

## Remembering D-Day

June 6, 1944 is an immensely significant date in the history of World War II and Baseball in Wartime remembers how that date affected the lives of professional baseball players who found themselves caught up in the invasion of Normandy which signified the Western Allied effort to liberate mainland Europe from Nazi occupation.

Among those at Normandy who had been professional baseball players before the war was Forrest "Lefty" Brewer, a pitcher who won 25 games with St Augustine of the Florida State League in 1938 and was killed at Normandy. When I began researching wartime baseball in the mid-1990s, Lefty Brewer was one of the first players I learned about. The Baseball in Wartime website is dedicated to his memory as I feel he personifies the sacrifices that young ballplayers made all those years ago. This one's for you, Lefty!

### MLB with Baseball in Wartime Honors Vets

Baseball in Wartime is proud to have partnered with Minor League Baseball on Memorial Day to remember all war veterans, especially those Minor League players who served in World War II.

On Monday, May 26, there was a public address announcement at ballparks throughout the country that highlighted the 4,000 Minor League Baseball players who served during World War II, including the 117 who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, losing their lives in military training and combat.

"We are extremely pleased to be able to partner with the Baseball in Wartime project," said Minor League Baseball Senior Vice President, Business Operations John Cook. "We hope these efforts will increase awareness of the program, but more importantly, we want to pay tribute to all veterans who served and specifically those who made the ultimate sacrifice during World War II.

"Doing so in conjunction with the Memorial Day holiday in our ballparks is a natural tie-in and will be the first piece of what we hope to be an ongoing partnership between Minor League Baseball and Baseball in Wartime."

### Professional Baseball Players Who Lost Their Lives in World War II

#### Major League

Name	Cause of Death
Elmer Gedeon	Killed in Action
Harry O'Neill	Killed in Action

#### Minor League

Name	Cause of Death
Herman Bauer	Died from Wounds
Fred Beal	Died in hospital
Leonard Berry	Killed in Action
Keith Bissonette	Killed in Action
Charles Bowers	Died from Wounds
Lefty Brewer	Killed in Action
Ed Brock	Killed in Action
Murrill Brown	Plane Crash
Whitey Burch	Military accident
George Chandler	Plane Crash
Floyd Christiansen	Plane Crash
Frank Ciaffone	Killed in Action
Orday Cisgen	Killed in Action
Edward Dalton	Killed in Action
Howard DeMartini	Killed in Action
Hal Dobson	Plane Crash
Norman Duncan	Killed in Action
Louis Elko	Military Accident
Charles Etherton	Suicide
Herb Fash	Explosion
Frank Faudem	Killed in Action
Ernest Ford	Military Accident
George Gamble	Killed in Action
Bob Gary	Plane Crash
Conrad Graff	Killed in Action
Alan Grant	Plane Crash
Jim Griik	Auto accident
Frank Haggerty	Plane Crash
Bill Hansen	Died from Wounds
Billy Hebert	Killed in Action
Nay Hernandez	Killed in Action
Bob Hershey	Killed in Action
Roswell Higginbotham	Died after operation
Ernie Holbrook	Killed in Action
Bob Holmes	Died from Wounds
Gordon Houston	Plane Crash
Ernie Hrovatic	Killed in Action
Harry Imhoff	Killed in Action
Frank Janik	Killed in Action
Tony Janis	Unknown
Art Keller	Killed in Action
Stan Klores	Killed in Action
Curly Kopp	Plane Crash
Harry Ladner	Killed in Action
Walter Lake	Died from Wounds
Whitey Loos	Plane Crash
Jack Lumms	Died from Wounds
Ted Maillot	Killed in Action
William Marszalek	Unknown
Henry Martinez	Killed in Action
Duke McKee	Killed in Action
Paul Mellblom	Killed in Action
Lou Miller	Unknown
Joe Mocer	Killed in Action
John Moller	Killed in Action
John Munro	Unknown
George Myers	Killed in Action
Walter Navie	Suicide

