of being a soldier and not a soldier, of wavering at a fork in the path.

The tower called out through the PA a few times to see what was up. There were only a couple of people left on the range, and Carey remembers the glare of the sun off the white gravel, the sensation of being in slow motion, staring at the human-shaped silhouette.

"The way you shoot is you line everything up. Once you're lined up, you stop breathing, squeeze, and the bullet goes where it is meant to go," he says. He recalls vivid images of all the bullets fired that day soon being aimed at people. "I could not mentally engage the target."

The voice called out again from the tower, telling Carey to go ahead and fire.



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He sighted down the barrel, nudged it slightly skyward and burned through the 20-round magazine in a matter of seconds. The 5.56-mm bullets flew over the silhouette and into the berm beyond.

He kept pulling the trigger a few seconds longer before realizing the M-16 had fallen silent.

"I dropped the magazine, put the weapon on safe, set it down and walked off the range without saying anything to anyone. The tower yelled something at me, but I was done," Carey says.

"That was the day I realized I could no longer participate in war or the training for war."

The Unremarkable Piece of Paper

It wasn't long after that day on the shooting range that Carey sought out DA Form 4187, a single sheet that begins the process of getting out of the military. On it, he typed a single sentence, "Soldier requests discharge as a class 1-0 conscientious objector IAW AR 600-43."

It is, he says, "an unceremonious, unremarkable piece of paper that is required to kick off the whole process."

The form itself may appear unremarkable, but filling it out certainly is not. Being a conscientious objector is little understood both within the military and without. Applying for a conscientious discharge can be fraught with tension and pitfall.

"The standard under U.S. law is you must be opposed, as a matter of conscience, to participating in war in any form," says Bill Galvin, a counselor with the Center for Conscience and War in Washington, D.C. The CCW was founded in 1941 by a coalition of churches to make sure conscientious objectors were treated better in the Second World War than they were in the First.

As long as there have been armies in America, there has been a mechanism to let out soldiers who find that conscience or belief will not allow them to participate in war. There is no dishonor, or at least there's not supposed to be.

"It's an administrative process," Carey says.

Yet the men and women seeking conscientious objector discharges since the start of the war in Iraq — precise numbers are impossible to find but are thought to be in the thousands — have been called cowards, disgraces, selfish opportunists who see a way out to a cushier life, abandoning their band of brothers.

Conscientious objector status brings an honorable discharge, and Carey is determined to achieve it. He had re-enlisted because he believed in the military and saw himself as an experienced, capable soldier who could perform his duties in a meaningful way. But through the first half of 2005, his understanding of the war in Iraq and his beliefs about nonviolence grew in profound ways.

The change was honest. He treated the military with respect and expected the same. It is this mindset, perhaps, along with the fact Carey is highly regarded in his unit, that has made him one of the rare war objectors who has not been jacked around or court-martialed.

"The process is not working. We are getting good, legitimate claims turned down for no good reason," Galvin says. "People can still get the honorable discharge, but it is totally hit or miss and a long, long struggle." Galvin describes a tricky tightrope in which a soldier files for conscientious objector status and, while the claim is delayed, denied and appealed, must follow all lawful orders. Some are put into a jam where orders would destroy the integrity of their claims, so they disobey and are court-martialed.

Carey filed his application on the Fourth of July 2005, and a process that is supposed to take 180 days has stretched nearly two years — and is still unresolved.

On May 16, the day he agreed to be interviewed by The Inlander in Bellingham, where he teaches Arabic, Carey received a three-page letter from his company commander, Capt. Brett Rubio.

"Based on the evidence presented before me and the hearing conducted with SGT Carey, it is my conclusion that SGT Carey is sincere in his beliefs. Therefore it is my recommendation that he be granted his request of conscientious objector and immediately discharged from further military service," Rubio writes.

Rubio's letter is a significant step, Carey says, but still must be sent further up the chain of command for review and approval by higher-ups in the 341st Military Intelligence Battalion and then to the 96th Troop Command.

Carey's term of enlistment expires June 16. He sees the two-year delay as deliberate stalling by the military to let his clock run out and thereby evade listing him as CO.

This does not surprise Galvin.

"Numbers? Nobody will be able to give you numbers. Besides, they all lie," Galvin says. "Kevin Benderman last year refused a second deployment back to Iraq after they turned down his conscientious objector claim. He was court-martialed and spent 15 months in jail. They don't count him as a conscientious objector, but he is. So numbers? Who knows?"

