

SWEETAPPLE SEARCH 2013

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Exploits Search and Rescue

Search Summary: Ches Sweetapple

Date of Incident July 27-Aug 2, 2013

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Background

The Exploits Search and Rescue Team is a highly trained and well equipped volunteer emergency response unit serving communities throughout Central Newfoundland. The Team was originally established in 1982 as the result of an initiative by Emergency Measures and the RCMP, who saw a need for organized and trained groups to assist police in locating missing persons. It is one of 24 teams, containing almost 900 members, currently operating throughout the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Today the Exploits Team provides search and rescue services to residents and communities from Harbour Breton and Bay D'Espoir in the south to Notre Dame Bay and Gander Bay in the north, from Badger Lake in the west to Glenwood in the East. To put this into perspective, this is an area somewhat larger than Cape Breton Island and almost twice the size of the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Members of the Exploits Search and Rescue team receive basic training in map and compass and GPS navigation, radio communications, first aid, wilderness survival, the psychology of lost persons, search techniques and procedures. In addition, members can receive training in evidence search techniques, emergency traffic control, wilderness first aid, ice rescue, high angle and helicopter rescue, tracking, swift water rescue, rope and rigging management and water search techniques. In most cases training is provided by skilled and certified trainers from within the Team however trained professionals are available to assist when further certification is needed.

The Exploits Search and Rescue Team is a licensed charitable organization and is largely self supporting. With the assistance of local communities, through the use of grants and through extensive fundraising efforts, the Team has been able to build up a large inventory of equipment to fulfill its various roles and to construct a building in which to house these assets. While it is one thing to obtain equipment; it is quite another endeavor to maintain these resources in an operational condition. Fundraising and the support of local communities remains a continuing priority for Team members. Members themselves are completely volunteer and receive no compensation for their efforts. Members also equip themselves at their own expense and frequently contribute their own vehicles, ATVs, snowmobiles, boats and other personal resources to search efforts.

Since its inception in 1982 the Team has responded to well over 250 lost or missing people's situations and acted as a support on numerous occasions. On average the team responds to 15 – 20 operational call-outs per year. These included searches for lost persons, evacuation of injured persons from isolated locations, water searches for drowning victims, body recoveries and assisting with traffic control and evacuation of residents during a local fire emergency. In addition the Team provided traffic control and first aid services at local public events. Our facility also serves as an emergency warming and crisis centre in the event of a widespread power outages or disaster.

The members of the Exploits Search and Rescue Team are committed to assisting the citizens and communities of Central Newfoundland in times of crisis. Through our

continued training and upgrading of equipment, we hope, with the support of local communities, to provide a quality service that people can call on in their time of need for many years to come.

Search Overview

On July 27/2013 Exploits Ground Search and Rescue was contacted by the RCMP regarding a missing 74 year old male, Ches Sweetapple in the Red Indian Lake area of Central Newfoundland. At 21:40, a call was put out to team members and the search team left Grand Falls – Windsor for the Harbour Round area of Red Indian lake located South of Millertown, NL (see appendix A). The Exploits Search and Rescue team, with additional support from the Red Indian Lake SAR team, RCMP, Universal Helicopters and 103 SAR squadron continued the effort to locate Mr. Sweetapple for 7 days . On the MORNING of day 7 Mr. Sweetapple was located alive by Exploits SAR members with the assistance of Universal Helicopters and flown to Corner Brook for emergency medical treatment. For location see appendix A.

Resources

Equipment

- *Transportation* - members typically use their own personal vehicles to travel to search locations to be reimbursed a small kilometer rate. At the time the team operated 2 vehicles - a Mobile Command Centre bus as well as a team pick up.
- *All terrain vehicles* - on the search most ATV's were owned by team members, at the time the team owned 1 atv.
- *Generators* - the team had several gas powered generators in operation in order to power the command and communication centre.
- *Radios*- during the search the team operated communications with hand held radio systems .

Partnerships

Ground search and rescue in Newfoundland and Labrador have fostered many positive partnerships over the years of operations that aid in key components of a search. In this case, the initial call came to the RCMP who in turn activated the volunteer rescue team. Once on site the involvement of the air support came from JRCC and the 103 Rescue Squadron out of Gander. Given it was night time they were the only available option for night flights. This call is made by the RCMP based on need and consultation with the search and rescue coordinator.

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The following day air services were provided by Universal Helicopters under the government standing offer for air support . Universal Helicopters have been utilized on searches across the province on countless occasions with generally a very high success rate in locating missing persons.

When warranted search and rescue teams often partner with other teams who may be in close proximity or familiar with search locations. In this case, members from the Red Indian Lake SAR team were called to assist for their expert knowledge of the area as well as the numbers needed to effectively search such a large area..

Timeline

July 26

Ches Sweetapple arrived in Millertown- left his cabin to go berry picking

July 27

22:40--RCMP Contact Exploits Search and Rescue to begin the search. **RCMP FILE # 2013-940013**

22:55--Team departed GFW, met up with Red Indian SAR at Millertown Jct and headed to the last known location.

July 28

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0018--team arrived on scene and began hasty search in the Harbour Round Area of Red Indian Lake

0030--Truck located on woods road, no sign of Mr Sweetapple, glasses and cell phone left on the seat of the truck.

Location **N 48 36' 39.67"**

W 56 57' 35.54"

0040--Group of 20 searchers and several ATV's searched the area around the truck and bog area. 2 red parachute flares put up, visibility good, megaphone used to call out Mr Sweetapples name.

0210--hasty search of the local area completed with negative results. Members checked cabins in the nearby vicinity as well as the large bog located adjacent to Mr Sweetapples truck.

0220--call made to Sgt Keith Frampton of RCMP at headquarters in St John's to request air support for daylight.

0250--all team members out of the woods and reported back to the command center, operation stood down until daylight, members to get some much needed rest.

0300--word from JRCC that cormorant helicopter will be joining the search around 0630.

0545--team heading back into the woods to re-examine the area of bog and surrounding wooded sections in the daylight.

0618--Rescue 912 out of Gander on site and starting grid search

0628-- communications made with Rescue 912, operating on marine radio, channel 19

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0630--members on quad to search surrounding forestry roads

0815--Rescue 912 heading to refuel in Deer Lake, no sign of missing person

1005--Rescue 912 back on site and continuing search pattern

1135--food arrives from Grand Falls-Windsor to feed the search group

1150--searchers back at command centre for lunch

1213--Rescue 912 returning to Gander, completed their initial search of area

1237--search team back in woods to continue to search for Mr Sweetapple

1237--RCMP Dog Handler (Glenn Brown) and his dog on site to help with search, Universal Helicopters on site with Sar Team spotters on board to resume with aerial search

1240--Dwayne King, Steve Saunders, Brandon Sheppard and Adam Glavine heading to search Sweetapples cabin and area around it.

1435--Dwayne and his group back at command, reported that at the cabin, meds were left on table, food was dropped on floor but not put away, shed was left unlocked but cabin was locked.

1445--Universal Helicopters heading back to Deer Lake to refuel and will return to scene again

1530--RCMP Dog Handler completed search of bog area and 50 ft into woods surrounding the bog area. Dog Handler proceeded to check the area from the pickup location to the main road.

1546--Universal Helicopters back on site with 3 SAR spotters on board and resuming aerial search

1700--Helicopter landed, no sign or any clues spotted, returning back to Gander

1715-- members returning to the command centre and packing up to return to SAR building in Grand Falls-Windsor.

1930--Team members back at SAR Bldg, GFW to start clean up equipment, replenish supplies and fuel

2200--team members leave building to head home for some rest.

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18 members of Exploits SAR and 9 members of Red Indian SAR responded

July 29

0640--6 members of Exploits SAR head out to scene to resume search for Ches Sweetapple, group to meet up with members from Red Indian SAR team at site

0847--team arrive on site and continue their search further up the bog, Dog Handler on site assisting as well

1015-- team noticed a track, Dog Handler searched area but with negative results

1200--team back at command to have lunch

1245--members resume search of bog area

1345--9 person grid search completed of bog area

1600--team heading to Sweetapples cabin again with RCMP to search for reported money that Mr Sweetapple may have been carrying

1755--Team heading back to GFW

1925--Team arrives back at Sar Bldg GFW

2030--Equipment all cleaned up, stock replenished , ready to respond again

RCMP has decided to stand team down the next day and await further investigation on their part

July 30- Team asked to stand down. Awaiting instruction from RCMP

July 31- Team asked to stand down. Awaiting instructions from RCMP

Aug 1

1330--Exploits SAR coordinator met with RCMP to discuss progress so far. All notes of search were discussed and put a plan in place to resume the search for Mr Sweetapple again the next morning

Aug 2

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0700--4 members left GFW to head to site to resume search. They will meet up with Red Indian SAR and Universal Helicopters at site. RCMP member Mike Fewer will be on site to assist

0858--Team arrives on site to resume ground and aerial search.

1045--Ches Sweetapple spotted from air in bog area, chopper landed, medical assistance rendered, it was determined that Mr Sweetapple was critical, he was packaged and loaded onto the helicopter and transported to Corner Brook hospital. Cpl Mike Fewer travelled with Mr Sweetapple. 2 SAR spotters were left on the location site to be picked up later.

1120--all team members back to command, awaiting return of 2 SAR spotters

1300--2 SAR spotters picked up by Universal Helicopters and transported back to command.

1330--Team left search area, SAR member driving Mr Sweetapple's truck back to RCMP Detachment GFW

1530--Team back at SAR Bldg GFW

1800--Team equipment all cleaned up and vehicles all refueled

Mr Sweetapple **located at N 48 35' 24.3"**

W 56 59' 30.6

Challenges:

Information

It was initially communicated that Mr Sweetapple had gone berry picking on July 27th however as it turns out he was actually missing the day before on July 26. This immediately put Mr Sweetapple nearly 24 hours ahead of search teams on the ground and air. In most searches, lack of information when search teams arrive on scene is one of the most challenging obstacles. . It takes time for RCMP to locate people, collect

the information and relay it to the search team. In many cases, information is not available and teams have to try to figure out all possible scenarios.

Communications

Given the location of the search – radio communication with team members , RCMP was a challenge from the command centre. Cell Phone service in the area was non-existent. In order to obtain cell coverage, members had to travel 10 + kms to get service in order to make a simple phone call. This poses a logistical and safety issue as is the case with many of our search locations. This creates issues in planning, collecting and gathering information, relaying important information to team members or back to the command centre. The Exploits SAR Team has acquired radio repeaters to help with communications and tracking members in the field but still does not allow us to communicate with the outside world. Teams have started to use In Reach systems that allow us to text message through satellites, this has helped but as with any third party system, it comes at a cost. Volunteer groups required to purchase these units at \$800 each with a \$25 monthly fee, plus usage becomes taxing on teams with limited funds.

Terrain/accessibility

The majority of terrain had to be covered by Air or on foot. Given the bog structure and lack of forestry access roads this produced a significant challenge in terms of search team access to potential locations. The search area only had one forest access road in the area with much of that road grown in with alders due to lack of use. This posed a problem in getting members in and out of the search area. The Team was able to access some of the area by ATV's and Argo but the majority was accessed only by foot.

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Air support was provided to the search which enabled members to search from the air, which meant more area was able to be searched in a shorter period of time. In the end, the air support was a critical key in being able to locate Mr Sweetapple alive.

Volunteer fatigue

Ground search and rescue in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is run by volunteers. When search activities extend beyond 1-3 days the issue of volunteer fatigue and retainment becomes an issue. The majority of SAR members work full time jobs with family and other commitments . Oftentimes our team members have availed of personal days, vacation days and unpaid leave to support the search operations. The Sweetapple case was a prime example in that the extended duration and difficult terrain presented an issue in member participation . We were fortunate enough to team up with the local Red Indian Lake SAR members on the days when our numbers were low.

Logistics

Every search and season provides different challenges in terms of team logistics and travel. The Sweetapple search location was 110+ kilometers from our base with limited access due to poor forestry road conditions. Keeping our team members, the RCMP members and other participating groups hydrated and fed can be a challenge when locations are so remote from typical services such as fuel, groceries and communications. On this search most members arrived on scene close to midnight and searched into the late hours of the night - only to resume the search again at daylight. The lack of sleep and difficult terrain is fatiguing and keeping members nourished during the first 24 hours was a challenge. In order to continue we had to bring fuel and supplies

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in from Buchans in the morning. On the night of the initial search team members also had to return back to town to facilitate the shift change of the RCMP and collect new information. At the end of each day the command centre post would have to be disassembled and all members had to return to our facility. Once back at the SAR building work continues on repairs, restocking of supplies and vehicle inspections.

