

NEAL CONAN, HOST:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Neal Conan in Washington. Just over a year ago, the Marine's Darkhorse Battalion left Camp Pendleton for a tour in Afghanistan's Sangin District; seven months when they lost 25 men killed and over 200 injured, the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit in Afghanistan.

Still, they say it was worth it. The experience of this famous unit is just one example of the enormous sacrifices of the U.S. military, sacrifices many civilians struggle to grasp. A recent Pew study found that more than 80 percent of recent veterans say the American public has little or no understanding of the problems they face in the military, and most of the public agrees.

If you or a family member served in Iraq or Afghanistan, what don't the rest of us understand? Give us a call, 800-989-8255. Email us, [talk@npr.org](mailto:talk@npr.org). You can also join the conversation on our website. Go to [npr.org](http://npr.org). Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Later in the program, NPR's Dina Temple-Raston on the charges against an alleged pipe bomber in New York, and disagreement between the New York City police and the FBI on the role of an informant.

But first, Lance Corporal Jake Romo served with Darkhorse, the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines. He was on his first deployment when he lost his legs in an explosion in February. He joins us today from the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, where he does physical therapy. Nice to have you with us today.

LANCE CORPORAL JAKE ROMO: Hey, how are you doing?

CONAN: Good - well, that's my question to you: How are you doing?

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

ROMO: I'm great.

CONAN: And maybe - is one of the things we don't understand, somebody able to say, after losing two of their legs, I'm doing great?

ROMO: Yes, it's hard for people to wrap their heads around, for sure.

CONAN: How is it that you explain it to them, or do you?

ROMO: Well, I guess it depends on the person asking because, you know, I mean, the question by itself, you know, is presented a lot. But it depends, you know, how they're - it really depends how they're asking it. And so a lot of people are sympathetic. A lot of people, you know, have a lot of pity. It's - you know, it just depends. You know, to me, it doesn't seem nearly as big a deal as people make it out to be, I guess.

CONAN: And pity - I suspect pity is not one of those things that's all that welcome.

ROMO: No, no. You know, not that - I should say first that me and my family are very, very grateful at all the well-wishes that people have. But pity is just not - I would say it's almost insulting for those who have sacrificed, I mean, just to see that coming back at them. It's just not - I don't know how you - any other way to say it.

CONAN: And I wonder: This must have happened to you both before and after the IED explosion that cost you your legs. People come up to you and say, thanks for your service.

ROMO: Oh sure, all the time.

CONAN: And how does that make you feel?

ROMO: Well, yeah, I mean, I'm very appreciative. I mean, it's - it's definitely well-received, but there's a lot of - there's a lot that you can tell people don't understand about it. You know, like I said, you can tell a lot of what people feel is pity. You know, people seem to think that we're taking it harder than we actually are.

You know, we all went into Afghanistan knowing that we - I should say, we already made the sacrifice before we even went. We knew what we were getting ourselves into, and we made that sacrifice willingly. Of course, there's exceptions. You know, people weren't expecting - you know, it's one thing to play it out in your mind, another to actually live it.

But I can say for the vast majority of people who have lost - and I can speak with confidence for those who didn't come back, knowing them - that they would do it again.

CONAN: That Pew survey I mentioned shows that the majority of the American public, 52 percent, doesn't think the war in Afghanistan was worth it. And they might think that, in part, because of the losses that people like you suffered. But I wonder: How do you and your colleagues in the 3rd of the 5th, how do you feel?

ROMO: Well, it's - I don't think it's anybody's right who didn't fight to say that it wasn't worth going over there and fighting. If nothing else, that spits in the face of everyone who willingly, and continues to willingly, sacrifice. I can say from a personal experience that if nothing else, when I got there, the area that we were in, people were living in complete fear and oppression. And by the time we left, they were walking around freely able to enjoy what they wanted to.

And even if that goes to crap, even if they - you know, they completely fall back in the same rut they did before, if nothing else, they got to live that for a short period of time. So I think that that was worth it.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get some callers in on the conversation. We want to speak to those of you who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and find out about what the rest of us don't understand. And we'll begin with Andre(ph), Andre with us from Goose Creek in South Carolina.

ANDRE: Hey, how are you doing?

CONAN: Very well, thanks.

ANDRE: Hey, I want to thank you so much for your service. I'm currently active-duty military as well. And I just want to commend you on like, your wife for being so supportive. And like, I'm married, too, as well. And the toll that it takes on your family is way more than anyone can believe. I have more military spouses telling my wife, thank you for your service, than I ever get out in public, you know?

And the public doesn't realize that it's not - the public as a whole doesn't recognize it. Military families recognize the sacrifice that military members are (unintelligible).

CONAN: And Andre, it sounds like you may have heard Jake Romo in one of Tom Bowman's pieces on the radio.

ANDRE: I haven't. I haven't heard.

CONAN: Yeah, yeah. Jake, well, you are married. You do have a wife. And she, well, shocked to get the news, but I'm told she's pretty supportive, too.

ROMO: Oh certainly. Once she knew that, you know, I was OK mentally, then she was fine. When she knew that I was fine, she was fine.

CONAN: Andre, are you scheduled to go deploy in Afghanistan?

ANDRE: I'm actually in a training status right now. I'm in a Navy nuclear power program. And I'm in the last leg of the power program and hopefully, I'll be stationed somewhere - hopefully, Hawaii, or somewhere where I can actually do something that's worthwhile, you know?

CONAN: Navy nuclear power sub program, for submarines?

ANDRE: Yeah, submarine service.

CONAN: OK, good luck with that.

ANDRE: Thank you so much.

CONAN: And we hope you get to go to Hawaii, too. It sounds like a good service.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

ANDRE: I know. Have a good one.

CONAN: Thanks very much. I mentioned Tom Bowman, who's done a series of stories about the 3rd of the 5th Marines. He joins us here in Studio 3A. And Tom, I think what Jake Romo's been

telling us, that seemed to be what you heard from a lot of veterans who came back from Afghanistan.

TOM BOWMAN, BYLINE: That's right, not only 3-5 Marines, Neal, but also with a lot of the other Marines and soldiers spoken with, both in Iraq and Afghanistan. They decided to join the service. They think they've made a difference. And it grates on them when they come home and people kind of pity them, you know, just like Jake was talking about; that again, it was their choice. They can see a clear difference, and they would - many of them would do it all over again.

CONAN: And there was - some of the stories involved the families of men who didn't come back and yet they, too, seemed to think this was worth it.

BOWMAN: That's right, and as Jake said, it's a safer place in Sangin. Kids are going back to school. More markets are opening. The district governor now can move around his district fairly easily; he couldn't before. So we talked to a couple of families who lost Marines over in Sangin, and they all point to those improvements and say, my son - or my husband - did make a difference, and I'm proud of him.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get another caller in on the conversation. This is Chris(ph), and Chris on the line with us from Columbus in Wisconsin.

CHRIS: Yes, I find that a lot of people don't understand the desire to serve. By the way, semper fi from 1-6 Marine. And, you know, when I say that I'm getting deployed, I get a lot of aw, that's too bad. And it's like no, I want to go. You don't understand. I was disappointed when we got delayed in a deployment. You know, I want to go.

And culturally, I think that we needed Iraq and Afghanistan to learn the lessons of Vietnam, where we respect the soldier and the soldier's family, irregardless of the political conditions involved.

CONAN: It was interesting, Chris, in one of Tom Bowman's - piece, there was a soldier - a Marine, excuse me, who said: You know, you train to be on the first team your whole life; yeah, you want to get in the game.

CHRIS: That's right. I'm - you know, I don't want to sit on the sidelines. I want to do what I'm trained to do. And that means get out there and not only be involved at the tip of the spear but also the blocks in the wall, and holding up the infrastructure and the people of Afghanistan and Iraq.

CONAN: And Chris, you set to go back?

CHRIS: Oh, absolutely. We were supposed to go back here in a couple months, but we got delayed until fiscal year 2013, and I'm so ready to go.

CONAN: Chris, thanks very much for the call. We appreciate it.

CHRIS: Thank you.

CONAN: Jake Romo, would you agree with that? I mean, you - one of the things you loved most in life was running. That's something you're never going to be able to do again.

ROMO: Well, I wouldn't say never. But...

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

CONAN: OK, go ahead. Go ahead, Jake.

ROMO: Oh, I wouldn't say never, but it certainly wouldn't be the same. I loved running for - not necessarily for the physical aspect or anything like that. It was more of a sense of freedom. You know, imagine, you know, you're halfway across - you're 20 miles across town and your car breaks down and, you know, you have that thing in the back of your mind; like, that's OK. I'll just grab a bottle of water and run home.

You know, and that's a little extreme, but that's the sense of freedom that - I enjoyed running so much because I could tell you, honestly, I ran more than I drove, and it was at least seven or eight miles to work.

CONAN: And what do you do now to replace that?

ROMO: Oh, anything, really. Anything can replace it. It's an act of - for me, it's just an act of mental conditioning. You know, I - there's other things - the idea behind the philosophy of it is to attack the insecurities in your mind, at least that was for me. Now that I'm more or less confined to a wheelchair, I've taken up - because I grew up in the martial arts community. I've gone back, and I've started training again.

Moreover, I've begun to teach, and we're - I've been working with a local studio. I'm working with developing a serious self-defense program for guys in wheelchairs. So that would very much replace that, and that sense of freedom of not being limited to what you think, or what other people think you're capable of doing.

I mean, it's a number of things. My right hand, for example, is damaged, and I have limited or, you know, relatively limited dexterity. So teaching my hand to do fine motor skills; for example, I'm big into firearms for, you know, obvious reasons. So...

CONAN: Hang on to that thought, Jake. We've got to take a short break. We're talking about the military, war and sacrifice. If you or a family member served in Iraq or Afghanistan, what don't the rest of us understand? Give us a call, 800-989-8255. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News. I'm Neal Conan. Less than 1 percent of Americans have served on active duty in the military in the past decade. For the rest of us, it's often difficult to understand the challenges, and the sacrifices, of those who serve and their families, and to know how to recognize that service.

A recent piece in the Washington Post quoted an Army battalion commander at Fort Stewart, Georgia. Lieutenant Colonel Michael Jason(ph) wrote on his Facebook page on Memorial Day: Don't thank me for my service. Don't give me 5 percent off my Starbuck's. Don't worry about yellow ribbons. Do me this one favor: Tell your children there's another calling out there. Talk to your kids about serving their country and their fellow citizens.

If you or a family member served in Iraq or Afghanistan, what don't the rest of us understand - 800-989-8255 is the phone number. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation at our website. That's at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

NPR Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman is with us. He did a series of reports on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED about the sacrifices of the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines, Darkhorse Battalion. You can listen to those pieces through a link at our website. Again, go to npr.org, and click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Also with us is Jake Romo, who's with the 3rd of the 5th, a lance corporal, and lost his legs in an IED explosion there. Let's see if we can go next to Greg(ph), Greg on the line with us from Pittsburgh.

GREG: Hey, how are you guys doing today?

CONAN: Good, thanks.

GREG: Great. Well, I guess the comment I wanted to have was, I think what most people don't get is being thanked puts us in a little bit of an uncomfortable position because we never know really how to respond other than, I appreciate that, you know; saying, I appreciate that.

CONAN: And there's another expression that some people use when people come home from Iraq or Afghanistan: You're all heroes. I wonder, Greg, have you heard that?

GREG: I've heard that, but I don't think that applies to everybody because less than - what, 2 percent of the forces that deploy actually ever see combat. And so, you know, those of us that do deploy have a lot of respect for the folks that are out there on the front lines, and most respect for those that are injured. You know, those are the real heroes. The rest of us, we're doing our part and supporting them, but those are the real heroes to me.

CONAN: Jake Romo, I wanted to ask you about that. Obviously, you did see combat.

ROMO: Yeah, yeah.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

ROMO: I did.

CONAN: Yeah. And how do you respond when people say you're a hero?

ROMO: Well, it's kind of - I'm going to try to put this in a perspective that you can - like, anyone can grasp. I mean, I don't know, almost as if, you know, you're pulling into the supermarket, and you pull into a parking space, and someone comes up and compliments you on, like, man, that was an awesome parking job. You know what I'm saying? It's the - what we did, we chose to do. We trained really hard to do. You know, for us, it was a lot, you know, a lot of misery, not - you know, I shouldn't say it was all bad, by any means, but it was very hard. And it wasn't something we did for thanks or, you know, expecting one day to stand on some kind of pedestal.

But it's just really hard to take. It's almost awkward, having someone sitting there and trying to thank you for that. It's - I don't know.

CONAN: I'm not going to leave you feeling awkward.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

CONAN: Tom, Tom Bowman, there was an officer you quoted in, I think, your piece who said there was an - a lot of sadness when the 30 Americans, most of them Navy SEALs, were killed in a helicopter crash - or actually, shot down in a helicopter in Afghanistan. You said the thing that people don't understand is those men were there doing their job. They got it.

BOWMAN: That's right. They were doing exactly what they wanted to, and that's what - Darkhorse comes in here and the same kind of thing, too, that they all signed up for this. It's an all-volunteer force. They knew what they were getting into. I think particularly if you're with a Marine infantry unit, in this day and age, you know you're going to see combat. So 3-5 is the same as 1-6, the guy that called earlier.

They're in Helmand province. It's still a very dangerous place now, just as Anbar province was in Iraq. They will see combat if they're in those kinds of units.

CONAN: Let's go next to John(ph), John with us from Laramie, Wyoming.

JOHN: Thank you for taking my call. First, I would like to thank Lance Corporal Romo for his service and his sacrifice. My nephew was one of the 3-5 Marines that was killed. And one of the - a couple of the things that I think America really doesn't understand is that we're losing some of the best young men of that generation.

These are young men who volunteered and are training for this mission, and they know what they're getting themselves into, and they're some of the best young men of their generation. And I think there should be more recognition from the American public.

America also doesn't realize that the 3-5 is a very elite unit, and you don't just get drawn out of a hat to go in that unit; you're selected because you are an exceptional Marine.

CONAN: John, can you tell us your nephew's name so we can have a moment to remember him?

JOHN: Lance Corporal Alec Catherwood. Romo, do you remember him?

ROMO: Yeah, I was about 50 feet away when he died.

JOHN: God bless you, Romo.

ROMO: It's hard to hear that name.

JOHN: Well, we would like to include you in some of our family things if you could hang on and get my number later.

CONAN: We'll get the number, John. We'll put you on hold and get your number, and forward it to Jake Romo.

JOHN: Thank you. I just want to say that America needs to understand what these boys are going through, and this was some of the hardest fighting in this entire war, and they knew what they were getting into.

CONAN: John, thanks very much, and we're sorry for your loss.

JOHN: Thank you.

CONAN: We put John on hold, and we'll get him that information. He did mention, Jake Romo, the 3rd of the 5th, an elite unit. People who saw the miniseries on HBO, "The Pacific," that was the 3rd of the 5th. This is one of the most famous units in a famous outfit, the Marines Corps.

BOWMAN: That's right, and they saw service in World War I, at Belleau Wood, and some of the other tough fights in Vietnam, as well. And the caller raised a really interesting point. Now remember, these guys, many of them are in their early to mid-20s. And they have a certain sense of responsibility, and they've seen things that most of us double their age have never seen. And I think that's what's really remarkable here, a maturity level.

And some of these guys not only are fighting for their country, but they're doing things like running villages or towns in Afghanistan and Iraq. There's a gunnery sergeant that's in charge of education programs in this huge district of Afghanistan. So the responsibility not only, you know, facing enemy fire but just what they're doing day-in and day-out over there, for their age, is really quite remarkable.

CONAN: Here's an email that we have from Dave(ph): The man who would have been my brother-in-law, Corporal Stephen McGowan(ph), drove over an IED and was killed on March 4, 2005. Despite the horror of what his comrades experienced recovering his body, many have re-enlisted and prolonged their careers.



These men have so much faith in their mission and their country, it puts the rest of us to shame. We complain about traffic and day-to-day problems while these men spend multiday missions living out of their backpacks, sleeping in the sand.

Let's go next to Angela(ph), Angela with us from Suffolk in Virginia.

ANGELA: Hi, yes. I just wanted to say - well, actually this is a great show for me because my husband got home from Afghanistan a year ago today. And he spent most of last year - he's a Navy medical type with the Marines Corps in Helmand province.

And, you know, what most people don't understand is, you know, the lack of communication for the family members. I mean, I never felt sorry for myself, but I never spoke to him for five months, either. And, you know, we have three kids. And it's very hard to - you sort of put your life on hold.

It's not like, you know, they go away for a business trip, and they come back, or you could call them if things come up. There was a period of time I couldn't even email him. So that's what people - they just, you know, he - I would have to send him food. You know, the food was - you know, they had no mess hall. I mean, it was just different, and people don't understand that.

CONAN: Angela, we're glad your husband made it. And Tom, there's that dichotomy. A lot of the time, the troops in the Marines are able to speak with their families by Skype or email almost instantly, or Facebook. Yet, as Angela says, a lot of the time they're completely out of touch.

BOWMAN: That's right. If you were in some sort of combat outpost, a small combat outpost, you have very little communication back home. The larger bases, like Bagram and Kandahar - I mean, it's almost like being at Andrews Air Force Base when you go to some of these places. There are plenty of computers and telephones and everything else, so you can communicate back home.

Way out in the field, though, where we spent some time with the troops back in June and basically look like vacant lots, or they would take over a house or something, there's no way to get a message out from there. So sometimes it can be very difficult.

CONAN: Jake Romo, I was wondering if you could speak for a moment about the Navy corpsmen. They're the medics who work with the Marines. Do they still call them squids?

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

ROMO: No, no, no. Squids is more or less a more derogatory term for, you know, Navy personnel who don't really - don't want anything to do with combat. So we - you know, the Marine Corps and the Navy have a little bit of a rivalry; we always have. No, no. The corpsmen we very affectionately refer to as doc, unless they just don't deserve it - but they usually do. They're right up there at the front with us. And we - they command a huge respect because most of the time when we're all shooting back, you know, what the - any reasonable person would do when fired upon, they are ignoring fire and looking for casualties and, you know, exposing

themselves to take care of, take care of our wounded. So they command a huge respect. There's - I can't think of any, you know - they're definitely way up there at the top with anyone I would serve with.

CONAN: Angela, is here - what's your husband up to now?

ANGELA: Well, he's still in the Navy, 20 years, and he's at a hospital in Portsmouth, the naval hospital in Portsmouth. So - but he enjoyed it. And you know, we - like I say, we - he went voluntarily. He chose to go. And, you know, Navy is a way - it's a way of life for us, you know? So it's a - but it was an interesting experience, and I would do it all over again. I really would.

CONAN: Angela, thanks very much for the call.

ANGELA: Thank you.

CONAN: Here's an email from William. We're becoming more and more remote from our military. I'm a veteran. My son is now a veteran. The general public have no idea what it's like to be in the military. The draft is a distant memory. My son's friends from high school and college have a video-game image of military service. Our day-to-day exposure to the military has also decreased due to the bases being closed and consolidated. And Tom Bowman, that's an interesting point, and one - if that's accurate, we're going to be seeing more of that.

BOWMAN: That's right. A lot of the bases have closed in the North, and still open in the South. And if you look at where the recruits come from, the large part come from kind of the Midwest, small-town Midwest, and the South. And a lot of the ROTC programs to get officers, over the decades, have closed in the North, and there are more of them in the South now. So you're starting to see almost a military caste system come in, where certain segments of the country are being recruited and volunteer. And various parts of the country, particularly among the elites on the East and West Coasts, have pretty much walked away from the military.

CONAN: I wonder, Jake Romo, that writer said his dad was a veteran and so was he. You have a young son now. Would you encourage him to join the Marines?

ROMO: Well, I wasn't particularly encouraged to join the Marines. Neither was my father. It was just something that I saw, and I saw honorable attributes in my father, and that's what I pursued. So if I (unintelligible) myself as such for my son and he sees those things and he saw, you know, that the Marine Corps had a positive influence on me, and he wanted to do that for the right reasons, I would be all for it. Now, I wouldn't particularly encourage it. I think that's like pushing anything else unnecessarily. I wouldn't push my agenda on anybody, especially my son.

CONAN: Jake Romo, a lance corporal in the Darkhorse Battalion, the 3rd of the 5th Marines. Also with us, Tom Bowman, NPR Pentagon correspondent whose series on Darkhorse Battalion and the Afghan War you can listen to; go to [npr.org](http://npr.org), click on TALK OF THE NATION. And this is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

And this is Beth from Hillsborough, North Carolina. I think it's a misconception the public doesn't understand what members of the military go through. While we may not walk in your shoes, World War II and Vietnam aren't that long ago. Many people still alive - our siblings, our parents - fought in these wars. Everyone else knew the impact. Military members are trained to see what they do as their work. We have enormous respect for you. It's not you or your service we question; it's the war itself, the killing and suffering. We commend you but don't want the government to send you to war for the wrong reasons. And I wonder, Jake Romo, have you heard other people express that opinion?

ROMO: I'm sorry?

CONAN: Have you heard others express that opinion?

ROMO: More or less. How you - it's just the norm. It's what you get used to. It's not necessarily that you're trained to do a particular thing. It's just - that's just how you see it, and that's what you're around all the time, especially if you're not married. You live on - you know, you live on base, and that's almost 24/7. So you don't really have - it becomes more normal than what people consider a civilian lifestyle.

CONAN: OK. Let's go next to Matthew, Matthew calling from Philadelphia.

MATTHEW: Yeah. Hi. I actually did two tours in Iraq. I worked in an operations center - and just the millions and millions of people that we were able to help out. But the first one, we had an area roughly the size of Rhode Island, and my second deployment was roughly the size of the state of Oregon. And we helped build new schools; we implemented a new government. We turned back a lot of ops over - back to the Iraqis, and everything else. And it's all completely worth it. That country was in such torment and just absolute tyranny. We gave it liberty and justice that people take for granted. The war is completely worth it, as well as the sacrifice.

CONAN: And I wonder: Earlier, Jake Romo said - talking about the accomplishments of his battalion in Helmand Province - said, you know, if it all goes to crap later, well, even so, it was worth it. Do you feel the same way about your service in Iraq?

MATTHEW: Oh, of course. The way I look at it, sir, is the island of Iwo Jima, over four days of fighting, we lost over 4,000 Marines - was that, 50-some Marines an hour. And in Iraq and Afghanistan today, we've lost roughly about 6,200, which translates to right around one every 12 hours. And Iraq and Afghanistan are a lot bigger places, a lot more people, with a lot more (unintelligible) Iwo Jima ever was. The sacrifice was completely worth it.

CONAN: Matt...

MATTHEW: I would go back in a heartbeat.

CONAN: ...thanks very much for the call. Appreciate it.

MATTHEW: No problem.

CONAN: And Tom Bowman, as we enter a new era of military cuts, as we wind down the wars - in Iraq, all U.S. combat troops are supposed to be out by the end of this year, and Afghanistan by 2014 - as we evaluate these conflicts, there's going to be this very difficult rash of emotions that people are going to feel differently all over the place. How do you think - what do you think the military is going to take away from these conflicts?

BOWMAN: Well, I think the military clearly - well, first of all, we have to say we don't know how the - both are going to turn out. I asked one senior Marine officer - we were talking about what Darkhorse went through and I said, do you think it was worth it? And he said, well, that depends how Afghanistan turns out. And that's still an open question. In Iraq, there are still troubles there as well. All troops will be out, as you say, by the end of the year. There are still divisions between Sunni and Shiite over there.

The Kurdish area is a problem. So you know, it's an open question to how Iraq will turn out as well. So I think, clearly, the military will look at Iraq and say, we achieved what we wanted to. We got rid of Saddam Hussein. We created something over there. Now, it's for them to move forward. But Afghanistan, definitely an open question.

CONAN: Tom Bowman, thanks very much, as always, for your time.

BOWMAN: You're welcome.

CONAN: Jake Romo, good luck to you.

ROMO: Thank you, sir.

CONAN: Happy Thanksgiving.

ROMO: Same to you.

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