A Slow Dawning

When Carey joined the military again, he came across a line in the enlistment agreement that asked if he was a conscientious objector. "I answered no to this question, which was absolutely a true answer at the time."

He listed three main reasons for becoming a soldier again in 2004:

It may be necessary to go to war to prevent a greater atrocity.

The Abu Ghraib scandal.

And, "Though I am now ashamed to admit it, I was fueled by a sense of vengeance stemming from the September 11, 2001 attacks."

So what changed?

Carey, in the 1990s, discovered Theravada Buddhism, the most conservative of the three main schools of Buddhist thought. For about a decade, he says, "I would consider myself a casual Buddhist." After his posting to the Army's Defense Language Institute (DLI) in Monterey, Calif. — where he studied Arabic — Carey found himself separated from his family. He began to

meditate extensively for the first time. He was also struck by profound changes in the Army since his first enlistment. When he was learning Russian at DLI in the late 1980s, "You could hardly get us to wear our uniforms," he says, describing the laid-back and collegial atmosphere. This time, "There were all these young guys always going out to train with hand grenades."

Carey himself was eager to do a good job and was a diligent student at DLI. He also knew he'd likely be deployed on raids so he hit the firing range, too, and organized and taught a kung fu class that became popular on post.

At the same time, he was having eye-opening talks with old intelligence colleagues as well as new American and Iraqi contacts who were bringing back dismal assessments of what was happening on the ground. Carey was hearing the war was not about WMDs or democracy or reconstruction. No one seemed able to say what the war was about. One interrogator friend e-mailed from Iraq, "Well I just knocked down my 100th door today, and I'm not sure why."

"Somebody just wants to have a military presence," Carey says. There is no reason to interrogate civilians, he adds. "They don't know anything we want to know."

When it comes to intelligence tactics, Carey says the military is still using a Cold War model, where interrogators waded in after the capture or surrender of entire battalions. In the new warfare, there are no battalions of enemy soldiers who may have a nugget of golden intel.

Instead, civilians are detained by the dozens and hundreds because they happen to be in the area of a raid, a firefight, an explosion, a checkpoint. It may take months before their cases are sorted out. In the meantime, they are dutifully grilled by soldiers who bear an oppressive sense there is no purpose to the task.

"The interrogators at Abu Ghraib were delirious with boredom," Carey says.

If anything is accomplished, it is that both sides become bitter and disillusioned.

At the language institute, Taps would be broadcast around the grounds every night at 2200 hours. Protocol requires soldiers to stop, face the nearest flag and salute at attention until the last, haunting bugle notes fade away. Many viewed it "as this kind of inconvenient moment where you didn't want to be caught outside," Carey says.

But it was sobering, and it was constant. "It's a different thing to hear it while you are at war and you know that day people died," Carey says.

By conservative estimate, 30 people a day have died in Iraq since 2003. The International Coalition Casualty Count lists 3,467 U.S. military deaths through May 29, 6869 deaths in the Iraqi Security Forces and, in what the highly respected ICCC calls an extreme lowball count, 32,646 confirmed Iraqi civilian deaths. In a country where various internal wars are raging and with almost no functioning central government, the civilian death toll is believed to be well into the hundreds of thousands with many deaths never recorded or bodies found.

Official deceptions, the death toll and the apparent lack of purpose in Iraq were among the last straws. But, Carey says, his objection went far beyond. Other soldiers resisting war in Iraq say, for example, that the war in

Afghanistan is more just or more legal and they would fight there. Carey concluded that no peace comes from killing and war, no matter how noble the stated purpose.

"This more critical analysis led me to my current and final position that war is morally unjustifiable," he says.

His conclusions — and the journey to reach them — are detailed in a 50-page document to support his conscientious objector application, starting with the first of Buddhism's Five Precepts: not to destroy sentient life.

In this thorough document, Carey reveals his doubts, his tests of belief and his growing understanding that suffering is suffering and violence is violence and neither is "good" even when we say we are causing them to achieve a good end.

Coming Out

The steady regimen of questioning and meditation finally led Carey to come out in the open and file as a CO.

"One of the first things you get is a psychological evaluation, because the military is the only group to consider you crazy for not wanting to kill people," he says.

He has only recently begun to tell people outside the military about his decision.

