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Tom ([00:00](#)):

Please note, the following episode contains mature language and discussion about sexual assault, including against minors.

Paula ([00:09](#)):

Even now, there are these strongholds of misogynistic military men that still want to take me down. Men that believe I ruined the military. One of my neighbors, former Naval Academy, his wife told me, "I've been praying a lot for you and I've been praying a lot for my husband so that he can forgive you." I mean, I know her from walking the dog. I don't know her from the Navy, I don't know her from anything. And this was just like last year.

Tom ([00:46](#)):

That's Paula Coughlin, a former Navy helicopter pilot.

Paula ([00:50](#)):

She said, "Well, I've been praying that my husband can forgive you for what you did to the Navy." I said, "I'm still not sure what I need to be forgiven for." And she said, "Well, you know, you went to the Naval Academy and a lot of his friends did too, and they didn't make Admiral because of you." I said, "That happened 30 years ago and I've lived down the street from you for 20 years, and this is how you initiate a conversation that you're going to pray for my forgiveness?"

Tom ([01:21](#)):

Las Vegas, 1991.

Tom ([01:26](#)):

Hundreds of Naval aviators were packed into a conference room at the Las Vegas Hilton. The previous day, three of the aviators shot down and captured by Iraq during the Gulf War had given presentations about their experiences. Everyone was in a victory mood. This was the annual Tailhook convention.

Paula ([01:48](#)):

Tailhook refers to the actual device, a little hook on the back of an aircraft. It's been in existence for, gosh, many, many years, since my dad was doing carrier aviation on a wood aircraft deck.

Tom ([02:03](#)):

That Saturday a row of Navy leaders sat on his stage taking questions from the audience. 40,000 women had been deployed to the Gulf War earlier that year, but by law were not allowed to serve on combat ships or fly fighter jets. One woman in the audience questioned when the Navy planned to finally open the doors to female fighter pilots.

Paula ([02:24](#)):

I was wondering when you plan to implement that, and if it's going to be soon.

Tom ([02:37](#)):

The male cheering set the tone for what occurred later that evening.

Paula ([02:42](#)):

I walk off the elevator expecting to meet my boss, expecting to meet other admirals, aids, people I know, and people I've worked with. And when I walked off the elevator into the hallway, it's a big wide hotel hallway, but it's completely lined with aviators in swimsuits and shorts and casual clothes, all holding drinks.

As soon as I made it to the head of the hallway, all the members, probably a couple of hundred people close in on me, and this was known as the gauntlet. Once the call was made, admirals aid, the ranks just closed in and I was sort of pushed, sort of pulled down, the hallway while they tried to remove my clothes, groped, went underneath my skirt, in my shirt. I mean, it was just an entire gang of men attacking me, and I fought back. I kicked and punched and actually bit somebody on the forearm. And finally, probably 40, 50, 60 feet down the hallway am ejected out the end. And I turned the corner and went into one of the hospitality suites. It was quiet there for a second and sat down. And the secretary of the Navy, his aid, found me and said, "I heard you just went through the gauntlet. Why would you do that?"

Tom ([04:27](#)):

The Tailhook Scandal, three decades ago, is largely forgotten these days, but it dominated the media for months in the 1990s.

Speaker 2 ([04:35](#)):

Bold stereotypes about sex crazed sailors have come back to haunt the Navy.

Speaker 3 ([04:39](#)):

Charges of sexual harassment by women who say they were men handled at a gathering of Navy flyers.

Speaker 4 ([04:44](#)):

It was called the worst case of sexual harassment in the Navy's history.

Tom ([04:50](#)):

Women were assuming a greater role in the Navy. The first mixed cruise ships had supported the Gulf War, even if they were not allowed to take part in active combat. The world was modernizing and women were fighting for equal rights in the military, as in other careers. Tailhook showed just how far the Navy lagged behind.

Paula ([05:08](#)):

They had posters up in their hospitality suites that said women are property. They had, in some hospitality suites, where they could invite women in and shave their pubic area and give them shots of alcohol. The mascot for the squadron was the rhinos. So they had a giant rhino painted on the wall and women could come up and actually suck on the rhino's penis to get a free drink.

