# PHILIP MAXWELL MOYSEY

*Experiences as a Prisoner-of-War, World War 2*

Interviewed by

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Oral History Archives

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Charles G. Roland, MD:

Mr. Moysey, would you tell me your full name, and where and when you were born?

Max Moysey:

Yes. Philip Maxwell Moysey. I was born in Holland, Manitoba the 12th of October, 1914.

CGR:

Very good. And what were your parents' names?

MM:

Gerald Philip and Agnes Louisa Moysey.

CGR:

And what was her maiden name?

MM:

Maxwell.

CGR:

Maxwell. Ah, that's how you got the Maxwell.

MM:

That's where I got the Maxwell.

CGR:

And what did your father do for a living?

MM:

Well he was in farm work and he had worked for the Manitoba telephone system for a number of years before he retired.

CGR:

Were you raised in the Holland area?

MM:

Yes, I was raised in the Holland area. I was there until the outbreak of war in 1939.

CGR:

And what were you doing in 1939 when the war started?

MM:

Well, I was, actually, I was assistant postmaster, I guess you'd call it, at that time. I was working in the post office for some time.

CGR:

So you were 25 then?

MM:

Yes, I guess that's just about it.

CGR:

When did you join up?

MM:

I joined up on the 27th of September, 1939.

CGR:

And did you go directly into the Grenadiers?

MM:

Yes, that's right.

CGR:

So then you were off to Jamaica. You went to the Caribbean, did you?

MM:

Yes. We left to Jamaica in June, 1940.

CGR:

Then it was, what, September of '41 you came back?

MM:

Well, it was September, early October -- the end of Septem-

ber, early October, 1940 that we returned to Winnipeg.

CGR:

What was your first impression of Hong Kong? Do you remember?

MM:

Well it was certainly quite a change from anything that we had been used to before. It was not only that, but it was a place where we hadn't expected to be going. I think most of us at that time -- oh, of course, they had all kinds of rumors and what have you, and I think we thought we'd end up possibly in Singapore or somewhere. But, however, it turned out to be Hong Kong. But we didn't have too much space of time from the date that we arrived there until the outbreak of war to really see too much, outside of the odd trip downtown and what have you, check the odd bar and so on. But that was about all that we had a chance to see or do before we went into action.

CGR:

What company were you in the Grenadiers?

MM:

I was in D Company.

CGR:

D Company.

MM:

Yes.

CGR:

And where were you when the war began? Where were you stationed?

MM:

Well I was stationed at Wong Nei Chong Gap,, and I was there until right through the siege at Wong Nei Chong until 22nd of December. I think, apart from the action there, our company had been across to the mainland on the 11th of December, I believe it was, and apparently we were the first company or first Canadian land forces to see action in the second World War, our particular company, what little action we did see before we came back to the island.

CGR:

That's right. You were a good seven or eight months before Dieppe, the summer of 1942.

MM:

Yes it would be, that's right.

CGR:

Were you wounded?

MM:

No. No, I wasn't wounded, outside of a little touch of shrapnel in the neck -- I wouldn't even call it a wound. No, I wasn't wounded.

CGR:

So you went into the camps. Did you go to North Point first?

MM:

That's right.

CGR:

I gather that pretty well everybody went to North Point.

MM:

North Point, that's the first spot that I was in, North Point.

CGR:

Were you ill treated at all when you were captured, when you surrendered? You know, some people were badly treated.

MM:

Yes, some of them were badly treated. No, I couldn't say that I was well treated, but I was never actually ill-treated, injured, or anything like that. No. I wouldn't say so.

CGR:

In the camps, how was your health? Did you have any major illnesses?

MM:

Well yes, I had,I guess I did. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, I was one of the first, in our outfit anyway, to be hit with the dry beriberi. I can remember the men, they couldn't understand what it was -- that terrible burning in their feet. I know I had gone to the medical officer and, golly, they certainly didn't have anything to work with in the camp, but they did have some liniment. It certainly didn't help.

CGR:

Do you remember roughly when this was that you began to feel this?

MM:

Yes. It'd be during, I guess, mid-1942. Of course, very shortly after that there were dozens and dozens got this dry beriberi and some, I guess, the wet beriberi too. That's the first thing that bothered me.

