

PRESS RELEASE

CHRISTMAS TRUCE

PLOEGSTEERT (PLUGSTREET) – WARNETON (ST-YVES)



Foreword

A Country, a Battlefield...

... that became a Peaceful place.

St-Yves, Plugstreet, where a Christmas Truce took place...

Few places combine so many of the following merits: those of Memory and Heritage, those of a common spirit built by the ancestors of neighbouring countries that were once enemies, those of the Symbolic and the battlefield which became a place of peace, those where "a bit of fun" became one of the most poignant episodes of WW1, and where balls replaced bullets - for a short while, that was to become eternal.

This place like no other, is the Christmas Truce Cross in St-Yves, in the heart of the town of Comines-Warneton, an enclave, yet a "world space", that will bring its growing influence to the noble idea of Peace through the audacity of Truce.

** Inspired by Philippe Housiaux*

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History

Christmas 1914... Germans and British soldiers leave their trenches, come towards each other, exchange cigarettes, souvenirs and... organise a football match...

"I wouldn't have missed that unique and weird Christmas Day for anything. ... I spotted a German officer, some sort of lieutenant I should think, and being a bit of a collector, I intimated to him that I had taken a fancy to some of his buttons. ... I brought out my wire clippers and, with a few deft snips, removed a couple of his buttons and put them in my pocket. I then gave him two of mine in exchange. ... The last I saw was one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile German, who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck." (Bruce Bairnsfather)

The facts

One hundred years ago, during Christmas 1914, incredible events occurred along the frontline. In several places, British and German soldiers decided to ignore war and celebrate Christmas in peace. Among the places in which these exchanges occurred, Ploegsteert Wood (Comines-Warneton), or "Plugstreet" for the British, was one of the main ones.

Soldiers of both nations were staying in their trenches. They endured the same rain, the same cold weather, the same war which never seemed to end, but above all, they wanted to spend Christmas in peace.

German soldiers had put trees illuminated with candles on the parapet of their trenches and started to sing Christmas carols. The British replied from their trenches with other songs until the two camps were singing "Adeste Fideles" together, in Latin. At the end of this prelude, the Germans asked for the British not to fire when they left their trenches promising to do the same in return if the British left theirs. This was the beginning of the truce.

They greeted each other, shook hands, exchanged a few words and engaged in conversation, British soldiers sometimes playing the role of interpreter, although some Germans spoke English quite easily.

They exchanged presents, food, cigars and alcohol, badges, belt buckles, and even uniform buttons. This marked the moment of Christmas. The soldiers of both camps buried their dead, fallen in No Man's Land, and repaired their respective trenches. British soldiers even borrowed tools from the Germans.

A football game between British and German soldiers maintained this truce and fraternisation, which continued well into January 1915, despite any fraternisation with the enemy being punishable.

Many written testimonies tell the story of a Truce at a place called Saint-Yves in the area of "Plugstreet" (see pages 11-13): those for example of Lieutenant Bruce Bairnsfather, Frank Black and Soldier Tapp, from the 1st Royal Warwickshire; of Major Arthur Bates and Soldier Graham Williams, from the London Rifle Brigade; that of Brigadier EMC Lieutenant Richards, from 1st East Lancashire; and that of Lieutenant Kurt Zehmisch from 134^e Saxon.

These events which are rather difficult to imagine taking place during a war, were reported in letters of soldiers sent to their families, and immortalised in photographs, proving that the Christmas Truce in the "Saint-Yvon" and the "Gheer" in Comines-Warneton is not a legend, but was the start of humanity in the trenches on Christmas Eve.

Remembrance...

In 1999, near the place called "Saint-Yves" (Warneton), a cross was left in 1999 by a group of amateur historians, in memory of the Christmas Truce that occurred in No Man's Land. The cross has today become a well-known landmark, thanks to the memory maintained by the patriotic association of Comines-Warneton.

Many visitors stop there to leave balls or other symbols, reminding us that almost 100 years ago, soldiers forgot war for a moment, to make peace around a football match.

To maintain the memory of this extraordinary event, every other year since 2007 the Christmas Truce has been commemorated in the locality of "Saint-Yvon" by a ceremony at Prowse Point Cemetery, and a re-enactment of the German and British trenches, and a symbolic football match on this historic place (organised by the local patriotic association), have taken place.

