

# Gulf Coast Reporters' League

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Vol. III, Issue IV

A bi-monthly update of aerospace activities in the Gulf Coast I-10 region

February 2016



Support provided by



Embry-Riddle Daytona Beach Campus, Fla. It also has an Arizona campus and its Worldwide program 130 sites. Embry-Riddle photo

## The Embry-Riddle factor

*When a highly regarded aviation university establishes multiple training facilities in your back yard, it's an affirmation of the role of aerospace in the I-10 region's economy...*

If a region wants to be known as a hot spot for aerospace and aviation activities, it's helpful to have one of the world's best-known aerospace institutions set up shop in your back yard.

And it has, big time. Call it the Embry-Riddle factor.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's Worldwide campus has had operations in

the Gulf Coast region for decades. It holds classes in New Orleans, Biloxi, Mobile, Pensacola, Milton, Fort Walton Beach, Crestview and Dothan.

That's more than a lot of regions can say. Indeed, the first residence center was established in the Gulf Coast region more than 40 years ago.

"Embry-Riddle Worldwide has an historical commitment to the United States military and Coast Guard, which, appropriately, all started at Fort Rucker, Ala., in 1970," said Dr. Brad L Sims, chancellor of Embry-Riddle Worldwide.

"In addition to providing practical, unique, and quality educational programs to Department of Defense and Coast Guard

*By David Tortorano, editor*

*(Continued on page 2)*

personnel, Worldwide serves commercial aviation, aerospace, and other associated industries in this vitally-important, four-state economic area.”

This year is Embry-Riddle’s 90th anniversary, and from its humble beginnings it has grown to become one of the most highly-respected schools.

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is a non-profit, independent institution and the world’s largest university specializing in aviation and aerospace. It has residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Fla., and Prescott, Ariz., and campuses at more than 130 locations in the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. And in a nod towards modern learning, it also has online programs, which *U.S. News & World Report* gave a No. 1 ranking.

Established in 1926 as Embry-Riddle Flying School in Cincinnati, Ohio, today it awards associate, bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees, and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Programs in aeronautics, air traffic management, applied meteorology and aerospace studies are certified by the Federal Aviation Administration.

For this region and elsewhere, a key program of the school is Embry-Riddle Worldwide. Established in 1970, Worldwide has more than 130 campuses across the globe, with 75 on military bases.

The largest employers of Embry-Riddle graduates are the U.S. Air Force and Army, and it also can claim six graduates as NASA astronauts.

It’s also involved in research. It’s expanded its partnership with industry in developing the Aerospace Research and Technology Park adjacent to the Daytona Beach campus.

In the Gulf Coast I-10 region, there are Embry-Riddle operations at Panama City-Tyndall; Crestview; Fort Walton Beach-Eglin; Fort Walton Beach-Hurlburt Field; Pensacola-NAS Pensacola; Milton-Whiting Field; Mobile-U.S. Coast Guard ATC; Fort Rucker, Ala.; Biloxi-Keesler; and New Orleans-Joint Reserve Base.

All those bases have aviation-related activities, but there are also many non-military aviation activities in the region, including two NASA centers, an Airbus A320 assembly plant, an unmanned aircraft plant and more.

“Our density within the I-10 corridor characterizes our continuing commitment to these groups, as well as a recognition of the economic value that this region brings to the local, state, and national economy,” Sims said.

Embry-Riddle Worldwide serves about 1,400 students in the Gulf Coast region each year. On average, there are usually 250 graduates a year from the Gulf Coast locations.

Embry-Riddle Worldwide locations in Walton and Okaloosa counties in Florida (Crestview, Eglin AFB, and Hurlburt Field) serve the largest number of students within the region.

In the Gulf Coast region, Embry-Riddle has both civilian and military locations. At civilian locations, Embry-Riddle Worldwide uses facilities that house classrooms and administrative areas. At military bases, Embry-Riddle is located in the education center with other schools.

Embry-Riddle Worldwide has partnered with the Okaloosa County School District to provide students with a dual enrollment program through the Okaloosa Aerospace Academy in the areas of aerospace, engineering, management and logistics.

