Alumni

Six Who Served

Sixty years after the end of World War II, Columbia veterans remember.

By
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|
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The men in the studio portraits are young and strong, smart in their new uniforms, the personification of 22- year-old sophistication. Like millions of their comrades, they appear full of determination as they ship out to Europe and North Africa, to Asia and the Pacific, and to stateside assignments. In the four years of U.S. involvement in World War II, regardless of rank or campaign, these men fought to turn the tide of what most Americans regard as The Good War — an inevitable clash of good and evil, waged at the cost of a staggering 50 million dead. Those who came back from that hinge event of history returned to a different world: the postwar era. They are members of what Tom Brokaw calls The Greatest Generation.

Sixty years after their missions were accomplished, Columbia magazine's Beth Kwon spoke with six veterans of World War II, all members of Columbia College's class of 1941.They are, of course, now in their 80s; as kids they might have watched Armistice Day parades with Civil War veterans riding by. Their roles were varied, but what they have in common is a matter-of-fact thoughtfulness about what they had to do, how it changed them, and how they perceived the war. Several speak of the fact that their training at Columbia steered them to military intelligence, as opposed to, say, the infantry.

We should also note that thousands of World War II naval officers attended Columbia, in a manner of speaking, without becoming CU alumni.These were the men who went through the U.S. Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School, run out of a 1901 battleship berthed at a Hudson River pier at 136th Street. The USS Prairie State (originally commissioned as the Illinois) was an odd sight, as its entire superstructure had been replaced at some point with an enormous wooden barn.

The Navy established the school in 1940 and by early 1941 was using a series of Columbia buildings for the school's programs. The aim was to produce naval officers in just three months. Columbia and Barnard students during the war years must have felt as though they were attending Annapolis on the Hudson. By 1945, nearly 25,000 naval officers and midshipmen had gone to and from classes via 116th Street, eaten their meals, and drilled or passed in review on South Field. The Navy, in turn, was forthcoming in its praise for the cooperation it received from what one Navy publication called "the gem of the ocean."

The Midshipmen's School is well known to readers of American literature, too. The Caine Mutiny, which won the 1952 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, opens with Willie Keith being dropped off for naval training at Columbia."Willie strode along the brick walk past the School of Journalism, and down a few steps to the entrance of Furnald Hall, formerly a dormitory for law students." The author of Caine, as well as of The Winds of War, is Herman Wouk '34CC, himself a veteran of the Midshipmen's School.

Robert Dettmer '41CC, '43LAW

I was drafted on May 5, 1941, the day after classes ended at Columbia, and was put on a train from New York to Miami for basic training. I was a very lucky fellow because I went to a hotel right on the water with a view of the ocean, believe it or not. The army had no facilities, so it took over hotels and stuck thousands of soldiers in them. Instead of calisthenics, we got to go to the beach and swim. We learned to march on a golf course. It was really a riot, but we worked hard.We were on our feet at dawn and out until after dinner, and then we went to bed.

While we were there, we took sequenced intelligence exams. The further up the chain you went, the more schooling they gave you. Since I went to Columbia, I knew how to study. We were the first class that took the Humanities curriculum (now called the Core Curriculum), so at the beginning of freshman year, we had to go to the bookstore and buy a whole collection of literature starting with Herodotus. I still have it.

I went to meteorology school, and we studied forecasting for about ten months. For eight hours a day we studied, then jumped around and trained a bit, then went to bed. It felt like we completed an entire PhD course, only we didn't get a PhD because we didn't do a dissertation.

The next thing I knew, I was heading in October 1942 to England, where the Germans were dropping bombs all over the country. I never saw any action, but I did get knocked out of bed a few times in London.As forecasters, our job was to get Royal Air Force defense planes up in the air and then tell them how to come home. I would phone in the forecast to the teletyper, who sent the message out to the commanding officers, and then I was done for the day.

I worked with the British, who were tremendously decent and brave. Every now and then you'd go to a pub and a girl would come in with a legless RAF soldier hanging around her neck. Pilots who had been hit would barely get their planes down, but they didn't want to land where they'd hurt people. So instead of bailing out of their planes, they would fly them into the ground and the planes would burn. Some of them died and others survived with their legs burned up. The girls would come in with these nice-looking lads, and they would sit them down and pat them, kiss them on the cheek, and feed them.I still can't talk about it because it makes me cry. That's what England went through.

