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# Filip Konowal, VC

## The Rebirth of a Canadian Hero

**Ron Sorobey**



*Filip Konowal as painted by the English artist Ambrose McEvoy after the former's return from France and his receipt of the Victoria Cross in 1917. Note the VC ribbon above his left pocket, and the two wound stripes visible on his left cuff.*

*(Canadian War Museum (CWM) CN 8430)*

More than most people's, Filip Konowal's life was a complex mixture of hope, frustration, disappointment, and glory. On an August day in 1917, this corporal from Ottawa proved to be one the world's bravest men. In peacetime faith, courage, and devotion would help this forgotten hero overcome tragedy and personal loss until he became once again the recipient of the esteem that he earned as a serving soldier.

### Early Life

Filip Konowal was born near the village of Kudkiv, Ukraine, then under Imperial Russian control. The Konowal family farm under the stewardship of his father, Myron, was situated on the Zbruch River, which formed the border between the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian Empires. Military records give his date of birth as 25 March 1887, while some recent publications contend that it was 15 September 1888. Although little is known of Konowal's life in Ukraine, it is likely that he worked on both the family farm and as an apprentice in his father's stone-cutting business until conscripted into the Russian Imperial army for a five-year term at the age of 21. During this compulsory service, Konowal first demonstrated his natural aptitude for soldiering, eventually serving as an instructor in close quarters bayonet combat.<sup>1</sup>

Konowal joined thousands of other Ukrainians in immigrating to Canada in April 1913. According to military records, Anna, his wife, and Maria, his daughter, remained in Ukraine. Unlike the majority of immigrants, Konowal did not cross the Atlantic and proceed to a prairie homestead. Rather, it appears that he ended his military service in Eastern Siberia and then, in early 1913, was selected as a lumberjack by a Canadian lumber company that was recruiting men for the British Columbia forest industry.<sup>2</sup> After four months in Western Canada, however, he travelled to eastern Ontario looking for higher-paying work. From 1911 to 1913, the Ottawa Valley and l'Outaouais Regions had a shortage of manpower for bush clearing, lumbering, and

other forestry related activities. The prospect of well paying jobs lured Konowal and many other original members of the local Ottawa Ukrainian community to the region. However, this apparent good fortune was short lived. By early 1914, with the boom years of the early 20th century over, Konowal and many of his contemporaries found themselves out of work.

### The First World War

Events in Europe would rapidly create new demands for manpower, however. Following the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on 28 June 1914, events unfolded that would drag the European powers into war by early August. As a British dominion, Canada was automatically at war against the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires on 4 August 1914. The volunteers for Canada's 1st Contingent came for the most part from members of local militia units and British immigrants with previous military service. Later contingents would be drawn from a broader ethnic base, including the Ukranian-Canadian community.



Reduced to part time work with no real career prospects, many Canadian men joined up as much for a steady wage as out of a sense of patriotism. Filip Konowal may have been one such man. As an individual with previous military service and an immigrant from an allied power (Russia), he had no difficulty being accepted into the army. On 12 July 1915, Konowal joined an Ottawa infantry unit, the 77th Battalion.<sup>3</sup> Between July and September 1915, 31 members of the Ottawa Ukrainian-Canadian community joined this battalion, which was commanded by the popular Colonel D.R. Church. The bond Konowal made with Colonel Church and other members of the 77th would serve him throughout his life and help perpetuate his memory.

In physical appearance, Konowal was not a model for a recruiting poster. At 5 feet 6 inches in height and with a 34.5 inch chest size, he was small by even 1915 standards. Only his piercing brown eyes and strong jaw gave any

indication of his soldierly qualities. Like many men of this period, Konowal sported a thick slightly drooping brown mustache.

Konowal spent the next ten months training in Ottawa and Valcartier, Quebec. His unit eventually left Halifax on 19 June 1916, and ten days later arrived in Liverpool, England. During a six-week layover at Bramshott Camp, many men from the 77th Battalion were reassigned to bring other Canadian units up to strength. As a result, Konowal was transferred to the 47th (British Columbia) Battalion as a lance corporal. The 47th was one of the four battalions in the 10th Brigade of the newly-created 4th Canadian Division, which embarked for France on 10 August 1916. There, the 4th Division was held in reserve while the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions were committed to the Somme offensive from early September to mid-October. The 4th relieved these divisions and was placed in the front lines on 10 October.

The 4th Division subsequently joined the other three divisions in preparation for the spring offensive at Vimy Ridge. The winter and early spring proved abnormally severe. Konowal suffered continually from diarrhoea and probably dysentery but beyond these facts, little is known of his activities during this initial period in France. He must have demonstrated both fighting and leadership ability, however, for just three days prior to the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Konowal was appointed acting corporal.

The 4th Division was assigned to the northern end of the front on the left slope of Vimy Ridge. Here, the offensive of 9 April fell into disarray. The initial thrust of the 4th Division's lead elements was caught in murderous German machine gun fire from Hill 145 at the western end of Vimy Ridge and a small wooded knoll two kilometres further north called "the Pimple." Without the immediate neutralization of these two strong points, the left flank of the attack was in jeopardy. The 47th Battalion, then in reserve, was ordered to assault "the Pimple." To add to normal confusion of battle, a freak snow storm struck as the Canadians began their attack. This blizzard, however, proved fortunate. The snow temporarily blinded the German machine gunners and in minutes "the Pimple" was in Canadian hands.

## Hill 70

By the summer of 1917, the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), after achieving its stunning victory at Vimy Ridge, had been redeployed further north to the sector facing the town of Lens. The Allied plan to recapture Lens hinged on the successful capture of Hill 70. This assignment fell to the Canadian Corps. Although Hill 70 was only a low dome of chalky downland, it dominated the Douai Plain and overlooked the ruined buildings of Lens. The Germans, after almost three years of occupation, had converted Hill 70 into a virtually impregnable fortress, honey-combed with machine gun nests, interlocking fields of fire, and bomb-proof rifle galleries cut into the chalk sides of the hill.

Following a massive artillery barrage, the infantry advanced at first light on the morning of 15 August. Within 20 minutes, the Canadians had taken the crest of Hill 70. Holding the newly-won territory would, however, prove to be the true test. Immediately after being pushed off the hill, the Germans launched a devastating counterattack in the early hours of 17 August.

The bulk of the German counterattacks originated from Green Crassier, a series of barren slagheaps and broken railway tracks at the southeast edge of Hill 70. To relieve the German pressure, two companies each from the 46th, 47th and 50th Battalions were selected to assault Green Crassier in what was euphemistically called a "mopping-up exercise." The two companies of the 47th on the right flank were assigned to proceed through the suburb of Cité du Moulen, cut the Lens-Arras Road, and capture the main German defensive position, Alpaca Trench.

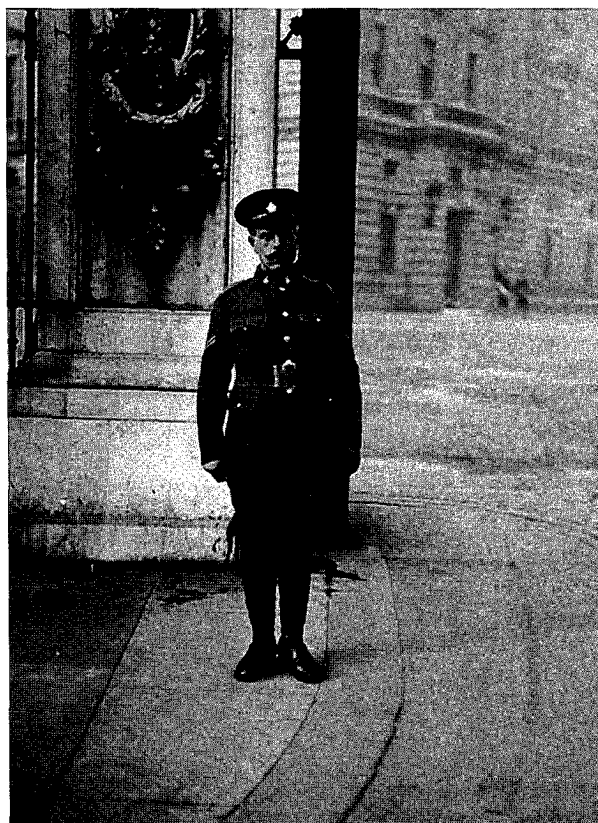
At 0435 hours on 21 August 1917, the men of the 47th advanced. As the early morning ground fog and drizzle dissipated, a German artillery barrage hit the advancing Canadians, killing or wounding most of the officers and senior NCOs in Konowal's company. Adding to the confusion was an ill-timed smoke barrage that temporarily blinded the Canadians. Konowal took hold of the situation and restored order to his company by his calm demeanour and steadying presence. One contemporary

account wrote that the Canadians under Konowal's command "went forward, penetrating the immediate German barrage without hesitation, and moving as if on parade."<sup>4</sup>

Not satisfied with merely holding his position, Konowal extended his company's new position across the Lens-Arras Road. However, the advance was blocked by German machine gun fire emanating from a cluster of ruined buildings. Konowal and his men, along with a wounded captain, found themselves trapped in a water-filled trench. Konowal made a snap decision to take on a nearby German machine gun nest single handedly. Armed only with a couple of grenades and an Enfield rifle, he leaped out of the trench and began to move towards the machine gun nest.

While approaching the machine gun nest he entered a bombed out cottage. Finding no one on the surface, Konowal jumped into the building's darkened cellar. He was immediately fired upon by three Germans as he landed. Unharmed, Konowal took on the three opponents in the pitch darkness of the cellar, and killed them in a confused melee. After leaving the cottage, Konowal resumed his advance on the machine gun nest, ever alert to locate the close rifle crack that would expose an enemy sniper.<sup>5</sup> The machine gun nest, littered with Canadian dead around it, was situated in a large crater on the east of the Lens-Arras Road. Upon reaching it, Konowal caught seven Germans as they were attempting to evacuate. After throwing his hand grenades, Konowal shot three Germans dead and then charged the others. Within seconds, Konowal had bayoneted the remaining members of the German machine gun crew. He then returned to the Canadian lines with the captured machine gun on his shoulders.

Konowal's sudden decision to attack the machine gun nest had caught everyone by surprise. To his men, Konowal appeared to explode or go mad. He would later state in a newspaper interview that the wounded captain had a different interpretation of his actions, as he "tried to shoot me because he figured I was deserting."<sup>6</sup> Forty years later Konowal gave the following humble and matter-of-fact explanation: "I was so fed up standing in the trench with water to my waist that I said to hell with it and started after the German Army."<sup>7</sup>



*Filip Konowal, October 1917*  
(NAC PA 6733)

On 22 August, the two companies of Canadians had still not succeeded in capturing Green Crassier. To assist another attack, the 47th was ordered to conduct a diversionary raid on another machine gun nest near Fosse (crater) #4. Once more Konowal attempted another one-man attack on a German machine gun nest. This time it seemed that his luck had run out. While approaching the German position, he was surprised by an enemy reconnaissance patrol and taken prisoner. Unperturbed, Konowal turned on and killed his captors and made his escape.<sup>8</sup> He then proceeded towards the machine gun nest and tossed two charges of ammonal (an ammonia based high explosive) into the darkness. Within seconds, he had bayoneted the stunned defenders and destroyed the machine gun. He remained in command of the company until relieved by a replacement officer late that day.<sup>9</sup>

By the time Konowal returned from destroying the second machine gun nest, the German High Command had suspended their counterattacks. In a ten-day period the Canadian Corps had captured and held Hill 70



*Filip Konowal and another Victoria Cross recipient talk outside Buckingham Palace, October 1917.*

(NAC PA 6732)

and inflicted an estimated 20,000 casualties on the enemy. The Canadians had suffered 9,198 casualties of which 5,671 had occurred after Hill 70 had been initially captured. Filip Konowal and five other Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross for their heroism in this battle.

Konowal escaped from the battle virtually unscathed. However, late on the evening of 22 August, he received gun shot wounds to the face and neck from sniper fire. This occurred when he was standing in a Canadian trench being debriefed by a newly-arrived officer. In poetic army language he had "crossed the river, but got mired in the creek."<sup>10</sup> As with many veterans, these injuries would become a source of recurring medical problems that would have a devastating impact on the remainder of his life.

Following preliminary treatment in Lens and Étaples, Konowal was evacuated to England on 26 August. After recovering from his wounds, he was sent to London where he was awarded the Victoria Cross by King George V on 15 October 1917. His citation in the *London Gazette* read:

This non-commissioned officer alone killed at least sixteen of the enemy, and during the two days of actual fighting carried on continuously his good work until severely wounded.<sup>11</sup>

After pinning the Victoria Cross on Konowal, King George remarked, "Your exploit is one of the most daring and heroic in the history of my army. For this, accept my thanks."<sup>12</sup>

## Other Duties

After returning to England, Konowal was hospitalized first at Beaufort Hospital, Bristol and later at the Beauwood Medical Facility near London. While at Beauwood, his head wound was examined by Dr. C.K. Wallace, a leading neuro-specialist and Ottawa resident. Dr. Wallace's first-hand knowledge of Konowal's condition would have a critical impact four years later.<sup>13</sup>

Konowal was released from hospital on 22 September 1917. After being taken on strength with the 16th Canadian Reserve Battalion on 1 November 1917, he was assigned to be an assistant to the Canadian military liaison officer at the Russian Embassy in London. Konowal was appointed Acting Sergeant on 30 December 1917, and remained on duty at the Russian embassy until 1 August 1918, at which time he reverted to the rank of corporal. For the next six weeks Konowal was assigned to the Canadian Forestry Corps in England, until the opportunity for a special duty presented itself.

Since the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in November 1917, relations with the western Allies had steadily deteriorated. By the fall of 1918, they bordered on open warfare. Although the German Spring Offensive had been turned back, the Kaiser's Army still posed a formidable threat. The thought of a new eastern front, to force the Germans to redeploy forces to the east, became very tempting. It would be formed from the various White Russian Armies fighting the Bolsheviks; the Czech Legion, a group of former prisoners of war (including some Ukrainians) who volunteered to fight for the Allies; and contingents from Canada and the other Western Allies. The new eastern front would run southeast from Archangel on the White Sea towards the Urals and then southwest to the Black Sea.

The Canadian forces were deployed at Tulgas, a small town 200 miles south of Archangel, and at Vladivostok. The latter group, known as the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force (CSEF), consisted of 4,000 officers and men. It was formally constituted as the 259th and 260th Battalions on 1 November 1918. The main function of the CSEF was to help guard the Trans-Siberian Railway from Vladivostok on the Pacific to Omsk in Western Siberia. It became apparent to the Canadian commanders that interpreters and translators would be essential to the CSEF. The most obvious choice were Ukrainian-Canadians already serving the army. Konowal and over 100 men from the Forestry Corps volunteered for duty in Siberia and returned to Canada on 10 September 1918. He was formally taken on strength with the CSEF and assigned duties with the Base Headquarters Unit.

Konowal embarked for Siberia on 11 October 1918 reaching Vladivostok on 4 November. There, the situation soon dissolved into confusion. Despite the Armistice which ended fighting on the Western Front, the Allies could not leave Siberia immediately without jeopardizing the loyal White Russian forces. Still, it was clear that the Allied intervention in Siberia was to be brief. Konowal accompanied a small liaison group to Omsk, the main Allied base, but Bolshevik gains eventually necessitated the group's withdrawal. In early June, with the Red Army's victory apparently assured, Konowal rejoined the main body of the CSEF and departed Vladivostok for Vancouver. The war was finally over for Filip Konowal VC. He had served for three years and 357 days in the Canadian Army.

### The Konowal Trial

Following his return from Siberia, Konowal was honourably discharged from the Army on 4 July 1919. However, his struggles were by no means over. Upon his return to Ottawa, Konowal was a publicly acclaimed local hero and a highly respected figure in the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA), a forerunner of the Royal Canadian Legion. On the evening 19 July 1919 he led the Peace Parade of Veterans through downtown Ottawa to the Parliament Buildings.

The feelings of the city towards him were best summed up in the following passage from the *Ottawa Citizen*:

The parade, which formed up on Laurier Avenue at Cartier Square was headed by Corp. Konowal VC, wearing the little bronze cross beside a Russian decoration, and proudly carrying the Canadian ensign. The Russian [Ukrainian] Corporal marched like the old campaigner that he is, and it was plain that it was a proud day for him.<sup>14</sup>

Within 24 hours, fate, war wounds, and events largely outside his control would dramatically alter the course of Konowal's life.

At about 6:00 p.m. on 20 July, Konowal and Leonti Diedek, a fellow veteran from France and Siberia, went over to an area of downtown Hull that was notorious for bootleggers, brothels, and gambling dens. The stated reason was to have supper and inspect bicycles at the house of William (Vasyl) Artich, a bicycle salesman and small-time bootlegger. On the way they stopped at a nearby restaurant/store operated by Mike Romaniuk.<sup>15</sup> As Konowal was ordering supper, Diedek went on to Artich's. While he was there something happened (some reports stated Diedek accidentally knocked down one of the bicycles and damaged it) that caused a fight between the two men. In a rage Artich punched and kicked Diedek savagely. Diedek tried to flee, but Artich hit him with a large stone and stunned him. Konowal, hearing the struggle, left the restaurant and attempted to aid Diedek. By the time he arrived, Artich had dragged the partially conscious Diedek into the house. Konowal forced the front door of Artich's home. Artich released Diedek and, according to the later testimony of Henri Simard, one of Artich's neighbours, came at an unarmed Konowal, first striking him in the head and then badly slashing his hand and wrist with a long butcher knife. In the ensuing struggle, Konowal gained control of the knife and killed Artich instantly with a thrust to the heart.<sup>16</sup>

By the time the struggle ended, about a dozen neighbours and passers-by were at the scene. Konowal remained calm and made no attempt to flee. When Constables Côté and Meranger of the Hull police arrived, Konowal insisted that he had killed Artich in self defence, but unfortunately commented: "I've killed 52 of them [in the war], that makes it the 53rd."<sup>17</sup> Konowal



and Diedek were arrested on suspicion of murder and were sent to the Hull Jail. Five other men, John Pavliuk, Bill Washi, Labrion Kedyke, Mike Korgabon and Peter Friezan, all Artich's associates, were also placed in custody as material witnesses.<sup>18</sup>

On 22 July 1919, the Coroner's Jury convened to review the case. Konowal and Diedek were a study in contrasts. Diedek appeared nervous, while Konowal was calm and even shook Coroner Davies' hand. George C. Wright, K.C., a distinguished local trial lawyer, had been retained by Colonel Church as Konowal's defence counsel. After Constables Côté and Meranger gave their testimony, the wife of the deceased, Sophie, and the members of his former gang were questioned. In shock and barely able to understand English, she stated that she did not see Konowal kill her husband. John Pavliuk commented that while he saw Artich stagger into the house and collapse dead on the living room floor, he did not see the actual killing. A neighbour, Jacques Ouellette, supported Diedek's claim that Artich had thrown and struck him with a large stone. However, the most potentially damaging testimony came from Romaniuk. He alleged that Konowal had taken a large knife from his restaurant/store when he went to confront Artich. As a result, Konowal was remanded to be charged for murder on the following day.<sup>19</sup>

On the morning of 23 July 1919, Filip Konowal was formally charged with the murder of William Artich. In the courtroom were both Colonel Church and J.A. Labelle, Vice President of the GWVA. The preliminary hearing was scheduled to be held five days later. Diedek, also present in the courtroom, was given a suspended sentence for disturbing the peace and released.<sup>20</sup>

The first day of the preliminary hearing was limited to police testimony, forensic evidence, and Diedek's account of the events leading up to the murder. However, the next day would afford some unexpected courtroom drama. During the week between the coroner's inquest and the preliminary hearing, Sophie Artich and other members of the Artich Gang had decided to change their testimony. As reported in the *Ottawa Citizen* of 29 July 1919, Sophie Artich now stated she had not only seen Konowal kill her husband in cold blood, but that he also had obtained the murder weapon at Romaniuk's restaurant/

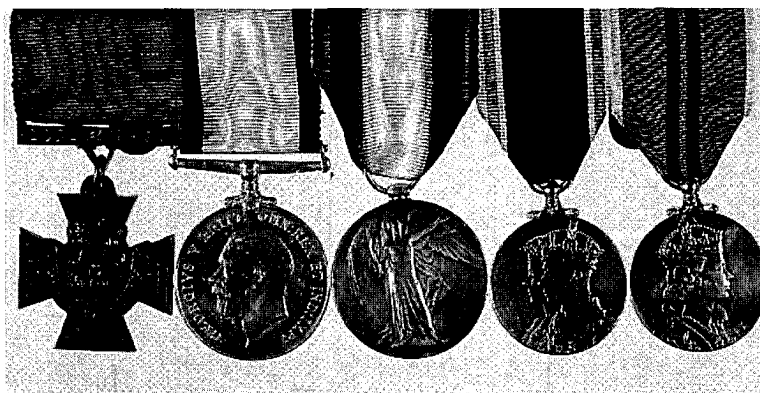
store.<sup>21</sup> However, George Wright jumped on this change in testimony from that given at the coroner's inquest and within a few minutes completely discredited her story.<sup>22</sup> Wright then proceeded to systematically destroy the credibility of the other gang members. After seeing Wright in action, Mike Romaniuk now stated he did not own the restaurant/store, which in fact was owned by Artich as a front for his bootlegging operations, and could not identify the murder weapon as one of his own knives. Romaniuk remarked under oath: "Do you think I run the Chateau Laurier, I do not mark my knives!"<sup>23</sup>

Between July 1919 and April 1921, while Konowal's trial was postponed on three occasions, there were a number of interesting developments in his life. Among veterans, Konowal's fate became a rallying point. During a special assembly of the GWVA on the evening of 16 October 1919, the membership voted unanimously to support Konowal in any manner. Before adjourning over \$3,000 was raised for his defence. After mounting pressure from both the Ottawa and Hull communities, the court set bail at \$8,000 the following morning. The bail was paid by the GWVA (\$4,000), Colonel Church (\$2,000) and H.W. Bowe (\$2,000), a close friend of Colonel Church. Konowal was released on bail on 18 October 1919.<sup>24</sup>

A more critical development was his recurring problems from the gun shot wounds to his head. The wound had left a large jagged scar that ran from just below his right eye down the cheek bone to his upper jaw. The scar was just the most visible manifestation of more serious problems. According to his medical examination at the time of discharge, Konowal was already experiencing facial paralysis as a result of these wounds. Shortly, after his release from jail Konowal underwent a series of x-rays and other tests at Saint Luke's Hospital in Ottawa and was examined by Dr. C.K. Wallace, who had last seen Konowal in 1917 in England and who determined that the wound had caused a fracture of the skull that had not properly healed and was placing increasing pressure on his brain.<sup>25</sup> By early 1920, Konowal's condition had deteriorated. He began to experience long periods of acute pain followed by complete memory loss for hours, and later days, at a time. During these periods, Konowal would have flashbacks to the battles on the Western Front. In these periods, he often believed



*Konowal's medals, purchased by the Canadian War Museum in 1969. Left to right: Victoria Cross (here a replica); British War Medal, 1914-1920; Allied Victory Medal, 1914-1920; George VI Coronation Medal, 1937; Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal, 1953. The Russian medal, the Cross of St. George 4th Class, received by Konowal in January 1918, was never offered to the Canadian War Museum and has disappeared.*



that he had to defend his men at Hill 70 and assumed individuals around him were the enemy. On one occasion, Konowal was arrested and briefly detained after a bar room confrontation. He claimed to have no memory of the incident.

Many people were appalled by the dramatic change in Konowal's behaviour. Colonel Church would later testify at the trial that Konowal had been an exemplary soldier and was astounded by the change. However, rather than forgetting about him, Colonel Church and the veterans became more determined to help Konowal. As well as retaining the services of George Wright, they added Alban Germain K.C., a noted Montreal defence lawyer, and R. MacDonald, another leading Hull lawyer, to the defence team. The team soon decided on their strategy – they would argue that Konowal had killed Artich, but was not responsible for his actions by reason of insanity.

Twenty-one months after the murder, the trial of Filip Konowal VC began on 15 April 1921, with Judge Philemon Cousineau presiding. Jury selection was completed by noon, and Crown Attorney Parent began calling the first witnesses. The defence team did not contest the fact that Konowal had killed Artich. However, both Diedek and Henri Simard confirmed that Artich had struck Konowal in the head and then stabbed him in the arm. At this point the trial was recessed until the morning of 19 April 1921.

The trial reconvened with further crime scene testimony from Joseph Gervais, the former Hull Chief of Police, and Sheriff C.M. Wright. Later, Colonel Church appeared as a character witness for Konowal's defence. However, the next two days of testimony would be dominated by the doctors.

The prosecution and defence called a number of specialists, including Dr. C.K. Wallace. Their unanimous opinion was that the skull fracture caused by the gun shot wound had rendered Konowal mentally unstable and not responsible for his actions. They further contended that Artich's blow to Konowal's head had triggered the mental episode which resulted in the victim's death.<sup>26</sup>

In his closing address, Alban Germain stated that the sole question at issue in the case was whether Konowal was mentally ill at the time of Artich's death. In his instructions to the jury, Judge Cousineau emphasized Konowal's outstanding wartime service and devotion to duty and to his men. He further remarked that Konowal's "organic disease of the brain" was the result of wounds received while serving in France, and although he had killed Artich, he was mentally ill at the time. In conclusion, Judge Cousineau instructed the jury that justice would be served if Konowal was found not guilty by reason of insanity.<sup>27</sup> The jury complied.

However, Konowal's condition had greatly deteriorated. While the jury's verdict was being read, he seemed to be suffering from severe physical discomfort and appeared to be totally unaware of the proceedings in the courtroom. The medical experts had already advised the lawyers and Judge Cousineau that in his present condition Konowal posed a potential danger to himself and others. Accordingly, Judge Cousineau ordered that Konowal be detained until he could be placed in an asylum. After shaking hands with his legal counsel, Konowal was removed to a Hull jail cell. The murder trial of Filip Konowal VC was over. Although not guilty, he would be confined for the next seven years.

His Victoria Cross and other medals were placed in safe keeping at the request of the GWVA.

### Against All Odds

Filip Konowal remained in the Hull Jail until 27 April 1921 when he was escorted to the Saint Jean de Dieu Hospital (now the Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine Hospital) in Montreal.<sup>28</sup>

The Saint Jean de Dieu Hospital had been in operation for 48 years by the time of Konowal's institutionalization. From its founding in 1873 by the religious order *Les Soeurs de la Providence*, this hospital had grown from a 72-patient facility housed in an abandoned military barracks and prison, to a massive state-of-the-art complex caring for over 2,500 patients. The religious and lay members of the staff were continually adopting the most progressive techniques for the care of mental patients. Their basic goal was to return their patients to society rather than act as a caretaking facility.

While it would be dangerous to speculate on Konowal's institutionalization, it would be reasonable to assume that the combination of progressive therapy (possibly including neurosurgery) and a dedicated staff were instrumental in Konowal's recovery. His own strength of character must also have played a role. Sometime between 1928 and 1931, Filip Konowal, now in his early forties, gained two things even more valuable than another Victoria Cross: his freedom and possession of all his faculties.

After being discharged from the hospital, Konowal eventually returned to the Hull area and secured employment on the maintenance staff of the Ottawa Electrical Company building. Through the intervention of the officers of the 77th, now the Governor General's Foot Guards, his medals were returned to him. Konowal was also taken into No.4 Company of his beloved regiment. At this time No.4 Company was commanded by another Victoria Cross winner, Major Milton Fowler Gregg.<sup>29</sup> His friendship with Major Gregg would prove to be another fateful development in his life.

Konowal's return to a normal civilian life was once more beset by tragedy. While attempting to contact his family in Ukraine, Konowal received news that his wife was dead and his daughter was an orphan lost in Stalin's vast communist

bureaucracy. However, he was not the only person burdened by real personal tragedies. A young widow, Juliette Leduc-Auger, was facing the daunting task of raising her two sons, Roland and Albert, and caring for an invalid brother. Like Konowal, Juliette was an individual of rare courage and determination. In 1934, Juliette and Filip were married in a Roman Catholic ceremony in Hull. Konowal was 47, Juliette 33.

By the mid-1930s, Canada was in the depths of the Great Depression. Many businesses were forced to cut staff in order to survive and the Ottawa Electric Company was not immune. Shortly after marrying Juliette, Konowal found himself once more unemployed. A few months later his luck changed for the better. By chance Konowal met Major Gregg near the Parliament Buildings and outlined his problems. Gregg held the position of Sergeant-at-Arms for the House of Commons, and offered Konowal a position as a junior caretaker. Although thankful for a job when tens of thousands were unemployed, he still was assigned the most menial tasks, including brewing coffee for the other caretakers.

Fate once more would change Konowal's life. Like many veterans, Konowal proudly wore his ribbons on his civilian dress, in this case a caretaker's smock. While approaching the main entrance to the Commons Chamber, Prime Minister Mackenzie King noticed Konowal washing the floor. The crimson Victoria Cross ribbon caught the Prime Minister's eye. From that day until his retirement, Konowal was the messenger and special custodian to Room No.16, the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>30</sup> This was a unique position, part caretaker, part messenger, and part commissioner.<sup>31</sup> For some people, such a position might not seem an appropriate job for a hero, but Konowal did not mind. During a newspaper interview over 20 years later, he remarked jokingly: "I mopped up overseas with a rifle, and here I just mop up with a mop."<sup>32</sup>

However, the opportunity for due recognition and honour eluded him. Due to hospitalization in 1930, Konowal was unable to attend the reunion of Empire VCs held in London, England. Another chance for recognition and reunion with his wartime comrades came with the Vimy Pilgrimage in 1936. In 1922, the French government had donated to Canada 250 acres of Hill 145, the highest point on Vimy Ridge, for a memorial park. The Mackenzie King administration commissioned Walter Allward

to construct a memorial on the site. By 1936, the monument was completed and it was formally dedicated by King Edward VIII on Sunday, July 29th. The dedication ceremony was attended by thousands of Canadian veterans and their families.<sup>33</sup>

Konowal's desperate financial circumstances made it impossible for him to contemplate making the voyage on his own resources. However, a number of reporters who had covered the trial were aware of his situation. Thomas Wayling, the President of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, wrote directly to Mackenzie King requesting that the House of Commons recognize their two VCs, Gregg and Konowal, and provide government funds to send Konowal to the dedication ceremony.<sup>34</sup> The request was forwarded to the Minister of National Defence. However, a peace-time military in the midst of a depression had no funds for Konowal's travel expenses. He would not be one of the 6,400 Canadians en route to France, and would be the only VC winner to be left behind.

### Finally Recognized (1939-1959)

During the 1930s and 1940s the Konowal family resided at 75 Rue Demontyny, Hull. During the 1939 Royal Tour of Canada, Filip Konowal's act of bravery was once more acknowledged, when King George VI shook his hand during the dedication of the National War Memorial, just as his father had done 22 years before!<sup>35</sup>

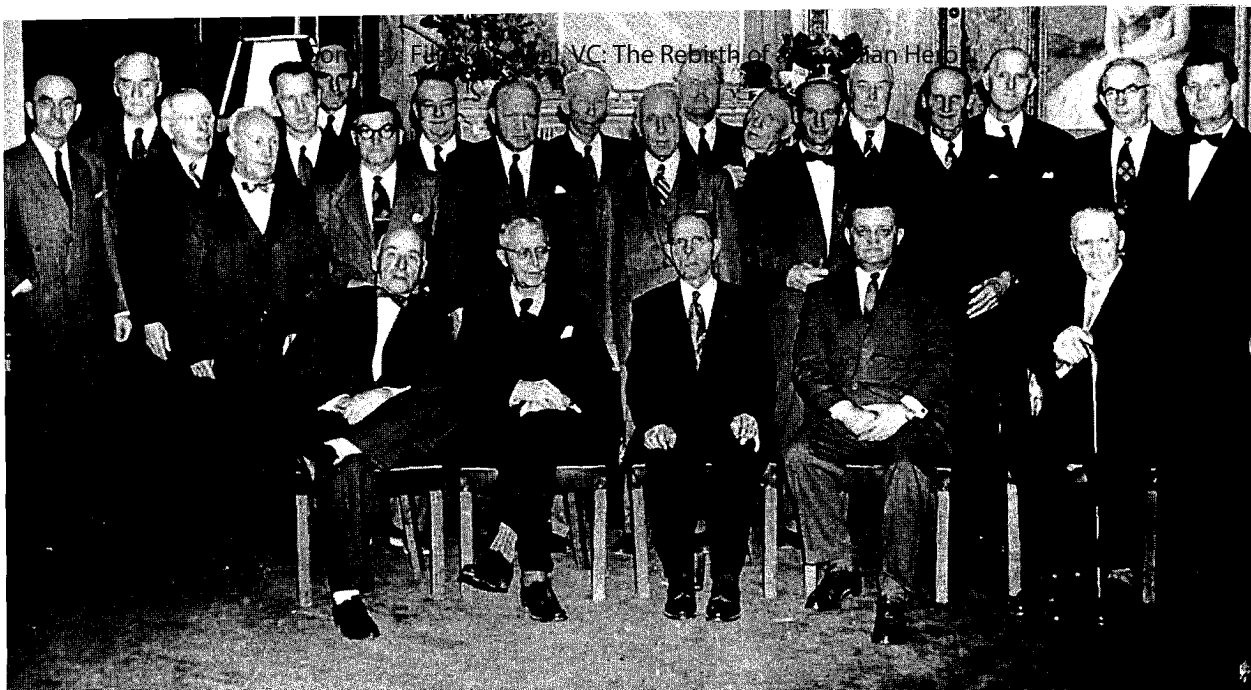
After Canada's entry into the Second World War, Konowal briefly joined Le Régiment de Hull but, at age 52, was too old for active service. Later Konowal joined the *Légion de Hull*, Branch No. 30, Royal Canadian Legion on 20 December 1945. According to his application for membership, Konowal was receiving a disability pension for his war wounds. As well as the gun shot wound to his head, he also had partial paralysis of his left hand due to shrapnel wounds and a noticeable heart murmur which had been cited in his medical examination form at time of discharge in 1919. On the application, Konowal also noted that he was still supporting his invalid brother-in-law, and only listed his Victoria Cross under the line reserved for service decorations. On a more humorous note, when replying to the question "Reason for discharge" Konowal wrote: "war was finish."

It is likely that Konowal would have lived his remaining years in relative anonymity. However, a new generation of veterans from the Second World War and the Korean War would not allow either the man or his deeds of valour to be forgotten. In the early 1950s, the Ukrainian Canadian Veterans' Association was actively establishing branches of the Royal Canadian Legion in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Edmonton that would meet the special needs of veterans of Ukrainian ancestry. The Toronto Branch No. 360 voted to make Konowal its patron in 1953. The official presentation would take place during the Branch's Remembrance Dinner scheduled for 7 November 1953 in Toronto. Upon learning that Konowal was still a custodian at the Parliament Buildings, Branch President Stephen Pawluk and the other Branch members were appalled and began an active campaign to improve his situation. As Pawluk wrote to Michael Starr, MP, "We notice that Mr. Konowal VC is employed on the Cleaning Staff of the House of Commons. It is hardly necessary to say our branch feels somewhat indignant about this matter. We feel that the very few Canadians who hold the Victoria Cross deserve a somewhat better position."<sup>36</sup>

During the Remembrance Dinner, Konowal was recognized as Patron and also awarded the Branch Merit Award. It was apparent at the dinner that Konowal's health was deteriorating. As Ray Mann, then Legion Vice President of the Central Region, Ontario Command wrote, "Age and ill health are taking a toll in the autumn of his [Konowal's] life and there was general resentment, when it was learned this National hero is a cleaner in the Civil Service in Ottawa."<sup>37</sup>

On 4 & 5 December 1954, the Ukrainian-Canadian Veterans Association held their convention at the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Ottawa. Konowal was once more made the "guest of honour." The Association *News Letter* contained stories of his battlefield exploits, and the cover featured Ambrose McEvoy's portrait of Konowal (see back cover). During the convention banquet, Konowal was made Honourary President of the Ukrainian-Canadian Veterans' Association. As a token of appreciation, he was also presented a gold watch that was engraved with the Victoria Cross emblem and the words "For Valour."<sup>38</sup>

The greatest tribute to Konowal would come two years later in 1956. That year marked the 100th Anniversary of the Institution of the Victoria Cross.



Konowal sits proudly in the centre of the front row amongst other Canadian recipients of the Victoria Cross. This photograph was taken in London in 1956 during the ceremonies marking the 100th anniversary of the Victoria Cross. Also seated (l. to r.) are Alexander Brereton (Amiens, 1918); Sir Richard Turner (Lillefontein, 1900); Paul Triquet (Casa Berardi, 1943); and Michael O'Rourke (Hill 70, 1917). Back row (l. to r.): Milton Gregg (Cambrai, 1918); Marcus Strachan (Cambrai, 1917); Rowland Bourke (Ostend, 1918); Robert Shankland (Passchendaele, 1917); John Mahoney (Liri Valley, 1944); Frederick Harvey (Guyencourt, 1917); Ernest "Smokey" Smith (Savio River, 1944); Frederick Tilston (Xanten, 1945); Thain MacDowell (Vimy Ridge, 1917); Norman Mitchell (Cambrai, 1918); Charles Train; John Foote (Dieppe, 1942); Benjamin Geary; Raphael Zengel (Warvillers, 1918); George Pearkes (Passchendaele, 1917); Thomas Dinesen (Amiens, 1918); John Kerr (Courcelette, 1916); and David Currie (St. Lambert-sur-Dives, 1944).

To mark the occasion, Queen Elizabeth II had decreed that special celebrations be held in London, and all living holders of the Victoria Cross were invited to attend. The Canadian Federal Government agreed to pay for transportation and hotel costs for all Canadian Victoria Cross winners. However, Konowal's tight financial situation made it virtually impossible for him to participate at these celebrations. These circumstances were poignantly brought home in Konowal's own words in the March 1956 edition of the *Legionary*: "It's nice of the Government to offer to pay our train and boat fares, but there are a lot of expenses that have to be paid on a trip to London. I'd like to go, certainly, but what with illness at home and only a moderate salary, I don't see how I can make it, I just haven't got the money."<sup>39</sup>

Konowal also wrote to Stephen Pawluk asking for help from the Ukrainian-Canadian veterans. Pawluk and the veterans did not let him down. In short order over \$400 was raised from the four Ukrainian-Canadian Legions. In 1996 terms, this sum would equal about \$4,000 or \$5,000. The money was sent to Juliette, who ensured Konowal had a new suit, coat, and hat for the trip. In a letter

to Pawluk and all the veterans, Konowal expressed his thanks in a typically humble manner:

Please be kind enough to extend my thanks to every Ukrainian Canadian Legion Branch who have contributed to the large sum of money sent to me lately. I was very surprised and I was not expecting that much. I knew I had friends amongst the Ukrainian people but I never thought they could do so much for a poor fellow like me. This will certainly help me to enjoy my trip in England and will be glad to tell you about it when I return. Thanks again to all of them and specially you Mr. Pawluk as I am sure it is through you I received so much.<sup>40</sup>

Although the majority of Canadian Victoria Cross winners travelled by ship, Konowal and nine other winners flew to England on 23 June 1956. The first event was on 25 June, when the British Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, held a formal tea party at Westminster Hall that was followed by a thanksgiving service at Westminster Abbey. The following day marked the high point of the celebrations. Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip reviewed Konowal and over 300 other Victoria Cross winners during a march past at Hyde Park. It was followed by an afternoon garden party at Marlborough House. The Canadian Government

**Right:** Members of the Governor General's Foot Guards at Konowal's gravesite in Notre Dame Cemetery, Ottawa, during a wreath-laying ceremony on Ukrainian Armed Forces Day, 6 December 1995.  
(Photo by Orest Reshitnyk)

**Below right:** The original grave marker (left) and its replacement.

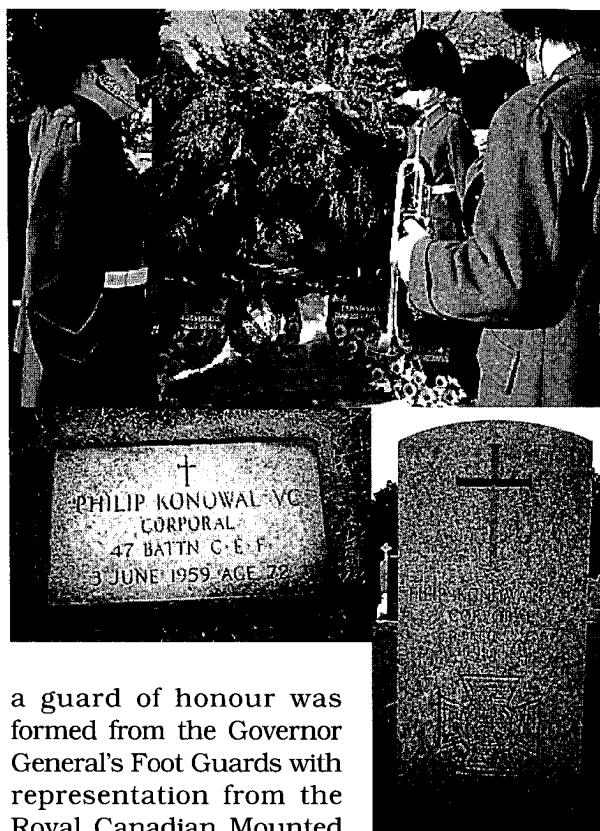
also had planned events in London that would coincide with Dominion Day. These included memorial services at Bramshott and Brookwood Cemeteries and dinner at the Canada Club.

Shortly after returning to Canada on 3 July, the Konowals moved to Ottawa and resided at 24 Spadina Avenue. He subsequently joined the Montgomery Branch No.351 of the Royal Canadian Legion and the Army, Navy and Air Force Association. At an age when most men are enjoying a well earned retirement, Konowal continued to fulfil his duties as messenger and special custodian to Room 16. In late March 1959, the pressures of old age, his war wounds, and a life of hard work combined to bring on his final illness. Despite rapidly deteriorating health, Konowal faithfully discharged his duties until 21 April 1959. On 3 June 1959, Filip Konowal passed away at the age of 72 in the Veterans' Pavilion, Civic Hospital, Ottawa after a two-month illness. The final entry in his government record simply read: "*died in service.*" For a man who had devoted his life to the service of Canada in both war and peace, there could be no more fitting epitaph.