Open to high school students in their sophomore, junior and senior years, the academy offers fully weighted high school credit, three college credits per course, FAA training, and relevant industry certifications from the FAA and in logistics. Formerly known as the Aviation Institute, this program is currently offered at public schools in Okaloosa County.

Embry-Riddle faculty members bring experience from the military, academia and industry to the classroom. They design courses and curriculum in line with current trends and industry needs so students can immediately apply lessons learned on the job. Many



Embry-Riddle Worldwide associate professor Orin Godsey teaches a class. Embry-Riddle photo

faculty members continue to work in their industries – whether engineering, aerospace, aviation, military, corporate business or others – throughout their teaching careers with Embry-Riddle.

“We are honored to play a large role in educating one of the most well-trained and competent workforces in the United States,” Sims said.

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**EMBRY-RIDDLE**  
Aeronautical University  
FLORIDA | ARIZONA | WORLDWIDE

**Established:** 1926

**Admin/main campus:** Daytona Beach, Fla.

**Students (all programs):** more than 22,000

**Undergraduate degrees:** aeronautics; aviation business administration; aviation maintenance; aviation maintenance technology part 65 (certificate program); aviation security; communications; emergency services; engineering fundamentals; engineering technology; interdisciplinary studies; logistics and supply chain management; safety management; technical management; unmanned systems applications

**Graduate degrees:** aeronautical science; aviation finance; business administration-aviation; cybersecurity management and policy; engineering management; human factors; human security and resilience; information security and assurance; leadership; logistics and supply chain management; management; management information systems; occupational safety management; project management; systems engineering; unmanned systems

**More information:** 800-522-6787 or email [worldwide@erau.edu](mailto:worldwide@erau.edu)



The first A321 jetliner being built in the United States is nearing completion at the Airbus U.S. Manufacturing Plant in Mobile .

Photo courtesy of Airbus

### Economic development

## Three aerospace clusters take hold

*Germany's Broetje is the latest company to announce it will have an operation at the Aeroplex, adding yet another link to the several clusters that now call Mobile home...*

#### Mobile, Ala.

When one of the world's major aircraft manufacturers chose the Mobile Aeroplex as the site for its first jetliner assembly plant in North America, expectations soared.

Economic developers, including Mobile Airport Authority Executive Director Roger Wehner, found them-

*By Martha Simmons*

selves having to temper those expectations.

"Early on," Wehner said, "even when the final assembly line hadn't gone vertical yet, people were saying, 'Where are all the suppliers?' We had to tell them, 'Who would they supply?' It's been a big educational learning curve for people."

Wehner and others continue to appeal for patience and understanding of how the aerospace industry grows and evolves around such a huge industry anchor as the \$600 million Airbus final assembly line. It all takes a good deal of time.

"It'll happen exactly how it's supposed to happen, when it's supposed to happen," he said.

Although the process may be slow, the evolution has so far resulted in three distinct clusters of aerospace industry businesses locating at the Aeroplex, Wehner said:

- Engineering
- Final Assembly Line
- Interiors

First among the aerospace industries to gravitate to the incubator at Brookley Field, a former Air Force Base and site of impressive military aircraft construction and maintenance in bygone years, were the engineering and construction firms tasked with building the new Airbus facility and keeping the final assembly line moving.

*(Continued on page 4)*

“Some construction firms have left (following the building of the plant) and some have created a permanent location here at Brookley,” Wehner said. “They were smart enough to say this is where it’s happening and I want to be there to get future opportunities to compete.”

Wehner said the engineering firms that have located in Mobile are predominantly European and work closely with Airbus engineers. (*See engineering firms story in the August 2015 newsletter, pages 3-4*)

“Our strategy was to make this as attractive as possible to them to plant their flag here, get them wedded to the community, and to encourage early adoption. We created a space specifically for this purpose to incentivize these early adopters and make it as easy as possible for them to be here.”

The second aerospace cluster comprises final assembly line (FAL) service and support. Germany’s Broetje just announced it’s coming to Mobile.

“Airbus seems to want its employees focusing on the pure assembly process,” Wehner said, “and currently they rely on a mixed bag of highly qualified suppliers to prepare the sub-assemblies and components.”