We didn't decide when the invasions would be; we just predicted the weather.Three days before D-Day, I made a forecast, which happened to be dead-on for that section of the French coast. It was extremely lucky. On June 6, 1944, the invasion got off. I knew it because everything in the world was suddenly flying over my head.There must have been 6,000 planes on their way to France. I made forecasts up until the Allies finished Berlin.

We went down to Berlin from England, and it was a mess. Some of those cities were really clobbered. You could hardly get a car through, and you couldn't find the darn streets.After that, I knew bloody well they would send me to Japan.There were about 90 of us kids in line to go. I was number 91, and they didn't have room for me."I'm in line," I said to the man in charge. "Where do I go?"

"Why don't you go to the mess hall and have dinner?"he said. So I did.The next thing I knew, they put me back on a boat and I went home.The war was over. It wasn't a romantic story. A lot of kids got killed. In the end, I didn't have to go to Japan at all. And I wasn't sorry. It was nice to get out.

Robert Dettmer served in the United States Army from 1941 to 1945 and was discharged as master sergeant. He grew up in Brooklyn and is now retired and living in Sleepy Hollow, New York. After the war, he went to Columbia Law School and

practiced corporate law.

Joe Coffee ’41CC

I reported for duty on July 1, 1941, in Washington, D.C. I received a direct commission as ensign after being referred by Robert Moore ’24CC, whom I knew from Nacoms, our senior society. I was assigned the job of assistant communications officer for the Bureau of Ordnance in the Department of the Navy. Nine months later, I became a watch officer in the Map Room in the White House, where it was my job to plot various actions of both our allies and our enemies — submarine sinkings, battles, and such. After about a year, I said to myself, “How am I ever going to face my children if I stay in the safest place in the United States during the war?” I requested a transfer and went up to Boston for naval training. I commissioned my first ship on October 1, 1942. It was called the USS Fechteler, Destroyer Escort #157, modeled after the World War I Destroyer. It was almost 304 feet long. Destroyer Escorts were constructed for antisubmarine work to drop depth charges but were principally used for convoy.

We were on regular convoy duty. It grew over time to about 100 ships, and we mainly brought armaments to North African ports — Algiers, Oran, Bizerte — for the invasion of Italy. On May 5, 1944, a torpedo hit us. Before the attack, we were aware there was a submarine in the area, but we didn’t know it was that close to us. It was a total surprise. I was in charge of damage control. In the event that we were hit with some kind of armament, I had to see to the repair of the ship and take care of the wounded.There were three damage control parties, and when there was a general alarm, I would alternate parties.This time, I was in the forward damage control party in the bow of the ship.The torpedo hit immediately below, in the midship damage control party. Everyone — 26 men — was lost. And that’s where I could have been. I was very, very fortunate. It’s not something I like to remember.

As first lieutenant aboard the ship, I was fourth in command and was responsible for setting up the abandon-ship plan.We had about 300 people, and there were probably 30 fellows in my abandon-ship station.The ship broke in half and started to sink, but by that time I was in the water and had already started swimming. My life belt didn’t work, which was laughable. (At the time it wasn’t, but now it is.) I was the guy who was responsible for all of the life belts and was always lecturing the fellows,“Don’t sleep on those life belts, don’t rub the belts on the steel deck, or else

they’ll get perforated.” And here I was with a life belt that didn’t work. However, I was a very good swimmer in those days. I spotted an Allied ship in the distance, another Destroyer Escort, and, being a fool, I decided to swim for it.We were in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, off Algiers, and I asked one fellow who I knew could swim very well, “Do you want to go with me?” And he very nicely said “Yes.” We swam and swam. It couldn’t have been more than a mile, if that. People have asked me how long it took, but I didn’t have a watch on and I wouldn’t have thought to time it anyway. We finally got to the side of the ship that rescued us. I was pretty strong in those days and was used to going up a rope, hand over hand. But when one of the crewmen threw one over to me, I was so weak I couldn’t move. So I reached for it, and they pulled me aboard.