#### Minor League continued

Name	Cause of Death
Jack Nealy	Killed in Action
Ed Neusel	Died from Illness
William Niemeyer	Killed in Action
Hank Nowak	Killed in Action
Joe Palatas	Died as POW
Jack Patterson	Killed in Action
Metro Persoskie	Flying Accident
Charlie Pescod	Killed in Action
Harold Phillips	Plane Crash
Joe Pinder	Killed in Action
Bob Price	Lost at Sea
Ernie Raimondi	Died from Wounds
John Regan	Plane Crash
Pete Rehkamp	Auto Accident
Joseph Rodgers	Killed in Action
Michael Sambolich	Killed in Action
Glenn Sanford	Plane Crash
Bill Sarver	Killed in Action
Charles Schaube	Killed in Action
Walt Schmisser	Killed in Action
Bob Schmukal	Killed in Action
Eddie Schohl	Died from Wounds
Frank Schulz	Killed in Action
Carl Scott	Killed in Action
Marcel Serventi	Auto Accident
Harold Sherman	Plane Crash
Jack Siens	Plane Crash
Art Sinclair	Killed in Action
John Smith	Killed in Action
Norman Smith	Missing in action
Marshall Sneed	Killed in Action
Billy Southworth Jr	Plane Crash
Earl Springer	Killed in Action
Gene Stack	Natural Causes
Don Stewart	Bombing Raid
Al Stiewe	Killed in Action
Sylvester Sturges	Killed in Action
Fred Swift	Plane Crash
Johnny Taylor	Killed in Action
Steve Tonsick	Killed in Action
Jimmie Trimble	Killed in Action
Wirt Twitchell	Killed in Action
Lou Vann	Killed in Action
Art Vivian	Killed in Action
Elmer Wachtler	Killed in Action
Leo Walker	Plane Crash
Roman Wantuck	Killed in Action
Jim Whitfield	Killed in Action
Dick Williams	Killed in Action
Les Wirkkala	Killed in Action
Stanford Wolfson	Killed in Action
Tom Woodruff	Lost at Sea
Elmer Wright	Killed in Action
Fred Yeske	Killed in Action
Marion Young	Killed in Action
Peter Zarilla	Plane Crash
Lamar Zimmerman	Killed in Action
John Zurberti	Killed in Action
George Zwilling	Killed in Action



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## Tragedy at Normandy

**F**rancis Field, home of the Florida State League's St Augustine Saints, was a magical place during the summer of 1938. With the smell of roasted peanuts filling the air, a tall, slender 19-year-old unleashed a season of blistering fastballs on his way to a 25-win rookie season. Six years later – on June 6, 1944 – the fun-loving southpaw with everything to live for lay dead alongside the Merderet River in Normandy, France.

Forrest "Lefty" Brewer grew up in Jacksonville, Florida where times were hard. The Brewers were an impoverished family moving from slum to slum, where street fights were commonplace and electricity wasn't. The Brewer boys - Frank, Lefty and William - were nonetheless impervious to the hardships of the Depression. Their days were spent hunting, fishing and playing ball. Lefty was the gifted athlete of the family - he was coordinated, fast and agile. A stellar pitcher with the Robert E Lee High School team and the Collins Department Store team in the local semi-pro circuit.

In the spring of 1938, certain that his future was in baseball, Brewer traveled to St Augustine in search of a professional tryout. The Saints' general manager, Fred Hering, needed just one look at the youngster's overpowering fastball and hard-breaking curve before offering him a contract with the independently owned Class D team. Brewer made 41 appearances for the Saints in his debut season, leading the league with 25 wins and 234 strikeouts. On June 6th, he hurled a no-hitter against Orlando, and league secretary Peter Schaal proclaimed Brewer "the greatest young prospect to come out of the Florida State League."



Lefty talks with a young fan in Charlotte, 1940.

News of Brewer's heroics spread fast and Clark Griffith, owner of the Washington Senators, purchased his contract and invited him to the capital city for the final weeks of the 1938 season. Although he did little more than warm up on the sidelines, it was Brewer's first taste of the big leagues and he hoped it wouldn't be his last.