FAL contractors do things like installing engines, inflating tires, maintaining small tools, preparing and installing batteries, and painting the finished aircraft.

The third cluster puts the finishing touches on the interior of the plane, Wehner said. Seats, entertainment systems, galleys and other original equipment specifications all vary according to which airline is purchasing the airframe.

Wehner points out that while a lot of attention is focused on the economic development plum that is Airbus, Mobile’s aerospace industry was fruitful long before.

MAA’s website notes that the Brookley Aeroplex is home to several MRO operations and FAA Part 145 repair stations. Continental Motors,

<b>Aviation cluster companies (pre-Airbus FAL highlighted)</b>	
tenant	specialty
Airbus FAL	aircraft manufacturing /FAL
AAA Aerospace	FAL services
Broetje	FAL services
Star Aviation	interiors and in-flight entertainment
Vartan	interiors integration
Zodiac	interiors and in-flight entertainment
Airbus Engineering Center	engineering
Akka	engineering
Assystems	engineering
Inter-Informatics	engineering
Safran Engineering Services	engineering
Sonovision	engineering
Aerostar	MRO
Continental Southern Avionics	MRO
VT MAE	MRO
Comau	jigs and tools
Reel	jigs and tools
AIDT	aerospace training
Aviation College	aerospace training
Continental Motors	engine manufacturing
MAAS Aviation	paint
Messier Bugatti Dowty	landing gear wheels and brakes
Signature Flight Support	FBO
<i>Source: Mobile Airport Authority</i>	

VT MAE, Star Aviation and their partner company Aerostar all call the Aeroplex home, employing about 2,000 people.

The complex is now home to many of the world’s leading aerospace suppliers and growing daily, with economic developers seeking to marry the new Airbus suppliers to existing businesses and strengthen the overall aerospace sector.

But as heady as all this new industry is to local government officials and prospective employees, Wehner urges

patience, flexibility and responsiveness in order to take advantage of new opportunities around the next corner.

“It’ll keep evolving,” Wehner said.

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#### *Related recent posts*

- Broetje to set up in Mobile ([2/8/16](#))
- Zodiac opening Mobile site ([1/6/16](#))
- Hike in A320 production? ([10/30/15](#))
- Mobile output hike seen ([10/14/15](#))
- 6512 start of new era ([10/7/15](#))

## Military - entrepreneur

# The Rockhill Group continues to grow

*At first he was all thrust and no vector, but the former Air Force pilot quickly changed that and his Molino-based aviation services company has grown over 900 percent in the last few years...*

## Molino, Fla.

James “Rock” Rockhill isn’t afraid to admit that when he first started his business a dozen years ago, he was “all thrust and no vector.”

“When I first started, I never saw a contract that I couldn’t do,” he says now. But it didn’t take long for the former F-15E pilot to realize that if he expected to survive in business, he had to add some direction to his charge forward approach. Once he did, the company started to take off.

The Rockhill Group (TRG) is one of the major entrepreneurial success stories from the Gulf Coast region. An aviation services company headquartered in Molino, north of Pensacola, it provides flight training, courseware development, aircraft leasing, maintenance and cryogenic services for the Air Force, Army, Navy and Federal Aviation Administration.

It now has operations at more than two dozen locations and about 200 employees. And with a new contract TRG won in December, the company founder and president expects to add another 100 employees. The biggest boost in employment will be at Hurlburt Field, which will grow to about 70 workers from today’s two.

The \$13.2 million contract calls for TRG to provide Air Force Special Operations Air Warfare Center aircrew training at Hurlburt Field in Northwest Florida and Cannon Air Force Base, N.M. TRG will provide instructors for several models of the C-130, including

*By David Tortorano*



*The Molino campus of The Rockhill Group, which provides aviation services to federal clients. Photo courtesy TRG*

the AC-130 gunship, the C-12 and remotely piloted aircraft.

The contract also has two and one-half option years which, if exercised, would bring the total value of the contract to \$57 million. TRG beat out 10 other bidders to win the contract from the Air Force Installation Contracting Agency at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

The growth of TRG is an example of how a determined entrepreneur can leverage experience to create something new and exciting, and provide jobs for hundreds of people.