"I told my parents, and I wondered how it would go over," Carey says. "My mother is left-leaning, I knew she would be fine with it. My father, he is very much to the right. He sends me all these right-wing chain e-mails.

"Basically his response was, 'If there is one thing that I taught you, it's to do what you know is right no matter what anybody thinks — even me.' I knew he didn't agree with what I'd done, but that's what he said," Carey says.

So far no one has been openly hostile, he says. "Any time the war comes up, I don't hide that I'm an objector, but I never open a conversation with it."

While at DLI, Carey joined a Buddhist meditation group in nearby Santa Cruz, where he volunteered his limited off-duty hours to be a chaplain at a nearby California state prison.

He also was introduced to local peace activists and created a visceral way for people to grasp the magnitude of death in Iraq. "I wanted visual impact of what 29,000 people would look like," he says. By using military intelligence channels "both authorized and unauthorized," as he obliquely puts it, Carey "through a favor of a favor got my hands on a list of names" of 29,000 Iraqi civilians killed in the war. He and others at DLI transliterated the names into Arabic script written on panels that — along with the names of American casualties — were assembled into a three-foot tall scroll that unfurled 100 feet.

"It was important we make no distinction between the two because all have families, all had lives and all didn't want to die," Carey says.

A recently updated version of the scroll is three times as long — the length of a football field.

Sgt. Nowhere

Letters and statements in his case file show fellow soldiers and officers in his unit supported Carey through the CO process. When the 341st was deployed to Iraq later in 2005, Carey was granted permission to stay behind. The deployment contributed to the delay because his paperwork was stranded, Carey says. After that was straightened out, another delay arose: "Somebody held onto it, thinking I would change my mind."

A second soldier in the unit filed for CO discharge at about the same time and, eventually, things changed.

Carey, who doesn't name names, says someone in his company viewed him as a potential source of infection.

"I am fairly influential in the unit," Carey says, adding he never spoke on duty about seeking conscientious objector discharge. "As a matter of professionalism, I never mention it. But there is always some sense of, 'There's Carey; what is he spreading now?'"

So little by little, Carey was excused from various duties until he became an invisible sergeant.

"Last summer, I went to North Dakota where there was a youth camp there and they needed volunteers," Carey says. "But during the last year, I have had no obligations — they have released me from all military obligations."

He has been allowed to leave post and essentially, he says, get a year's head start on becoming a civilian.

It can be bittersweet and awkward. Soldiers exist in groups — eat, sleep, train, fight in groups — and develop tight bonds. Objecting to war suddenly pits an individual against everything in military culture.

On that terrible day in April 2005, when Carey's inner compass was wobbling, he found an unexpected symbol of grace.

"The firing range was just glaring white gravel, a stark, desert-y, desolate place," Carey says. "As I was walking from one position to another, I came across one tiny little purple flower. It's a small thing, but at the time I was thinking if this little flower can beat all the gravel and all the pesticides and pop up in the middle of this range ... I can do it, too."

From the Front Lines

"I signed." The header on the e-mail from Baqouba is a declaration of defiance from a weary U.S. soldier in Iraq. The soldier, who asked not to be named, is one of 1,956 active duty personnel who have signed the Appeal for Redress — a short, bold statement urging prompt withdrawal from Iraq.

When the Appeal surfaced on the Internet late last October, it was called an unprecedented barometer of dissent in an all-volunteer military by The Nation and Eugene Fidell, president of the National Institute of Military Justice.

On May 11, Appeal co-founders Jonathan Hutto, a 29-year-old Navy seaman, and Marine Corps Sgt. Liam Madden, were awarded the Letelier-Moffitt Human Rights award for "your bravery in speaking out against the war," by the Institute for Policy Studies.

There are 90 Appeal signers who are either from Washington and Idaho or who are stationed in Washington and Idaho, say volunteer staffers at the

Appeal office in Washington, D.C. Three signers — Sgt. Brent Carey (see lead story) and two soldiers in Stryker brigades (one at Fort Lewis and one in Iraq) — contacted The Inlander about their having signed the document.

The soldier now in Iraq has written several times since May 16, between missions and when a brief shot at a shared Internet terminal is available.

"I just came back from a 7 or 5 day mission ... all the days mix into one," he wrote on May 27. "As you can tell, I'm a little resentful of the army. I really try not to be. I did sign on the bottom line," he writes. "I just feel very frustrated."