Conclusion

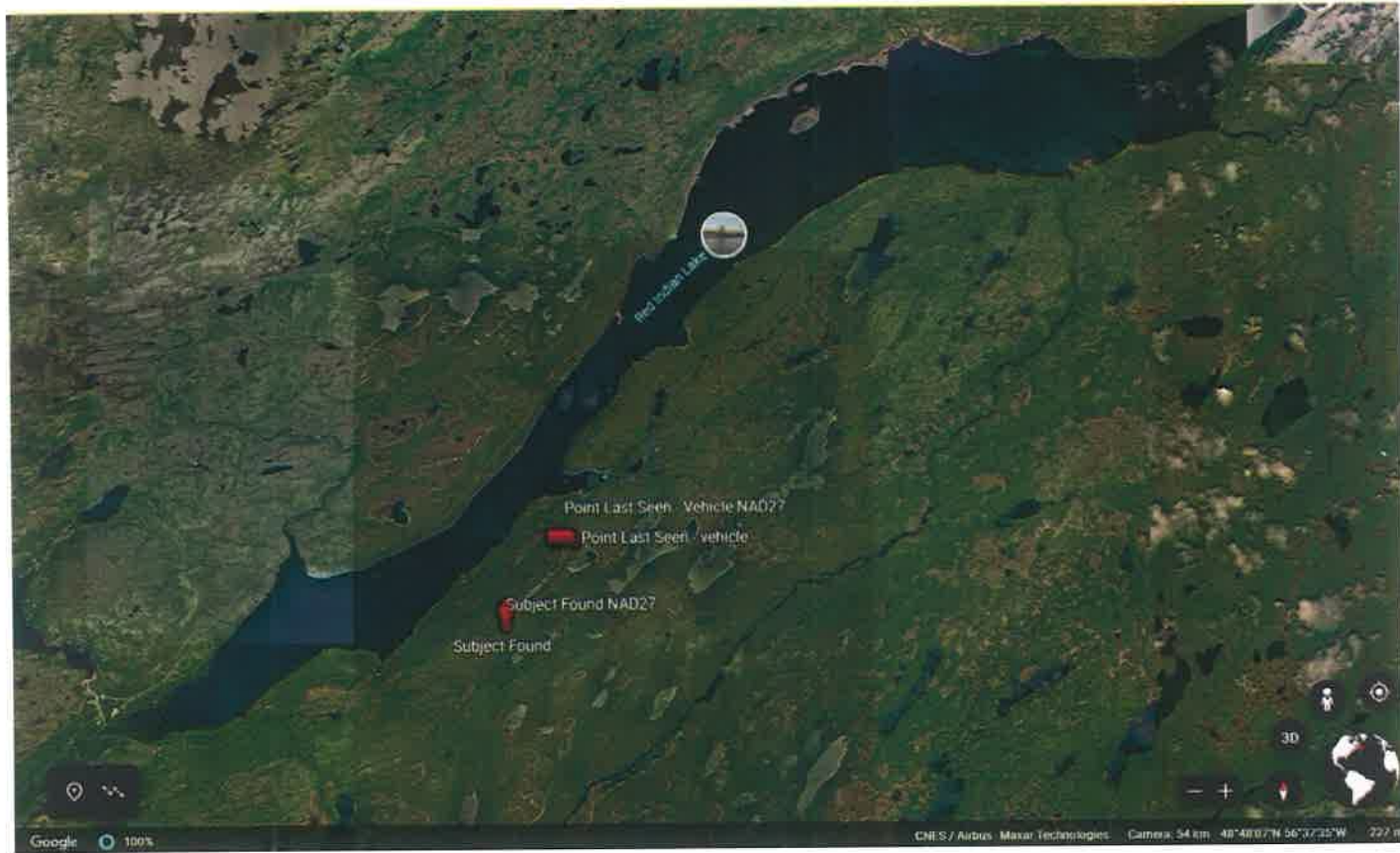
Every search has its own unique set of challenges and unknowns - these are often dictated by the weather, the terrain and quality of information available to the RCMP. Given previous searches and experience with air support , the team was very puzzled as to why Mr. Sweetapple was not located during the first several days of the search. The SAR 103 squadron fly a methodical grid pattern well beyond a reasonable area of probability and are professionals in every way when it comes to these operations. The air support provided through Universal helicopters for several days initially did not turn up any positive results either. Both the pilot of the Universal Helicopter and search members have experience as well in searching from the air. Given the age of Mr Sweetapple, medical conditions and the terrain it was highly unlikely that he had traveled far from his truck . The area was extensively searched on the ground as well with no positive results. He was eventually found approximately 3 kilometers , 7 days later from his last known location in an area of open bog.