Rockhill enlisted in the Air Force in 1983 and was assigned to Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., where he was enrolled in the air traffic control school program.

He moved up the enlisted ranks to staff sergeant and later attended Officer Training School. In 1987 he started pilot training at Vance Air Force Base, Okla. He has been “Rock” from



*Rockhill with an F-111 during Desert Storm. TRG photo*

the time he became a pilot in the Air Force. He said he got off easy compared to the call-signs the others in his class of about 30 students were given.

*(Continued on page 6)*

## TRG locations

- Austin, Texas
- Beale Air Force Base, Calif.
- Cannon AFB, N.M.
- Corpus Christi, Texas
- Dallas, Texas
- Daytona Beach, Fla.
- Edwards AFB, Calif.
- El Paso, Texas
- Fort Lauderdale, Fla.
- Fort Worth, Texas
- Holloman AFB, N.M.
- Houston, Texas
- Hurlburt Field, Fla.
- Jacksonville, Fla.
- Joint Base Andrews, Md.
- Lubbock, Texas
- Miami, Fla.
- Orlando, Fla.
- San Antonio, Texas
- San Juan, Puerto Rico
- Tallahassee, Fla.
- Tampa, Fla.
- Vandenberg AFB, Calif.
- West Palm Beach, Fla.
- Wheeler Army Air Field, Hawaii

He was assigned to an F-111 and later transitioned to fly the F-15E fighter. He flew in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Operation Provide Comfort I and II and Deny Flight, earning two Distinguished Flying Crosses and seven Air Medals. Rockhill later became an F-15 instructor and served at Naval Air Station Pensacola, where he was the first Air Force Operations Officer in the history of Training Squadron VT-4.

He retired from the Air Force in 2004 after 21 years of service. When he took off his military flight suit for the last time on a Friday, the next Monday he was already putting on a civilian flight suit as a pilot for a contractor. In that job in Pensacola, he flew T-1 twin-engine planes while military sensor operators were learning their trade aboard the plane.

He became the chief pilot in just a

few months, which provided him with an even better understanding of what it took to be an aviation contractor. He liked the job, but started to ask himself if he wanted to work for a contractor or be a contractor himself. The problem with working for someone else is there is a ceiling on just how far you can go. By owning his own company, the sky is the limit.

“I always had confidence, I thought I could do more,” he said. After retiring from the Air Force at a young age, he didn’t feel like he was even half-way through with what he could do.

He started his own business Oct. 15, 2004, and began attending workshops through the Florida SBDC at the University of West Florida. He credits to a large extent Laura Subel, an SBDC government contracting specialist, for providing him with the tools to change his approach to his business.

TRG, which hired its first 16 employees in October 2005, has grown 3,000 percent since it launched.

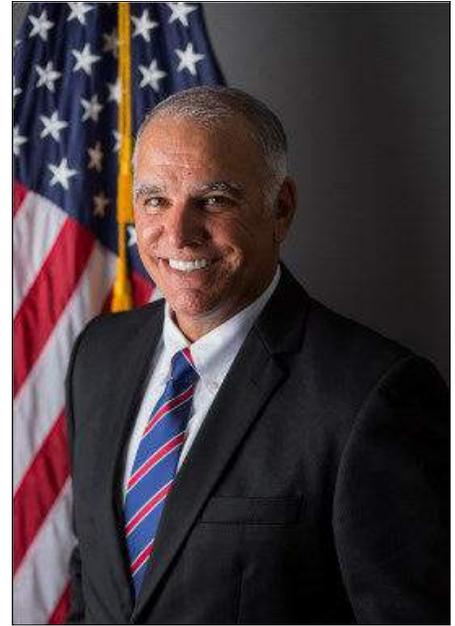
He said he stopped reaching so high and ended up landing his first contract for nearly \$39,000, low-hanging fruit, if you will, providing pilot training materials to Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala.

That was just the start. He also learned that he needed to diversify his business.

“Sometimes, there’s a tendency that with a business they do something well and get comfortable,” he said. He realized he had to prepare for new things - remotely piloted aircraft was just one example.