CGR:

What were the other symptoms, in addition to the painful feelings in the feet? Were there other symptoms as well?

MM:

Well, no. The arches in my feet all went. I don't know whether that was due to the beriberi really or not. But the burning, it was terrible to start with. After a few months time, I was one of the -- I guess I'd have to say lucky few -- that they took to Bowen Road Military Hospital where they still had some British doctors looking after, doing the best they could for them. By the time I got there, I guess, the cords or whatever, were apparently contracting in the right leg, and it got to the point where it was pretty badly drawn up, and the toes too, and I guess there was a period of five or six months that I couldn't walk at all. As a matter of fact, I believe that someone told me that: "I don't think you're going to be able to walk again." But I still had the terrible pains in beriberi. You'd go for maybe a couple of days without not being able to maybe sleep a wink, just sit and hold your feet or try and put them under cold water, or what have you.

CGR:

Would nothing relieve the pain?

MM:

Nothing. Then I got these septic sores on the feet. They were bad. I had them when I was in Bowen Road too. I can remember the (I forget the name of this solution, Doctor, you would know). It's sort of put in water, blue solution.

CGR:

Potassium permanganate?

MM:

Potassium permanganate, yes. I soaked my feet in that, and I remember this Limey orderly, he had these sort of swab sticks. I soaked my feet in that and I had the rings on the soles of the feet and he kind of scraped the sole with these and I'd flinch and he'd say, "Well, it's not my funeral." He said, "It's your's," so that's the way it went. But I still have the marks, of course, on it, but I got over that.

But then I had, I was put in the dangerously ill ward with this darn diphtheria. There weren't too many that went in there that came out. But I was very, very fortunate because a number of us were in the hospital, they did have, they were able to immunize us, I guess, or give us a needle, which they weren't able to do out in the camps where there were dozens of them passed away with it. So I come out of there in pretty good shape.

CGR:

Now excuse me. You went back from Bowen Road...?

MM:

I was still in Bowen Road then.

CGR:

When you came down with diphtheria?

MM:

Yes.

CGR:

How did this affect you?

MM:

Well, oh golly, I don't -- I remember Colonel [Donald C.] Bowie. He was the head of the hospital, a real gentleman. He used to come around -- they had a Major [George F.] Harrison, he was sort of an eccentric kind of chap but he was a good man -- but they'd come and do inspections. You know the British were great on their inspections, and he'd bring the Colonel with him and come around. And if you could stand, you stood by your bed, and Colonel Bowie, "Well, how are you today?" If you had seven or eight problems and told him about them, he'd always end up, "But how do you feel in yourself?" He used to always, "How do you feel in yourself?" Poor soul, I don't know.

I guess it was important how you felt in yourself too, because it seemed to me if you quit, you could die in two or three weeks. But I don't think all that time that I was there, it ever occurred to me that I was going to die or wouldn't live through this. I don't know, it just never struck me, maybe I was stupid, but it just never struck me. We used to see fellows that, oh golly, they didn't seem too bad and they seemed just to pack it up. And there's others we'd say that they should have died, but they didn't. It was an odd thing. But it seemed to me that your mental being had considerable to do with it.

CGR:

I don't think there's any question about it. It certainly does. If I could just go back to the diphtheria for a moment. Did it get you in the throat, was that the kind you had?

MM:

Yes, to a degree. Although I didn't seem too sick, I didn't

seem too sick. But I guess they thought I was sick enough anyway to put me in where they did. I came out of there after a fairly short time. You know, as it ended up in there, with the leg as bad as it was, they used to, oh for days and days (I used to dread it too), lie on my back and they'd have an orderly come along and put a cushion under my -- pillow or whatever -- under my heel there, and then he'd rock himself on these to try and stretch it. But he wasn't too successful, so one day, they did put me under, I guess it was just a local anesthetic, they got it, and by golly they straightened it out, the darn leg out. However they did it, I don't know. But then they told me to get up and to just walk and walk, which I did. I used a cane.

A couple of weeks after, they sent me back to Sham Shui Po Camp. And after I got there, I used to go in and see Captain [George] Porteous, he was the recreation officer. He used to massage the leg, the thigh, and the calf, and more or less do the same thing, apply pressure to the knee and so on, and it eventually got that I got along quite well. Although, as I say, I used a cane for a long time and my legs, of course, have never been that good since. They're quite weak and the arch is very, very sensitive. I have special shoes that they had made, but any little stone or anything like, if I tramp on that I'll flinch or jump a mile, anything like that.

