The Navy Speaks Out:
A Reflection on Oral History Regarding the Canadian Forces Unification

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As the Royal Canadian Navy approaches its hundredth birthday the historical highlights of this important institution will undergo considerable review and re-examination. Significant moments such as the acquisition of RAINBOW, Canada’s first commissioned ship in 1910, the sinking of ATHABASKAN in the spring 1944, the reactivation of HMCS HAIDA and her deployment to the Korean peninsula, the peacetime fire on KOOTNEY in 1969, the decommissioning of BONAVENTURE in 1970 and the damage sustained to CHICOUTIMI in 2004 will all receive renewed attention and keen reflection. All of these events have been well documented in the historical records and the popular media. There is one critical event, however, that in my view has been under reported in the historiography of the Canadian Forces Maritime Command, nee the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). That is the integration or “Unification” of the three Canadian Armed Forces branches into a singular entity.

While there is increasing written comment about Unification, its rationale and results, it has largely taken a minor role in the historical accounts. This is true, not only from the traditional naval perspective but particularly from the personal narrative aspect. This gap in the history of the Canadian navy is largely the result of Unification’s somewhat traumatic effect. The vast number of rapid changes instituted resulted in organizational disarray; so much so that even people who lived through it, not to mention subsequent historians, had difficulty understanding exactly what went on. This small “dark age” which lasted from about 1964 into the early 1980s was a result of the vast social, logistical and personnel shifting that occurred in the unification of the Canadian Forces. The scant, yet growing, history that does exist is basically a chronology and meta-narrative of the events that took place. In general, personal histories as provided by individuals are largely absent or deemed irrelevant. This paper will attempt to fill in some of this gap by incorporating the oral accounts of three servicemen who served during the “Unification” period.

Although many veterans of the three service branches could provide interesting first hand narratives and response to “Unification” the scope of this paper will be limited to the three chosen by the Royal United Services Institute. This was done in a recent collaboration with the University of Victoria’s History Department as part of a Veterans
Oral History project. The entire collection, including the three full interviews used for this paper, is held in special collections at the University of Victoria. The servicemen were chosen for their knowledge, positions, differing experiences and perspectives on Unification. Two of the subjects, Rear Admiral (Retd) W.A (Bill) Hughes and Rear Admiral (Retd) R.D. (Bob) Yanow, were executive branch officers in the Royal Canadian Navy. Their careers were extensive with postings throughout Canada and the world that provided them with unique experiences in both seagoing units and headquarter positions. The third subject, Brigadier General (Retd) Jean Veronneau was a naval aviation pilot before being transferred to the Airforce during Unification. His experiences are unique, as he served command positions with the Army, Navy and Air Force. These three oral histories are extensive and of significant analytical value. Occasionally, they express concurring opinions about a subject, but on other issues their differences are very clear. These histories have served to both reinforce the validity of some existing recorded material and to provide previously unpublished information and insight. This paper will attempt to incorporate and examine their individual verbal recollections as well as evaluate the three interviews in relation to each other. Analysis of this sort is useful in an assessment of oral histories provided by contemporaries.

At the end of the Second World War the Canadian armed services were three distinct entities each independent from the other in terms of policy, management and hierarchy. Each functioned under its own Minister as head and designated its own military head, chains of command, logistic system, rank structure and uniforms. Although some had proposed the concept of Unification as early as the prewar period, the slow process of blending the services probably began in 1946.\(^1\) Then, Prime Minister Mackenzie-King appointed a single minister to be responsible for defence, with the ability to appoint Associate Ministers for each service, as appropriate.\(^2\)

It was under the direction of a newly appointed Minister of Defence, Brook Claxson, in the 1950s that the earnest shift toward unification began. First, in 1950 a new National Defence Act standardized the legal framework for all three services, granting equal legal status and standardized military law and justice systems. The creation of a Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee allowed for the minister to appoint a figurehead chairman of the tri-service panel independent from their seniority of service. Although this chairman was not granted any executive powers over the other services the appointment allowed for further institutional integration. Then, under Conservative Minister George R. Pearkes the integration of specialist roles, such as legal, medical, and chaplain services were established. As well, logistic functions, such as common cataloguing systems, food procurement and postal services were adopted by the army and provided to all three services.