Tom ([05:37](#)):

I'm Tom Wright, and this is Fat Leonard, a podcast from Project Brazen. And I've been uncovering the truth of the Fat Leonard corruption scandal in which Leonard Francis, a contractor for the Navy in the Pacific, corrupted the Seventh Fleet and became exorbitantly wealthy in the process. Our story, and it's yet to be written conclusion, shows the Navy still has not fully reckoned with its treatment of women laid bare by the happenings at Tailhook all those years ago. And that's because, back then, as now, the Navy prefers to protect its own. Women had to suck it up, and those who complained like Paula Coughlin ended up being ostracized.

Paula ([06:23](#)):

In the context of what you're looking at systemically in the military Tailhook is a shiny, nasty little abscess that is a microcosm for the attitude that, I'm sorry to say, still is very prevalent in the military.

Tom ([06:41](#)):

Well, that's what I was going to ask. The reason I'm interested in Tailhook is because it doesn't seem that there's been any improvement in the last 30 years. It's not exactly the same situation as what you're describing, but it's indicative of a culture that didn't change in the last 30 years times.

Paula ([06:55](#)):

Right. Well, it's what the consistencies are. Abusing women is a commodity, whether it's at a hotel in Las Vegas provided by the Tailhook Association or whether it's by Fat Leonard, it's a currency.

Tom ([07:13](#)):

Paula Coughlin is different from other whistleblowers I've known over the years. During our video chats, she came across as smart and humorous. The injustices dealt out to her by the Navy haven't made her bitter. You sense a hardcore of resilience built up over years of men telling her she should have stayed quiet, not been such a kill joy. But she's able to look at her own story, and the Navy's predicament with a detachment, that's rare for people whose lives have been defined by an injustice.

Can you just explain to me why you think women are mistreated in the armed forces? If you would try to analyze what are the core reasons, what would you say?

Paula ([07:55](#)):

I spent most of my career before the Navy working in an all male dominant field, and my observation is that when men recognize that women can do their job just as well, somehow that is perceived as diminishing the value or the difficulty of the job. So in order to maintain their stature and their self-esteem as superstar jet pilots or boat drivers, or Naval officers or corporate leaders, whatever position they're in, keeping women out of it, because obviously it's too technical, or it's too physical.

Tom ([08:44](#)):

In hours of my conversations with Leonard, he constantly played on this trope that Navy officers are somehow special, a cliché propagated by TV shows and films like Top Gun and NCIS. And Leonard explained away the wild sexual nature of these officer as a release from the stress their under.

Leonard ([09:02](#)):

Well, they're all war fighters.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:09:04]

Tom ([09:00](#)):

Release from the stress they're under.

Leonard ([09:02](#)):

Well, they're all war fighters. They have this insight. It's their psyche. For them is they have a lot of stress internally. Pressure. There's a lot of pressure with their jobs. This is the way the Navy operates. It's normal. The military is always like that. That sex drive, sex driven. That's why there's so much of sexual harassment, rape. There's so much goes on in the military. It's covered up most of the time.

Tom ([09:33](#)):

I talked to Blake Hertzinger, a US Navy reservist based in Singapore about all this. From a Navy family, Blake was keen to talk, angry at what he sees is a failure to properly account for the fat Leonard corruption. He's from Sandpoint, Idaho, all American, in his 30s and well-built. We recorded in my home studio in Singapore, where he works as a business consultant.

Blake ([09:56](#)):

It's a high stress environment, for sure. And you're away from shore for a month, and a lot of people cut loose when they hit the shore. People go crazy.

Tom ([10:04](#)):

But the officers involved with Leonard weren't exactly battle-hardened. Although many had rotated into Iraq or Afghanistan, few had experience of combat like the Marines or Army. And yet when they got arrested, many claimed PTSD or stress from war had caused them to fall into corruption and debauchery with Leonard. It's an excuse for which Blake has no time at all.

Blake ([10:26](#)):

I mean, oh, I just don't have any pity for that person who is just blatantly engaging in corruption and then blaming operational tempo for all of his woes. No, buddy. You took your family to a hotel in Hong Kong. This was not like, "Oh, my God, I've really been in the shit, and now I've got to blow off some steam." I'm not Charlie Sheen breaking mirrors in a hotel room. You're on a nice vacation with your family. Martin Sheen. Charlie Sheen? Wrong Sheen.