CGR:

When you first came down with the dry beriberi, before you went to Bowen Road, who was looking after you then? Who was the medical officer?

MM:

Dr. John Crawford.

CGR:

John Crawford. Oh yes, I've met him. But basically there was nothing much he could do?

MM:

Not really, there wasn't, no. He did give me a couple of needles too, I don't know if it was vitamin B or whatever it was that he had there. But, as I say, there wasn't a great deal that he had to work with, that's for sure.

CGR:

Were you in bed with that? I mean, is that why you got the contractures that you were...?

MM:

No. I was up and around. I was never in bed as long as I was in North Point Camp. But then my eyes started to go and it was quite sudden too, it seemed to me, or a very short time. You just noticed that it was hard to see across the room and so on, and they were a bit sore. That soreness went away but it left the sight affected.

CGR:

Just dim sight? I mean, everything went fuzzy or...?

MM:

That's right. Just sort of dim, and you could make out maybe a silhouette but you couldn't make out features and so on.

CGR:

Do you recall when that was, approximately?

MM:

I would say that was roughly after, oh, it must have been close to a year, I guess, after we were captured.

CGR:

So you were at Sham Shui Po then?

MM:

No, I was still at Bowen Road.

CGR:

Oh, I see, at the hospital there. Did that get steadily worse? Did it stay about the same?

MM:

Oh it got to a stage, no it didn't seem to get too much worse and then it just more or less stayed the way it was. The only change that I know is, from then and now, in 1976 it was, I think, that the retina of the right eye became detached. I went to Deer Lodge [Veterans' Hospital] -- I thought there was something, I see all these cobwebs and stuff and, "What in the world?" I thought it was something I could wipe away. They checked me there and then sent me to the Health Sciences Center and I saw a Dr. Bracken there. He told me, he said it was a detached retina and he said, "It's just about complete." And he said, "We could operate. I would say there was a 50-50 chance that we can fix it up." And I said, "Well, what if you don't operate?" He said, "Well, you'll go blind in that eye." "Well," I said, "there's not much point in waiting then I might as well go ahead."

Well he did operate, but as it happened it didn't turn out. He said that the tissue, I guess, in the back of the eye, he said, apparently from the malnutrition suffered in the prison camp, he said it was more or less just like parchment and it

wouldn't hold stitches, or at least it hadn't. So he said, "If you want to go home for a month or so, then come back and," he said, "we'll try it once more," which I did. And the second operation wasn't any more successful than the first. So that is it. I lost the sight in the right eye. So he said, "We'll keep a pretty close watch on the left."

Then about three years ago, I had my eyes checked and they said, "You've got a cataract on the bad eye, on your blind eye." So I thought, well, that doesn't matter a great deal. But he said, "No, we'll operate on it anyway," because it would build up pressure, and so on --- which they did.

You know, it seems when you just have the one eye, you're just a little bit more leery or careful and about, oh I guess a month and a half ago, I thought I saw this sort of fog, cobweb effect on my left eye and I thought, "Gee, I'd better see a doctor." So I did. I saw Dr. Bracken again and he said, "No, everything is okay." I guess it was just imagination maybe on my part.

CGR:

Were there any other sicknesses?

MM:

Well, I had malaria on a couple of occasions. As a matter of fact, I was suffering from malaria when the war ended in Sham Shui Po Camp. I also had erysipelas. Is it erysipelas?

CGR:

Yes, right.

MM:

Erysipelas in the one leg and it was pretty bad. That time, that was at Sham Shui Po, and they put me over in, oh, some kind of a shack. You know, my recollection is still faint but I was in isolation, anyway. I'd see somebody about once a day -- you know, when I was in there part of the time I was a bit delirious, I think. I didn't know what the score was, or whether I was up, down, or what. But I got over that okay.

I recall when we came back from overseas I came back on the Admiral Hughes, we were in the Philippines for a couple of weeks, and then went to a camp on Vancouver Island. After we had been there for a day or so, we more or less lined up and went through for a quick medical -- men, officers, and all. And just behind me "Long John" Crawford, Dr. Crawford, went through and he said, "Moysey, when they ask you what you had," he said, "just tell them 'everything'." So that was about it.