The first thing they did was hand me two bottles of brandy, which was very thoughtful. Then they got some clean clothes on me. I wasn’t hurt, but some of the other fellows were seriously wounded. From there we went to Algiers and Oran, where there was a camp to absorb fellows like us who had survived sinkings. After a couple of weeks, we were put aboard an American merchant ship. It took us three weeks to get across the Atlantic and back home.

Meanwhile, my wife knew about my ship, but she didn’t have any assurance that I had survived. When I got back to New York, about a month and a half later, I phoned her from Navy headquarters at 90 Church Street to say I was home, and then I went to our apartment where she was with our first child, who was four months old. Then she definitely knew I was alive.That’s the dramatic part of the story.

Joe Coffee served in the United States Navy from 1941 to 1946 and was discharged as lieutenant commander. He grew up in Albany and now lives in Manhattan. After the war, he returned to Columbia College, where he was director of development from 1946 to 1966. Coffee cofounded Columbia College Today and the Columbia College Fund. He was president of his graduating class.

Wm. Theodore de Bary ’41CC, ’53GSAS, ’94HON

When I started college in 1937, I was something of a socialist and a pacifist. But I began to rethink my position with respect to World War II after what happened in Europe with Hitler and Stalin. The crucial thing was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. In a sense, it left Hitler free to attack Great Britain and the Jews.This had a

profound effect upon those of us in the campus movement who had tended to be antiwar. On the one hand, we were what you might call peaceniks, but when we saw the British standing alone against Hitler in the Battle of Britain in 1940, we began to have different thoughts about that.When I graduated in the spring of 1941 I didn't think there was a likelihood that we would get into the war, but my main concern was simply that we should provide Britain with all the help we could. During my senior year, when I was chairman of the student government, I was visited by Joseph Lash, representing Eleanor Roosevelt, who had always been close to the student movement and was eager to enlist support for Roosevelt's policy of aid to Britain. As a result, I was invited to the White House and joined in that effort.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, I was at Harvard studying Japanese and Chinese.The draft was in place, but I had a deferment since I was a graduate student.I was one of very few young Americans who had studied Asian languages, especially Japanese, so I was recruited into Naval Intelligence. In January 1942 I went to the Navy Japanese Language School, which was located in Berkeley, California, and later moved to Boulder, Colorado. I finished the program in January 1943 and was sent to Hawaii, to the headquarters of the commander in chief of the Pacific Area, Admiral Chester Nimitz. In Boulder we had learned basic Japanese, but in the Pacific I mainly translated technical manuals and had to pick up a lot of the language on the job. I served in Naval Intelligence, but much of my time was assigned to working in the field with the Marines and the Army. I served in Hawaii, then the Aleutians and Central Pacific.

I went on operations and I was in the field with the Army and Marine regiments. It was tough for somebody who had had no military training or military experience — nothing but language training. I translated documents our forces had captured and interrogated prisoners of war. On Okinawa, I went in with the Marines on D-Day, April 1, 1945, the Allies' final battle in Japan before the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a tough battle, a long struggle.The Japanese had retreated to the south, but it wasn't long before we captured some Japanese civil officials, who had just come down from Tokyo. When we interrogated them, we found out that they knew already that Japan was moving to make peace.

Unfortunately, their first diplomatic moves were through the only Western power with whom they still had diplomatic relations, the Soviet Union.The Soviets had already gotten promises from Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Harry Truman about what they would be rewarded with if they got into the war, so they

wanted to capitalize on this.They weren’t interested in seeing the war come to an end before they could get into it. The Japanese got nowhere trying to work through the Soviets.As a result, the war went on.

What I learned from the Japanese officials had a profound effect on me when I heard about the bombing of Hiroshima on August 6. I wondered if it was necessary, since the Japanese were already trying to surrender. It was a problem for me. I believed that, in fact, it was not necessary to drop the atomic bomb on either Hiroshima or Nagasaki. But I felt I was not in a position to second-guess the judgment made by Harry Truman, who obviously had a lot of other things to consider and knew about things I didn’t. So that was a profound experience for me at the end of the war.

