# N.7 Undergraduate Internship Program: Fall 2015

Interview N-0041
Larry Poe
7 November 2015

# ABSTRACT – Admiral Larry Poe

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| Interviewee: | Admiral Larry Poe |
| Interviewer: | Devin Holman |
| Interview Date: | 11/7/2015 |
| Location: | Love House |
| Length | 42:30 |

Larry Poe is a retired Admiral from a small town outside of Salisbury, North Carolina. He was one of the first African Americans to integrate the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He transferred from Livingstone College in 1963. He served as the first black representative in the student legislature while at UNC. In this interview, Admiral Poe discusses growing up in Salisbury, his family's history with Livingstone College, transferring to UNC, having his mother as a teacher in high school, living in Craige dormitory, playing intramural sports, discussing Huckleberry Finn at orientation, getting involved with the Independent Party in Student Government, participating in activism in high school and at Livingstone, Salisbury building new schools and libraries for blacks to avoid integration, issues with a Modern Civilizations Professor, and finding cheap and free ways to get food while at UNC. This interview is part of the Southern History Program's project to record the life histories of UNC's Black Pioneers, a group of the first African Americans to attend the University.

# FIELD NOTES – Admiral Larry Poe

*(compiled November 11, 2015)*

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| Interviewer: | Devin Holman |
| Interview Date: | 11-7-2015 |
| Location: | (brief description of interview location, not full address) |
| | Love House |

THE INTERVIEWEE. Larry Poe is a retired Admiral from a small town outside of Salisbury, North Carolina. He was one of the first African Americans to integrate the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He transferred from Livingstone College in 1963. He served as the first black representative in the student legislature while at UNC. After he graduated in 1965, he was drafted and decided to join the Navy. He continued to work with the Navy and the CIA until he retired.

THE INTERVIEWER. Devin Holman is an undergraduate intern for the Southern Oral History Program. She is a junior majoring in History and Political science, with a minor in education from Durham, North Carolina.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW.
During the recorded section of the interview, Admiral Poe discusses growing up in Salisbury, his family's history with Livingstone College, transferring to UNC, having his mother as a teacher in high school, living in Craige dormitory, playing intramural sports, discussing Huckleberry Finn at orientation, getting involved with the Independent Party in Student Government, participating in activism in high school and at Livingstone, Salisbury building new schools and libraries for blacks to avoid integration, issues with a Modern Civilizations Professor, and finding cheap and free ways to get food while at UNC.

After the recording ends, we continued to talk about Admiral Poe's time after UNC.

He talked about being drafted during the spring of his senior year, and how he decided to enlist in the navy. He watched Victory at Sea while growing up, and that inspired him to want to become a navy fighter pilot.

Unfortunately, he was found to have the sickle cell trait, and while testing continued he was not allowed to be deployed as a pilot or complete his training. He started working with intelligence instead so that he could go ahead and work for the navy rather than remain on base. Ultimately, the tests came back finding that he could be a pilot, but by that point he had already fell in love with intelligence, and had seen enough to know that he did not want to be a pilot.

As an officer, he rotated back and forth between Guam and Vietnam. He noticed a lot of racial tension at the base and hospital on Guam. He was asked to speak to the black men and discourage violence, but, instead, he suggested that they give the men something to do instead. In an effort to alleviate some of the tension and fighting, he helped established opportunities for the men to play football and other sports.

From 1970 to 1972, he worked with an office associated with the CIA. When he went back to the Navy, he continued to also work for the CIA as a liaison and intelligence officer.

He also described his experience during 9/11. Many of his sailors were going on museum tours in Paris, France while he was still in the United States. He described the feeling of himself and other members of the Navy feeling prepared to take action and just waiting to find out what that action would be. He also mentioned a call that he received from a high level official in Pakistan, which made him certain that if the United States mobilized against Afghanistan, then Pakistan would support the United States.

I asked him what were the biggest changes that he noticed during his time in the Navy and the CIA. Admiral Poe responded that the technology available and quality of the sailors had greatly improved since he began working with the Navy.

He also spoke about how the CIAs accomplishments go unnoticed due to the nature of the work.

We ended by talking about some of the changes that UNC has gone through, how he believes that UNC has shaped him, and how he believes that the Black Pioneers have shaped UNC.