Tom ([10:55](#)):

I agree with Blake. These Navy officers felt entitled to the sex, a perk of the job. And only after the fact did they resort to this self-justifying myth about the needs of combat veterans to blow off steam.

Blake ([11:07](#)):

To say like, "Oh, well, these guys have really been in the wars and now they need to come here and engage in some sort of weird, paid for orgy in the top of a hotel in Manila," I don't know about that.

Tom ([11:17](#)):

A lot of excuses have gotten thrown around in the fat Leonard saga, but Paula has an explanation for how male Navy officers behave, and it's simpler and more brutal.

Paula ([11:27](#)):

I would say that there's just this gray area where the military culture has always viewed women as second class citizens, as property, as a reward when you get into port to rape and pillage, and that gray area occurs when what they viewed as property now is a co-worker or is supposed to be treated as a co-worker, and make the leap from, "What we did in port to minors and women was bad, because look, now we're working with women and they have such value and contribute to the workforce." That leap has not been made.

When I was attacked in the hallway at Tailhook, those people knew exactly who I was. They were chanting, "Admiral's aide. Admiral's aide." I became a high value target, not someone who's like, "Oh, wow, this is an aviator. This is one of ours."

Tom ([12:26](#)):

Penang, Malaysia, 1992.

Tom ([12:29](#)):

The USS Acadia pulls alongside Swettenham Pier in Penang, a basic facility more used to hosting cruise ships than a Navy vessel. Leonard Francis, aged only 27, is waiting expectantly on the pier. He'd done some contracting jobs for the US Navy, but the flow of ships between the US and the Middle East during the recent Gulf War had increased, and that made Penang attractive as a midway R&R spot.

The thousand strong crew started down the gangplank to the pier. Leonard had everything planned out in folders: dinners, drinks, entertainment, touring, and shopping. The Acadia, an auxiliary ship, had repaired damaged vessels and supplied Tomahawk missiles to destroyers during the Gulf War conflict. After some time in the Pacific, it was heading back to the Middle East, but the ship was notable for another reason. It was the first ever mixed sex US Navy vessel to be deployed during wartime. Of the 1,000 crew, about a third were female.

Leonard ([13:34](#)):

We had a lot of ships pulling in at that time that were going into the Persian Gulf. So all the submarine tenders, or tenders as we usually call them, all the supply ships were pulling into Penang those days, and we had a huge female crew on board.

Tom ([13:53](#)):

By the time it berthed in Penang, the Acadia already was notorious, dubbed in the US media as the love boat after 36 women, or one in 10 of the female crew, became pregnant and had to be flown home during the war. For years, conservatives in the Navy argued against letting in women exactly for this reason. "They would distract men," they said.

Speaker 6 ([14:15](#)):

No, I don't know exactly how these women are going to handle this. I think this should be a man's war here.

Tom ([14:23](#)):

Senators and military generals, old white men, bloviated for hours in Congress about how women were not up to the task.

Speaker 7 ([14:31](#)):

The purpose of the military is, first of all, to defend this nation's vital security interests throughout the globe, and second, to ensure equality.

Speaker 8 ([14:41](#)):

So it's an extraordinarily high standard of excellence which must be met, and you cannot have a dual standard. And in my judgment, you are not going to find very many, if any, other than males, who can meet these kinds of stringent combat and related tasks.

Tom ([15:05](#)):

But the tide was turning. Two years after the Gulf War, Congress finally allowed women to serve on combat ships. 10 years ago, they were permitted to serve on submarines, and five years ago, they could apply for any combat job, although no woman has yet been made a Navy SEAL. Still, the women on the Acadia back then were in a male dominated environment and they were expected to play by the boys' rules. Paula Coughlin.

Paula ([15:30](#)):

When you are one of the only women in the room or the only woman in the room or the only woman in the cockpit, there's an expectation of behavior to conform to norms of communication, including cussing, lewd conversation, bad jokes, whatever. You're part of the boys' club. I always felt like I am rough and tumble. I've worked around men in my whole career, and I can roll with a lot of the bad humor, a lot of it. I don't take it personally, but this idea that you're part of the boys' club is a fallacy. You're not.