It also influenced my own view of the War Crimes trials. I didn’t think it was right for us to conduct them when the Japanese were the only ones in the dock. It was one-sided: victors’ justice. None of the Allies was subject to the same proceedings. I’m not saying they should have been, I’m just saying that the justice meted out in Tokyo was one-sided.

After service in the occupation of Japan in the fall of 1945, I was reassigned to become head of the Far Eastern desk at the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington, D.C. From there, I returned to Columbia to resume my graduate studies.

Wm. Theodore de Bary served in the United States Navy from 1942 to 1946 and was discharged as lieutenant commander. De Bary is John Mitchell Mason Professor of the University and provost emeritus, and was chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures. He has taught at Columbia since 1949 and developed the undergraduate general education program in Asian Studies. De Bary and University Professor Donald Keene ’42CC, ’49GSAS corresponded regularly when serving in Japan and China. Their letters were published in War-Wasted Asia: Letters, 1945–46 (Kodansha, edited by Otis Cary). De Bary lives in Tappan, New York.

Robert Zucker ’41CC

We were the class that graduated into the war. I signed up for the U.S. Naval Reserve Midshipmen’s School the day after commencement.The draft was in place, but I was just 20, and the draft age was 21. I had to get permission from my parents to enlist. It took cadets at Annapolis four years to complete their training, but it took

us three months,so they called us the 90-Day Wonders. We stayed on the USS Prairie State,a converted battleship tied up at 136th Street that had been part of Teddy Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet. It looked like a barn, and we slept in pipe-rack bunks that folded down.

I was called to active duty three days after Pearl Harbor. They sent me to mine warfare school and eventually assigned me as executive officer on a small minesweeper with a 45-man crew, responsible for hunting German mines on the coast from New York to Virginia. A year later, I was captain of a minesweeper and had command of five ships, which was ridiculous because I was only 22, but that’s what happened.

Once there was a hurricane that hit Cape May, New Jersey. I didn’t know much about hurricanes but didn’t think we had the capability to make it through, so I argued with my squadron commander, who said: “We’ll call you when it’s time to come back in.” The minute I left the dock with my five ships, I went to my cabin and started reading about hurricanes. If I had studied as hard in college as I did then, I would have graduated summa cum laude with a Phi Beta Kappa key. I called the bridge every five minutes to get the wind velocity, wind direction, and wave direction, and I kept reading and plotting. We had been out for an hour and a half when I realized the eye of the storm was coming right at us. I went back to the bridge, called the other ships, and told them to recover their gear and proceed back to port. The hurricane hit, but if I hadn’t done My ship . . . was a fleet minesweeper with 11 officers and 100 enlisted men. The slogan for minesweepers — now called mine hunters — was “Where the fleet goes, we’ve been.” my studying, we never would have made it. I was young and thought I knew everything there was to know. If I were that age today, I’d be scared stiff to disobey an order. But I did, we survived, and my squadron commander was very happy to see me.A sister ship, under the command of a classmate from mine warfare school, was off Cape May but farther out than us. Neither his ship nor the 45 men on board were found. His wife was pregnant, and he never saw the baby. His wife’s father was killed in World War I, and she never saw him, either. The same thing happened in two generations.

I went from that ship to two more schools, a minesweeper training center in Norfolk and a fleet sonar school in Key West. They worked us hard, and we didn’t have air-conditioning! When I got out of that, I was made executive officer of a fleet minesweeper and six months later I was named captain.My ship, the USS Delegate, was a fleet minesweeper with 11 officers and 100 enlisted men. We were also fully

equipped to fight submarines and aircraft. We made our own fresh water and ice cream and carried enough diesel fuel to supply other ships from time to time.The slogan for minesweepers — now called mine hunters — was “Where the fleet goes, we’ve been.”

After V-J Day we were sent to Japan, where we swept both American and Japanese mines. I was discharged in February 1946. A lot of minesweepers went down in the war, and it was hard. But one of the toughest moments in my life was when I returned home to my wife and child, who was 16 months old. When he was about to go to bed, my wife told him to kiss Daddy good night. Not recognizing me, he went and kissed a photo of me instead. Of course, in another day or so, he realized who I was and wasn’t interested in seeing anybody but me. Now he’s 61 years old.