In general, there was little objection to these changes. As all three interviewees noted, integration or amalgamation, as it was called, was viewed as a logical though unwelcome move. Yanow even suggested that amalgamation was seen as possibly a good thing from a financial standpoint. As to dialogue regarding these changes, no interviewee recollected any major discussion with peers about these changes. Nor could they recall any formal public announcements or requests for input on Unification by the government at the time. Interestingly, this provides support for the notion that integration was generally viewed as a reasonably positive measure. However, it is plainly evident from the oral history that during the actual period of integration the primary discussion was focused only around the combining of select support trades. The idea that combat trades would ever be combined into a singular force was not considered, as it seemed so implausible. Furthermore, the general feeling was that not all support trades could be integrated. Hughes for example, discussed the impracticality of placing an army trained cook on a ship and expecting them to be successful. Both Hughes and Yanow contended that with the specialization of skill required by the main support trades, integration would benefit only a few.

3 Hellyer, Address, 7.
4 Hellyer, Address, 8-9.
By the start of the 1960s the foundation for Unification had been laid but there were still major obstacles to overcome before creation of a truly unified force could be practically realized. As historian Jack Granatstein stated, “to go beyond this point in the face of entrenched habits and traditions required a minister with rare determination. [Liberal Minister of Defence Paul] Hellyer proved to be that man.” Not at all esteemed by the trio of interviewees, Hellyer was somewhat villainized by all three. In fact, there is a written note by the interviewer of silent motions of discontent made by them when speaking of Hellyer during their official tape recorded sessions. He was characterized as a politically driven man with a personal agenda who had scant regard for the Canadian Forces. As the plan for unification became better known, Hellyer took his campaign further afield in his attempt to win support for his massive transformation. While these efforts, including visits overseas, were meant to allay the worries of concerned military officers they instead reinforced a growing sense of distaste and alienation.

In 1964 Minister Hellyer tabled his government’s White Paper on Defence. In this document the government outlined its official rationale for moving towards an integrated force. Hellyer argued that with the increased role and responsibilities in NATO, the threat of “all out thermonuclear war,” and a focus on peace-keeping operations, a unified force would be more effective for these new realities. Hellyer’s plan stressed the financial and logistical advantages of unification but failed to address the organizational challenges of implementation. Although there was initial grumbling and expressions of concern from serving members, the core of the plan- that is, to achieve efficiency and cost saving measures- made the concept difficult to outright reject by many of the military’s elite. Hellyer’s strong personality and political clout, not to mention the military’s ethos of not publicly displaying displeasure with a superior’s order, further subdued any initial public dissent by senior officers.

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At the same time but separate from the integration debate, other changes were taking place in the Navy that though in the record of Navy history, are not often articulated as connected with Unification. The evidence as provided by the oral histories indicates that Unification was not seen in isolation from the other changes. For example, Yanow discussed how the technological transformations that were taking place on the ships in upgrading from mostly analogue to digital modes, created massive morale and systematic problems. A Grade six education, once the Navy’s minimum, no longer proved sufficient to understand or operate the new technologies being installed on new ships and during the upgrades of the existing fleet. Large portions of the navy’s ranks were finding themselves incapable of meeting the requirements of their jobs. This quickly led to diminished morale and an increased drop out rate in the Navy. Concurrent with this educational and technological transformation was a major reduction in ‘Dress and Deportment’ of sailors uniforms, drill and overall daily routine. While this overall decline is often associated with the sailor’s feelings about Unification it assumes that it alone was not responsible. In fact it was a three-pronged incursion of technology, higher educational prerequisites and the amalgamation of the forces, all contributing to what was for many was an unsatisfactory result. Within a few years, the higher minimum education standards and recruitment of more “tech savvy” people, brought a return to more traditional norms in morale and a corresponding leveling off and improvement in appearance and conduct.