### Postscript

Following Konowal's death, Royal Canadian Legion (Ukrainian) Branches actively sought to maintain his memory. However, with the passage of time, Konowal and his deeds of valour were all but forgotten by the general public. At best he became only a curious footnote in Canada's military history.

By the summer of 1995, a number of individuals and organizations were independently striving to have Konowal's memory restored and once more honoured. The first major event was a wreath laying ceremony on 6 December 1995, at Konowal's grave. Wreaths were laid on behalf of the Minister of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Republic of Ukraine and several other groups while



a guard of honour was formed from the Governor General's Foot Guards with representation from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

This wreath laying proved to be so successful that Major-General J.P. LaRose, Honourary Colonel of the Foot Guards, contacted Professor L. Luciuk of the Royal Military College and suggested that a permanent plaque honouring Konowal be installed at the Cartier Square Drill Hall. This suggestion proved to be very timely. The Royal Canadian Legion No.360 (Toronto) enthusiastically supported the project and agreed to cover all costs. The Konowal Project, headed by Professor Luciuk and the author, planned to have trilingual (English, French and Ukrainian) bronze plaques installed in Ottawa, Toronto and New Westminster, a booklet published on Konowal's life, and the creation of the Konowal Prize.

By July 1996, the booklet was published and distributed to all libraries and schools in Canada. As well, the Department of Veterans Affairs replaced Konowal's grave marker with a free standing granite tombstone inscribed with a Victoria Cross. On 15 July, it was consecrated in a full Ukrainian religious ceremony (*Ponyake*) highlighted by a 25-man honour guard, with bugler and piper from the Foot Guards. The second event was the unveiling of the

plaque dedicated to Konowal at the Cartier Square Drill Hall by The Honourable David Collette, Minister of National Defence, and Major-General LaRose. For this event, The Canadian War Museum graciously loaned Konowal's Victoria cross and other medals, and the painting entitled *Sergeant F. Konowal, Victoria Cross* by Ambrose McEvoy.

The second plaque unveiling was held 21 August at the headquarters of Branch 360 on Queen Street West in Toronto. Ironically, the unveiling occurred exactly 79 years to the day after Konowal won the Victoria Cross. While watching the evening news on 15 July, Lynne Wright, Konowal's great-granddaughter of Cumberland, Ontario, saw a report of the Ottawa ceremonies. She immediately called her mother Claudette, Roland Auger's daughter, and brother Brian. They would be the very special guests of honour. During the second unveiling, David Collette also announced the creation of the Konowal Prize, an annual scholarship awarded to two Ukrainian officer cadets to attend the Royal Military College of Canada.

The third plaque unveiling is tentatively scheduled for the spring of 1997 and in August 1997 the Ukrainian Centennial Memorial Committee plans to raise a memorial cairn to Konowal in Dauphin, Manitoba. Now this Canadian soldier and hero would be remembered for all time.

### Notes

1. George Machum, *Canada's VC's* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1956), p.72; National Archives of Canada (NAC), 2134, Personnel Records: Filip Konowal, C.E.F. Record Sheet; Machum, *Canada's VC's*, p.72; Douglas Meleville, *Canadians and the Victoria Cross* (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing., 1986), p.38.
2. Austin Cross, "VC Winner Was Almost Shot As War Deserter," *Ottawa Citizen*, 16 June 1956, p.2.
3. NAC, 2134, Personnel Records: Filip Konowal, Particulars of Service, Canadian Expeditionary Force, p.1. All subsequent details of Konowal's service are from this source.
4. Canadian War Records Office, *Thirty Canadian VC's* (London: Skeffington & Sons, 1919), p.58.
5. *Ibid.*, p.59.
6. Cross, p.2.
7. *Ibid.*, p.2.
8. Jars Balan, *Salt and Braided Bread* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.49.
9. Cross, p.2.
10. G. R. B. Panchuk, ed., *News Letter*, Vol. II, November-December, Nos.11-12, (Ottawa: Ukrainian-Canadian Veterans' Association, 1954), p.5.
11. *London Gazette*, 23 November 1917, Report No.30400.
12. Panchuk, p.7.
13. *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 April 1921, p.16.
14. *Ottawa Citizen*, 21 July 1919, p.12.
15. *Ibid.*, p.1, 5.
16. *Ibid.*, 22 July 1919, p.1.
17. *Ibid.*, 21 July 1919, p.5.
18. Archives of the City of Hull, Prisoners Received from *Hull Gaol*, 5-22 July 1919.
19. *Ottawa Citizen*, 22 July 1919, p.1.
20. *Ibid.*, 23 July 1919, p.1.
21. *Ibid.*, 29 July 1919, p.12.
22. *Ibid.*, p.12.
23. *Ibid.*, p.12.
24. *Ibid.*, 18 October 1919, p.1.
25. *Ibid.*, 29 April 1921, p.16.
26. *Ibid.*, p.3.
27. *Ibid.*, 21 April 1921, p.16.
28. Archives of the City of Hull, Sheriff C.W. Wright to the Deputy-Attorney General, 21 September 1921.
29. Major-General J.P. LaRose to Ronald Sorobey, 23 January 1996, p.1.
30. Balan, p.47.
31. *Ykpaibcbki Bicti*, 24 February 1942, p.7.
32. Cross, p.2.
33. Berton, p.303.
34. NAC, MG 26 J 1, Mackenzie King Papers, Thomas Wayling to Mackenzie King, 4 April 1936.
35. Thomas Prymak, *Maple Leaf and Trident: The Ukrainian Canadians During the Second World War* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988), opposite p.88.
36. NAC, MG 31 D 155, Stephen Pawluk Papers, Stephen Pawluk to Michael Starr, 23 October 1953.
37. NAC, MG 31 D 155, Stephen Pawluk Papers, Ray Mann to T.D. Anderson, 8 November 1953.
38. Following his death, the watch became the possession of Konowal's stepson, Roland. Upon Roland's death, the watch was placed in the care of Senator Yuzyk. With the consent of Juliette Konowal and the other members of the family, he subsequently returned the watch to the safekeeping of the Veterans' Association during their 1980 Winnipeg Convention.
39. Filip Konowal, *The Legionary*, Vol.4 (March 1956), p.6.
40. NAC, MG 31 D 155, Stephen Pawluk Papers, Filip Konowal to Stephen Pawluk, 17 May 1956.

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