Since he spent most of his career in Washington and overseas, Admiral Poe has only really started returning to campus since deciding to retire. One of the main changes that he noticed was the simply the number of blacks on campus. Several of his daughters and relatives have since attended UNC, and he is proud of that tradition.

He said that his experience at UNC prepared him and gave him confidence to tackle difficult challenges.

NOTE ON RECORDING.

There was a malfunction with the recorder, so the interview did not record on the zoom recorder. The audio is from a back-up recording on my iPhone. Most of the interview was recorded, but it stops abruptly after 42:30.

At :53, there is a silence as I paused to close the door as a group entered the Love House.

# TRANSCRIPT— LARRY POE

Interviewee: LARRY POE

Interviewer: Devin Holman

Interview Date: November 7, 2015

Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Length: 1 file; approximately 43 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Devin Holman: So can we begin by you talking to me a bit about your childhood and the neighborhood that you grew up in?

LARRY POE: Okay. I was born and raised in a small township right outside of Salisbury. The township was East Spencer, North Carolina. Born and raised there, I'm the middle child of five siblings. I have a younger brother and a younger sister, and two older sisters, I'm the middle child so it's five in our family. My father was a blacksmith for the Southern Railway. He worked there for forty-five years.

DH: Do you mind if I close the door?

LP: No.

DH: [Pause] Sorry about that. You were talking about your father working as a blacksmith.

LP: Yes, he was a blacksmith for almost forty-five years with the Southern Railway. My mother was a school teacher. She taught French and English American literature. I grew up

there in East Spencer. Went to segregated schools all the way through, one through twelve. I actually enrolled in Livingstone College, which is a college there in Salisbury. My family has a long tradition history with Livingstone. My grandmother was graduated there, class of 1909, and I had an uncle--my mother's uncle, so he's my great uncle--was class of 1915. So we have his diploma and actually presented his diploma back to Livingstone this year. That was 100 years ago, 1915. So we have a long tradition with Livingstone College. I have a brother and a sister who were graduated from there, and I enrolled there in 1961. I did two years there, but really fell in love with oceanography, marine biology. I worked two summers, one with Woods Hole up in Massachusetts, and the other with Scripps, oceanography out in La Jolla, out in San Diego. So coming to Carolina was a decision, in large part predicated on having a better grounding in zoology, invertebrate zoology in particular. That was the thing that motivated my transferring to Carolina. I came in 1963, which you can imagine was a very exciting summer, all the things that were going on, marching on Washington, and things of that nature. I arrived here that summer.

DH: Did you have any difficulty getting admission to the university?

LP: No, not at all. Surprisingly, no, not at all. I don't think the other African Americans who were here had any either. Now I think there were three or four who were here as freshmen, had come here as freshmen. I came here as a junior. My second cousin, Karen Parker, who was in Greensboro, that women's college, also transferred here. So we came down together. But no, I didn't have any problems. I had really good grades at Livingstone. I was the valedictorian of my high school class and I'd done very well there at Livingstone. I had good SAT scores and things like that. I didn't have any problems getting in.

DH: You mentioned earlier that your mom was a teacher. Did you ever take a class with her?

LP: Oh, yes I did. [Laughter]

DH: What was that experience like?

LP: She was just legendary in that high school. She was a person who stressed fundamentals. She believed in diagramming sentences. She thought that was the greatest way to really master the English language and appreciate proper English. And of course, kids hated that. They went to great lengths to not get in her class, but she always made sure I was always in her class, and she taught all of us, all five of us through school. She also taught American Literature, and French, which interestingly enough was very beneficial because I later became the US Defense attaché to France, and so I had more-- because of her--, had pretty good grounding in French. I was able to draw on that many, many years later, even though the Navy sent me to school for eight months, [Laughter] five days a week, to make sure I had plus two proficiency in French for that job.

DH: When you were growing up, did you have much interaction with the white kids and white students in your area?

LP: In a way, I did. Interestingly enough, my father grew up outside East Spencer in the country. He had a lot of white friends. The folks who lived in front of him were white, the folks who lived on the side of him were white, and so those were his friends. They were at the house all the time, so we had close associations. They were genuine friends, and their extended families, we were friends with. While clearly, East Spencer, Salisbury, and the environs represented all of the morays and beliefs and everything else in terms of segregation. It was less

apparent in terms of our friendships and things of that nature. We hunted together, fished together, things of that nature.