Robert Zucker served in the United States Navy from 1941 to 1946 and was discharged as lieutenant commander. He grew up in the Bronx and Manhattan and currently lives in Roslyn, Long Island. Zucker was CEO of the men’s apparel company that is now called Nautica and mayor of his village.At Columbia College, he was the business manager of the Columbia Jester and manager of the track team.

A. David Kagon ’41CC, ’47LAW

After completing my junior year in May 1940, I volunteered to enter the Navy’s V-7 midshipmen training program, which led to a commission in the Naval Reserve. My decision to join the Navy was in no small measure influenced by a lecture at the end of the spring term in 1940 by one of my political science instructors, Professor Louis Hacker. Professor Hacker reviewed the military and political situation in Europe, where the German armies had swept through almost the entire continent and were threatening the British forces at Dunkirk. He presciently and emotionally concluded that in all probability we would be in uniform in the near future to defeat what he described as “the greatest threat to the survival of free and democratic societies and their institutions throughout the world.” At that time, the legislation for a military draft had not yet been enacted.

In accordance with the terms of the V-7 program, my training was deferred until I finished my senior year, which I completed concurrently with my first year in Columbia Law School under the Professional Option Program.

My training period commenced in June 1941 aboard the USS Prairie State. Shortly before the completion of our training, in September 1941, we were informed that the V-7 reservists were being placed on active duty and would not be returning to civilian status. We were given the opportunity to select whichever branch of the naval service we preferred. One of my instructors asked me if I would be interested in a temporary assignment at the Naval Reserve Educational Center located in Lower Manhattan, at 90 Church Street (sometimes jokingly referred to as the USS Concrete).

I discussed it with my wife-to-be, Dorothy Blumberg of Yonkers, who was in the last year of her studies at Pratt Institute. We decided to get married the day after I was commissioned and that the temporary assignment at 90 Church Street would let us enjoy an extended honeymoon.

After December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, it appeared that all assignments temporary or otherwise became fixed. Although I had been informed that my service would last three to four months, I remained at 90 Church Street for approximately two years. In the summer of 1943, I asked my senior officer if he would approve my request to the Bureau of Naval Personnel for a change of assignment to the Pacific area “where the action was.” He replied that although he was reluctant to do so, if I felt strongly enough about it, he would approve. However,he expressed his doubts that I would be assigned to any duty unrelated to educational services because of my reserve status and my experience at the Reserve Educational Center.

He was right. I was ordered to Pearl Harbor to report to the headquarters of the commander of service forces, Pacific, and the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet to assume my duties as the educational officer. One of my most gratifying functions was to establish training programs to assist enlisted, noncommissioned personnel to achieve higher ratings (and more pay).

During 1944, while I was in Hawaii, I was asked to participate in the Navy’s new educational service program to assist Navy personnel in transitioning from military to civilian life. In late 1944, I was reassigned to the Naval Air Station in Patuxent River, Maryland, as the educational services officer. I remained there until my discharge from the service after the Japanese surrender in September 1945. Two days after my discharge, I returned to Columbia Law School to complete my last two years.

After graduation, I offered my wife, Dottie, the opportunity to return with me to my hometown, Lawrence, Kansas. Somehow, her response, “I’ll make the divorce easy for you,” was not conducive to a lasting relationship. So, we compromised and came to California.We haven’t been sorry and we are still happily married.

A. David Kagon served in the United States Navy from 1941 to 1945 and was discharged as senior grade lieutenant. After the war he became a lawyer and was active in the Columbia Alumni Association of Southern California and served as president. In 1966 he was awarded the Alumni Federation of Columbia University Medal for Conspicuous Alumni Service. Kagon lives in Malibu, California. He and his wife have two children.

Gene Sosin ’41CC, ’58GSAS

The day after Pearl Harbor, I was on the living floor of my fraternity house, Beta Sigma Rho, listening to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s broadcast. We were stunned. I had graduated from Columbia in June 1941 but had remained to take my master’s in French. I remember going to class that day. I had a professor of 19th-century French literature and criticism, and he encouraged us to be firm and have resolve, and not to lose our spirits, because our way of life will prevail.