The following year he was with the Senators for spring training but was released to Shelby, North Carolina, of the Tar Heel League in March 1939. His sophomore year was plagued with arm problems - five wins in 19 appearances and an inflated ERA of 5.25 caused a return to the Florida State League in July. With the Senators' franchise at Orlando he recorded 7 wins, 11 losses and a 3.85 ERA.

In 1940, Brewer was assigned to Charlotte, North Carolina in the Class B Piedmont League. As Hitler's blitzkrieg swept through Europe at an alarming rate, Brewer turned in a steady performance with the Hornets. On a team that lacked offence and finished fifth, he won 11 games against 9 losses, including a four-hitter against Rocky Mount in July and a two-hitter over Norfolk the following month. It was enough for Clark Griffith to offer him a job for the coming season at \$200 a month but the contract with the Washington Senators was never signed.

Early in 1941, as the United States strengthened its military force, Brewer received his military draft notice. At the age of 22 and on the verge of a major league career, he swapped flannels for service fatigues and reported for basic training. Brewer and the military seemed well matched. Following basic training he volunteered for the paratroopers - attended Parachute Jump School at Fort Benning and was assigned to the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 82nd Airborne Division, at Camp Blanding in Florida and then Camp Mackall in North Carolina.

It was during this time that Brewer had an opportunity to limber up his pitching arm. The ball team at Camp Mackall was strong. The



line-up was dotted with semi-pro players, and Brewer shared pitching duties with Okey Mills, a colliery league pitcher from West Virginia. The 508th Red Devils played all through the long, hot summer during off-duty hours and clinched the Camp Mackall championship with a 26-4 won-loss record. One of their few losses was at the hands of an all-star team put together by Babe Ruth. In a letter to his mother, Brewer revealed his plans for the future. He was optimistic and with good reason. "When the war is over," he wrote, "I'm really going to town. My arm is in better shape than it's ever been and yesterday I pitched a one-hitter."

In November 1943, Brewer was preparing to be posted overseas and made one last visit to his wife and family in Jacksonville. Judith Frierson Hunter, Brewer's niece, was eight years old at the time and remembers her uncle's last visit home. "The whole family was together," she recalls. "I was in awe of everything military and Lefty gave me his paratrooper's wings to 'keep for him.' How proud I was of my handsome uncle who was going to be a big-league baseball star after the war."

In March 1944, as part of the invasion build-up the 508th PIR was posted overseas. They were based in Nottingham, England, where Brewer had the chance to play one last ball



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508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Red Devils in England on May 28, 1944. Lefty Brewer is front row, first left. Rene Croteau, front row, far right, also lost his life at Normandy.

game before going into combat. On Sunday, May 28, 1944, an enthusiastic crowd of 7,000 fans gathered at Meadow Lane soccer ground to see the 508th Red Devils play an exhibition game against the locally based 505th PIR Panthers. Okey Mills started the game and was relieved by Brewer in the fourth inning. "Lefty had one of the best pick-off moves I've ever seen," says Mills. "He picked off the first two men that got on base - just left 'em high and dry." The Red Devils outclassed the Panthers, 18-0.

Eight days later, as night fell on June 5th, Brewer and the men of the 508th - faces blackened and hearts racing - boarded transport planes for the flight across the English Channel. That night over France, 24,000 Allied paratroopers ascended through the darkness into chaos and confusion. Inexperienced pilots failed to locate designated drop zones and whole regiments landed miles from intended locations.

Brewer was with a group of about 80 men that were led by Lieutenant Homer Jones against a German force at the La Fiere manor house on the Merderet River not far from St Mere Eglise. In the words of Bill Dean, who had served with Brewer for over two years: "One helluva fire fight erupted" and by early afternoon the paratroopers controlled the manor house. Shortly afterwards German tanks and infantry

appeared, and the paratroopers had no option but to run for the possible safety of the river. Trapped in a hail of bullets and explosions, Bill Dean was running as hard as anyone. "I was aware someone was running just behind me," he recalls. "In my panic I took a quick look and saw Lefty, at port arms, running like he was going the stretch a triple into a home run!"

A split second later there was a burst of machine gun fire. Exactly six years after pitching a no-hitter with the St Augustine Saints, Brewer's life ended.

