

Sergeant Francis Ash (Number 469417) of the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

(Right: *The shoulder-flash of the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles) is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

(continued)

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a *nailworker* and labourer, Francis Ash was possibly the young man of seventeen years of age noted in the passenger list of October 21, 1909, of the SS *Bruce* which made its way from Port aux Basques to North Sydney, Cape Breton, on that date. (However, this information requires confirmation.)

Whether or not this was in fact one and the same person, the Francis Ash of this present dossier sooner or later made his way to the industrial city of Sydney, Cape Breton, where he enlisted*. His pay records document that he received his first remuneration for services to the Canadian Army on August 10 of 1915, and that on the same day that he was *taken on strength* by the 64th Battalion.

**There is a medical record in his file that cites his enlistment as having been undertaken in Sussex – presumably the New Brunswick town of that name – on August 13.*

Having then presented himself again in Sydney for medical examination on the 12th of that month, Private Ash was attested on the following day. On September 3, officialdom had the last word when the Officer Commanding the 64th Overseas Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel H.M. Campbell, declared (on paper) that...*having been finally approved and inspected by me this day...I certify that I am satisfied with the correctness of this Attestation.*

Private Ash was attached to “C” Company of the Battalion on the same September 3.

Towards the end of the period that he was to spend in Canada prior to his departure overseas – his training possibly having been undertaken at the Halifax Armoury - Private Ash was admitted into the Rockhead Military Hospital, Halifax, for contagious diseases in that city. There he remained for three weeks, from March 10 of 1916 until March 30, the day before which he was to take ship. The complaint appears to be undocumented in his files but it is possibly the same one which is cited further below.

The 64th Overseas Battalion embarked in the harbour at Halifax onto His Majesty’s Transport *Adriatic*, a requisitioned trans-Atlantic liner of the *White Star Line*, on March 31 of 1916. After also having taken on board for the trans-Atlantic passage the 73rd Battalion of Canadian Infantry, the Cobourg Heavy Draft Battery and the 8th Canadian Field Ambulance*, the vessel sailed on the following day, April 1, 1916, in the company of *Baltic* and *Empress of Britain*, the convoy being escorted by the cruiser HMS *Carnarvan*.



Adriatic docked in the English west-coast port of Liverpool at three o’clock in the afternoon of April 9, eight days later again.

**The 8th Field Ambulance apparently provided the medical service on board ship, services of which Private Ash is reported to have availed during two days of the voyage, for a venereal problem.*

(Right above: *The image of HMT Adriatic is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.*)

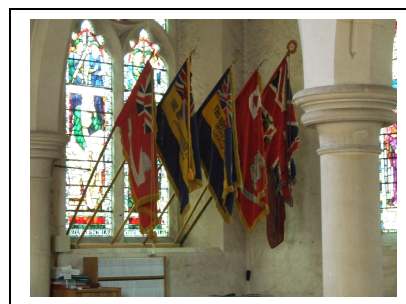
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Upon its debarkation in the United Kingdom the 64th Overseas Battalion was apparently transported south to *Camp Bramshott* in the English county of Hampshire. Only days later, on April 14, Private Ash was admitted into the Connaught Hospital at the British Army complex at nearby Aldershot for further medical attention to his on-ship condition. He was discharged from there some five days later, on the 19th*

**As was often the policy - particularly in the early days of the conflict - towards soldiers hospitalized with venereal problems, Private Ash forfeited fifty cents from his pay for each day spent receiving treatment.*

On that same April 19, he was released back to duty to the Canadian Military establishment in the vicinity of the villages of Liphook and Bramshott, the latter having lent its name to the camp. Ten weeks later, on June 24, Private Ash was transferred to the 12th Reserve Battalion, it stationed at the Canadian complex at *Shorncliffe*, close to the English-Channel harbour and town of Folkestone in the county of Kent.

(Right: *Royal Canadian Legion flags amongst others adorn the interior of St. Mary's Church in the English village of Bramshott. – photograph from 2016*)



He was also transferred on June 28 to the 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, thus his sojourn at *Shorncliffe* lasted for only some four days.

