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Intelligence in Afghanistan

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The role of intelligence in war tends to be unclear, at least until enough time passes to allow the declassification of records necessary for historians to ply their trade. In the Second World War, for instance, revelations of the Ultra secret almost three decades after the end of the war substantially altered judgements on what transpired.¹ However, intelligence on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has been subject to a significant amount of public reporting thanks to a number of unauthorised disclosures. This reporting, together with personal experience, makes it possible to sketch a picture of the role intelligence played in supporting Australian operations in Afghanistan.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a personal perspective of intelligence support to land operations in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2014. In doing so, the chapter will touch on three main areas: organisation and structure, strategic support, and intelligence effectiveness.

When reading this chapter, a number of caveats should be borne in mind. The first is that intelligence remains *sub rosa*—subject to secrecy—and this is a fundamental constraint on what can be said by the author. The second is that much of the intelligence story in Iraq and Afghanistan—particularly in the air and at sea—is not mine to tell. Finally, this chapter is based on my experience of four and a half years of direct involvement in operations in Afghanistan, more than two of which were deployed.

1 See for instance F.W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1974.

In regard to wisdom, this chapter is dedicated to the memory of Graeme Clarke, a man who shaped the majority of today's Australian Army Intelligence Corps personnel through his experience, knowledge and peerless passion for one of the oldest of professions.

In writing this chapter, I have been mindful of the words of General Peter Cosgrove, who wrote in his biography that intelligence officers should 'bring you the facts, their careful deductions, [and] from time to time a courageous conclusion'.² I hope I have done justice to the General, Graeme Clarke, and the men and women I served with.

Context

There is, of course, history to this history. For army intelligence, the period leading into 2001 had not positioned it well for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Following Australia's military commitment to East Timor (1999 to 2005), the Australian Army Intelligence Corps was heavily committed and understaffed. Additionally, many of the Army's core intelligence collection capabilities, such as electronic warfare and human intelligence, were the victims of benign neglect. The deployment to East Timor in 1999 had also seen an ugly public brawl erupt between Cosgrove's chief intelligence staff officer (J2), Lieutenant Colonel Lance Collins, and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO). This dispute revolved around Collins's reported concerns about pro-Indonesian bias in DIO and the alleged switching off of a strategic intelligence pipeline from Canberra to the field.³ Relationships were not what they should have been.

The organisational consequences of these issues played out during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, forcing the Army's intelligence efforts into a decade of improvised and ad hoc arrangements, practices, technological innovations and tactical support structures.

With this context in mind, and to the extent that it is possible to describe an organisation across two theatres and over 10 years, what did intelligence in Afghanistan look like?

2 P. Cosgrove, *My Story*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2007.

3 P. Flood, *Report of the Inquiry into Australian Intelligence Agencies*, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 2004, Chapter 3.

The organisation and structure of intelligence support to operations in Afghanistan

While intelligence operations in Iraq and Afghanistan changed in structure and functional capability, there were three generic constants in its framework (see Figure 4).

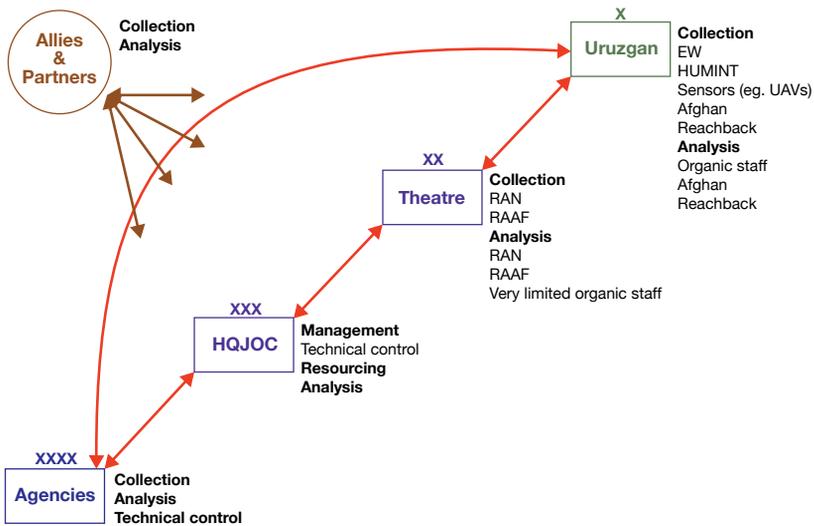


Figure 4: Australian intelligence collection and analysis arrangements in Afghanistan.