### Yogi Berra

Early in the morning of D-Day itself, a young catcher in the Yankees' farm system named Yogi Berra was on an LCS(S) rocket boat 300 yards off Utah Beach firing rockets at enemy targets and supporting troops being landed on the beach with machine gun fire. "It was just like a Fourth of July celebration," he later recalled.

### Pete Petropoulos

Among the troops landing on Utah Beach was minor leaguer Pete Petropoulos. The left-handed hurler was a batting practice pitcher with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1938. He signed a professional contract in 1939 and was assigned to the Daytona Beach Islanders

of the Class D Florida State League where he posted a 10-9 won-loss record. In 1940, Petropoulos was with the Fort Lauderdale Tarpons of the Class D Florida East Coast. He had a 7-4 record as a pitcher and also played first base and the outfield.

On March 6, 1941, Petropoulos was drafted and entered military service with the Army. He was based at Camp Gordon, Georgia and pitched for the 1st Battalion baseball team. On June 8, 1941, Petropoulos threw a 4-0 no-hitter for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment team against the 20<sup>th</sup> Engineers at Fort Benning, Georgia. During the winter Petropoulos, who had played professional basketball in the American Basketball League, coached the basketball team.

The day after D-Day, Petropoulos was badly wounded by an exploding enemy artillery shell. He suffered severe leg wounds and was picked up by German troops the following day, being held prisoner without food or medical aid in Montebourg, France.

### Joe Pinder



Landing at Omaha Beach was Technician Fifth-Grade John J. Pinder, a minor league pitcher. Pinder was born at McKees Rock, Pennsylvania, and was a standout pitcher at Butler High School. He signed a professional contract to play with the Butler Indians of the

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Penn State Association in 1935. One of his finest seasons was with the Sanford Lookouts in the Florida State League in 1939, where he posted a 17-7 won-loss record and a 3.92 ERA with the league champions.

Pinder entered military service on January 27, 1942. The year before that he had been with the Fort Pierce Bombers of the Florida East Coast League and the Greenville Lions of the Alabama-Florida League. He was 11-9 with the Bombers and 6-2 with a 2.48 ERA with the Lions.

Pinder trained with the 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division at Camp Blanding, Florida and Fort Benning, Georgia. The division left for England in August 1942 and took part in the Allied landings of North Africa at Algeria and the battles against Rommel's Afrika Korps in Tunisia. In July 1943, Pinder was part of the Allied landings at Sicily.

By November 1943, Technician 5th Grade Pinder was back in England preparing for D-Day. On the morning of June 6, 1944, the 16th Infantry Regiment were in the first wave of troops to assault the beaches at Colleville-Sur-Mer - more familiarly known as Omaha Beach. Pinder was aboard a landing craft of men from the 16th Infantry Regiment's Headquarters Company. For Pinder it was a special day - his birthday. He was 32.

As the landing crafts approached the beach the Germans opened fire with artillery, mortars and machine-gun fire. An artillery shell exploded close to Pinder's landing craft, tearing holes in the boat and injuring many of the men inside. Panic set-in as the vessel filled with water and began to sink. Still 100 yards from the beach the ramp was dropped and the men of HQ Company were instantly met with a hail of deadly accurate machine-gun and small arms fire, killing many outright as they struggled to reach the shore.

Despite the chaos and carnage, Pinder remembered his duties. He grabbed the vital radio equipment, placed it on his shoulder and made his way down the ramp and into the waves.

With bursts of gunfire all around him it was only a matter of time before he was hit. A bullet clipped him, causing the veteran soldier to stumble, but he didn't stop. Pinder made it to the beach, dropped the radio and returned to the water to retrieve more radio equipment. Again he was hit - a serious wound to his face and then bullet wounds to



his legs. But still he couldn't be stopped. In all, Pinder returned to the water three times to recover the vital equipment. Already weakened by heavy loss of blood, he was hit by enemy fire once more - this time it was fatal.

### Elmer Wright



Elmer Wright, a pitcher in the St Louis Browns' organization, was also at Omaha Beach on D-Day. Wright was born in Bedford, Virginia - a tight knit community of 3,000 and Elmer was the son of Bedford's deputy sheriff. He was a standout athlete at Bedford High School - a tackle in football and a pitcher in baseball.