Testimonies...

According to Bruce Bairnsfather, around noon, a football match was suggested ... someone had obviously received a deflated football as a Christmas gift. Despite the frozen surface and turnips a kick-off took place.

According to Lt. Kurt Zehmisch of the 134th Saxon; two English soldiers brought a soccer ball in their trench and a football game began. This was so wonderful and strange.

match was suggested. ... someone had evidently received a deflated football as a Christmas present.' Despite the frozen and pitted surface and the surviving turnips, a football was kicked about and in an interview with Canadian Television in November 1958, Bairnsfather was adamant that 'one of ours brought up a football, blew it up, to kick about.'

Zehmisch is as definite- 'a couple of English brought a football out of their trench and a vigorous football match began. This was all so marvellous and strange. The English officers thought so too... towards evening the officers asked ...'

A Soldier of the 1st Royal Warwickshire, Tapp, returned in the trenches next to Ploegsteert Wood, in the evening, under a clear and disturbing moon:

It was the moon which worried Private Tapp of the 1/Royal Warwicks as his battalion, which had been in billets for several days, prepared to return to the line near Ploegsteert Wood:

We go back to trenches tonight, it is going to be a moonlight night so I think we shall lose a few men while we are relieving the other regt. We get near the trenches but can't hear any firing, now we hear some singing from their trenches and ours.

Another young officer of 1/Royal Warwicks, Lieutenant Frank Black, was there as this meeting took place. He could see sufficiently clearly to observe that when the sergeant met the two Germans they lit each other's cigarettes, at which there were cheers from both lines.

The 134th Saxons at La Basseville near Warneton, opposite the British at St Yves, had attended Christmas 134th. But Zehmisch's English and that of two of his men, Möckel and Huss, managed to break through, and soldiers on both sides slipped from the wire to meet in a 'willow ditch'. One Englishman, his arms raised to show he was weaponless, held in one elevated hand a cap, bottom up and brimming with cigarettes to exchange.

In the same trenches at Ploegsteert was Major Arthur Bates, also of the London Rifle Brigade, watching the proceedings, in spite of his relative seniority, with no disapproving eye. Some time before midnight, while the impromptu concert was still going on, he slipped away to write a brief letter to his sister:

Dearest Dorothy,
Just a line from the trenches on Xmas Eve – a topping night with not much firing going on & both sides singing. It will be interesting to see what happens tomorrow. My orders to the Coy are not to start firing unless the Germans do.
Best love from your loving brother. Arthur.

On Christmas Day itself at many locations along the front something resembling football occurred. Private William Tapp of the Warwickshires wrote at Christmas from just above Ploegsteert Wood, 'We are trying to arrange a football match with them' – the Saxons – 'for tomorrow, Boxing Day.' Harassing British artillery fire, he claimed later, prevented it. There were other plans for competition, right up to New Year's Day, once the clearance of corpses from No Man's Land had exposed potential fields for play. However dotted by half-hidden turnips and cabbages, the spaces between the lines were at least as wide as a conventional soccer pitch. A London Rifles officer whose letter appeared in *The Times* on 1 January reported that 'on Christmas Day a football match was played between them and us in front of the trench'. Perhaps because it was more appropriate later to deny it, the brigade's official history would claim that no match happened, 'because it would have been most unwise to allow the Germans to know how weakly the British trenches were held'.¹

¹The official denial, despite testimony from participants, that a Rifles Brigade match occurred with the Germans is in A.S. Bates, C. Harrison Jones, H.G., Wilkinson et al., *The History of the London Rifle Brigade, 1859–1919* (London, 1921).

According to the regimental reports of the Lancashire Fusiliers the company played a match against the enemy on Christmas, just north of Le Touquet, using a ration tin for a ball, losing 2-3.