He spoke of soldiers posing with Congressional delegations or Bush administration officials who "... don't even have a combat MOS [job description]. If I ever got a chance to meet the President or his Vice I'd tell him I hope for every soldier who dies someone in their family dies, too. I know it's mean ... but I'm just tired of losing friends."

May has become the third worst month for casualties with 116 through the 29th. The soldier in Iraq's unit is among those hard hit. The son of an Eastern European immigrant family who came to America after the Iron Curtain fell, he enlisted because "It made me feel I was doing my part." Also, "My family is poor. Can't go to college with \$300 to your name."

He stresses, "We do a lot of good here. We've captured plenty of people who kill and torture civilians. While I don't know much about what's on the news these days we go very much out of our way to follow the Geneva Convention. It's quite frustrating sometimes feeling like the enemy gets treated better than you.

"But unless we're willing to stay here for the next 20 to 40 years we can't change this country around with a surge or two. We've lost so many guys here. And now with this extension [he was due to be rotated out in July, but was extended to January] we'll lose even more. I don't care what the brass says, the morale here has never been lower. Our unit has been stressed to its limits. Just about everyone has some case of PTSD and combat stress."

Stress from combat is one thing, but he fingers a deeper source that has been echoed by many veterans — fighting a guerrilla war where civilians are as likely to be killed as enemy combatants.

"To tell you the truth, I'm afraid to shoot my rifle."

The soldier currently living at Fort Lewis says he was initially skeptical about the civilian death toll before his deployment to Mosul late in 2004.

"I blew that off when I first went over there, but over the year... the number of people I saw die..." he says in a telephone interview.

His company of 100 soldiers, he estimates, registered 500 kills. "That's five each ... Some days we'd come up on an area and there would be dead bodies. Other days we'd be ambushed. My company lost four and had 40 injured.

"My squad alone killed 10 with weapons in hand where we could say, 'Yes, this is the enemy.' My platoon killed over 40 where we could say, 'Yes, this is the enemy.'"

The identity and affiliation of the enemy was never exactly clear. "I hate to say this but this is a completely ambiguous war. And there is all the collateral

damage ... Strykers are speeding over to react where somebody is being killed, they run into a vehicle and somebody dies."

The civilian death toll in Iraq is wildly uncertain with estimates ranging from 60,000 to 600,000. This is due in part to the chaos since the U.S. invasion. It seems, however, that the American military would be an organization well-equipped for this sort of data collecting. Yet Iraqi deaths are not routinely noted in DoD press releases.

The Fort Lewis soldier did the cold math. Let's say, he calculates, that out of all the U.S. forces in Iraq maybe 60,000 are combat troops. "If five Iraqis die for every one of those, that's 300,000 people. You can't tell me this is working."

It was just before Christmas 2004, his unit had only recently arrived in Mosul, when a suicide bomber walked into the mess tent (known as the DFAC for dining facility) wearing a vest packed with explosives and ball bearings. The blast killed 22 and wounded 66. The bomber was a civilian employee on base.

"I responded to that, helped people out of the DFAC," the soldier says. "That affected a lot of us. My next-door neighbor was within 20 feet of the explosion. He's lucky to be alive. That was one of the larger and more secure FOBs [forward operating bases] in Iraq but there was so much manual labor on those bases handled by Iraqis. How do you expect anybody to be safe when you have 1,000 Iraqis on base?"

One of the strategies of suicide bombing is to kill trust as well as people, and it works.

"By the time I was there three months I came to the conclusion if you are not in a U.S. uniform, you are not my friend," the Fort Lewis soldier says.

The paranoia takes a toll. "The biggest thing I see from my buddies is mental issues," he says. "They come home and they honestly don't know who's their friend and who's not their friend."

His anger at the way the war is being conducted convinced him to sign the Appeal, he says.

"We've had four years now and still to this day nobody knows who the enemy is, no one knows where the next attack will come from. We don't even know who our political allies are," he says.

"Honestly, I'd no have problem with this if it was all about oil. Let's lower gas prices and accomplish something, at least. It's not like I would personally choose to invade another country, but we've got to get something out of 3,400 lives. I hate saying my brothers' lives are lost in vain ... but it's starting to look that way."

He, too, is ticked off when politicians or government officials shake a few hands in the Green Zone and then make pronouncements about the war.