Tom ([16:06](#)):

Leonard, of course, sees it differently.

Leonard ([16:09](#)):

Male, female officers, there's no difference. When they get drunk, they're so messed up. They're out of control. I had a good time. Of course-

Tom ([16:27](#)):

Leonard and his group from the Acadia stumbled out into the street and ended up back at a hotel. Leonard says he had sex with one of the female offices.

Leonard ([16:39](#)):

I mean, you're going to do what you got to do. It's survival. And I was a bachelor then, too, so it's okay. I wasn't married. We were all just having some good fun, some good sailor fun. See, so that's why I said I was in bed with the Navy all the way.

Tom ([16:57](#)):

Leonard makes all his sexual encounters sound fun, innocent even. He knows he's being recorded for a podcast, but every now and then he makes a word choice that shows his deeper feelings about women.

Leonard ([17:08](#)):

Another thing that the Navy covered up was they never want to charge any of their female officers.

Tom ([17:13](#)):

We're not naming the Navy officer here for privacy reasons. It's hard to know exactly what went on 30 years ago, but we included the outline of this story for one important reason, to shine a light on Leonard's deep hatred of women, which will become clearer later in this series with tragic consequences.

Leonard ([17:31](#)):

She was a bloody whore. I just look at it, then. It's shocking the way they are. Conflict of interests, sexual relationship? Man. With a contractor? Oh, lord.

Tom ([17:43](#)):

Leonard's misogyny, his gratuitous use of hostile language, perhaps started with his father who battered his mother and had multiple affairs. But Leonard's view of women as sexual objects appears to have deepened through his work with the US Navy in the years that followed.

Leonard ([17:59](#)):

But it's really nice when they interview you, right? They ask you, "Oh, could you tell us ..."

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:18:04]

Leonard ([18:00](#)):

When they interview you, they ask you, "Oh, could you tell us were there any specific marks on the body? Were there any mold?" What do you want me to do? Tell her what kind of nipples you had or something?

(Silence).

Tom ([18:27](#)):

Navy defenders say most officers don't act this way and no one doubts that, but it's hardly the point. The almost 30 officers who have been indicted for their involvement with Leonard were supposed to be among the best and best of the Navy. Take Mario Herrera, a commander aboard the Blue Ridge who has nicknamed Choke according to an indictment that will go to trial in November.

What about Choke Herrera?

Leonard ([18:53](#)):

Well, that is Mario. Mario Herrera liked to strangle hookers so he used to choke them until a lot of the girls went blue and they didn't want to see him anymore.

Tom ([19:07](#)):

Herrera has pleaded not guilty to charges that include conspiracy. Then, there's Jose Louis Sanchez, another Navy commander, almost as huge as Leonard with a double chin and thinning hair who sent regular requests for photos of prostitutes. Sanchez would write, "Yummy. Daddy like," according to an indictment. Sanchez has pleaded guilty to conspiracy and is awaiting sentencing. After orgies, Leonard regularly sent around nude photos of the women for the men to ogle and comment. They call prostitutes, barbecue ribs, chocolate shakes, and other names. One Navy official asked Leonard for disease free hookers.

Leonard ([19:53](#)):

Well, you're a young dandy andy man. I mean I'm used to orgies. That's my specialty.

Tom ([20:07](#)):

Back then, Leonard was soaring high. In the post 9/11 years he organized lavish dinners for officers of the biggest aircraft carriers in places like Hong Kong and Singapore. The dinners, often in Michelin starred restaurants cost \$1,000 per plate. Afterward, officers smoked \$2,000 a box Cohiba cigars, and \$2,000 a bottle cognac. And often, they slept with prostitutes. He also took care of the grunts when they got into trouble in bars in far flung ports.

Leonard ([20:46](#)):

Yeah, so that's how we would get somebody out of jail. That's a quick fix, damage control, before the press gets a hold of-

Tom ([20:58](#)):

And GDMA was involved in that?

Leonard ([21:00](#)):

Oh, we were involved in everything. We had to.

Tom ([21:02](#)):

Just give me an example of something like that, something that would happen.

Leonard ([21:06](#)):

Well, molestation, bar fights, damages, accidents, rape anything.

Tom ([21:15](#)):

Can you think of a specific rape allegation where GDMA played a role?