DH: So when you got to UNC, where did you live on campus, and can you describe what the dorm environment was like?

LP: Craige, I lived in Craige. Craige was brand spanking new. [Laughter] I mean brand spanking new, we had a dirt path going that hadn't been paved. Had they paved the parking lot? I don't know, but we were one of the first classes there at Craige. Interestingly enough--I'm glad you mentioned that--When I arrived, even as a transfer student, you come in a week or two weeks early for orientation, which was great, and I can talk about that a little later. But I already had my room and everything, and my folks had come down right at the beginning of the Fall session for a reception or something, I can't remember now. But when I went back, someone had moved in to the room with me, a kid from Kannapolis, and we met his family. So we left to come back for something else, but when we went back, he had moved out. So, my first year, both semesters I had the room by myself, and they never reassigned anybody. Now, senior year, I had a roommate whose father was vice president of Standard Oil of New Jersey, believe it or not. He had been hopping from school to school. He'd been in Stanford, and ended up here at Carolina. Needless to say, he was filthy rich. He had an XKE, a purple XKE. He ended up being my roommate for the last year, my senior year. But Craige was great, it was a new dormitory, I eventually became a resident manager. They had resident managers on different floors. That was one way of getting money, making money, and I played in a lot of intramural sports: volleyball, football, touch football and basketball.

DH: Did you always play with a team from your dorm?

LP: Yes, I always did. Actually we had a very good community out there. Quite frankly I can't think of any really nasty things. The thing is you have to be careful about prankish things that happen. Early on--. Craige is what, six stories? But anyway, I was there early on, walking to my room--I was on the ground floor--walking to my room, and a favorite thing was dropping balloons full of water down. I was walking in and one landed behind me. Of course, I was irate and ready to tear after someone, but the thing is, when you're living that, you see balloons being dropped on almost everybody, so whether it was purposeful because I was African American or something like that, that's a different--. I was a target of opportunity, so you see what I mean? You can sense that you were being singled out, when in fact you probably weren't because that was an exercise that went on all the time.

DH: Going back to your first roommate, do you have any idea why he moved out?

LP: I'm quite sure he didn't want a black roommate. I'm sure. He was there a week or so. As soon as we went back--. We were probably--. I think we met with Karen, and her parents had come down, and we had lunch or something like that with them in town. By the time I got back, he was gone. The thing is, I'd see him on campus in and in a sheepish way he'd shy off and never say anything. We never spoke again after that.

DH: How did that make you feel going forward?

LP: [Laughter] It was more his problem than mine. More of his problem than mine. You can internalize these things differently. You can internalize these things as if the pathology is with me, or is with him. So, that's the thing. He's the one that had whatever bigotry or ambitions. It probably was more his parents than him because folks are taught to hate. That's the thing.

DH: So you mentioned earlier the orientation experience. Would you mind ( )?

LP: I thought that was good because I was--. That summer, before I got here, I was working for Bureau of Commercial Fisheries at Scripps Oceanography in California. I got all the paperwork about coming early. We had a number of discussion sessions about a book, and the book was *Huckleberry Finn*. You were supposed to read that, and we were going to have some discussions, things like that. Well, my mother had had me read *Huckleberry Finn* years before, and she thought that that was one of the most profound books, social commentaries on American and deep-rooted prejudices and things of that nature. But also, the fact about how blind and accepting people are of bigotry and how other folks are treated. As an example, the big point in the book obviously is that slavery and the whole sense of black, African American in American society as one of inferiority and really not a full whole person, was accepted. It was reinforced by all out institutions, laws, the church. And Mark Twain, in a very skillful, satirical way, wrote and lulled a lot of folks, thinking it was just this thing about Huckleberry Finn and Jim, a runaway slave and things of that nature, when in fact it was a much more subtle indictment of American society. Now, he wrote that years, obviously, years after slavery was outlawed, but the point he was making was, those feelings were still resonant in American society. There were bigotries and things like that, and there was a lot more work to be done, and of course we are still working on it today, quite frankly. The point is that I found that orientation and the discussion in those sessions to be very informing in terms of the participation from the other kids in there. They got it, it wasn't like this was some--. The richness of the discussion was really--. So I came to realize early on that Chapel Hill was different, and the students here were different. So it was quite encouraging.

