

## GAS WARFARE

*The following excerpts are from the letters of two Canadian soldiers. Excerpt 1) is from a soldier who was among the first troops to experience German chlorine gas at Ypres, while excerpt 2) was originally a letter written to the soldier's mother and published in the Quebec newspaper Huntingdon Gleaner in 1918.*

1)

Passing through Ypres we drove on to Wieltze, intending to walk into the salient to see that desolate, dreary, shell-shattered area where no birds sang. [...] As we tramped along towards St. Julien our attention was attracted to clouds of greenish-yellow smoke ascending from the part of the line occupied by the French. We wondered what the smoke could be coming from in such volume close to the firing line. We seated ourselves on a disused trench and looked about us. An aeroplane flying low overhead dropped some fireballs which seemed to be the signal for the beginning of a violent artillery bombardment. Rising along the French line we could see this yellowish-green cloud ascending on a front of at least three miles and drifting, at a height of perhaps a hundred feet, towards us.

"That must be the poison gas we have heard vague rumours about," I remarked. The gas rose in great thick clouds as if it had been projected from nozzles, expanding as it ascended. Here and there brown clouds seemed to be mixed with the general yellow-green ones. "It looks like chlorine," I said, and the captain agreed that it probably was. [...] The bombardment continued to grow in volume. In a field not two hundred yards away numerous "coal boxes" exploded, throwing up columns of mud and water like so many geysers. Shells of various calibres, whistling and screaming, flew over our heads from German batteries as well as from our own batteries replying to them. The air seemed to be full of shells flying in all directions.

The gas cloud gradually grew less dense, but the bombardment redoubled in violence as battery after battery joined in the angry chorus. Across the fields we could see guns drawn by galloping horses taking up new positions. One gun we saw unlimbered not three hundred yards from us, when within two minutes a German shell exploded, apparently not twenty feet away from it, and the gun was quickly moved to another position. Occasionally we thought that we could hear heavy rifle fire and machine-gun fire, but the din was too great to distinguish much detail. The expression commonly used at the front, "Hell let loose", was the only term at all descriptive of the scene. By this time our eyes had begun to run water and become bloodshot. The fumes of the gas had reached us, irritated our throats and lungs and made us cough. We decided that this gas was chiefly chlorine, with perhaps an admixture of bromine, but that there was probably something else present responsible for the irritation to our eyes. [...]

We could scarcely credit what followed. Coming across the fields towards us we saw men running, dropping flat on their faces, dodging into disused trenches and keeping every possible bit of shelter between themselves and the enemy while they ran. As they came closer we could see that they were French Moroccan troops, badly frightened. Some of them lay down in a nearby trench and lit cigarettes, only to start up in terror to run on again. Some of them even threw away their equipment after they had passed us. It was now quite evident to us that the Moroccan troops had given way before the gas attack. [...] At last we reached Vlamertinge and entered the building occupied by the Canadian field ambulance. Lying on the floors were scores of soldiers with faces of a blue or ghastly green colour, choking, vomiting and gasping for air in their struggles with death.

The faint odor of chlorine gas hung about the place. These were some of our own Canadians who had been poisoned, and I felt, as I stood and watched them in agony that the nation, which had planned in cold-blood the use of such a foul method of warfare, should not be allowed to exist as a nation among nations, but should be taken and choked in turn until in humbleness and on bended knees it, too, craved for mercy. At midnight we arrived home, gray and ghastly from the effects of our experience with the poison gas and its consequences upon our men. [...]

2)

There have been two chief ways of using gas. In the early days of the war it was always "cloud gas". This was a cloud liberated from compressed gas cylinders, and could only be used when the weather conditions were just right, with the wind in the right direction and blowing with the correct velocity. It was a suffocating gas, could be seen coming, had a strong smell, and immediately irritated eyes, nose and throat, with choking. It was quite deadly. This form has not been used for two years, on account of its disadvantages. A variation of the same gas is to shoot over cylinders full of the gas. These break when they strike. These do not need good weather conditions, and the wind is not nearly as important a factor. This is still used.

The more common method now is to fill shells with compressed gas or liquid, with just enough explosive to smash them open. They may be fired right along with other shells and need no special transportation facilities to bring them up to the guns, and of course can be sent to just where they want to fire them. They may use only a "tear gas," which makes the eyes water, or a "sneezing gas." Both these make the soldier unable to carry on for a time.

The real devilish gas is "Mustard Gas." This is a heavy liquid, which evaporates slowly and may lie on the ground or on clothes a long time, and so be tracked in on boots or carried into dugouts. Of course when a shell of it breaks a certain amount is sprayed around and part evaporates at once. The mischief of it is, that it has only a faint smell, that of course could be easily missed, and it does not develop its deadly work for some time after it has attacked the man. In about three hours, his eyes become sore, some hours later vomiting sets in, with sore throat and chest.

In from perhaps 24 to 48 hours blisters appear wherever the gas struck him [i.e. the soldier], especially in the armpits or between the thighs. These blisters become very sore burns, which are hard to heal and are liable to make boils. The skin is stained deeply around them. If he got a good dose (which is very small) he may die in a few hours from the way the gas has eaten into and inflamed the linings of the throat and lungs, or may die in a few days from a pneumonia, which starts on the chest inflamed, or he may die from the extensive burns received by the stuff being spattered over him, although he had his gas mask on all the time and his chest and throat are all right.

It is quite common for those afflicted to have a sore throat, and lose their voices for 2 or 3 weeks, others have severe vomiting as their worst feature. A certain number have nervous conditions in [sic] some of these are hard to get rid of; many are quite easy. A simple one is to have a man think his voice is gone and he may recover it in a few minutes when he is talked to and reasoned with.

Of course, means are being devised all the time to meet this infernal gas. For example, they have chemicals at the door of dugouts in powdered form and they wipe their feet in this. The sentry will not let a man in with it spattered on his clothes, and all means are used to recognize the shells and warn and treat the soldiers immediately. The respirator, which is a wonder, put [sic] protects the face and lungs if it is worn. The one disadvantage is, that such shells are not as good as cloud was (before respirators were made) for a rush attack. About the only satisfaction is, that while the Germans started this gas business, it is being done now more effectively by our side and they suffer worse.