

Weapons of War—Poison Gas

Considered uncivilized prior to World War One, the development and use of poison gas was necessitated by the requirement of wartime armies to find new ways of overcoming the stalemate of unexpected trench warfare.

Although it is popularly believed that the German army was the first to use gas it was in fact initially deployed by the French. In the first month of the war, August 1914, they fired tear-gas grenades against the Germans. Nevertheless the German army was the first to give serious study to the development of chemical weapons and the first to use it on a large scale.

The debut of the first poison gas however - in this instance, chlorine - came on 22 April 1915, at the start of the Second Battle of Ypres. During the morning of 22 April the Germans poured a heavy bombardment around Ypres, but the line fell silent as the afternoon grew. Towards evening, at around 5 pm, the bombardment began afresh - except that sentries posted among the French and Algerian troops noticed a curious yellow-green cloud drifting slowly towards their line. The effects of chlorine gas were severe. Within seconds of inhaling its vapor it destroyed the victim's respiratory organs, bringing on choking attacks.

Remaining consistently ahead in terms of gas warfare development, Germany unveiled an enhanced form of gas weaponry against the Russians at Riga in September 1917: mustard gas contained in artillery shells.

Mustard gas, an almost odorless chemical, was distinguished by the serious blisters it caused both internally and externally, brought on several hours after exposure. Protection against mustard gas proved more difficult than against either chlorine or phosgene gas.

The use of mustard gas also proved to have mixed benefits. While inflicting serious injury upon the enemy the chemical remained potent in soil for weeks after release: making capture of infected trenches a dangerous undertaking.

The types of protection initially handed out to the troops around Ypres following the first use of chlorine in April 1915 were primitive in the extreme. 100,000 wads of cotton pads were quickly manufactured and made available. These were dipped in a solution of bicarbonate of soda and held over the face.

Soldiers were also advised that holding a urine drenched cloth over their face would serve in an emergency to protect against the effects of chlorine.

By 1918 soldiers on both sides were far better prepared to meet the ever-present threat of a gas attack. Filter respirators (using charcoal or antidote chemicals) were the norm and proved highly effective, although working in a trench while wearing such respirators generally proved difficult and tiring.

With the Armistice, such was the horror and disgust at the wartime use of poison gases that its use was outlawed in 1925 - a ban that is, at least nominally, still in force today.