Appendix A- Search Location

Search location- Central NL



Map of Location of Mr Sweetapples Truck and point last seen.

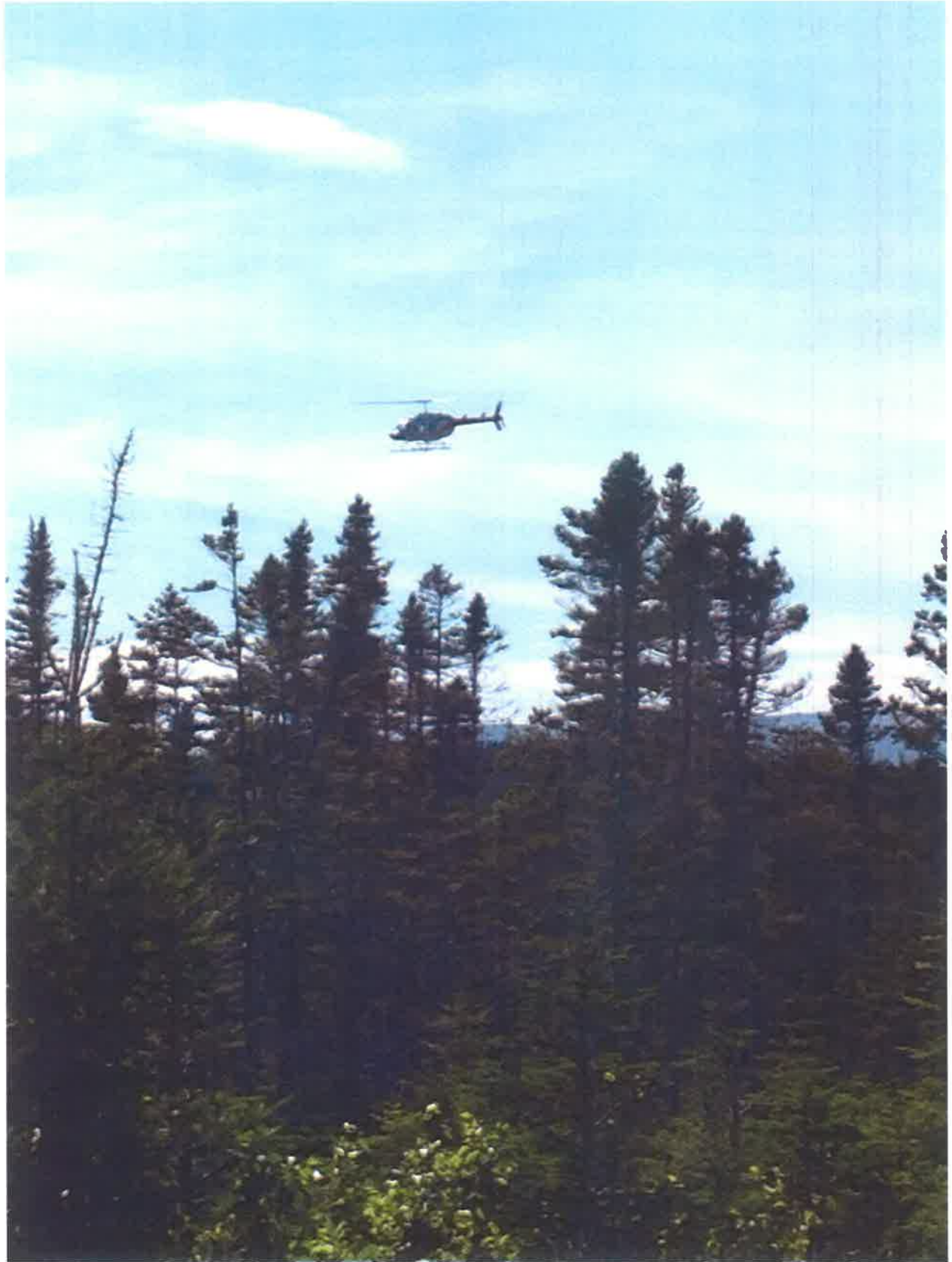




Appendix B - Search Photos







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