

## Weapons of War – Flamethrowers

The flamethrower, which brought terror to French and British soldiers when used by the German army in the early phases of the First World War in 1914 and 1915 (and which was quickly adopted by both) was by no means a particularly innovative weapon.

The basic idea of a flamethrower is to spread fire by launching burning fuel. The earliest flamethrowers date as far back as the 5th century B.C. These took the form of lengthy tubes filled with burning solids (such as coal or sulphur), and which were used in the same way as blow-guns: by blowing into one end of the tube the solid material inside would be propelled towards the operator's enemies.

The flamethrower was inevitably refined over the intervening centuries, although the models seen in the early days of World War One were developed at the turn of the 20th century. The German army tested two models of flamethrower in the early 1900s, one large and one small, both developed by Richard Fiedler.

The smaller, lighter Flamethrower was designed for portable use, carried by a single man. Using pressurized air and carbon dioxide or nitrogen it belched forth a stream of burning oil for as much as 18 meters.

Having tested the Flamethrower in 1900 the German army deployed it for use in three specialist battalions from 1911 onwards.

It was put to initial wartime use against the French in the southeastern sector of the Western Front from October 1914, although its use was sporadic and went largely unreported.

The first notable use of the Flamethrower came in a surprise attack launched by the Germans upon the British in Flanders. Springing forward at 0315 on 30 July 1915 the Germans made effective use of the portable Flamethrower, with gas cylinders strapped to the back of the men responsible for using the instrument, a lit nozzle attached to each cylinder.

The effect of the dangerous nature of the surprise attack proved terrifying to the British opposition, although their line, initially pushed back, was stabilized later the same night. In two days of severe fighting the British

lost 31 officers and 751 other ranks during the attack.

With the success of the attack, at least so far as the Flamethrower was concerned, the German army adopted the device on a widespread basis across all fronts of battle. The Flamethrower tended to be used in groups of six during battle, each machine worked by two men. They were used mostly to clear forward defenders during the start of a German attack, preceding their infantry colleagues.

They were undeniably useful when used at short-range, but were of limited wider effectiveness, especially once the British and French had overcome their initial alarm at their use. The operators of Flamethrower equipment also lived a most dangerous existence.

Quite aside from the worries of handling the device – it was entirely feasible that the cylinder carrying the fuel might unexpectedly explode – they were marked men; the British and French poured rifle-fire into the area of attack where Flamethrower were used, and their operators could expect no mercy should they be taken prisoner. Their life expectancy was therefore short.