The first constant was coalition intelligence support. Australian intelligence efforts did not, of course, occur in a vacuum. Integral to intelligence, from the strategic to the tactical level, was the network of international resources from which the Army, Navy and Air Force could draw, be they Five Eyes, Nine Eyes (Five Eyes plus four close European partners),⁴ Fourteen Eyes (the extended network of NATO-linked international military partners operating in Afghanistan) or wider coalition. Indigenous intelligence reporting, with its own strengths and weaknesses, was also available. Of these, in my experience, I would contend that Australia benefited

4 See E. MacAskill and J. Ball, 'Portrait of the NSA', *Guardian*, 3 November 2013, www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/02/nsa-portrait-total-surveillance (retrieved 26 April 2020).

most from the Five Eyes relationships, thanks to the level of coverage, the resources available in support, and the depth of often complementary analysis undertaken by the various components of the coalition.

The second constant was Australian-based support. Forces in the area of operations (AO) were supported by strategic and operational intelligence efforts based in Australia. These efforts served four main functions: feeding the needs of their respective Canberra audiences (including Defence and wider national security intelligence, operations and policy circles); managing the intelligence resources provided to the AO; providing direction and oversight for intelligence operations in the AO; and providing support of varying degrees of usefulness to those within the AO.

Finally, there were the deployed ADF intelligence assets. Each of the services deployed elements to meet their own intelligence needs and to contribute to the joint picture. For example, there were specialist Air Force and Navy intelligence elements protecting platforms and providing intelligence support to their respective tasks, including counter-piracy, counter-smuggling and counter-terrorism. Then there were the deployed land intelligence elements, contributing to planning, force protection and situational awareness through sensors on such platforms as the Heron Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), and through such functions as human intelligence, electronic warfare and signals intelligence, and geographic intelligence. Ultimately, this information was, through the science of analysis and the art of fusion, turned into intelligence by analytical staff. While driven by the needs of commanders, this intelligence was basically focused on fighting the insurgency and understanding the muddled tapestry of Uruzgan's population and its power structures.

At this point, it is proper to recognise the contributions made by deployed civilians. Across all three of these constraints, civilians provided specialist expertise otherwise unavailable to the Army, which was particularly valuable in allowing our forces to leverage the capabilities of national agencies. This included the deployment of Defence civilians to Afghanistan to provide trusted and close intelligence support. These deployed civilians fully deserve the Operational Service Medal, and I am proud to have served with them.

Strategic support to intelligence operations in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the majority of my experience was with operational and strategic intelligence support, including direct support to deployed forces.

Drawing on the incomparable capabilities of allied partners, the scale of strategic intelligence support provided to deployed forces was considerable. In keeping with their acknowledged roles of supporting military operations and protecting Australian troops, Defence's three intelligence agencies: the Defence Intelligence Organisation, the Australian Signals Directorate and the Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation, all had deployed staff. These deployed elements provided, at least, liaison officers who were able to task their agencies in what was known as reach-back support. Each agency provided a unique service, which grew in utility over time. This utility was a product of both the significant resources committed and a developing understanding of how to support the deployed chief intelligence officer, J2 or S2 (at the lower echelon), of the Joint Task Force (JTF) and its respective subordinate units.

However, I do recall multiple conversations when ADF colleagues would criticise strategic support to deployed forces. Barbs might include that the agencies deployed people to be seen to be relevant, that the agencies did not trust ADF personnel with their capabilities, or that agencies wanted to prevent their capabilities from diffusing down into the Army. I also remember hearing several times that agency liaison officers would run single-source reports to commanding officers, without telling the Intelligence Staff Officer (S2), in a form of intelligence one-upmanship. I personally never saw failings of this nature, and the vast majority of agency staff I encountered were professional and dedicated.