Another example of a change occurring in the Navy was the loss of HMCS BONAVENTURE. Although this ship, the last Canadian aircraft carrier, was not decommissioned until 1970, its demise was widely known years before that date. This particularly affected the Navy Aviation pilots who were facing imminent and daunting changes. Veronneau, provided an excellent example of this change when he discussed his transformation from a carrier based, fixed wing naval aviator to a Sea King helicopter pilot by 1968. He was aware, even before Unification, that the move from a carrier based aviation corps to a destroyer based one would dramatically alter the nature of Navy aviation. With the sale of the last carrier, he was acutely aware that a major adjustment was looming. While still fearful of what the loss of the carrier might entail, he and many
of his other pilots embraced the challenge and the exciting new opportunities. For these members though, Unification was not the greatest change taking place, rather it was the shift from Carrier to Destroyer based naval aviation.

For the majority of the Navy however, there was increased concern about the nature of the White Paper and what Unification might mean, especially among the highest-ranking officers. In the White Paper, the Navy’s future role had been projected for reduction to a much smaller anti-submarine force. Many viewed this major diminution of capacity as an emasculation of responsibility compared to the perceived RCN’s blue-water fleet at the end of the Second World War. This fact was not mentioned by any of the interviewees specifically but they did express similar sentiments to those described in written sources as prevalent at the time.

Despite efforts to adopt a quiet and non-assertive tone, dissatisfaction had swelled among Naval leaders. Within five months of the publishing of the White Paper, Admiral H.S. Rayner, the earliest and most vocal critic of unification and then RCN Chief of Staff, was “prematurely retired” at least a year ahead of schedule. With his retirement the Naval Board ceased to exist and with it a clear focus of Naval leadership. Rear-Admiral Jeffry Brock, Commander of the Atlantic Fleet, was similarly “retired”. A short while after, Brock’s replacement, Rear-Admiral W.M Landymore along with Rear-Admiral M.G Stirling met with The Minister and stated that they would not tolerate any plan that would seemingly wipe out the navy. They demanded that the Royal Canadian Navy not lose its distinctive identity. Their stand was applauded by at least the executive branch of the Navy and when Landymore resigned in frustration in 1966 they gave him martyr status.

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10 Milner, First Century, 241.
11 Milner, First Century, 245.
In 1964 "An Act to Amend the National Defence Act" was enacted establishing a singular, common Headquarters’ structure for all three services. Despite the worry about identity, this process was seen largely as a positive step, as it reduced duplication and grid locking of command structures and decisions. The promises of new money for equipment and staffing also seemed encouraging.\textsuperscript{13} Still the idea of complete unification was unacceptable. However, a new leaf had begun to turn for the Navy.

On February 15, 1965, HMC Ships from both coasts, at sea or along side joined with the Naval bases and for the first time lowered the Naval Ensign and replaced it with the new Maple Leaf Canadian Flag. As Marc Milner stated, “The RCN laid aside the only ensigns it had ever worn since its birth more that a half century earlier. If there was a sense of loss, and for most there was, there was at the same time a sense of pride in a trust well discharged and in a new obligation happily undertaken.”\textsuperscript{14} The Royal Canadian Navy, while seeming to understand that changes were inevitable, was still apprehensive and rightly concerned.

The changes came as a surprise and without any formal announcement. None of the three interviewees remembers any announcement regarding Unification. Instead, as Hughes pointed out, most of his information came through reading the newspaper. In 1965, Hellyer announced that a single walking-out uniform would be implemented for all members and a singular rank structure would come into effect by 1967. This news was not well received by the Naval staff or the top officers of all three services or by many of the serving members. In June 1966, the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marchal F.R. Miller, the Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff, Lieutenant-General R.W. Moncell, the Chief of Personnel, Vice-Admiral K.L. Dyer, and the comptroller general, Lieutenant-General F. Fluery were simultaneously retired.\textsuperscript{15} Instantly, the top five military positions were vacant and the threat of more retirements loomed large.

\textsuperscript{14} Cameron, Unification Crisis, 339.
\textsuperscript{15} Cameron, Unification Crisis, 339.
When asked about the retirement of Senior Officers, the two Executive officers told a common story. On receiving so many resignations from Senior Officers Prime Minister Pearson was reported to have advised Hellyer that if he had received one more resignation he would have called the whole thing off. Although the evidence to substantiate this story is minimal, two different people without solicitation and with identical details told it. Whether true or not this story reveals a significant element of the Unification story. It suggests, especially through the oral history, that the idea that Unification teetered so close to failure aroused the still felt feelings of hope that it would all go away. It reflects the retrospective desire of many contemporaries for Unification to not have occurred.