Lieutenant Charles Brewer of the 2nd Bedfordshires wrote home, 'Higher up in the line – you would scarcely believe it – they are playing a football match.' And a history of the Lancashire Fusiliers records that its 'A' Company played a Christmas game against the enemy just north of Le Touquet, using a ration tin for a ball, and lost 3–2. The recorded scores echo

Private Graham Williams of the London Rifle Brigade in Plugsteert. He stands in the way of the shooting in a flooded trench, not a shot from a sniper this morning and suddenly the German parapet lights up with candles on Christmas trees. The Germans began to sing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht" songs. We finally replied by singing "the first Nowell" and at the end they applauded and sang "O Tannenbaum" and it continued, alternately, we continued to sing, till we sang "O Come All Ye Faithful" and the Germans sang with us in Latin "Adeste Fideles". An extraordinary night.

Sergeant Bob Lovell of the 3rd London Rifles played at footer, and although his side lost, the fact that the match had happened at all left him in awe. 'Even as I write,' he noted at dusk, 'I can scarcely credit what I have seen and done. It has indeed been a wonderful day.'

Some had their first experience of the Christmas truce on Boxing Day. Second Lieutenant Cyril Drummond, Royal Field Artillery, had been out on rest until late on Christmas evening. Shortly after breakfast, he and his telephonist set off from their artillery lines to take up their duties in an observation post which they had established in a ruined house at St Yvon, just to the north of Ploegsteert Wood. As they walked down the road towards the front they were confronted by an amazing sight:

Looking down towards the trenches it was just like Earls Court Exhibition. There were the two sets of front trenches only a few yards apart, and yet there were soldiers, both British and German, standing on top of them, digging or repairing the trench in some way, without ever shooting at each other. It was an extraordinary situation. And so my telephonist and I walked down the sunken road in full view of everybody in Germany, with no one taking any notice of us.

Extracts from:

- ✓ *Stanley WEINTRAUB, "Silent Night";*
- ✓ *Malcolm BROWN et Shirley SEATON, "Christmas truce";*
- ✓ *Marc FERRO, "Frères de tranchées".*
- ✓ Andrew Hamilton - Alan reed, " Meet at dawn unarmed".

Heritage Committee created by Comines-Warneton

The municipality of Comines-Warneton wants to generate an ambitious program to preserve this universal notion of Truce by creating the "Heritage Committee - Cross of St Yves Warneton / Plugstreet."

This committee has for main objective to keep the memory alive, the "Truce" as a symbol of Hope, Peace and Brotherhood.

The committee should continue to develop the St Yves Cross from Comines-Warneton as a unique place in our modern world alongside other initiatives (Interpretation centres, cemeteries,...). This is essential regarding the horrors of war; this Truce is unique and should inspire Hope by excellence.

The St Yves location should also represent and commemorate all other « truces » between human beings. To believe in a better world forever.

Objectives of the Committee

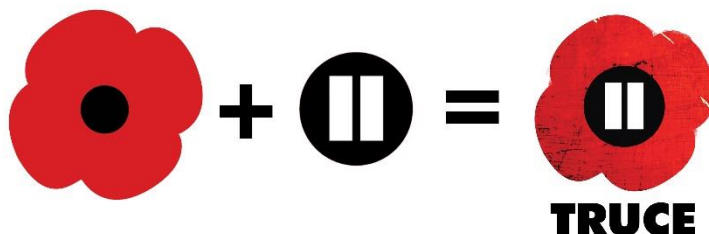
- To highlight the « Truce »
- To give meaning to all human initiatives to:
 - Suspend war
 - Stop a conflict for a moment between armies
 - Bring belligerents together
- Analyse the conditions that lead to a Truce
- Communicate largely these global initiatives to become an active reference and a source of inspiration for world leaders
- Gather (one way or another) these "initiative creators" to support where possible the "Truce" in a process for Peace.

Symbolic

The " Truce " is not (yet) Peace ; it is a "stolen" time , a suspension of time , an 'I do not know what " surreal episode between moments of extreme tension or that are often denied human value, so it is also a moment where anything can happen, including starting a " game " of football as was the case in December 1914 Ploegsteert .

For this History of the Christmas Truce, Ploegsteert has created a universal identity, one that highlights the stopping of time, in itself a sort of truce, and secondly the poppy symbol in memory of soldiers killed in battle during the Great War. The poem of a war doctor from Australia was a link between the colour of the poppy, the colour of blood and the horror of fighting. Moreover, it is the only flower that grew along the trenches during the war.

The "marriage" of one and the other reflects the spirit of the Truce in Ploegsteert (Plugstreet)



This strong symbolic identity will be used for the first time during the commemoration by UEFA of the 100th anniversary of the WW1 Christmas Truce on December 11, 2014, at which members of the Heritage Committee, the authorities and others personalities will sign the register with a choice of colour (red, black or blue). But before that, they will have to perform the same symbolic gesture on a

clay plate around the monument. Then their "footprint" will be treasured and displayed in the Interpretation Centre.

Strong International support

This massive project has already attracted several Belgian, British and German partners: associations of remembrance of the First World War and historians.

For this purpose, since the idea of the Heritage Committee and its future implementation, the Heritage Committee received the official moral support of the IOC on 8 September 2013. The request for support to the IOC reflects the recent history of the Olympic Movement.

Context

The tradition of the Olympic Truce was established in ancient Greece in the ninth century B.C. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to revive this tradition in order to safeguard the interests of the athletes and sport in general.

The idea

The tradition of the " Olympic Truce " or " Ekecheiria " was established in ancient Greece in the ninth century BC by the signing of a treaty between three kings. During periods of truce, athletes, artists and their families, as well as ordinary pilgrims, could travel in total safety to participate in or attend the Olympic Games and return afterwards to their respective countries. With the opening of the Olympic Games approaching, the sacred truce was proclaimed and announced by citizens of Elis who travelled throughout the Greek world to spread this message.

Relevance today

Taking into account the global context in which sport and the Olympic Games exist, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to revive the tradition of the Olympic Truce to preserve, as much as possible, the interests of the athletes and sport in general and to encourage the search for peaceful and diplomatic solutions to the conflicts in the world.

Through this global and symbolic concept, the IOC aims to:

- Mobilise youth for the promotion of the Olympic ideals ;
- Use sport to establish contacts between communities in conflict ;
- Provide humanitarian assistance to war-torn countries ; And more generally :
- Create opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation. IOC initiatives for the Olympic Truce extend beyond the period of the Olympic Games and led to the implementation, through the National Olympic Committees, of a series of activities related to Sport for peace.

"Sport alone cannot enforce or maintain peace, but it has a vital role to play in supporting the building of a peaceful and better world. " - Jacques Rogge, IOC President , October 2007

Christmas Truce commemoration

The International Olympic Committee has heard the arguments of those who presided over the creation of the Heritage Committee, officially supporting the re-enactment of the Christmas Truce on the historic site of Comines-Warneton, attaching it to the development of Truce through sport. For this reason the IOC has allowed Comines-Warneton to utilise the Olympic rings within the framework of the truce.

Other support, from the mayors of Olympic cities, Mayors for Peace , SportAccord , local associations and national communities is pending approval.

Avec le soutien de



COMITÉ
INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIQUE



COMITÉ
INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIQUE

Le Président

Monsieur Cédric Vanyacker
Le Secrétaire communal
Monsieur Gilbert Deleu
Le Bourgmestre
Administration communale de
Comines-Warneton
Place Sainte-Anne 21
7780 Comines
Belgique

Buenos Aires, le 8 septembre 2013
Réf. No 2013/qcw
Envoi par courriel

Christmas Truce à Plugstreet Comines – Warneton

Messieurs,

Je tiens à vous remercier pour votre courrier daté du 22 août que Monsieur Housiaux a voulu me faire parvenir.

Je vous félicite chaleureusement pour l'excellente initiative de commémorer la Trêve par le sport qui a eu lieu pendant la Grande Guerre. C'est donc avec plaisir que le CIO apporte le soutien moral à votre projet pour l'année 2014. A ce sujet, je vous remercie de bien vouloir trouver ci-joint les Principes et Directives, ainsi que le logo, qui s'appliquent à un tel soutien.

Vous souhaitant plein succès dans l'organisation de cette importante initiative, je vous prie d'agréer, Messieurs, mes salutations distinguées.

Jacques Rogge

p.j.

A particular act of Remembrance: UEFA

UEFA will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the WW1 Christmas Truce on December 11th, 2014, close to the centenary of the date when soldiers from both alliances took part in a spontaneous truce, which included playing football on the territory of Warneton/Plugstreet (Ploegsteert) between the trenches.