DH: So you also mentioned intramural volleyball, were you involved in any other student activities on campus?

LP: Basically, I played intramural sports. I also officiated, so I would get paid, I can't remember what it was, two dollars, two dollars and fifty cent for every game that you officiated. So I actually worked for the intramural department or whatever. So, I was in the gym a lot and I enjoyed that a lot. The student government piece was just about it. I'll tell you, I had--. Between chemistry and zoology labs, [Laughter] I didn't have very much time to do too much of anything.

DH: Would you mind describing how you came to be a part of the student legislature?

LP: Well actually what happened was there was a guy who--, I can't remember his name now. I'll have to look that up. But anyway, he was organizing an Independent party. We were Independents. So I helped with that campaign. He was originally elected from Craige, but through some personal problems or some difficulties or something, I can't remember why, but I ended up replacing him in the student assembly. So basically me and about four or five other folks were the core of that Independent party. We came up with our platform and things that we wanted to push and things that we thought were being ignored by other folks.

DH: Do you remember any of the specific platforms?

LP: Well, not so much. It was more around speaking out louder. The thing that was really getting us, that was a States Rights party back then. They got far too much press in terms of their pronouncements, speaking out about demonstrations and all sorts of things. The thing that was most revolting, sad, whatever, was the acceptance of that. It's not acceptance, but the permissiveness of it. It was okay to hold those beliefs and speak out on those issues without being taken on. As if it was a valid way of seeing the world, just like slavery was. People

accepted it for years and years as the South's peculiar institution, they wouldn't even say slavery--"peculiar institution"--without dealing with all the vulgarities that were a part of slavery, all the dehumanizing aspects of it. There were a number of us who saw a lot of the rhetoric that was going on. Speaking out against civil rights, and things on campus too as a passive acceptance of its legitimacy. So we wanted to have, not necessary a more strident voice, but a much more reasoned, consistent voice against that.

DH: What were the racial demographics of the Independent party?

LP: It was me and one other African American, and everybody else were white folk, white kids. I think they weren't but four blacks in Craige, total.

DH: Oh wow.

LP: Yes, total, that I can remember, four. And I think that included, let's see, one, two, three, four, five, six, and that's over those two years. Some came later but--, and that included two graduate students, guys that were in medical school, yes.

DH: You mentioned that the States Rights party was condemning the demonstrations. Were you involved in any way in the civil rights demonstrations?

LP: Not really. I had been when I was at Livingstone. But I will tell you--, James Farmer, who was the leader of CORE, Congress of Racial Equality, came to Chapel Hill to help do some organizing and stuff, and I was at one of those early rallies. I can remember him saying to us students here, and there were three or four of us, and he said, "Participate and do as much as you can, but your job is to graduate from this place." You know, "Don't miss a lab or class or anything." And I took it to heart and interestingly enough, years later, years later, I had a chance to chat with him, he was an old man that lost an eye to diabetes or something like that, was

ailing, but still had a commanding voice. I don't know whether you ever heard him speak, but just a giant of a person, such command of the English language and ideas. He said, "Oh, no, I said that everywhere I went to students, not just here at Carolina or on black campuses that demonstrate. But your biggest job is to prepare yourself for the future." Now Karen on the other hand, [Laughter] was just the opposite. She got arrested any number of times than anything else. [Laughter]

DH: You mentioned being involved in some activism at Livingstone, would you mind describing that?