So why mention what might be nothing more than rumours? Well, what I can say with certainty is that the central role of the S2 was assisted immensely by Headquarters Joint Operations Command (HQJOC) regularly evaluating the effectiveness of the supporting intelligence efforts. This held everyone, including agencies, accountable.

In my observation, there was a mostly healthy rivalry between the agencies, although there were times, often associated with particular personalities, when this was tested. I do recall seeing a poster in Tarin Kowt on the differences between the agencies. This poster expounded the virtues of

signals intelligence, and contrasted it with another intelligence function, represented by a stick figure holding what might have been a weapon, and the assessment: ‘There are bad men in Afghanistan.’

To my mind, one of the most important contributions made by strategic agencies was the provision of ‘actionable’ intelligence for targeting purposes. This type of intelligence is precisely what it sounds like. It involves a cycle of identifying individuals as insurgents, presenting this intelligence as part of a command decision to target, or not, and then providing accurate information to allow duly authorised action to be taken.

It is a matter of public record that intercepted phone calls informed decisions on who should be targeted by special forces. Media reports claim that mobile telephones can be located when an emitter is used to mimic a mobile telephone tower, convincing a target phone to connect through it.⁵ If the emitter is itself mobile, then triangulation can occur as the platform moves around and measures the target phone’s signal strength. It is a covert but deadly game of ‘Marco Polo’.

In 2011, an article in the *Australian Army Journal* titled ‘Australian special forces in Afghanistan: Supporting Australia in the “long war”’ stated that special forces, specifically Task Force 66, had the capabilities and role to ‘incapacitate’ the Taliban’s leadership. The author went on to conclude that ‘the effectiveness of these operations has ... been significant’.⁶

The ABC television program *Four Corners* later reported that Australian special forces had killed ‘dozens’ of Taliban commanders. It quoted an unnamed lieutenant colonel as saying that special forces missions to target insurgent leaders were provided with ‘very good’ intelligence, drawn from national agencies and ADF sources, on which decisions were based. It was claimed that the intelligence available to Task Force 66 often allowed it to ‘find’ and ‘fix’ a specific insurgent at a specific location, regardless of their physical appearance, clothing or efforts to avoid detection.

5 See for instance V.J. Appelbaum, J. Horchert and C. Stöcker, ‘Catalog advertises NSA toolbox’, *Der Spiegel*, 29 December 2013, www.spiegel.de/international/world/catalog-reveals-nsa-has-back-doors-for-numerous-devices-a-940994.html (retrieved 14 March 2020).

6 I. Langford, ‘Australian special forces in Afghanistan: Supporting Australia in the “long war”’, *Australian Army Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2010, pp. 21–32.

The Taliban were reportedly aware of the coalition's ability to track their mobile phones, at least as early as 2008. This was thought to have been behind their threat to attack cellular towers that were not turned off at night—when special forces often staged their counter-leadership operations.

The experience of Major General Jim Molan in Iraq was that US Special Forces, supported by their unique intelligence feeds, played a 'key part' in targeting the insurgency. In talking about the operational and legal considerations of actioning a target, he records himself thinking: 'God, let there be special intelligence so that the decision will be straightforward.'⁷

My experience was that intelligence support to Australian special forces in Afghanistan was as important as that described by General Molan. One of my most treasured mementos is a letter I received in mid-2013 from an officer in the Special Air Service Regiment in which he talked of the 'lasting impression' left by this support, while noting that 'few appreciate [its] impact'.

Overall, I am comfortable in asserting that, in the history of Australian military operations, there has not been a better resourced or more sustained targeting of an adversary's operational and tactical leadership.

Additionally, I am strongly convinced that intelligence support to targeting in Afghanistan was tactically and, at times, operationally effective. But—in terms of influence on strategic decision-making—there is clearly room for debate. The former Director of the US signals intelligence organisation, the National Security Agency, General Michael Hayden, has acknowledged this, saying: 'If you radiated on an American battlefield, you were likely to die. Less certain, though, was our ability to inform broad questions of policy.'⁸

However, it is important to note that strategic support was about more than targeting. It played a key role in many force protection operations. One example is in the December 2011 seizure of 3.55 tonnes of ammonium nitrate in Zabul. This stockpile was enough to make more than 250 improvised explosive devices, the majority of which were probably bound for Uruzgan.