The place chosen for this commemorative event is Comines-Warneton, a Belgian town; the ground where the football match occurred is situated on its territory.

A remembrance ceremony will be held at Plugstreet where the UEFA President will address the audience before inaugurating a monument at Warneton (St Yves) where the truce was a reality 100 years ago.

"This remembrance ceremony," said Michel Platini, "pays tribute to the soldiers who expressed, a hundred years ago, their humanity by playing football together. They have opened an important chapter in the construction of the European community and gave example for today's young generations. "

This unique and extraordinary moment of peace and human brotherhood - where football emerged as a common language between people of different nationalities - is considered as one of the first expressions of an informal European idea.

11 December 2014 : A particular inauguration

Michel Platini, as well as political and sports authorities from Countries implicated in the conflict, will inaugurate a monument which will remind young generations that sport, and especially football, may have a major role in the world's history.

This monument will be the link between sport and the realities faced by the British and German soldiers during the early winter of 1914.

The monument will be erected a few meters away from the existing St-Yves Cross, close to British and German trenches.

The ceremony on Thursday 11th December 2014 will be an opportunity to remind all of us (from the world of football or not) of this moment of humanity which occurred in the heart of an absurd war.

At 11.30 am, the press will be invited to the official inauguration of the "Christmas Truce" monument at St. Yves, attended by the President of UEFA, Michel Platini. The ceremony and reception will take place at the interpretation centre "Plugstreet 14-18 experience" - Rue de Messines, 156 B -7782 Ploegsteert.

The inauguration will give you opportunity to discover this unique monument.

Discovering a place of Truce: a walk around Warneton/Plugstreet

To give a full dimension to this unique moment, a guided walk will bring visitors from the “Plugstreet 14-18 experience” centre to the St-Yves Cross and UEFA monument; along this walk (+/- 1500m), panels will establish the link between the Truce, the place held by memory, football, and monuments. The interpretation centre “Plugstreet 14-18 experience” will preserve all objects left by the visitors around the monuments (balls, scarves, drawings, etc.). A message inviting visitors to sign a register at the “Plugstreet 14-18 experience” centre will also be presented along the walk.



Heritage Committee in 2015 and thereafter...

Historical, political and University research about the Truce

This study will be the key point of the legitimacy of the Heritage Committee. It will be carried out by a recognised Belgian authority, possibly accompanied by a renowned foreign university. This study will be launched in autumn 2014 and published in 2015.

Heritage Committee Launch Event

This event will be organised during the first half of 2015. It will take place in the presence of authors of the study about the Truce, as well as political and legal authorities who have already given their support to the Heritage Committee (International Olympic Committee), but also national and international associations who could serve as relays of this work of reflection.

In that context, towns, countries and places that will be discussed in the study will be evidently the first invited to take part in this event as well as in its enlargement.

Annual Symposium - Comines-Warneton

The first symposium will take place in December 2015 and will be an annual event (in winter). It will approach a particular theme defined by the secretariat of the Heritage Committee and approved by its members, and will also involve a current theme related to any kind of truce that will emerge from a group of individuals somewhere around the world.

The symposium will also present a series of workshops, as well as highlight (for example in the form of stand or exhibition) initiatives from different associations and/or towns and places which have developed a kind of truce.

Register and official "St Yves Cross" reward

This register will be held as a symbolic mark of the Heritage Committee. It will be signed by those who support this Committee in every way and will be kept at the Heritage Committee's Headquarters situated at Comines-Warneton. Two other versions of the register will also be proposed inside the UEFA monument and at the Plugstreet 14-18 experience centre. Each visitor will be able to sign the register, and include his name and place of residence.

Furthermore "St Yves Cross" decorations will be awarded by the Heritage Committee to any person, association or personality who shall have participated in a human effort for truce.

Heritage Committee and Christmas Truce – Dessimination

Why ?

The spirit of the Christmas Truce must continue, not only through the continuation of the program, symbolic and intellectual, but also through the widespread distribution of special items.

These will provide a strong signal, bearing testament and relaying the story between visitors and those who will consider this notion of truce is an argument to expose the virtues of a lasting peace.

Where?

