

# First use of war gas on 22 April 1915

## Introduction

Machine guns, trench warfare, airplanes and the first use of tanks are some of the impressions that characterize the general perception of the First World War. To this can be added the use of war gas, which until the advent of atomic weapons systems was one of the most feared weapons, against military and later civilian targets.

## About the first use of war gas

Excerpt from *Protective means against Atomic, Biological and Chemical Warfare* (Source 1):

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"... When the French succeeded in stopping the German advance at the Battle of the Marne, the war hardened into years of trench warfare. In order to regain momentum in the war, the Germans decided to use gas warfare, initially using the chlorine gas. This agent was widely available in German industry, so the agent was close at hand.



*Gassed soldiers of the 45th (Algerian) Division 1)*

Fra *The Great War in a Different Light*.

The first use took place on 22 April 1915 at Bixhote-Langemark near Ypres in Flanders.

It was almost like an attempt, and they had not foreseen the success of the attack, which is why they did not have forces ready to follow up the success.

The attack was carried out by simply setting up a long row of pressurized cylinders of chlorine in a trench facing the French positions, and at a given time, when the wind was favorable and blowing towards the French positions, the taps were opened.

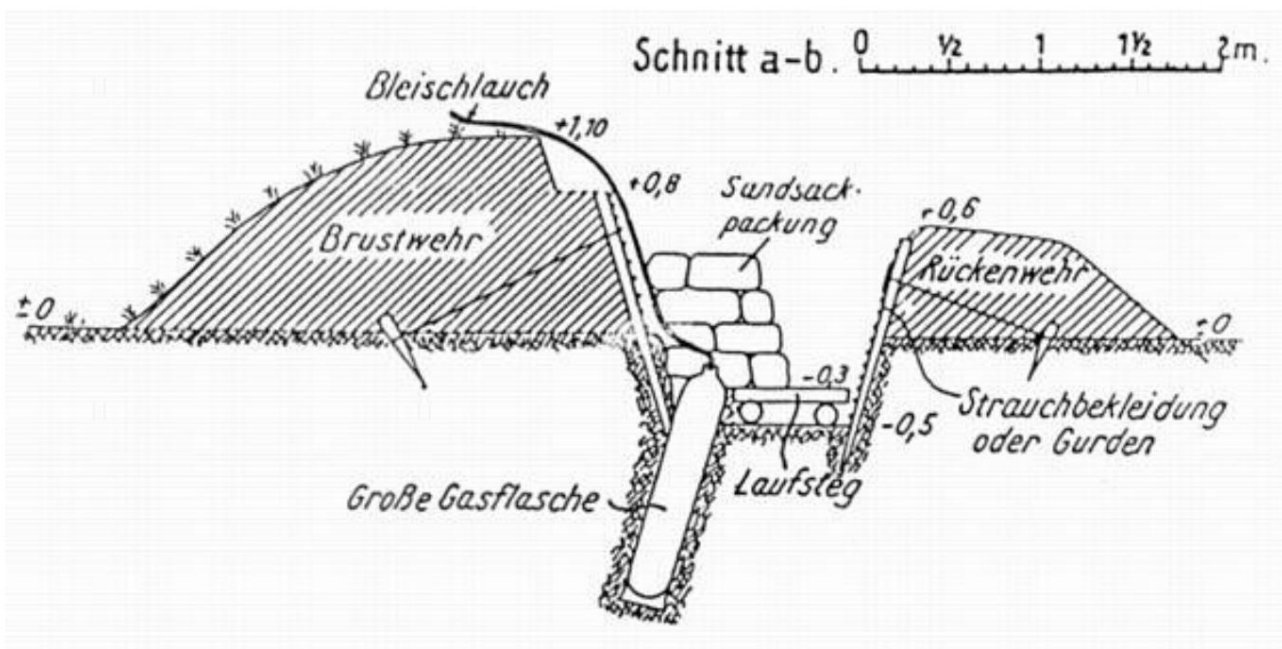


German chlorine blasting plant in a trench.  
From Source 1.