⁷ See Molan, *Running the War in Iraq*.

⁸ See M.V. Hayden, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*, Penguin, New York, 2017.

In his fascinating but frustrating book, *Intelligence in War*, John Keegan wrote that all history of the Second World War written before 1974 was 'flawed' simply because the story of Enigma and Magic, the breaking of German and Japanese wartime codes, was unknown before then.⁹ There is a lesser but still enthralling history waiting to be told about the people and impact of technical intelligence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The dusk of a 'golden age' for intelligence?

Afghanistan might very well be a high-water mark for intelligence support to military operations. Afghanistan had a relatively unsophisticated communications network, and the distance between Uruzgan's insurgents and their leadership in Pakistan forced them to use these networks at least part of the time.

A very considerable intelligence enterprise exploited technological and practical factors, particularly as the balance between operations in Iraq and Afghanistan changed. I believe this coincidence of technology, geography and resources is unlikely to be seen again.

Second, despite the strain it caused on the limited numbers of intelligence personnel, the scale of strategic support was mirrored by deployed tactical capabilities, which at one time included intelligence specialists embedded at the company level.

It did not, however, begin this way. For example, in 2001, there were six Australian Army Intelligence Corps specialists and liaison support from two agencies supporting special forces in Afghanistan. At one stage, the S2 for our special forces was an SAS officer rather than an intelligence specialist. By 2010, in the words of an intelligence colleague, the intelligence support available to the Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) was 'a massive evolution by any measure'. Analyst numbers had greatly increased; sensitive collection capabilities had been added; there were more agencies with more staff and more embedded capabilities; and there were Australian specialists in two coalition intelligence cells in Kandahar. I am aware that these capabilities continued to grow through to 2013, creating a truly robust presence.

⁹ J. Keegan, *Intelligence in War*, Pimlico, London, 2004, p. 370.

Overall, I would liken the level of intelligence support received in Afghanistan by our brigade minus-sized forces to have been roughly equivalent to what a reinforced division might have hoped to receive in the field in other contingencies. This was a laudable focus of Defence intelligence resources on the mission, but I doubt that this level of resources could be expected in future.

My concern is that the experience in Afghanistan has created a generation of commanders, particularly special forces patrol leaders, who might regard the intelligence support they received in Afghanistan as the norm. As long as Australia has the strategic luxury of choosing the extent of our involvement in conflicts, this is likely to be the case. But if a future enemy removes this choice from us, I see a strong possibility of unmet expectations and, consequently, accusations of intelligence failure.

Iraq, weapons of mass destruction and the role of intelligence

In regard to failures in this period, the 800-pound elephant in the room would have to be the presence, or not, of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq leading into 2003. General Hayden recalls that there was a genuine consensus that ‘there was a case’ for WMD but that ultimately the intelligence community ‘just got it wrong’.¹⁰ In the Australian context, Dr Albert Palazzo’s previously classified work concluded that WMD judgements were based on ‘faulty’ assessments and therefore that Iraq was an intelligence failure.¹¹ I do not propose to go into this further; however, those who want a more detailed account of Australian intelligence assessments of the WMD threat posed by Iraq might start with Phillip Flood’s 2004 inquiry into the Australian intelligence community.¹²

Ultimately, this begs the broader question of the relationship between intelligence and decision-making, and the fine balance that needs to be struck so that the first informs the second without being suborned by it. In my opinion, this balance, extrapolating slightly from a recommendation of the Flood Inquiry, is best served when the leadership of intelligence

10 Hayden, *Playing to the Edge*, p. 50.

11 Palazzo, *The Australian Army and the War in Iraq: 2002–2010*, pp. 27–8.

12 Flood, *Report of the Inquiry into Australian Intelligence Agencies*.

assessment organisations comes from those whose professional life has been spent mastering its nuances, complexities, limitations, relationships and legalities.

Intelligence effectiveness in Afghanistan: Kicking goals in a game of cricket?

Looking at the operational and tactical levels, to what extent did they also suffer from intelligence failures? Or, as I have pondered since I left Afghanistan in late January 2016, was intelligence kicking goals but playing a game of cricket? In other words, were the achievements by one measure largely irrelevant in terms of the measure that counts the most: the final outcome?

For me, one of the most striking public critiques of the effectiveness of intelligence was in the report *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*.¹³ This public report was scathing of the efforts of US intelligence in Afghanistan, describing them as ‘only marginally relevant’, obsessed with the insurgency, and ‘unable to answer fundamental questions’ that would leverage popular support and thereby delegitimise the insurgency. It is not just the content of this document that is striking; it is the fact that it was written by the senior US military intelligence officer in Afghanistan at the time, Major General Michael T. Flynn.

The solutions proposed by Flynn are grassroots, community-based intelligence collection, focusing on governance, development and stability. Of course, like all things, there is a context, and a debate had raged in 2009 over the relative merits of a counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism-based strategy in Afghanistan. It is clear whose side Flynn was on. However, even if one accepts that counter-insurgency was a valid approach in the Pashtun-dominated areas of Afghanistan, I am not aware of any evidence that this report substantially changed the way the United States approached intelligence there.

13 M.T. Flynn, M. Pottinger and P. Batchelor, *Fixing intel: A blueprint for making intelligence relevant in Afghanistan*, Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, 2010.

Returning to kicking goals in a game of cricket, I have quoted General Cosgrove's view on intelligence officers. The general also said that a key attribute of intelligence officers was experience, and opined that this usually had 'scars attached'. Personally, as I look back over my time involved with operations in Afghanistan, there are 'scars' that I bear and that I will now recount. I leave it to others to judge whether these were failures, but they certainly were not successes.

The first 'scar' came from the two occasions when my team was unable to support operations. One occasion followed the conclusion of Operation ATHENA and the Canadian withdrawal from Kandahar. This left portions of Route Bear to the south of Tarin Kowt (connecting Tarin Kowt with Kandahar) potentially vulnerable and—quite rightly—generated a desire to exert influence there. The second occasion was similar. It followed the withdrawal of our Dutch partners from Uruzgan and the subsequent Australian decision to penetrate into the Tangi Valley to the west of Tarin Kowt.

In both cases, my collectors and analysts had no baseline to work from. Australian troops were to be committed into what was effectively a black hole for my teams' intelligence function. While we worked to fill that void, all we could do was inform commanders, so that this gap could be taken into account in their planning. Intelligence training stamps into you the absolute necessity to say 'I don't know' when that is the case. That does not make it any easier when lives are at stake.

The second 'scar' was also operational, and it was our lack of success in being able to provide actionable intelligence on arguably the most effective of the senior Taliban field commanders for Uruzgan—Objective Katana. Although he was the enemy, I came to regard Katana with a grudging respect. He was a competent and committed leader, who was not afraid to leave his Pakistani sanctuary and venture into Uruzgan. The fact that he was able to do so was a testimony to his operational security practices, as well as to the respect he commanded from the Taliban, who knew of his travels. Regardless, an Afghanistan with men like Katana in charge will be poorer by any Western measurement—except, possibly, stability.

Finally, there was the period between 2009 and 2012 when the number of attacks by Afghan security personnel on coalition soldiers—that is, the so-called green-on-blue attacks—skyrocketed. There were significant losses to coalition forces as the result of such attacks, including seven Australians who were killed and 12 who were wounded.

Consequently, there was an unrelenting focus on combatting green-on-blue attacks. However, technical intelligence proved to be unsuitable for the task. Essentially, unless the potential attacker associated himself with known insurgents or was brought to our attention by other reporting—counter-intelligence, human intelligence or reports of suspicious behaviour from the field—then technical means were likely to be useful only after an attack.

This turned out to be the case. Australian intelligence played the key role in bringing justice to all three rogue Afghans who fled after their attacks: Objectives Morningstar, Jungle Effect and Shady Igloo.

There is scant detail publicly available about the hunt for Lance Corporal Jones's killer, Shafidullah, although the then Defence Minister Stephen Smith acknowledged that intelligence tracked him to his home where he was shot when he pulled a pistol on special forces troops.

In August 2013, Prime Minister Rudd announced that Mohammad Rozi, an Afghan soldier who attacked and wounded Australian and fellow Afghan soldiers almost two years before, had been killed. Using 'focused intelligence' (drawing on a range of sources in a concentrated effort to weave together the strands and make sense of the situation and deliver timely and actionable intelligence), Australian forces had tracked Mohammad Rozi from Uruzgan to Pakistan and then to Takar Province in northern Afghanistan.

Later that year, the direct role of intelligence in the capture of the Patrol Base Wahab attacker, Hekmatullah, was clear in the description of the operation as a 'hi-tech spy hunt' using 'a combination of electronic eavesdropping, human intelligence and detailed satellite imagery'.¹⁴

14 C. Stewart, 'How they found the Diggers' killer Hekmatullah', *Weekend Australian*, 3 October 2013, www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/how-they-found-the-diggers-killer/news-story/6883aa8eee237dcac676c67f259073d2 (retrieved 14 March 2020).

Perhaps illustrating the difficulty of predicting individual behaviour, the Queensland Coroner's report on the August 2012 attack at Patrol Base Wahab concluded that there were no indications that Hekmatullah was a threat and that it was not possible to draw a conclusion on his true motivation for the attack. Almost exactly the same findings about indications and motivation were made about the earlier green-on-blue attack that killed Lance Corporal Jones in May 2011.

As I have said, the techniques that were successful in providing actionable intelligence against Taliban leaders in Uruzgan were unsuited to pre-emptively combatting green-on-blue attacks. This inability to contribute to the prevention of green-on-blue attacks weighs heavily on me. It is my greatest professional regret.

Finally, I do not think that any discussion on the 'scars' left by this war would be complete without acknowledgement of the enduring and terrible psychological legacy it has left some with. In the context of my experiences, I want to take this opportunity to touch on a facet of psychological risk that I encountered during this time: vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is what can happen when a person is exposed to something in which they did not personally participate. For example, it could result from seeing graphic images or listening to potentially distressing material.

The danger of this sort of exposure was first brought home to me in the aftermath of a successful strike against a target. Immediately following the strike, we were looking to assess the longer-term impact on the insurgent network. The information collected was graphic, detailing the physical effects of the strike and the emotional toll it had on certain key figures. As the direct result of exposure to this material, a young analyst working for me started showing signs of distress. Over some days, it became clear that it was having an effect both at work and at home, including significant loss of sleep and nightmares. Ultimately, this exposure to the brutality of war meant that this analyst—who was very good at their job—had to move to another area.

As a footnote, this episode also carried a warning, although a different one, for me. When I was exposed to the same material that had caused the young analyst psychological distress, my reaction was laughter. Beyond any degree of reasonable professional satisfaction, I felt something bordering on euphoria at the results of the strike. It was only when my analyst's reaction became known that I took time to reflect on the dangers of dehumanisation.

While psychological stress affects individuals in different ways, this legacy of operations in the Middle East will be with us for decades, and the care and treatment that we offer our people who suffer must continue to be a priority for government and Defence.

Conclusion

What I have described in this chapter is my perspective on intelligence support to land operations in Afghanistan, from 2007 to 2014. This story begins poorly. Its opening features an Australian Army Intelligence Corps tired and under-resourced from its years in Timor, as well as an intelligence system whose relationships were not as harmonious as they could have been. However, over time, the story becomes one of success, although this success is far from unqualified and is not synonymous with a satisfactory ending.

Ultimately, however, this is the story of men and women, military and civilian, making a clear difference to Australian operations in Afghanistan and to the soldiers who conducted them. It is the story of men and women who did precisely what their country asked of them and who did it very well indeed. In the fullness of time it is a story that deserves to be told in its entirety.

I am very proud to have been a part of this intelligence effort, as we did our best to pierce Clausewitz's fog of war and to ensure that the Australian Army was forewarned and forearmed in Afghanistan.

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