Hellyer, who the servicemen held directly responsible was naturally unpopular and blamed as the scapegoat. When in mid-summer of 1966 he visited HMCS STADACONA, the Halifax Naval station, he was openly booed over Unification issues at an all ranks question and answer period. The interviewed oral history subjects cited Vice Admiral Nigel Brodeur as a having a significant influence at this event. Although it was outside of the scope of this paper to interview him directly, the recorded and oral history that surrounds Brodeur’s comments and actions at this meeting warrants consideration. Doubtless, his outburst and stand against Hellyer was applauded by integration opponents and seen as a courageous and valiant attempt to raise concerns about Unification. By this point it was apparent to most that the vague term of “Unification” was going to be something that affected more then just a structural re-adjustment. It became clear that the Canadian Navy, arguably the most conservative and stalwart bastion of Royal Navy monarchist traditions and customs, would be faced with new challenges that were now uniquely Canadian.

In November 1966, the “Canadian Forces Reorganization Act” was first read in Parliament and was granted Royal Assent six months later on May 8, 1967. Immediately it became clear that while the rationale was understandable the means and methods of implementation were not well thought out. There appeared to be no apparent plans in

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16 Cameron, *Unification Crisis*, 341.
place to accommodate the three services, their unique traditions, customs, rank structures, command systems, and other unique features into a singular body. To complicate matters, Minister Hellyer, was shuffled out of Defence and into the Transport portfolio. He abandoned his plan for Unification completely when he ran for and lost the Liberal Party leadership race.”

The services were left on their own to adjust to this new system.

During the course of the interviews Veronneau provided an excellent account of how aviation reorganized itself or rather was forced to reorganize. He gave an account of 10 Tactical Air Group (10TAG), which began as the Army’s attempt to establish an aviation command. Pre-Unification, the control of this group was entirely the army’s. During the phase-in of Unification, however, the control of the group went to the Airforce, which was to become the only air group in the Canadian Forces. The Tactical Air Group became a standard for the mishmash of identity that Unification caused. For example, Veronneau, despite having been in the navy and still wearing his naval blues, belonged officially now to the air force, but worked in an Army Aviation command and associated himself with the army. The army meanwhile attempted to guard their own interests and tasked Veronneau with protecting the air group’s army identity and function. It was evident then that entrenched identities still existed for all the prior services and that a new common identity would be a long time coming; if it came at all.

Needless to say, the administrative and logistical functioning of this amalgamated force had never been experienced before. Other nation’s military’s watched this experiment at first in hopeful curiosity and later in abject disbelief as the unified Canadian Forces became the only tri-service military in the world. All three served internationally in HQ or staff positions and all made mention of the criticism voiced by allies of their uniforms. Yanow stated that although the concept of Unification was openly mocked he never felt personally attacked by his allied cohorts who respected that the wearing of a singular uniform was not the Officer’s choice. Most militaries could not

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comprehend or envision their own forces undergoing a similar experience. All three interviewee’s were not hesitant to point out that no other nation has since attempted Unification of their forces.

The expected promise of more money and a simpler budget did not materialize. The tightening of the military’s budget and the dramatic weakening of the Canadian Dollar under Prime Minister Trudeau extinguished any chance of a financial windfall for the military. The Liberal Party was absolutely blamed for the budget cuts. Yanow told of a meeting he sat in where Defence Minister Buzz Nixon, whose Liberal Party had lost an election but still held the portfolio, was hesitant to make any changes to the previous agenda. Nixon calmly told the group of officers gathered that the Conservatives would be defeated soon and “our guys” would be back in. Yanow felt that the Liberal Party believed they controlled the government completely and political opposition was just a small bump in the road. Trudeau’s policies also slashed Canada’s NATO commitment in half, undercutting dramatically the rationale given in the 1964 White Paper as a major reason for Unification.