Leonard ([21:19](#)):

For example, sailors would be in pubs or in clubs and then they would just go and rub a female the wrong way, touch their breasts so that's molestation. They're going to get arrested. Sometimes the girls are just not going to give in. These guys get drunk. They get very boisterous. They start touching women. And then once you start touching someone who's in university going to become an attorney, she's going to yell rape on you, molestation. And then the cops will come in and haul you in.

Tom ([21:51](#)):

And that would happen?

Leonard ([21:51](#)):

Well, then we have to go and resolve it and get the girl to withdraw the charges.

Tom ([21:57](#)):

So GDMA would play that role in multiple occasions?

Leonard ([22:00](#)):

Yes. Yes. We played our roles in molestation and rape cases in-

Tom ([22:06](#)):

And that would involve paying off the local police, right?

Leonard ([22:08](#)):

Well not just the... The victims.

Tom ([22:11](#)):

Just pay them off. Keep it quiet.

Leonard ([22:12](#)):

Yeah. Well just pay them off-

Tom ([22:14](#)):

Before it gets to court, right?

Leonard ([22:15](#)):

Well, before he gets to court, before it gets to the press. I think what they try to prevent is coming out in the open.

Tom ([22:24](#)):

So why don't you start by telling me about the Genesis of this problem in the military? Where does it come from and why in your view, hasn't it been dealt with?

Don ([22:34](#)):

Yeah, that's an excellent question.

Tom ([22:36](#)):

Don Christensen, the US Air Force's former top prosecutor is now president of Protect Our Defenders, a nonprofit that advocates for victims of sexual assault in the military. To be clear, no one in the Fat Leonard case has been accused of sexual assault. But as Don points out, the clear misogyny in the Navy creates a culture in which violence against women can thrive.

Don ([23:00](#)):

We know from the numbers that about 20,000 men and women are sexually assaulted every year on the active duty force. About 13,000 of them are women, about 7,000 are men so it affects both sexes, but it disproportionately affects women.

Tom ([23:15](#)):

Don is 6 feet tall and talks about the military with a resignation born from experience. Seven years ago, he left the Air Force in disgust because of the military's failure to address sexual assault and its opposition to reform.

Don ([23:32](#)):

Well, it wasn't an immediate decision. It was something that occurred over a number of years where I had become frustrated with the justice system in the military that's control by commanders. Unlike the civilian world, where the police would do the investigation or FBI would do an investigation and then arrest a person and charge them with a crime, and then the prosecutors would step in and look at it, and prosecute that crime. In the military, our investigative agencies don't arrest people. They don't charge them with crimes. They just do a report that goes to a commander, and that commander makes a decision whether a case should go forward or not and the prosecutor doesn't. When I was the Chief Prosecutor of the Air Force, which sounds really cool to say, "I was Chief Prosecutor of the Air Force," but I had virtually no authority. I had no ability to send any case to trial. That was completely a commander's decision.

Tom ([24:32](#)):

The US military has its own legal system called the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and as Don said, a major issue for years has been that military commanders, not independent prosecutors, decide whether to go forward with sexual assault cases. That has meant many are thrown out.

Don ([24:49](#)):

One of my prosecutors had prosecuted a guy that had molested his 13 year old, mentally handicapped daughter and confessed to it. And his commander and first Sergeant testified for him in findings to try to get him acquitted. And then after he was convicted, came in and testified that they wanted him to stay in the unit, even though he was a convicted child molester. And I was like, "Wow. What's going on here?"

Tom ([25:21](#)):

In 2012, Don successfully prosecuted a case involving a US Air Force F16 pilot who was accused of sexually assaulting a civilian woman on a base in Italy. Don found the woman among the most credible victims he'd ever worked with in over 300 sexual assault cases. Pilot was sentenced by jury of officers to a year in jail and a dismissal that stripped him of his retirement benefits. But three months later, a senior commander concluded the evidence was insufficient. He determined that the pilot, whom he considered a doting father and husband, could never have the act and he threw out the verdict.

Don ([26:02](#)):

They could care less about the victim and it was last straw for me. The process needed to be changed, but I wasn't going to be able to do it from the inside.

Tom ([26:15](#)):

Don left the air force in protest.