(Right: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago. – photograph from 2016*)

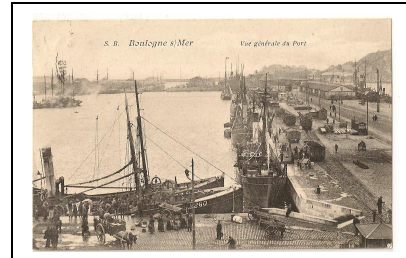


On that same June 28, 1916, Private Ash was one of a reinforcement draft which left England – likely, but not confirmed, via Folkestone and Boulogne – for the Continent. Once having landed, the contingent was sent to the Canadian Base Depot established at Le Havre on the estuary of the River Seine. He was *taken on strength* there on the 29th of the month for some two weeks of training and organization, before then being despatched to rendezvous with his new parent unit on July 12.



This Private Ash did two days afterwards, on July 14, at a time when the 24th Battalion had been withdrawn to Dickebusch, days later to move from there to serve in Brigade Reserve in Camp 'H' at Reninghelst.

(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the top of the white cliffs of nearby Dover – photograph from 2009*)



(continued)

(Preceding page: *An image of the French port of Boulogne at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

(Right: *A view of the French port-city of Le Havre at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

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The 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) had been serving on the Western Front since September of 1915 as an entity of the 5th Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 2nd Canadian Division.

Up until the time of Private Ash’s arrival it had been stationed but very briefly in the north of France before serving primarily in the *Kingdom of Belgium*, in a sector just to the south of the medieval city of Ypres.

(Right above: *While the caption claims that these troops to be ‘English’, this could refer to any unit in British uniform – including Empire (Commonwealth) units. This is early in the war as there is no sign of a steel helmet. – from a vintage post-card*)

In early April of 1916, the 2nd Canadian Division had undergone its baptism of fire in a major infantry action. It was at a place in that sector to the south of Ypres named St-Éloi where, by the end of March, on the 27th, the British had already dug tunnels, on that date detonating a series of mines placed under the German lines; they had then followed this with an infantry attack. The newly-arrived Canadian formation had been ordered to subsequently follow up on the presumed British success, to hold and consolidate the newly-won territory.

However, it had been a terrain damaged by the explosions, the putrid weather then having turned the recently-created craters into ponds and the shattered earth into a quagmire - plus a resolute German defence – which greeted the newcomers who took over from the by-then exhausted British on April 5-6. Two weeks later the Germans had reclaimed the lost territory and in doing so had inflicted severe losses on the Canadians.

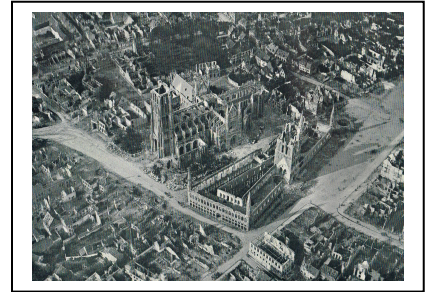


(Right above: *The occupation of a crater in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines – perhaps in the St-Éloi Sector – from Illustration*)

It had not been a happy baptism of fire for the novice Canadians. The 24th Battalion, however, according to its War Diary, had not been heavily involved and most of its casualties at the time had been due to artillery fire. Apart from repelling a German bombing party on April 15, the unit had been engaged in little infantry action.

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(Right: An aerial photograph, taken in July of 1915, which shows the shell of the medieval city of Ypres, an image entitled *Ypres-la-Morte* (Ypres the Dead) – By the end of the conflict there was little left standing. – from *Illustration*)



After that, six weeks later, there had been the confrontation at *Mount Sorrel*. This had involved mainly the newly-arrived Canadian 3rd Division but other units had subsequently played a role.

On June 2 the Germans had attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under Canadian (and thus also British) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of *Hooge*, of *Sanctuary Wood*, *Hill 60*, *Maple Copse*, *Railway Dugouts* and also the promontory which has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action: *Mount Sorrel*.

(Right below: Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood – photograph from 2010)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans were unable to exploit their success and the Canadians thus were allowed the opportunity to patch up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, however, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, was to be a costly disaster for the Canadians.



(Right below: The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres (today Ieper) whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance – photograph from 1914)

The 24th Battalion was not to play a leading part in the action at *Mount Sorrel*. Uninvolved during the early days, the unit moved forward into the front-line trenches in the area of *Maple Copse* on June 7, there to remain until relieved on the 11th. Nor did it participate in the final stages of October 12-13.



The Battalion was not to escape without casualties however. Once again these were caused mostly by German gun fire, particularly at the time when it was moving forward towards *Maple Copse* on June 7, one platoon incurring twenty-three casualties in a single extremely heavy bombardment and thus ceasing to exist.



(Right: *Maple Copse*, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians – photograph from 2014)

From then until the final week of August the 24th Battalion had again resumed the rigours and routines of life in the trenches*. Often the War Diary entries of this period refer to... *quiet days... front quieter than normal* – although, of course, everything is relative. After the exertions of *Mount Sorrel*, any infantry activity was on a local level and limited to patrols and raids – the latter being something of which the High Command appeared to be fond but that the lowly soldier, whose duty it was to undertake them, apparently loathed - and most casualties were due to artillery and to sniping.

**During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest the forward area, the latter furthest away.*



Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(Right above: A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles – from Illustration)

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Private Ash, of course, had reported to the 24th Battalion on July 14, a day on which his new unit was operating in the vicinity of the community of Dickebusch to the south-west of Ypres. There, out of the line, it had been supplying working-parties for such tasks as burying cables, carrying equipment and supplies forward, and construction under the guidance of the Royal Engineers.

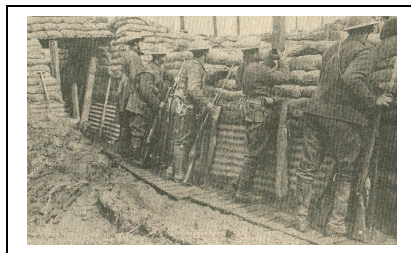
On the following day, the 15th, the Canadians of the 24th Battalion were moved into Brigade Reserve. Nine days later again, from the 24th of the month until the 31st, the unit was in the trenches, being relieved on that latter date by the 22nd Battalion and immediately sent to the rear into *Divisional Reserve*.

The first two weeks in August were replete with such events as route marches – one to coincide with a visit by His Majesty the King – inspections of both men and equipment, training and daily physical exercise, until the Battalion was once more ordered forward into the trenches, on August 16.

When the unit next retired on August 20, however, and after a few *quiet days* at Micmac Camp, there was to be some change in the training routine, and for this reason it was withdrawn further from the front than on previous occasions, to an area south of the Franco-Belgian border and adjacent to the centre of St-Omer.

As an excerpt from the 25th Battalion War Diary* of the entry of August 31 explains, the Battalion ... *marched to training area where open warfare, extended order etc. as per special instructions, based on the recent fighting on the Somme, was practised.*

(Right: *Canadian troops, here with steel helmets and Lee-Enfield rifles**, training in trenches a little bit too immaculate to be the real thing – from *Le Miroir*)



**The 25th Battalion – also a unit of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade - had been withdrawn from the front near Ypres at about the same time and was undergoing the same training as was the 24th.*

Private Ash was seemingly on his way – as was indeed the entire 2nd Canadian Division - southwards to the area, and to the *Battle* – of the *Somme*.

**During that training period there had been one important development of some significance to the individual Canadian soldier: the Canadian-produced Ross rifle, which had proved itself so unreliable under battle conditions, was finally withdrawn and replaced with the British-made Short Lee-Enfield Mark III.*

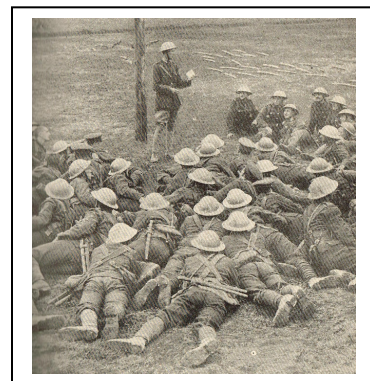
The *First Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for well over two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties – in the short span of four hours - of which some nineteen-thousand dead.

On that first day of the offensive all but two small units of the attacking divisions had been from the British Isles, the exceptions having been the two hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the eight-hundred personnel of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment which was to lose so heavily on that July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel.

As *First Somme* had progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were brought in; at first it had been the South African Brigade (July 15), then the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to become a part of a third general offensive. Their first major collective contribution was to be in the area of the two villages of Flers and Courcelette on September 15.

In the meantime, ten days after its retirement from Belgium for training, the 24th Battalion had left its billets at Eperlecques and had marched to the railway station at Arques. On September 4 it had there boarded a train for the journey to Conteville, just over one-hundred kilometres distant. The unit had arrived at its destination at five-thirty on the following morning, September 5.

(Right: *An image purporting to be that of a Canadian officer giving instructions to those under his command prior to the attack at Flers-Courcelette (see below), September 1916. – from *The War Illustrated**)



On the next day again Private Ash's Battalion had started to march, to arrive some five days later at the large military encampment at the *Brickfields (La Briqueterie)*, in the immediate proximity of the provincial town of Albert. The afternoon of September 10 had then been spent preparing bivouacs.

(Right: *Some of the fields which surround la Briqueterie – the name on the signpost - almost a century after the battles of the Great War – photograph from 2014*)



During the days following, the Battalion had supplied personnel, mainly to carry supplies, to clean trenches and to bury cable. On the 14th it had moved forward to act as Brigade Reserve in the attack of the following day, September 15. For the most part this was to involve supplying carrying-parties moving the necessities of war from the rear to the front as the need arose – this task to be done for the best part of the following three days over exposed ground.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers at work carrying water in the town-centre of Albert, the already-damaged basilica to be seen in the background – from Illustration*)



On September 17, the unit was ordered to deliver an attack on the German front line, an assault which began at five-thirty in the afternoon.

The operation enjoyed only mixed results – and heavy casualties - and the War Diarist wrote the following scathing paragraph in his entry of that day: *With regard to this attack, if the Artillery preparation had been in any way adequate, there is no doubt but that the objective would have been obtained along the whole line. As it was, a barrage was put up approximately 500 yards in rear of the German front line, which merely served to warn the enemy that an attack would probably be launched, and they were able when our men advanced, to stand up on their parapets and shoot them down.*

By the 18th the 24th Battalion was back at *Brickfields Camp*: total casualties during the preceding days had been three-hundred twenty.

(Right: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

On September 28, the unit moved back to the line once more, on this occasion having been ordered to assault the so-called enemy *Regina Trench* system. The attack was one of several to fail and *Regina Trench* was not taken definitively until November 11, six weeks later. The 24th Battalion's operation cost it a further two-hundred four casualties all told.



(Right below: *Regina Trench Cemetery and also some of the area surrounding it, ground which was finally wrested from the Germans by Canadian troops in November of 1916 – photograph from 2014*)

On October 2, the remnants of the 24th Battalion (*Victoria Rifles*) began its withdrawal from the *First Battle of the Somme*. It marched westward before turning northward, passing in a semi-circular fashion behind the city of Arras and beyond. It continued onward in the direction of the mining centre of Lens, where it was then stationed in the suburbs, in the *Angres Sector*.



By then, just on the eve of his Battalion's withdrawal, on October 1, Private Ash had received a first promotion, to the rank of lance corporal.

(Right: *The remnants of the Grande Place (Grand'Place) in Arras which had already been steadily bombarded for two years by the end of the year 1916 – from Illustration*)



It was in the *Angres Sector* that Lance Corporal Ash and the other personnel of the 24th Battalion remained until almost the middle of the following February. But he was soon to be Corporal Ash as it was early on during this period, on November 11, that he received a second stripe.

That late autumn of 1916 – after the *First Battle of the Somme* - and the winter of 1916-1917 was a time for the remnants of the Canadian battalions to re-enforce and to re-organize. There was to be little concerted infantry action during this period apart from the everyday routine patrolling and the occasional raid - sometimes minor, at other times more elaborate – against enemy positions.



The period proved to be a succession of tours: in the front-line trenches; in support; and in reserve. The days served nearer to the forward area were usually punctuated with artillery and aerial activity, local patrols – both ours and theirs – inspections by lower-ranking, but still senior, officers, and by working-parties.

There was of course, the constant trickle of casualties, for the most part occasioned by the enemy artillery and snipers. However, it was mostly sickness and dental work that kept the medical services busy during this period.

(Right above: *A detachment of Canadian troops going forward during the winter of 1916-1917 – from Illustration*)

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On February 11 the Battalion was ordered to the *La Folie Sector* not far removed from a German-occupied village by the name of Vimy. A further six weeks of relative calm and routine followed until March 23 when the 24th Battalion moved back behind the lines to the area of Maisnil-Bouche where it was to undergo a period of *special training*.

Among these preparations were some novel developments: use of enemy weapons; each unit and each man to be familiar with his role during the upcoming battle; the construction of ground layouts built, thanks to aerial reconnaissance, to show the terrain and positions to be attacked; the introduction of the machine-gun barrage; and the excavation of kilometres of approach tunnels, not only for the safety of the attacking troops but also to ensure the element of surprise.

On April 9 the British Army launched an offensive in the area to the north of the Somme battlefields; this was the so-called *Battle of Arras* intended to support a French effort elsewhere. In terms of the daily count of casualties, some four thousand per day, it was to be the most expensive operation of the War for the British, one of the few positive episodes being the Canadian assault of *Vimy Ridge* on the opening day of the battle, Easter Monday.



While the British campaign was to prove an overall disappointment, the French offensive at *le Chemin des Dames* was to be yet a further disaster.

(Right above: *The Canadian National Memorial which has stood, since 1936, on Vimy Ridge – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *Canadian troops of the 4th or 3rd Division equipped – or burdened - with all the paraphernalia of war, on the advance across No-Man’s-Land during the attack at Vimy Ridge on either April 9 or 10 of 1917 - from Illustration*)

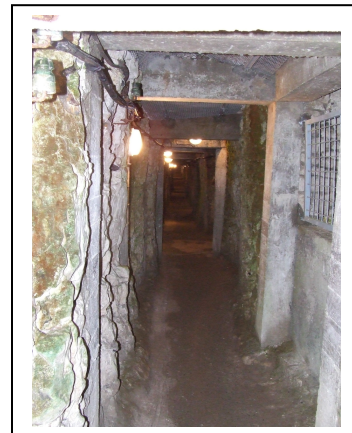


On that April 9, in driving snow, the four Canadian Divisions, for the first time acting as a single, autonomous entity, stormed the slope of *Vimy Ridge*, by the end of the next day having cleared it almost entirely of its German occupants.

Much has been recorded – and rightly so - about the many kilometres of tunnel hewn out of the chalk under the approaches to the front lines and beyond of *Vimy Ridge*, underground which afforded physical safety and also the element of surprise during the hours – and in some cases, days – leading up to the attack. However, not all of the attackers were to reach their starting positions in this manner.

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(Right: *One of the few remaining galleries – Grange Tunnel - still open to the public at Vimy one hundred years later – photograph from 2008(?)*)



Corporal Ash and his comrades-in-arms were a case in point, being obliged to march over-ground for five hours to reach their *Jumping-Off Trenches*.

The 24th Battalion's attack on April 9 was successful, although at the high cost of about twenty-five percent casualties. The 2nd Canadian Division, of which it was a unit, did not attack the crest of the *Ridge* itself – this task had been allotted to the 3rd and 4th Divisions – but had been ordered to clear the Germans out of their positions on the right-hand – the south-eastern – side of the slope near the village of Thélus.

(Right: *Canadians occupying and consolidating the third line of German trenches at Vimy Ridge – from Canadian War Records via Illustration*)



By the middle of that Easter Monday morning the 24th Battalion had achieved its objectives and Thélus had been cleared. On that same day, Corporal Ash was promoted *in the field* to the rank of sergeant.

Unfortunately, as was often the case during the Great War, initial success was left unexploited. Such was the case at *Vimy Ridge* where it had proved to be impossible to move artillery and reserves forward quickly enough – on this occasion the weather playing a hindering role: the Germans were able to plug the gaps and thus the days following the assault were spent consolidating gains and preparing for the anticipated German counter-attacks – which on this occasion, perhaps surprisingly, never mounted to very much.

The battle which for the Canadians had commenced so promisingly, was now to revert to one of stalemate.

On May 5, having relieved the 22nd Canadian Battalion in the front-line trenches near the village of Acheville, the 24th Battalion was subjected to a day-long heavy enemy artillery bombardment comprising high-explosive, shrapnel and gas. The casualties for the day, according to the Battalion War Diarist were: *3 ORs killed and 28 ORs wounded*.

One among the dead was Sergeant Ash: **This non-commissioned officer was killed in front line trenches near ACHEVILLE** (on a paper found among in his documents)

The son of John Martin(?) Ash (former fisherman, likely deceased October 30, 1907) and Jane Beatrice Ash (née *Le Whiting*), to whom he had willed his all on April 27, 1916* – the family earlier of Courage's Beach - her address at the time of her son's death *Old Custom House* (today a museum) in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland - he was also brother to at least two older sisters: Louisa and Ethel.

**He also allotted to her, as of April 16 of 1916, a monthly sum of twenty dollars from his pay.*

Francis Ash had enlisted at the age of twenty-four years: date of birth August 10, 1891, at Courage's Beach*, Newfoundland.

**Much of the family information is based upon a single source and could use confirmation.*

Sergeant Francis Ash was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).

The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 25,



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