"I keep hearing Bush and his people, and Senators and Condoleeza Rice say, 'Oh, I went over and talked to soldiers and they are happy to be there and want to finish the mission.' I didn't want to go there. I wasn't happy to be there. And we didn't finish the mission — we failed the mission to bring democracy and prosperity to that country."

"Most of Congress doesn't want us there. Iraqis don't want us there, 60 percent of the nation doesn't want us there, half the generals say we're not

doing it right. Nobody's happy. The whole concept of this war is messed up yet we keep going back and we keep going back and we keep going back."

That level of outrage that led to the spontaneous combustion of the Appeal for Redress last fall, which reads:

"As a patriotic American proud to serve the nation in uniform, I respectfully urge my political leaders in Congress to support the prompt withdrawal of all American military forces and bases from Iraq. Staying in Iraq will not work and is not worth the price. It is time for U.S. troops to come home."

C.O. STORIES

Sgt. Camilo Mejia

"Those who called me a coward ... are also right. I was a coward not for leaving the war, but for having been a part of it in the first place," says Camilo Mejia, a 31-year-old sergeant and combat infantry squad leader in the Florida National Guard. "Refusing and resisting this war was my moral duty ... I did not want to stand up to the government and the army. I was afraid of punishment and humiliation. I went to war because I was a coward, and for that I apologize to my soldiers for not being the type of leader I should have been."

Mejia spent six months as squad leader in Iraq before deserting while home on a two-week furlough. He was denied conscientious objector discharge and imprisoned for a year.

— *KEVIN TAYLOR*

Sgt. Ricky Clousing

As an interrogator, Sgt. Ricky Clousing says he was well trained in guidelines for the treatment of prisoners. "However ... I witnessed our baseless incarceration of civilians. I saw civilians physically harassed. I saw an innocent Iraqi killed before me by U.S. troops. I saw the abuse of power that goes without accountability. Being attached to a tactical infantry unit and being exposed to the brutalities of war, I began to doubt and reconsider my beliefs."

The 24-year-old served with the 82nd Airborne in Iraq in 2004 and 2005 before going AWOL. He surfaced in his hometown of Seattle last August, making the above statement in front of a mock cemetery and then surrendering at Fort Lewis. He was out of custody by Christmas.

The military is conducting two investigations into Clousing's allegations.

— *KEVIN TAYLOR*

Lance Corporal Ivan Brobeck

"Please, President Bush: do what is right. And do everything you can to bring our troops home from Iraq." This is the close of a letter written by Lance Corporal Ivan Brobeck, who signed up for the Marines' delayed enlistment program while a high school junior in Arlington, Va. Less than a year after graduation (in 2004), he was serving near Fallujah where he says he observed mistreatment of detainees and civilians killed at traffic checkpoints.

When his unit was about to be sent to Iraq a second time, Brobeck went AWOL to Canada, where he was diagnosed with PTSD. He returned late last

year with his letter for the President, turned himself in for court martial and was released from the brig on Feb. 5. — *KEVIN TAYLOR*

Agustin Aguayo, medic

"I realized deep within me that I couldn't hurt anyone, that I couldn't take life," 35-year-old Agustin Aguayo said last week as part of a Latino war resister speaking tour through California.

"He is a legitimate CO. We have been working with Augie for three and a half years," says Bill Galvin, counseling coordinator for the Center for Conscience and War.

Aguayo, who enlisted as a medic, submitted a CO application and made a request not to be deployed in 2004 when his 1st Infantry Division was headed to Tikrit. Despite initial favorable review of his application, he was sent to Iraq and told he could complete the process.

Aguayo refused to carry a weapon because he didn't want to compromise his beliefs, Galvin says. Assigned guard duty and explicitly ordered to carry a weapon, Aguayo refused to load it.

When his unit returned to Germany, Aguayo's CO application was denied. "They said he did not demonstrate he was sincere in his beliefs," Galvin says. "Come on! What do you got to do? He had an unloaded weapon in a war zone."

In September, Aguayo refused orders for a second deployment and surrendered to MPs, expecting to be detained for court martial. Instead, "His commanders said he was going to Iraq if they had to put him in handcuffs and chains to send him," Galvin says. Aguayo escaped through a window from his base in Germany. He surrendered a few days later at Fort Irwin, Calif., was placed in solitary confinement and flown back to Germany, where he was imprisoned. Aguayo was released April 18 but has yet to be discharged.

— *KEVIN TAYLOR*

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