The German operating crew was provided with large circuit devices (oxygen devices) that were used in coal mines. These were of course too large and expensive to distribute to all the soldiers.

The common soldier was provided with a cloth soaked in sodium thiosulphate (fixing salt), which neutralizes chlorine gas. The cloth had to be tied around the nose and mouth so that one breathed through it.

When the taps were opened, a yellow-green cloud of chlorine rolled over towards the French lines, and when they first hit (soldiers), fell coughing and sputtering, all panicked and ran back from their positions, leaving hundreds dead and dying.



Sketch of a German chlorine blowing plant.

From Source 1.

## Countermeasures

As I said, the Germans had not expected this favorable result and could not follow up their luck. By the time they realized what they could have achieved, it was already too late.

Countermeasures were taken in the form of supplied primitive masks similar to the German ones, and already within a dozen days masks had been supplied to the Allies.

Until masks were issued, however, some had saved their lives by breathing through a sock filled with topsoil or a bottle whose bottom had been knocked out and replaced with a tied cloth that held the topsoil in the bottle 2) .

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The German use of war gas caused an international outcry, but the Germans claimed that the French had already used gas warfare, as instructions on the use of hand grenades with tear gas had been found on prisoners of war.

This may possibly be true, as the police of Paris had used this remedy against the great criminal gangs that inhabited Paris in 1910 ..."

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*Menig, 4th Colonial Infantry Regiment, 1915.*

From Source 5.

On his chest the soldier wears his gas mask;

a pair of goggles is worn on the hat.

## About volatile war gases

The chlorine gas used at Ypres belongs to the type of war gases known as volatile.

Concentrations dissolve quickly, it took 10-30 minutes, depending on wind, weather and terrain.

Effect of deployment of volatile war gases is obtained by a wind of suitable strength - 2 to 4 meters per second. Strong wind and rain reduce the effect of the gas; the gas evaporates faster in bright sunshine than in the cold.

(Source 2)

The gases in this group only attack in air form and through the respiratory tract, and their aim is to destroy the function of the lungs. If large amounts are inhaled, it will result in the lungs filling with fluid and death will occur due to lack of oxygen. The initial symptoms are coughing, suffocation sensations and headache. (Source 3)

## Closing

This article can be read in conjunction with [About 1/2nd London Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery](#), which describes one of the English units that felt the effects of the first attack of war gas.

In addition to this, you can also read [An Eyewitness Account of the First Gas Attack](#), which can be found on the website [The Great War in a Different Light](#). From the eyewitness account, it is possible to find more information and visual material about the gas war.

Additionally, the accounts on the website [The Great War 1914-1918, Battle Study: The Second Battle of Ypres](#) can be recommended. Here, it is dealt with in detail how, among other things, the 45th (Algerian) Division witnessed the attack.

## Sources

1. *Protective means against Atomic, Biological and Chemical Warfare* by lieutenant colonel AV Skjødt, formerly the ABC service of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Booklet from the Tøjhusmuseet's special exhibition 30 November 1990 - 28 April 1991, Copenhagen 1990.
2. *Textbook for the privates of the army, part 1*, Copenhagen 1946.
3. *Field instruction for Individuals*, published by the Army Command, Copenhagen 1959.
4. *Gas* af Ian V. Hogg, Weapons Book No. 43 i serien Balentine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century, New York 1975, SBN 345-24392-7-200.
5. *Men at War 1914-1945: French Colonial and African Troops, Sergeant, 1e Régiment de Marche de Zouaves, France 1914*, published in association with Osprey by Del Prado Publishers, Madrid 2000, ISBN 84-8372-516-9.



*Some of the first French gas masks.*  
From Source 4.

Per Finsted

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**To note:**

- 1) Color reproduction of an image that was included with the Illustrated War News' (= Illustrated London News) report of 5 May 1915.
- 2) Source 3 indicates corresponding countermeasures if a soldier's gas mask is destroyed.