Is it also the case that sexual crimes are somehow not seen as crimes in the culture?

Don ([26:24](#)):

I think across the military, it's viewed that a lot of the women who come forward are complaining, they're out to get something, they're doing this for benefits, which there really aren't that many benefits. That they're out to get the guy. This was regret sex. So there's definitely that culture of disbelief that makes it difficult to get these cases to trial and to get convictions.

Tom ([26:49](#)):

It's this very same military justice system that's dealing with many cases in the Fat Leonard scandal. As we'll hear, the Navy Justice System is again, coming up short.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [00:27:04]

Tom ([27:07](#)):

Leonard does deserve to go to jail, right?

Paula ([27:09](#)):

Yeah.

Tom ([27:10](#)):

I mean, he's pleaded guilty.

Paula ([27:12](#)):

Oh yeah. Oh definitely.

Tom ([27:13](#)):

It's one thing to say that, "Okay. He was benefiting from a system of corruption and misogyny that pre-existed his arrival on the scene," but that doesn't mean that he's not guilty of all those crimes that he's been guilty to.

Paula ([27:25](#)):

He's monetized debauchery. And it's, what? The oldest profession. He just really brought it into the 21st century. He just really made it an empire. He really made it lucrative.

Tom ([27:41](#)):

Back in 1991, Paula Dugan, she wrote a letter to the Navy, which was leaked to Senator John McCain, himself a former aviator who called for an investigation. The Defense Department probe found over 80 other women claimed they'd been victims of sexual assault or harassment at the Tailhook Convention. The Navy also dug in. Because of the scale of the Tailhook scandal, the Navy set up what's called a Consolidated Disposition Authority, headed by an admiral to administer justice. Prosecutors looked at 300 offices and 35 admirals, but did not pursue a single court martial. Some officers got censure letters or monetary fines in what amounted to a slap on the wrist. Many in Congress pushed back against this whitewash. In 1992, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service or NCIS was born under civilian leadership. You've probably heard of NCIS from the long running TV show, but as you'll hear in coming episodes, it's nothing like the crack law enforcement agency portrayed on screen.

And that's largely because ultimate prosecutorial power remained in the hands of Navy officers, as it does to this day. Paula resigned four years later, a figure of hate for what she had done. She sued the Hilton, was awarded a multi-million dollar judgment and reinvented herself as a yoga teacher. Today, as a board member of Protect Our Defenders, she's still involved in the fight for equality in the military. Going back to that woman who said, she'd pray for you, I mean, you didn't talk to her husband, but it's indicative of this idea that boys will be boys and you unnecessarily rocked the boat. Did you get a lot of that?

Paula ([29:29](#)):

No, it's more specific than that. I ruined the Navy. That's a pretty wow. I mean I'm 5'4, 120 pounds. I'm super fit and I'm smart, but I'm not enough of a resource to ruin the United States Navy.

Tom ([29:49](#)):

The question now is can Fat Leonard ruin the Navy? This podcast could do great damage. Why is Leonard even talking to us? In one sense, he's trying to blow up the institution and bring it down with him. He's bragging about the sexual misconduct at the heart of his fraud, at the same time, exposing misogyny in the Navy. Leonard doesn't deny the corruption or the prurience, but in his feud, everyone knew what was going on and now the Navy's involved in a coverup. It's hard not to agree. The Navy has failed as during Tailhook to hold its most senior admirals to account for their involvement with Leonard.

This isn't a case of a few wrongdoers, but a systemic breakdown in a culture. In the next episode, we'll explore exactly why Leonard was so untouchable for so long. He didn't just provide prostitutes to admirals and barred contracts, Leonard's ability as an operator in the Pacific was second to none and he was evolving to play a crucial national security role for the U.S. That's why he survived, no, thrived despite the corruption. And as Leonard's star rose, Russian and Chinese spies started to circle around him.

Leonard ([31:22](#)):

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What really worried the United States the most was their offices being corrupted by me, that they would be corruptible by the foreign powers.

Tom ([31:39](#)):

Fat Leonard is a production of Project Brazen, in partnership with PRX. For audiation, the executive producer is Sandy Smallens. Mark Lotto is the co-producer and story editor. The producer is Ireland Meacham. Mixing and sound design is by Matt Noble.

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