CGR:

It certainly sounds like it. What did it feel like to have malaria?

MM:

Well, of course it's just a very, very high fever and we were able to get, they had some quinine and there I got delirious at times, didn't know just what the score was and perspired terribly after quinine, which is a good thing I guess. And it was weakening, but...

CGR:

And you had the shakes?

MM:

A bit, yes. Then you'd get chills, that's right, cold chills and perspire.

CGR:

Do you remember how many days apart your attacks were?

MM:

Well, I think it was roughly a period of a week that I had it from start to finish, yes. Of course, then I was bed-ridden at that time in one of the huts.

CGR:

You certainly had your share and then some, didn't you?

MM:

Oh, I had them and I guess maybe the average anyway, or maybe a little bit more. As I say, I was pretty fortunate too. I think the life-saving thing was just being able to get to Bowen Road Hospital, such as it was. I guess there could have been no doubt quite a few more saved if they could have made it that far, even with the little extra care that you got there.

CGR:

What about the food supply? There wasn't much I gather. What sorts of things did you have to eat?

MM:

Well, of course, as mentioned, it was the rice was the basic and it wasn't polished rice like we had here and it wasn't always that clean either, certainly not at the start anyway. It had little worms and what have you.

But then as time went by, we had, they had planted gardens and they had some greens and make a sort of a soup out of it and you'd get maybe a tin of that. One of the ingredients of the

soup that I remember best was chrysanthemums they'd chopped up. Then they had another sort of, oh, spinach, bok choy they called it, quite a bit of the white on it. They had some bok choy. We didn't get it all the time. Then on occasion, we had, they used to bring in a bit of octopus or squid, I guess, and they made a bit of a soup out of that. Sometimes they brought in these darn eels, sometimes they weren't too fresh. That ended up, they had fish head soup. That was another one of their specialities, not a regular diet.

I can remember on one or two occasions, they had these duck eggs. We saw some of the cases as they came in and they were marked, some of them, 1911, 1912, and so on. I guess the Chinese had some special way of preserving them or something like that. But as I recall, you went through in line and got one egg, and if it was a bad one, you had a chance to go back in the line and if there were other eggs left when they got back to you, you got another egg. If there wasn't, well you were out of luck. You'd see some of the fellows too after you got by, they were going through the garbage looking for the bad eggs that had been thrown out.

Oh, and another thing. They had these wee little fish, about half the size of a minnow I guess, they were dried and they'd cook them up in the rice, our own cooks. Well, as far as we were concerned, it was quite tasty, in comparison to other types of food we were used to. But it was a two-meal-a-day deal. I think around 10 o'clock we had a bit to eat and again around 4:00 in the afternoon, I think it was. But it was at times the quality was sure restricted. It just seemed to be enough to,

they had it pretty well figured up, enough to keep you alive if you were lucky.

CGR:

How about Red Cross packages?

MM:

I think I got two in the course of roughly four years.

CGR:

Not much is it?

MM:

Not very much, no.

CGR:

Were you married when you went overseas?

MM:

No, I wasn't. No, I wasn't married until 1946, when I came back.

CGR:

What about sex? Was sex something that people talked about or thought about?

MM:

No, I don't think they did, as I recall, very little. It was always food. What we were going to have when we got back, and some of them talking about different recipes. It'd almost drive you crazy. But no, I don't think the average one didn't give two thoughts about sex.

CGR:

How about you? Did you think about it?

MM:

As I recall, I didn't. No, I have no recollection of it.

No, that's a fact. Odd that you should mention that because I hadn't even thought, till now. But it sure didn't play a big part in our minds, anyway. I'm pretty sure of that.

CGR:

I guess survival was more crucial.

MM:

Yes, it was, and if you had a little of this you'd trade this for that or something. I can remember we had a packet of these biscuits and I guess there was a bit of I don't know what kind of -- lard, I guess -- and I traded one of the Indian troops and of course the cow was sacred, I guess, to this particular sect, so he gave me a packet of biscuits for a pair of shorts that I had gotten some darn place or other. But you're always thinking of food -- this time this, this time that.

CGR:

Just before I got away totally from this subject of sex. Were you ever aware of homosexuality? Was there ever any of that that you know about?

MM:

No. No, there wasn't. No, I have no recollection of that.

CGR:

That's interesting. So many men thrown together -- you might wonder about it.

MM:

Yes, that's right and over that long period of time. No, I honestly have no recollection of any homosexuality.

CGR:

I've asked everybody else that and they've all said the same

thing.

MM:

Is that right? I mean you hear so much about it today. I mean it seems such a damn common thing, doesn't it, that you think that with that many men as you say over a period of time. There could have been some, but not to my knowledge. No.

CGR:

Were there any problems in the camp created by the people themselves? I'm thinking of -- in every crowd of people there's usually one or two who are "bad apples." Do you have any recollections of any of those kinds of problems?

MM:

No, not really. Well, I've seen just a few minor squabbles, but nothing really serious at all, nothing that you might not see just any day with a group of people. Nothing serious, no. As a matter of fact, it seemed to me that the fellows got along remarkably well among themselves. There were a lot of good fellows; they were out to help a guy if he seemed to be worse off, a little sicker than they were, and so on. There was a lot of real good comradeship, no doubt about it. Those things I remember far more than I would any dissension that there was between any of them. No, they were pretty darn good in that respect.

CGR:

As far as you're concerned, did the medical people do a pretty good job. I know they were lacking a lot of things, but given what they had, did they...?

MM:

Yes. I think definitely. While we were in that camp, in

the hospital and so on, I feel sure that they did everything that they possibly could. I haven't a word to say against any treatment that I had, or any treatment that I saw in anyone else. No, I think they did a yeoman job, I would say.

CGR:

Did you have any dental problems while you were in the camps? Any dental work done?

MM:

Well, I didn't, no. That was an odd thing. I've heard, when we got back, they said that in view of the fact that you've had no dental work done for, well roughly, we'll say four years anyway, that there's practically no deterioration as far as teeth were concerned.

CGR:

That is remarkable, isn't it?

MM:

Yes.

CGR:

What would you say was the worst thing that happened to you while you were in the camps? If you had to identify one thing that happened.

MM:

Well, I think that the thing I suffered most from was the beriberi and the leg. That bothered me, I mean as far as medical problems went. It'd been times when I thought, if it would relieve the pain and so on, I would gladly -- I used to think at that time -- have the leg amputated at the knee or something like that, the feet were so bad. But another thing that bothered me a

great deal was the fact that you always had on your mind wondering just how they were at home -- no word, no letter, just the uncertainty of everything like that. That was another thing.

CGR:

Did you get any mail?

MM:

No, I didn't.

CGR:

Nothing at all?

MM:

No. I had some returned afterwards, from Hong Kong, after the war was over.

CGR:

Yes, that would be pretty bad.

MM:

Yes, that was one thing that bothered me a great deal. And another thing, too, was I think that we sort of -- as I say, I was never really tortured or mistreated physically that I can say, to any extent anyway. But the thing that bothered me as much as anything, was to see other people punished or abused in front of you. Maybe it was an officer, maybe it was a buck private, it didn't really matter. To think you had to stand there and watch it and there wasn't a thing in the world you could do about it, to see somebody get knocked down and get up and get knocked down again. Those things used to bother a lot. I think those were the three things. But as I say, I think physical pain and stuff like that, that's something that I guess everybody tends to forget very fast. I mean it might be bad just

at that time, but you forget about that very quickly. But other things sort of prey on your mind.

CGR:

Isn't it fortunate that we do forget about things like that!

MM:

Oh it is. Yes, good thing sometimes it doesn't last. That's true.

CGR:

This whole experience, is it something that bothers you now? Do you think about it? Do you dream about it?

MM:

Sometimes I dream a bit about it at times, maybe once every four or five months. But it isn't something that really bothers me, no. Well, it doesn't bother me to talk about it; it doesn't bother me one bit, really. It doesn't bother me though. No. Although sometimes I have a bad dream or something, and see a bunch of Japs and you run out of ammunition or something, but no, it doesn't really bother me. No.

CGR:

How do you feel about the Japanese?

MM:

Well, I have no ill feelings towards them. No. I mean, I can meet a Jap and treat him the same as anybody else. But no, that doesn't, it hasn't left any black marks, I don't think, on my mind, as I don't think the ones we were involved with had a great deal of choice and they didn't know that much, I guess. They just didn't know any better, or had no choice in what they did -- many of them. I suppose you can reverse the situation and

you can find cruelty both ways as far as that goes.

There were the odd one, of course, that went overboard with torture and cruelty and so on. I mean, you certainly can't say that you have a soft spot in your heart for them, but it doesn't bother me. As I say, I can see a Jap any day and treat him the same as anybody else. I'll take them for what they're worth.

CGR:

Well very good. Is there anything else that you can think of that we might talk about in this whole area?

MM:

Well, I don't know, Doctor. As I say, it was an experience where you really got to know what people are made of, I think. It seems to me, when we joined up and so on and you're in the army, here's a corporal, and a sergeant, and sergeant-major, and an officer and so on. You think that they're good, or they're tough, or they're easy, but it seems to me, when you get into a battle situation and then you get into a prison camp, that's when you really find out which one of them are men and who isn't. I think we all learned quite a bit from that and I think we all got, were all a bit surprised in some cases. Sometimes the big talker wasn't just as tough or didn't have the backbone that you would expect him to have. We learned a lot about people. I know that from the experience, I'm sure we did.

I don't know, I've thought too, at the time of the Korean conflict which came along later, and we read about different prisoners-of-war, men that were taken by the North Vietnamese and so on, and that they were put in different camps and prisons and questioned and tortured; I guess some of them spilt the beans

about this and that, and talked, and others went through all kinds of torture and held their ground and didn't. Then we find that these men that were maybe judged by others, maybe generals in big easy chairs and so on, and some of them were condemned, and some of them were found guilty of this and guilty of that. But I don't think the average person is like that, unless they've been in similar situations, I don't think that they know just what they would or might have done under the same conditions. Because some people can, let's say, crack easier than others and not because they're bad or unloyal, or anything like that. But some just can't take what others can take and so it's pretty hard for an outsider to judge fairly sometimes, it seems to me.

CGR:

I think you're quite right. I agree.

MM:

When you've been there, it gives you a better idea of both sides of the story, I think.

CGR:

Yes. I would suppose it would teach you something about yourself too.

MM:

Yes indeed. That's right too. Yes, I think so. It does teach you something about yourself. I'm sure it does, when you think back.

CGR:

What have you done since the war?

MM:

When I came back, my feet and legs were quite bad at that

time. I had a hammer-toe operation a couple of years after on one foot. But I was discharged the first of April in '46. The first place I went, I guess, was to an employment counselor here at Deer Lodge and he asked me what I had done prior to the war. Well, I told him that I worked in the post office immediately prior to joining up. Anyway, he gave me a note to the Provincial Civil Service and thought maybe I could find something there.

I went down there and I saw a chap, and his name was Honeyman, at the time, and he was very nice. We sat down and had a chat for half an hour or so, and he was made aware of the condition of my eye and so on. He had a piece of paper and, "Would you read this or that," and at that time I couldn't; well, he said, "That means that I guess clerical work is out, isn't it." I said, "Apparently it is, that's true." And he said, "Your feet and legs are bad." He said, "You couldn't very well climb a ladder or paint a wall or do this or that." So actually I was out there. Didn't have a chance.

I went back to the pension commission -- at that time I was only on a 50 percent pension, and I said, "I seem to be between the devil and the deep blue sea. I can't do this and on the other hand I can't do that, and so on." Well shortly after that, I had my pension increased (I was fortunate) to 100 percent.

Then I went to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and I was employed there from 1946 until 1970. I retired, I guess, or they called it retired, or packed it up in 1970. And I was there, as I say, for about 23 years and I worked in the catering department and got to be an office manager or whatever you want to call it, or Jack of all trades, or Joe of all trades.

But as I say, as far as employment goes, there's been no other place except the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, so I have a lot to thank them for because it seemed at that time that it was pretty restricted to just what I could do to make a buck.

CGR:

Well I don't have any other questions? Is there anything else that you've thought of that you want to go back to?

MM:

I don't think of anything specifically.

CGR:

Well, I thank you very much.

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