After graduating from high school the fun-

loving right-hander pitched for a number of local semi-pro teams before signing with the Browns in 1937. He was assigned to the Terre Haute Tots of the Three-I League where he won 10, lost 13, and finished the season with the Kitty League's Mayfield Clothiers.

Wright worked his way through the minors and was due to attend spring training with the St Louis Browns in 1941 but instead was inducted in the Army. He was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland, home of the 29th Infantry Division, and during the summer of 1941, Wright regularly had the opportunity to pitch for the Fort Meade post baseball team. In August 1942, the 29th Infantry Division left Fort Meade bound for Camp Blanding in Florida. Less than a month later they were preparing to move out although they had no idea where they were going - the Pacific to fight the Japanese or Europe to fight the Germans. The question was soon answered. The 29th boarded a train that took them to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey - staging post to Britain. A staggering total of 11,000 troops boarded the *Queen Mary* for the Atlantic crossing with an escort of five destroyers and a British cruiser, *HMS Curacao*. As the *Queen Mary* approached Scotland it was the *Curacao* that guided her to the Forth of Clyde. It was a routine operation but at 2.12pm on October 2, 1942 disaster struck. The *Queen Mary* collided with the *Curacao*. The huge ocean liner suffered minimal damage but the *Curacao* sank almost immediately from the impact. Three hundred and thirty-eight lives were lost.

Shaken, but safely on dry land in Scotland, the division moved by train to London, England and from there to Tidworth Barracks



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just ten miles from historic Stonehenge. It was the beginning of the division's training program that would last until May 1944 - the longest of any US infantrymen in World War II.

But Elmer Wright still found a little time for baseball. In September 1943, he played for the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Yankees in a four-day US services baseball tournament in London. The 116<sup>th</sup> were a darkhorse team at the outset - unknown to most of the other teams who were already playing in well-established military leagues around Britain. Wright's pitching guided the Yankees to an unexpected place in the final against 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force Fighter Command that saw the 116<sup>th</sup> win 6-3 for the ETO championship title. That was to be Wright's last chance to play any form of competitive baseball. For the remainder of 1943 and the first five months of 1944 it was intensive military training in preparation for the invasion of mainland Europe.

On the morning of June 6, 1944, Staff Sergeant Wright was on a landing craft heading for Omaha Beach at Normandy. Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was to lead the D-Day assault. As the landing crafts approached the beach they were met with a barrage of deadly accurate fire. As the ramp dropped on the front of the landing craft the men of Company A were met with a hail of enemy fire. Many were killed outright as the ramp dropped on the front of the landing craft, others lay critically wounded, screaming for help. Those that could jumped in to the six-foot of water and desperately tried to make their way to the beach.

Staff Sergeant Elmer Wright was among those dead on the beach.

### Sylvester Sturges

One of the pilot's bringing in supplies to the troops on the ground in Normandy on D-Day was Second-Lieutenant Sylvester Sturges - minor league outfielder.

Sturges was born in New York City and signed with Americus in 1939, playing 20 games and batting .250. He batted .243 with Shelby of the Tar Heel League in 1940, then raised his average to .294 with the Goldsboro Goldbugs of the Coastal Plain League in 1941. He entered military service on October 15, 1941 and trained as a pilot with the Army Air Force. On June 7, 1944 - D-Day Plus 1 - Sturges was co-piloting a Douglas C-47 from Saltby Airfield in



Leicestershire, England to France as part of the resupply mission - codename FREEMPORT. The plane crash landed about one mile northeast of Sebeville in France. With the exception of the tail assembly, the plane was burned out. Sturges, along with the pilot, crew chief and radio-operator all lost their lives.

### News of Brewer's Death Reaches Home

Lefty Brewer was reported missing in action following D-Day and for four agonizing months, his family held on to a glimmer of hope that he could still be alive. But in October 1944 the War Department confirmed his death. He was buried at the American Cemetery in Ste Mere Eglise. That month, his younger sister, Katherine, sent news of his death to Clark Griffith. "I want you and your entire family to know that I mourn along with you at the loss of this fine boy," wrote Griffith in his reply. "Forrest was such a fine upstanding young man and Calvin [Griffith, Vice President of Senators] and myself and all connected with the Washington club dearly loved him."