The most unexpected result of Unification was the beginning of the civilianizing and corporate-style bureaucracy at National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ). All three interview subjects commented on their experiences regarding civilian take over of some Military responsibilities. No one considered this a positive thing. The concern was that “too many decisions affecting the daily lives of service personnel were being made by civilians who were not sufficiently familiar with the details of service life.” Hughes, who spent two short postings in Ottawa around the period of Unification wanted nothing more then to get “out of there very quickly.” Many at the NDHQ Sr. Staff level shared his feelings. Yanow found that “politics played a great part in Head Quarters. Senior Officers were very careful” about what they say and did. NDHQ became focused on the political rather then military necessities of the Canadian Forces. Officers who managed

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19 Shaw, Armed Forces and Unification, 4-6.
to not fall into this format, or at least were seen not to have, were highly regarded by other officers. Examples by name of each type, those who became political and those who avoided it, were cited by both Executive Officers. Veronneau observed this outcome as well but was not so quick to lay the blame on the government. In his mind the services were so concerned with protecting their own interest that they were competing against each other for the limited resources rather then acting as a cohesive team working against the civilian bureaucrats. While some would disagree, the sum result was that the civilian Department of National Defence competed with and often prevailed in these turf wars with the military.

The Navy did attempt to generally resist the most distasteful elements of Unification. For example, within the Navy, the traditional rank structure and titles were maintained. The absurdity of imagining a wardroom full of “Captains” and having a Colonel command a ship was too much for most sailors. Despite the Navy’s in house vernacular, however, NDHQ “contented itself” with using the army style ranks in all official correspondence. All three interviewees remember the phasing in of uniforms between 1967 and 1970. During the phase-in of the unified green uniforms, officers clung to their old blues for as long as possible. They regretted giving it up the traditional uniform when the new green issue finally arrived. Hughes boasted of a trip from the east coast where he was stationed, where they had not yet received the green uniforms, to Esquimalt where every sailor had already received theirs. He said he was jealously admired for not yet having to wear the green. In addition, Naval Officers also kept their traditional mess kits through the period of Unification. Yanow and Hughes both proudly remembered not having to forfeit this uniform and were genuinely pleased that Unification did not take everything from them.

The Executive Officers both also commented that it was possible for Unification in everyday life to be avoided. When asked how Unification affected their everyday job, they both replied that in many ways it did not, unless they were at NDHQ. The sea going assignments remained relatively unchanged. The ships would put to sea, they would still

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22 Milner, First Century, 267.
sail the same waters and conduct the same operations. They even wore a similar seagoing uniform. It was not until they put to shore and had to don the despised and uncomfortable green uniform that feelings changed for most sailors. Yanow said it well in his interview when he commented, “That was the nice thing about being in the navy and being on ships. They couldn’t put their fingers on you and make you do what they want.” In his opinion the task of the Navy remained to serve the Crown’s wishes. It was easier to avoid Unification at sea where a message could be sent back simply saying “Unless otherwise directed; intend…” and simply state what it was the ship was going to do. If an answer did not come back quick enough to counter the intention then the ship was left to its own devices. The Navy managed to avoid some tasking that the Army and Airforce could not, simply because they put to sea and were beyond the reach of the NDHQ. Despite this resistance, however, the Navy was being integrated and life went on. The general servicemen stoically did what General J. Dextraze suggested by “fight[ing] against an idea, lose[ing], and then try[ing] to make the new system work.”

The first real opportunity to try and right the system came in 1980 with the publication of the final report of the Task Force on Review of Unification of The Canadian Armed Forces. Sponsored by the Government, this commission was an attempt to “examine the merits and disadvantages of unification” and “to provide expert comment on the unified command system.”

Hundreds of sailors, soldier and airmen volunteered to testify before the commission in hopes of finding a sympathetic ear. The findings of the commission established that there had been a dramatic decline in the overall spending power of the Canadian Forces budget, a huge decline in active personnel, a “Civilianization” of NDHQ and a dramatic loss of morale. Historian Geoffrey Shaw summarized this when he described morale as “unit cohesion, that almost mystical mix of the warrior’s psychology, family dynamics, and something more ethereal or intangible, that all good armies and their commanders coveted” which because of Unification resulted in a loss of “identity and recognition of the separate services.”