- Plugstreet 14-18 experience interpretation centre,
- Through the municipality,
- Through Tourist Offices in Belgium
- In various publications, leaflets,
- Website, online communication.

What?

Some of the selected items will include:

° 5 symbolic objects which will each bring a message: A mug – a metal box and key ring containing earth from St Yves – a simple key ring – a box with pastels, and a glass snowball

Each item will be accompanied by a brief explanation of the Christmas Truce story

A crucial element: the soil

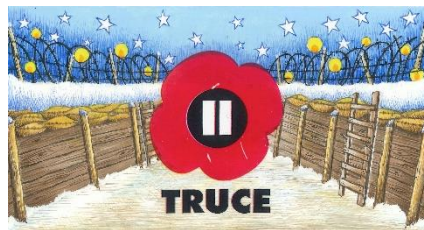
The soil keeps the memory of this unique moment. This soil, certified from St Yves, will be the link between all those who visit this place of memory.



A stamp to commemorate the Christmas Truce

SPIRIT OF TRUCE

For a permanent impression of this Christmas truce in 1914, the City of Comines-Warneton in association with Philippe Housiaux and Olivier Guilbaud has created a stamp which will spread the spirit of the truce in the coming years. Created and realised by Jacques Doppée, Artist, Painter, creator of several stamps, this stamp symbolises the Christmas Truce.



THE ARTIST

Jacques Doppée began his professional life at the Royal Academy of Brussels. After having worked for a large multinational corporation, he established his own society where he made customised items for the royal family. He was then contacted to create stamps for Belgium and Luxembourg. Today he is the author of more than 60 stamps for the two countries.

Christmas Truce 1914 – Commemoration Program

- **Thursday 11/12**
13:00 - Official inauguration of the UEFA Christmas Truce monument in the presence of Michel PLATINI
Place : St Yves, Ploegsteert-Warneton

- **From Friday 19/12 evening to Sunday 21/12**
Re-enactment during two days and two nights, next the Christmas Truce monument.
The re-enactors will immerse you in the context of the 1914 Christmas Truce.
Discover the living conditions in the trenches and a nursing post.

- **Friday 19/12**
17:15 Torchlight March from « Plugstreet 14-18 experience » to Plugstreet Wood Cemetery.
18:00 Last Post ceremony at Plugstreet Wood Cemetery
20:00 Royal Marine Music concert in the Church of Ploegsteert

- **Saturday 20/12**
17:00 & 20:00 Film projection about the First World War in a special atmosphere (place to be confirmed)

Guided walks starting at Le Gheer
Guided visits at Plugstreet 14-18 experience

- **Sunday 21/12**

11:15 Ceremony next UEFA Christmas Truce monument
11:45 Choir concert in Ploegsteert Church

Guided walks starting at Le Gheer
Guided visits at Plugstreet 14-18 experience

All day long (10 :00 – 17 :00) Christmas market on Ploegstreet Main Square (next Church), animations. Shuttle between Ploegsteert Church / Plugstreet 14-18 / Christmas Truce monument and re-enactment site.

Info :

Plugstreet 14-18 experience
Rue de Messines, 156
B – 7782 Ploegsteert
Tel. : 00.32.56.484.000
E-mail : info@rememberplugstreet.com
www.plugstreet1418.com

Tourist Office Comines-Warneton
Tel. : 00.32.56.55.56.00
E-mail: office.tourisme.comines-warneton@belgacom.net

Support

- City of Comines-Warneton
- Plugstreet 14-18 experience (Interpretation centre)
- Tourist Office of Comines-Warneton
- Comité de la Bataille du Canal
- Associations des Ententes patriotiques
- Ploegsteert Memorial Committee
- Historical association Comines-Warneton
- Marathon Trophy Organization

- UEFA
- Belgian Tourist Office-Brussels & Wallonia in London
- Wallonie-Bruxelles Tourisme
- Wallonie-Bruxelles International
- Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles
- « Commémorer 14-18 » group
- Wallonia, Belgium
- Minister of Sports in Wallonia, Belgium
- The Defense, Belgian government
- National Commemoration Program in Belgium
- National Lottery in Belgium
- « Via Dolorosa » project

They also support us :

- Spirit of Remembrance
- Shorncliffe Trust

Contacts

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