LP: Well, we had demonstrations against white lunch counters--this was all after Greensboro--the integration of the theatre. We grew up in Salisbury, when you went to the movies, blacks, African Americans were upstairs in the balcony, and in front of the theatre it had a big sign that saying "Colored" with an arrow going up, and you didn't even come in the same entrance even. And that was still a big part of Salisbury when I was there. Interestingly enough, I just thought about that coming over. When I was in high school, my senior class was almost, may have been the last or next to the last segregated graduating class. I think the next one, the junior class went to North Rowan, which was a consolidated, integrated school. But, my classes was the last or next to the last. Anyway, somebody, it wasn't me, but somebody raised an issue about--. Salisbury was applying for an All-American status. You drive through these cities and there's a sign that says "Salisbury, All-American Town". You haven't seen that? It was a big thing. It's pushed by the Chamber of Commerce and people like that as a way of attracting businesses, industry and things. So, we took on as a class project, to write to the National Council, I can't remember who sponsors that, to say, "Exactly what's the criteria that you use to

select an All-American city?" Because if you are thinking about Salisbury, these are some things that you want to know about Salisbury. So we listed all the accommodations, facilities, lunch counters, restaurants, which was completely the same all through the South. It wasn't unique or anything like that. Our point was, how can you say this is an "All-American City" when a large segment of the population is disenfranchised in all sorts of ways, discriminated against in all sorts of ways? Separate library, separate swimming pool. Salisbury closed their swimming pool rather than integrating it. Little things like that. So we were saying, "How can Salisbury be an All- American City with this? What's your criteria?" It took them the longest to get back. Back then, you couldn't get on the web and call those things up, you had to ask somebody for it. We asked for the business associations, the civic associations like chamber of commerce, "What's the criteria that you are building toward?" Interestingly enough we found that they had already approached some of the leaders in the black community, African-American community, to say that, "Things are okay, we got sidewalks here, where we didn't have sidewalks before." Little things like that. "We got a new school." Dunbar High School, the school where I was graduated from, for years had an old dilapidated physical plant, so right there at the end of the late 50s, early 60s after Brown vs. Topeka, the integration thing, they were doing all sorts of things to pacify or satisfy blacks into not pushing for integration. They built a new high school there at Dunbar, so they were citing that. All of these things, which on the surface if you view them one way you would say, "These are great advances," and things of that nature, when in fact they were just the opposite. It was an attempt to maintain the status quo and not to integrate the schools.

DH: So, was the letter writing campaign, was that designed by the students or by the teachers?

LP: No, the students. The social studies instructor was--. We discussed it, it came out of that class.

DH: That's awesome.

LP: Yeah.

DH: And was it effective?

LP: No. [Laughter] Salisbury was selected as an All-American. And of course we were beat up on by the town fathers saying, "Here we're trying to do something to build up the economy and bring in industries and jobs and things like this, and you're doing just the opposite. You're speaking out against us. You're hurting the black community." Because they had jobs, obviously, black folks would be in this also.

DH: Did you get support from the rest of the black community for this effort?

LP: We didn't really push for it. Even though there were some blacks that had been brought in as part of the overall committee or whatever that was working towards this, for input and stuff. They did; they built a black library. The year before had this little rat hole of a library, and they actually built a new library for blacks. To face the prospect of having to integrate, so a lot of things like that happened to maintain the status quo. On the one hand, you have this nice building, but obviously the collections and things in that library weren't the same. But there were all sorts of things that were done like that to placate blacks, African Americans.

DH: So skipping ahead a bit, back to UNC. What did you and your social group do for fun when you guys had free time?

LP: Well as I said, did a lot of sports. I always liked to play tennis, and Dan (
), a white guy who lived there in Salisbury, who I didn't know, and he went to one school, I went

to the other school. But we oftentimes rode home together or thumbed home together [Laughter], whatever way we were able to get back to Salisbury. We ended up playing a lot of tennis together. I really wish I could have reconnected with him. I never did. Sports was my big outlet. Now, I had met my wife there at Livingstone. So, that was also a big attraction to go back [Laughter] to Livingstone, to go back home. So I went home the weekends that I felt like I could. But, with chemistry and zoology, biology and all of that, the weekends--. I always thought, my mother always believed that you work hard and you get as much out of your academic experience as you could. Her point was that a lot of folks who are very bright and just get by. They are smart enough to pick stuff up and don't have to study as much, and she always would say you need to study, to me. She said it not so much in a derogatory way, but, "You can be a better student than a lot of folks who may be brighter than you are." That was the case, because I think, even in my little high school there were probably kids who were brighter or whatever, but I ended up being the valedictorian. Her thing was, "A B isn't good enough if you can actually work hard to get an A." So I worked hard. I really did.