23 Granatstein, Who Killed…?, 84.
26 Shaw, Armed Forces and Unification, 4, 11-14.
After the report was published a second group, headed by General R.M Withers, and assisted by Veronneau, released their findings. They published recommendations based solely on the published conclusions of the first task group and did not use additional testimony. Of the thirty recommendations made by the original commission the review group agreed with, fully or with qualification, twenty-three of them. It was the seven non-supported ones, naturally, that were the most troublesome. In the review process, which was divided up due to its magnitude, Veronneau was assigned the contentious “Identity” section. In the eyes of many sailors and airmen the strongest opposition to Unification came from their perceived loss of identity with their original service. They favoured a return to distinct uniforms, ranks, and other forms of pre-unification identity. However, Veronneau’s opinion and recommendation differed.

In his written findings, which he rearticulated in his interview, Veronneau believed that Unification, while not necessarily the best solution was a fait accompli by the time the report was released in 1980. He believed that it would have been an economic impossibility to return to three separate services after a decade of budget cutting and the resulting downsizing of the Canadian Forces. Unification had happened and it could not be undone. In his view the only viable option was to work with Unification, not against it. He believed that “If the Armed Forces had made a virtue of unity as opposed to an exception” then Unification would have been more successful. He felt that a return to distinct uniforms would destroy the unified Forces. He cited as an example, a mechanic who he suggested could and inevitably would be posted between air force, army and naval stations. If he had worn a green army uniform and was posted to a ship, where navy dress was the norm, the alienation that member would feel would be a greater detriment to unity and team cohesion than if all members had worn the same uniform. For Veronneau identity with the Canadian Forces was paramount rather then with a specific service. At the very least members related to and associated with their local unit regardless of uniform.

Veronneau’s opinions, however, fell on deaf ears. In complete opposition to his recommendations, and largely due to the overwhelmingly popular support for reversion
to separate uniforms, the political decision was made. Distinct uniforms returned in 1985. Veronneau was chastised for his stance as only a Senior Officer could be. Shortly after the report was published he was “exiled” to Washington and was never again promoted. In his first 20 years in the forces he was promoted from Cadet to Brigadier General but in his last 17 never again moved up in rank. He acknowledges that it was not the report as a whole that brought him into disfavour with his superiors— the other two serving officers who were part of the review were each promoted at least twice—but explicitly his opposition to the politically supported “identity”. Separate identities returned to the Canadian Forces and with it the politically popular viewpoint was adopted, rather than a measured, logically calculated and articulated opposing one. The politicization of the military evidenced in the move to Unification appeared again, this time ironically against an advocate of integration.

Although all three interview subjects had fundamentally differing opinions on what Unification meant to the Canadian Forces, they all unequivocally agreed that the changes had been dramatic and the results virtually irreversible. Even though it has been twenty years since the review and forty since Unification the sentiment about it was still deeply felt. As Hughes clearly stated “It’s a very emotional subject.” The interviews had evoked emotion and passion regardless of the opinions expressed. Yanow and Hughes had spoken about the subject previously and yet still spoke with the same quality of sentiment as did Veronneau, who admitted to not having to really consider Unification in many years.

Unification dramatically altered the institutions of the Canadian armed services. For no other branch, now called ‘element’ was this change felt stronger then in the Navy. Although the genesis of amalgamation had presented itself in as early as the post-war period it practically began with Paul Hellyer and the 1960 White Paper on Defence. Four years later policies had been adopted, approved and implemented and by the end of the decade the Navy was engulfed in change. Attempts from the navy to speak out against the growing concern that it was losing its identity had been quickly and discreetly suppressed. This led to a decade of a somewhat confused, and demilitarized bureaucracy forming in Ottawa at NDHQ. The valuable incite, opinions and oral history of three
serving senior officers have served to reinforce this conclusion. Although differing in vantage point and opinion they spoke with passion and commitment rooted in the emotional effect of the profound changes they had lived through. They referred to the commitments they had made to the service of Canada, the Canadian Forces and to the Navy and reflected on how deeply Unification had impacted them. I thank them for their service and for their help in shedding some light on the history of Unification.

Bibliography:


