



Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF
THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

w w w . c m h s . c a

June Extra #3, 2020

Gassed - Part 3



Gassed' by John Singer Sargent (1919)

Impact of Poison Gas in World War One and a Family Gas-Related Anecdote

Gas never reproduced the dramatic success of 22 April 1915. Nor did it prove as decisive a weapon as was anticipated. After the initial large gas attacks at Ypres, gas never did lead to a strategic breakthrough, but then neither did tanks, machine guns or even artillery. But it was effective as part of the all-arms doctrine that had developed (often largely from Canadian initiatives). It was mostly used in clearing enemy forward positions and became a standard weapon which, when combined with conventional artillery, was used to support most attacks in the later stages of the war. Gas tactics were put in place to achieve different tactical missions and it became a key weapon that contributed to the overall strategy of attrition. In the last year of the war especially, soldiers of all armies struggled across battlefields often choked with gas. The dangers at the front affected all those who lived and labored there. Besides affecting military populations, gas clouds also caused civilian casualties because the wind often blew through villages and towns close to the front. Unlike soldiers, civilians did not necessarily have access to gas masks or the training to make sure the masks were used properly. Although the official number of civilian casualties was about 5,200, the actual numbers were undoubtedly much higher.

Overall, there were approximately one million gas casualties to all armies during the war, 12,000 of them being Canadian. Many soldiers never reported their multiple minor gassings, which, at the time, were not immediately debilitating. Suffering in later years from chemically-induced illnesses and disabilities, they would sometimes fight unsuccessfully to have medical claims approved, having failed to document their injuries at the time

Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE
CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The SOCIETY

is a non-profit registered society
which fosters the study of the
military and the police, and the herit-
age of
Canada, the British Empire, and the
world

as well as the preservation of military
artifacts and records.
The CMHS meets once every calendar
month at: Petty Officers' Mess
HMCS Tecumseh
1820 - 24th Street SW

Acknowledgements and Thanks

The March supplement was provided by President Dave Love.

The 1st April Extra was by Rory from the Boer War Forum. We thank him for allow-
ing us to publish his work. It was forwarded to us by long time member Mike Clare

The 2nd April Extra article was researched and provided to us by Member Garrett Lapp

The 3rd April Extra paper was researched, and provided by Member Michael Clare

The 4th April Extra article was provided by Member Tim Popp

The May Extra #1 article was provided by Member Roy Akins

The May Extra # 2 article was provided by Member Garrett Lap

The May Extra # 3 is a reprint of 2015 newsletter

The June Extra #1 & 2 was Part 1 of 3 by Dave Love

**This June Extra #3 was provided by President Dave
Love**

The Western Front, with its confined trench systems, was ideal for achieving an effective concentration, and therefore was the main theatre in which gas was employed. Having said that, gas was also effectively used against Russia on the Eastern Front, where the lack of effective countermeasures resulted in thousands of Russian deaths as well as in Italy. It was also used by the British in Palestine.

As already mentioned, the contribution of gas weapons to the total casualty figures was relatively minor. British figures, which were accurately maintained from 1916, recorded that only 3% of British gas casualties were fatal, 2% were permanently invalided and 70% were fit for duty again within six weeks. However, all gas casualties were mentally scarred by exposure, and gas remained one of the great fears of the front-line soldier. Simply put, gas warfare had become a psychological as well as a physical weapon. Much as hellish-multi-day artillery barrages resulted in mental breakdowns associated with "shellshock," the constant threat of exposure to even a single gas shell added to the already unbearable stress of life at the front. The fear of being gassed along with periodic harassing gas attacks kept soldiers on edge and could lead to a loss of morality, gas fright, and in some cases mental breakdowns. Soldiers on all sides felt that gas warfare was not a proper weapon and went beyond the bounds of humanity. The psychological consequences of gas attack-swere not limited to fear of the air that soldiers breathed or the ground on which they walked, but many became convinced that their food was contaminated. In some cases this led to a sort of hypochondriac sort of attitude and a mistaken belief that they were suffering from gas poisoning.

Nation	Gas Casualties (estimated)	
	Fatal	Non-Fatal
Russia	50,000	400,000
Germany	10,000	190,000
France	8,000	182,000
Britain and Commonwealth	8,000	181,000
Austria-Hungary	3,000	97,000
United States	1,500	71,500
Italy	4,500	55,000
Total	85,000	1,176,500



Nursing Sister's with
gas masks

Because both gas fright and gas attacks became more severe from mid-1917 onwards, doctors and medics found it difficult to diagnose real as opposed to imagined gas attacks. For the most part, all the medical corps could do for gas casualties was prescribe bed rest and wait for symptoms to emerge. Moreover, soldiers never knew if their gas mask would leak or if their filter would run out, which caused even more anxiety as belligerents used more caustic agents. While Allied efforts to contain the effects of chlorine and phosgene briefly stabilized the technological balance through the first half of the war, the introduction of mustard gas by the Germans destroyed this balance and elevated the sense of gas terror to a new level.

Following the war, there was a resolve by the combatants to never again use poison gas in warfare, however this resolve quickly broke down and has continued to be that way up to the present. While wide use of poison gas was not used in World War 2, it still was utilized in some instances. Additionally, a new type of poison gas, namely nerve gas was discovered during World War 2 and many countries have stockpiles of this more deadly menace. Since the Second World War, there have been numerous instances of the use of poison gas of several types, most recently this being in the middle east.

It should be pointed out that the full story of gas in warfare is far more comprehensive than what has been summarized in this work. In many ways it is a fascinating story, albeit horrible, and a testimony to the ruthlessness of humans.

A Personal Experience of Gas

Four members of my immediate family, then living in Canada, served for most of the First World War and beyond in one case – my maternal grandfather and three great uncles. Several other siblings of my maternal grandfather, living in Scotland, also served with the British Army. My other grandfather was not allowed to enlist because he was in a restricted occupation at the time.

My maternal grandfather, David Black Alston, served with the Canadian Army Service Corps and Canadian Forestry Corps in England and France as a driver, one great uncle, James Russell Clarke, served with the Royal Flying Corps as an observer in France and Flanders; another great uncle, John (Jack) Stanley Clarke, served with the Canadian Dental Corps and Canadian Army Medical Corps in England and France as an orderly and

field first aid man; my last great uncle, Clifford Alexander Love, served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps in France and Flanders and with the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force as a Pharmacist and Pharmaceutical Chemist. All survived the war, officially without injury.

This story involves a gas-related incident experienced by Uncle John A. Clarke during the Battle of Passchendaele which he recounted to me prior to his death. This tale was confirmed by his brother, James Russell Clarke and my grandmother. At the time of this event, John had been seconded from the Dentistry Corps to the Canadian Army Medical Corps in support of the Canadian attack specifically to act as what we would today call a field medic. It was during either the second or third day of the Canadian attack on Passchendaele when he found himself alone out in, for lack of a better term, no man's land.

Now we have to set the setting at that particular time. He was alone on a devastated, shell-pocked, featureless battlefield, having become separated due to his work in administering to wounded soldiers on the battlefield. The main fighting at that time had moved forward so he was not under immediate fire at that point but nevertheless was isolated from any other soldiers. One must remember that the Passchendaele battlefield was horror personified. It was complete mud and desolation. Where he was, there were no roads or paths, no clear lines of supply, and no clear landmarks other than a normal sense of north and south, east and west. Just mud, more mud, destroyed stumps of trees and shell craters, many of them full of water. You also have to imagine that after upwards of three 24-hour days of active fighting and tending to the wounded without any opportunity to eat or drink apart from the limited rations he carried with him (most of the supplies he carried with him were medical). He had become very thirsty and hungry. Thirsty, in particular. With no other options available, he found himself forced to drink water from a shell crater, which he did.

As soon as he had done so, being an experienced army medic as well as a qualified pharmacist in civilian and military life, he told me that he quickly realized that the water he drank was heavily laced with dissolved phosgene gas. He also told me that he clearly understood that most soldiers under the same circumstances did not survive due to the phosgene essentially progressively destroying his stomach over the next few weeks. You have to remember that phosgene took at least 24 hours to show its symptoms so at that moment he was feeling no distress. With that in mind, he realized his only option was to walk back to the rear to the nearest medical facility in the slight hope that they may be able to provide sufficient support for him to survive. Off he went. At some point a bit later, he suddenly realized that a German fighter pilot had spotted him from the air and was proceeding to make a strafing run on him as he moved across the broken battlefield. As the plane dived on him firing his machine guns at him, my uncle told me that he flung himself into the nearest shell hole for shelter. As soon as the aircraft flew over him, he jumped up and ran like hell (his words) to the next suitable shell hole. In the meantime, the pilot attacked him turned around and attacked him in the same manner. This went on for over a half hour with the German pilot making repeated attacks while my uncle frantically rushed from crater to crater as he moved towards the rear. Finally, for whatever reason, be it lack of fuel, no ammunition or losing interest, the German pilot broke off his attacks and presumably returned to his airfield.

Shortly after the German's departure, and probably due to a combination of intense physical activity, exhaustion and the phosgene working inside his stomach, my uncle became violently sick to his stomach for an hour or more, vomiting up essentially all the contents in his stomach. A few hours later, he arrived back at the Field Ambulance he had been seconded to and reported in, feeling much better. So much so, he did not officially report himself as a gas casualty. He finished out the war with little incident or regard, but did tell me that for the rest of his life he had a history of recurring stomach problems. Obviously, the phosgene did have some residual effects that lasted the ensuing 50 or so years.

What I found most interesting about his story is he ended it by stating that he owed his life to that German pilot who was trying to kill him. Strange bedfellows, as they say, and a bit of a unique story related to gas.