His company can take credit for helping to train thousands of warfighters, both pilots and flight officers, and is currently training Air Force pilots and sensor operators under government contracts now approaching \$100 million.

In addition to running TRG, he has also taught at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, where he had earned a bachelors and masters in aeronautical science in 1987 and 1993, respectively.



James “Rock” Rockhill

He’s encouraged about the future of the region. Providing aviation services for the federal government is like a pendulum that moves back and forth, with more work at times, less at others. But he’s prepared to some extent by having diverse services available - and keeping his eye on how TRG vectors.

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**Corporate HQs:** Molino, Fla.

**Established:** 2004

**No. of employees:** 200 plus, but with new contract projected to be 300 plus

**Focus areas:** aviation services for the federal government

**Types of workers:** wide variety, including instructor pilots, navigators, fire control, sensors, electronic warfare, combat systems, flight engineers, loadmaster, radio operator, gunner, maintenance workers and others

**Employment information:** visit the TRG site at [www.therockhillgroup.com/careers](http://www.therockhillgroup.com/careers); email [office@therockhillgroup.com](mailto:office@therockhillgroup.com); or call 850 754 0400

## Space and the military

# DoD gives Raptor project a boost

*Contracts from the military to continue work on next generation propulsion systems to replace Russian engines provide a boost to commercial space efforts...*

## Stennis Space Center, Miss.

The development of the Raptor methane rocket engine received a sizeable boost in January when the Air Force awarded a \$33.6 million contract to Space Exploration Technologies Corp., SpaceX.

The contract is to develop Raptor for the Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle (EELV), a program started in the 1990s to assure U.S. access to space for the Department of Defense and other federal agencies.

Called “an other” transaction agreement, it’s used instead of a standard procurement contract to leverage ongoing investments by industry. It requires SpaceX and the Air Force to share costs in development of a prototype of the Raptor for the upper stage of the Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy launch vehicles. SpaceX is contributing \$67.3 million at the time of the award, with a potential investment of \$122.8 million. The total potential government investment is \$61.4 million.

At the heart of the SpaceX award and a companion \$47 million contract to Orbital ATK of Magna, Utah, for development of three propulsion systems for EELV, is the requirement of the 2015 Defense Authorization Act to transition from Russian-built RD-180 engines for National Security launches.

But the significance of the awards goes well beyond the military’s EELV program. It will have an impact on other commercial space ventures, including SpaceX’s ambitions plans to create a launch vehicle designed to

eventually colonize Mars. The Raptor engines play a key role there. And the Gulf Coast is playing a major role.

SpaceX, the first commercial company to successfully fly cargo to the International Space Station (ISS), announced in October 2013 that it would use NASA’s John C. Stennis Space Center (SSC), Miss., for R&D on its Raptor engine. In April 2014 SpaceX cut the ribbon on its test stand at SSC. Since then, it’s been testing components for the Raptor. In a typical week SpaceX conducts multiple tests.

The decision to use SSC hitched the Gulf Coast to one of the most ambitious commercial space companies. SpaceX’s projects include sending supplies to the ISS, and eventually astronauts. It’s also involved in the military’s EELV program, and is creating new spaceships that will take colonists to Mars. In December 2015 it marked a major milestone when its Falcon 9 made a vertical landing at Cape Canaveral, Fla. That, along with an earlier vertical landing by a suborbital Blue Origin craft promise to make reusable launch vehicles a reality. That would greatly reduce the cost of all launches.

The Raptor is key to SpaceX’s future endeavors. It can be used for both the upper and core stage of launch vehicles. A cluster of nine will be used on the core stage of the planned Mars Colonial Transporter. The Raptors use of methane as a fuel is crucial since methane can be synthesized on Mars.

SpaceX had to fight to get involved in the EELV. The program’s goal since its inception has been to make government space launches more affordable. It led to the creation of United Launch Alliance, a joint Boeing and Lockheed venture, which makes the Delta IV and Atlas V launch systems used to lift U.S. military satellites. The Delta IV booster is powered by Rocketdyne RS-



Falcon 9 lands vertically in Florida. SpaceX photo

68 engines tested at SSC, and the Atlas V booster uses RD-180 engines.