In 1947, his body was returned home to Jacksonville, Florida. The flag-draped coffin was carried passed the ball field where he learned to pitch and was finally laid to rest in Riverside Memorial Park. In November 1988, Brewer was inducted in the Jacksonville Sports Hall of Fame for his "outstanding athletic achievements." To most sports fans, Lefty Brewer's name remains as unfamiliar as his career remains incomplete - another bush leaguer who failed to make it to the "The Show." But his ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty should not be forgotten, and thanks to baseball's unique statistical

documentation, the brief career of this American hero will always remain an integral part of the national pastime.

### Petropoulos Repatriated

On June 19, 1944, Pete Petropoulos was repatriated when Allied troops overran Montebourg where he was held prisoner by the Germans. Petropoulos was shipped back to the United States with a Silver Star and Purple Heart. He was sent to Rhoads General Hospital in Utica, New York, where it was feared he might have to have both legs amputated. Seven major operations followed and the former ball player's legs were saved.

Although he would never be able to play professional baseball again, an injury to his hand could have resulted in him being a more effective hurler than before the war. A medical report by Doctor John J O'Bell of Rhoads General Hospital orthopaedic section read: "The sergeant cannot play professional baseball again, due to compound fractures in the upper thigh bones, which, while healing entirely, may leave a slight stiffness. However, he can pitch as well as ever, and it is likely he may pitch better than before, because the second metacarpal of the left hand, also injured by shrapnel, will have a new formation in healing that will make possible a better curve. It is reasonable to expect that he can make a fine coach or instructor in physical education."

After Petropoulos left hospital he went to work for the New York Giants as a scout, and in 1948 he became a goodwill ambassador to servicemen and veterans, conducting *The Sporting News Sports Caravan*, which, in conjunction with Liggett & Myers the makers

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of Chesterfield cigarettes, visited veterans' hospitals in the New York metropolitan area. "I know from my long years of association with Pete Petropoulos," David Woodside told *The Sporting News*, "that he can talk the language of any vet either in or out of a hospital."

This tour was later expanded to take in veterans' hospitals in southern states, and Petropoulos also managed the Chesterfield-Sporting News (later Chesterfield Satisfiers) baseball team that played at veterans' hospitals for the next 12 years.

By 1950, Petropoulos was running Greater New York Sports Promotions, an agency booking events for baseball and basketball teams, including his own professional basketball team – the Long Island Bombers. In 1955, *The Sporting News* gave him his own column – *Sounding Off with Pete Petropoulos* – in which Petropoulos gave his views on all major sports.

Pete Petropoulos passed away on December 1, 1996 in Atlanta, Georgia, aged 81. He is buried at Arlington Memorial Park in Atlanta.

### Medal of Honor for Pinder



On January 4, 1945, Technician Fifth-Grade Pinder was awarded the Congressional

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"The indomitable courage and personal bravery of T/5 Pinder was a magnificent inspiration to the men with whom he served," proudly claimed his citation.

On May 11, 1949, the US Army barracks at Zirndorf, Germany, was renamed Pinder Barracks in Joe's honor. Although the barracks have since been torn down, a park now occupies the area - it is known as Pinder Park. Joe Pinder is buried at Grandview Cemetery in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania, where a monument was erected in his honor in October 2000. Fifty-five years after his death, fourteen members of Pinder's family and many local dignitaries attended the ceremony.

### Elmer Wright and Bedford's Losses

It was not until July 16, 1944, that news of Elmer Wright's death reached the townfolk of Bedford, Virginia. But Wright was not the only D-Day casualty from Bedford. Nineteen Bedford boys died in the first bloody minutes of D-Day. Two more died later in the day. No other town in America suffered a greater loss. Elmer Wright is buried at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer in France. On June 6, 1954, ten years after the tragic losses at Normandy, a memorial to the young men of Bedford was unveiled.



### Recent Passings

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