It was obvious to us that we would have to serve in some way or another. The father of one of my fraternity brothers said to me, “You’re a good linguist, you got honors in French. Take Japanese immediately.There will be a desperate need for Americans who know Japanese.”

So I enrolled in an intensive Japanese class in the spring semester. A member of our course was Henry Graff, who later became a professor of history at Columbia. By the time the class ended, we could read and write pretty well, so when military recruiting officers came to Columbia, it was a gold mine for them.

The Navy snapped up several of us. In June 1942 we left on the Trail Blazer from Pennsylvania Station to Chicago.There we boarded the Denver Zephyr and took a bus to Boulder, 34 miles away, to the Navy Japanese Language School. It was originally located at the University of California at Berkeley, but because of that tragic page in American history where the Japanese were moved inland, the whole school was relocated to the University of Colorado. A member of my Columbia College graduating class transferred from Berkeley — William Theodore de Bary,

who later became chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and provost of Columbia.

We were pretty good at Japanese because of the training we had had at Columbia, so for the first few months of school, we did a minimum of homework while everyone else caught up.We got to go horseback riding and went swimming in the lake.That was fun. We were commissioned in July 1943 as ensigns. Half of us were sent to Hawaii and the other half — including me — were sent to the Navy Communications Intelligence annex in northwest Washington, D.C.We were called Boulder Boys.

For the first few months we translated Japanese diaries taken from the bodies of soldiers in the Pacific. Here were young men our age who had obviously perished. And the bloodstained pages were indicative of the conditions under which they died. They wrote simple things: the feelings that they had at the time. The human tragedy of war was so stark for us.We couldn’t help but empathize with these gallant people who fought for the things they believed in. But the wrong goals, we felt.

Then I was transferred to a more hush-hush section of Naval Intelligence.The knowledge of Japanese was crucial,not only for those who went to the Pacific to interrogate prisoners, but also for those in Washington who did cryptography and translation of some of the codes and ciphers. If I hadn’t learned Japanese, I probably would have been drafted and ended up in the infantry. Cryptography was under both the Army and the Navy. A lot of the pursuit, the conquest of Japan’s war effort depended upon its merchant ships bringing material to be manufactured, either for military purposes or to feed the population. These ships broadcasted their positions for the next day at noon, in code. They would say they would be at such and such a longitude, such and such a latitude at 12:00 noon. These were known as the noon positions. We were so good that we were able to inform Navy submarines of where they would find the merchant ships. I think we sank an awful lot of them.

We Boulder Boys had an inside joke to describe ourselves.Ships that carried men and tanks were called LSTs, or Landing Ships, Tank.These were the vehicles that transported the Allied troops from England to the French coast on D-Day. However, we would say we were captains of LDMs — Large Desks, Mahogany.

By 1946 I was honorably discharged, and I came back to Columbia in the fall of 1947 and entered a two-year graduate program in Russian language and literature, which led to a master’s degree. At the same time, I received the Certificate of the Russian

(now Harriman) Institute. I eventually got my PhD in 1958 in Russian language and literature. But most important, in a course on Dostoyevsky in Philosophy Hall taught by Professor Ernest J. Simmons, I became aware of an attractive young woman who always sat in one of the first few rows.For many months I admired her at a distance. I also attended meetings of the Russian Circle, of which she was the president, and finally got up the courage to ask her for a date. By the end of the course, we were going steady. She was my future wife, Gloria Donen ’49GSAS, who had also come to Columbia on a GI Bill, having served in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC). It led to a 50-year partnership in the field of Russian studies that began right after we were married, when we moved to Munich, Germany, as members of a Harvard and Columbia team of specialists who interviewed former Soviet citizens (displaced persons). A year later, we returned to the U.S. and had our two children, Donald and Deborah.

Sosin served in the United States Navy from 1942 to 1946 and was discharged as lieutenant senior grade. He grew up in Flushing and now lives in White Plains, New York.At Columbia he was president of the French Club and coauthor of the 1942 Varsity Show. Sosin became Director of Radio Free Europe/Liberty, and today he and his wife continue writing, lecturing, and teaching in the field of Russian studies.

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