In late 2012 DoD announced a re-opening of the EELV launch vehicle market. Under the new plan there was a bloc buy of up to 36 launch cores from ULA, while opening another 14 cores to be purchased competitively.

The vertical landings of Blue Origin’s New Shepard and SpaceX’s Falcon 9 promise to have implications for the EELV program.

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### Related recent posts

- Contract: Space X, \$33.6M ([1/13/16](#))
- Contract: ATK, \$47M ([1/13/16](#))
- Falcon 9 successfully lands ([12/22/15](#))
- Blue Origin makes history ([11/24/15](#))
- SpaceX sues Air Force ([4/26/14](#))
- Raptor tests being in month ([4/21/14](#))
- SpaceX picks SSC ([10/23/13](#))

*By David Tortorano*

## Economic development

# Sassano starting new phase of his life

*He's been a part of region's economic development effort for years, but he stepped down from Florida's Great Northwest to do work less demanding of his time...*

## Niceville, Fla.

Looking back on 35 years in economic development work, Larry Sassano said helping to create regional business strategies has been his most rewarding work. But he announced in December that he planned to leave Florida's Great Northwest as president.

He last day at FGNW was Jan. 31.

"I was able to take the knowledge I got at the state and local organizations and apply it at a regional level and have some affect," Sassano said.

Sassano was hired in 2012 to the helm of Florida's Great Northwest, which coordinates business marketing and development for a 16-county region stretching from Escambia to Jefferson counties.

That was the same year that aircraft production giant Airbus announced it would build its first assembly plant on United States soil in Mobile, Ala., less than an hour drive from Northwest Florida's westernmost border.

Sassano and others in his field saw the potential to expand a commercial aviation sector that has long been dwarfed by the vast military aviation complex in the region.

In his three years at Florida's Great Northwest, the Panhandle has begun making a name for itself in commercial aviation. Seven industrial airparks are now being developed at or near air fields across the region, including Escambia County, Santa Rosa County,

*By Tom McLaughlin*

Okaloosa County, two in Bay County, Leon County and Franklin County.

Most feature direct airfield access. The businesses they attract perform such services as maintenance and repair, or add new technologies, like aircraft erosion prevention, to extend the lifetime of a commercial aircraft.

Thanks in large part to the existing aviation technologies already in the area, this past quarter a group of investors interested in motorsports announced they were looking at Northwest Florida as a possible site for automobile racing, high-end car sales and vehicle development and testing.

During Sassano's time as president of FGNW, an emphasis has been placed on providing businesses looking to locate in Northwest Florida with shovel ready locations verified by Gulf Power, the region's primary energy provider, as Florida First Sites.

And Sassano leaves as Northwest Florida prepares to enter an unprecedented era for economic development. Eight of the 16 counties who are members of FGNW are projected to receive \$1.6 billion over the next 18 years to be used solely for the diversification of the region's economy.

Triumph Gulf Coast, a five-member board, has been chosen to oversee the dispersal of the funds. Sassano wouldn't rule out playing some role in the work that Triumph Gulf Coast will do.

However, Sassano said he wants his next job to be part time, or at least significantly fewer hours at the office than he spends now. In an email to his contacts, Sassano said he is starting an advisory firm, L.S.A. LLC and will be working with associates.

Sassano's career includes working for the Florida Department of Commerce for 13 years, and the Bay Economic Development Alliance for three years. He headed the Okaloosa County Eco-



Larry Sassano

nomics Development Council for 16 years before assuming the presidency of FGNW.

Sassano is known throughout the state and beyond. He has helped to heighten awareness of Northwest Florida through his many associations. He has been a supporter of FGNW since its inception through his participation with the Marketing and Executive Committees.

Under his leadership, FGNW has grown its membership base while continuing to market and brand the region. He accomplished his goal of stabilizing the organization and believes the time is right to move on.

An advisory group headed by Gray Swoope, a former Enterprise Florida CEO who now heads VisionFirst Advisors, is working with FGNW to refine its mission and find a replacement for Sassano.

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