DH: So you were valedictorian. Did a lot of other students from your high school end up going to colleges?

LP: Yes, quite a few did, and my mother was in part, responsible. She really pushed kids. A lot of kids whose families had no one else in college, first generation kids. That was originally in Livingstone, that the college there in Salisbury was important. She pushed them and got scholarships for them, she was a big supporter of Livingstone. My mother, her entire life, was inspirational. She was a family of six, and she was valedictorian of her class there in Salisbury, she was born and raised in Salisbury. She was the valedictorian of her class. Her

mother was a graduate of Livingstone and was very bright, and really thought that women ought to see themselves as their number one priority is to get an education. So she really, really supported my mother and was extremely proud of her when she was the valedictorian. Unfortunately, she died the summer after my mother was graduated from high school. But, the thing that she told her--She died in child birth, the complications from childbirth--But, she said, "You need to go to school, you need to go to Livingstone." My mother had a scholarship, and her father was a gardener. He did gardens for the folks in the country club there in Salisbury. And he loved it. Even at their house they had always had these big rose gardens, so he liked gardening. But he had a different sense of the importance of education for women and in general, "Just get out, work hard, make a living." The thing that I was struck by was my mother's mother's admonition to her was, "In spite of what your father ever says about you not going to school, it's his responsibility to raise these five kids; it's your responsibility to get an education." And she did that. I know he would much rather have her stop and go to work and help support the family, but she didn't, she went to college.

DH: That's very impressive

LP: Yeah, just incredible.

DH: How did--. Were all of your professors really supportive of you when you were an activist?

LP: Most of them were. I had problems with only one professor. That was the first year I was here. I had to take Modern Civilization, which I probably should not have, I probably could have taken History of Europe since 1815 or something like that, but I ended up being in the Modern Civilization course. There were, I don't know, fifty other people. So, if you had

made certain grades on tests he said, "If you've done this, you're certain to get a C." I had made more than that, so I was still struggling with qualitative analysis or quantitative analysis or something like that with chemistry. So I said, "I'm not going to study for that." I went to him and told him, I said, "OK I'll take you up on that." When the grades came out, I got a D. I couldn't understand, I went back and I protested to him, and I said, "Here are my grades." He said, "You're right, but I've turned it in and I can't do anything about it." So I thought that was disingenuous. I don't know whether it was some malice, whatever. I was really hurt by that. That was probably the only really bad experience that I had with professors. The other professors were just unbelievable. In fact, I had to take Europe Since 1815 the next semester, which ended up being just an outstanding course. I was never a big history buff, but I just really fell in love with the whole history thing. In a way that was some benefit, but I will always remember that. I was really offended by that D.

DH: Did you have a favorite course, or moment in the classroom while you were at UNC?

LP: Doing well in some of those tough zoology classes. These were huge classes, I had a six hour invertebrate zoology class, which I just took one summer. I just took that one course, it was a six-hour course [Laughter]. You couldn't take any during the summer. That was the only course--. You were in it all day. You had two hours of lecture, and a lab every day, right straight through summer session. I did exceptional. Those were big hurdles to have done well in those classes because those were the gateway classes if you were going to graduate school. So that was reassuring, satisfying.

DH: Did you have any interactions with the dining hall, or grounds, or housekeeping staff that really stuck out to you?

LP: Not really. I, interestingly enough, I had that meal plan, and I think I had one meal in the chow hall. Eventually I dropped it. I ended up--. There was another guy, Louis Burton, who was another African American, who had a job in the Carolina Inn. He could go in after the mid-day meal was over and clean the grill, the hot skillet, which was a big thing. It was still hot, so that was the thing it was still hot when you had to clean it, and you had to get all the crud off it. But the thing was, you didn't get any money, but you could eat as much as you could eat. [Laughter] So you could go back and cook hamburger or anything. So I got to the point where I would go to Lenoir Hall. Is it still here?

DH: Yes.

LP: [Laughter] Is that right? I'll have to go back there. I remember you could, for twenty-five cents, you could eat, and I swear they were two-day-old donuts or something like that, and all the coffee you could drink. So I would drink about three cups of coffee and about three or four donuts, and that was my breakfast that would get me to midday. Then I would clean the grill between class and

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center

July 14, 2016

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