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## The First Use of Poison Gase at Ypres, 1915: A Translation from the German Official History

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# The First Use of Poison Gas at Ypres, 1915

## A Translation from the German Official History<sup>1</sup>

Introduced and edited by  
**Mark Osborne Humphries and John Maker**  
Translated by **Wilhelm J. Kiesselbach**

While English-speaking historians know in detail about almost every event on the BEF's front, the same cannot be said of our knowledge of the German side of the Western Front. This is not surprising, as comparatively few English language books have been written about the German experience on the battlefields of the Great War. Recent English language scholarship by Holger Herwig, Annika Mombauer, and Robert Foley,<sup>2</sup> to name but a few historians,<sup>3</sup> has enriched our understanding of the conflict. However, these works have tended to concentrate on political and diplomatic history, or in the case of Mombauer and Foley, on high-ranking officers such as Helmuth von Moltke and Erich von Falkenhayn. This means that events at the tactical and operational level remain comparatively unexplored in English. This gap in the historiography has largely been shaped by the absence of primary source materials.

The major impediment to study of the German army was the destruction of the military archive at Potsdam during Allied air raids on 14 February and 14 April 1945.<sup>4</sup> These raids destroyed virtually all the war diaries, field dispatches, orders and memoranda that made up the primary records that historians use to

This article is excerpted from the forthcoming publication *Germany's Western Front: Translations from the German Official History of the Great War*, edited by Mark Osborne Humphries and John Maker, a four-volume series in seven parts due to be published beginning in 2008.

reconstruct a battle.<sup>5</sup> Although the destruction of the archive was not total,<sup>6</sup> the materials that did survive – or that have resurfaced following the end of the Cold War<sup>7</sup> – represent only a fraction of the documents that exist on Allied operations, for example, in London or Ottawa. While recent historians have used these limited archival resources with great effect, a large history of Germany's Great War was actually published before the destruction of the majority of the archival record.

On 1 October 1919, as the institutions of Wilhelmine Prussia–Germany were being swept away, a new organization headed up by Hermann Mertz von Quirnheim was created to oversee the German archival holdings: the *Reichsarchiv*.<sup>8</sup> Military history in Germany had always been the purview of the Great General Staff, but with the abolition of that Prussian institution, the task of writing a comprehensive military history of the Great War was assigned to a special subsection of this new organization under the direction of Hans von Haefthen.<sup>9</sup> Although the *Reichsarchiv* and its Historical Section were officially civilian institutions, they were staffed by former members of the Great General Staff including Hans von Seeckt, Wilhelm Groener, and Hans von Haefthen, and the military was thus able surreptitiously to maintain its control of military history in Germany.<sup>10</sup> On 1 November 1931, von Haefthen became the president of the





*Reichsarchiv* and Wolfgang Foerster assumed the directorship of the Historical Section.<sup>11</sup> Between 1919 and 1 April 1934, when the Historical Section was removed from the umbrella of the *Reichsarchiv* and placed under the purview of the *Reichswehrministerium* (Military Ministry), the organization produced the first nine volumes of the main series<sup>12</sup> and several ancillary texts. On 1 April 1937, the Historical Section became the *Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres* (KGFH) and was reintegrated into the German General Staff system until the project was completed in 1944.<sup>13</sup> On 1 April 1936, the military records of the *Reichsarchiv* were also transferred to a new 'Heeresarchiv' (Army Archive) at Potsdam, which was administered by the KGFH, and it was here that they were destroyed at the end of the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> By 1945, however, the series had been completed and totalled over 9,300 pages accompanied by more than 430 maps and sketches.<sup>15</sup>

*Der Weltkrieg, 1914 bis 1918* is a comprehensive, narrative overview of the Great War, based on a documentary record that no longer exists. Moreover, it contains lengthy excerpts (sometimes three or four pages) from the destroyed official documents. Published between 1925 and 1944, the volumes of *Der Weltkrieg* are remarkable, not only because they are one of the only surviving sources of information on the day-to-day operations of the German Army as a whole, but also because they provide insight into how the Great War was understood and portrayed by an official, government organization during both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.<sup>16</sup> At times the history is apologetic, as when it explains the reasoning behind the first large-scale gas attack of the war, but is also remarkably frank as when it discusses German war aims on the Eastern Front. In fact, it is comparable in many ways to Edmonds' *British Official History*, which has likewise had its critics.

By their very nature, official histories of any kind are notoriously problematic. Like any work they are the product of a particular time and place in history. Unlike most historians, however, an "official" historian must satisfy both the demands of the sponsor organization as well as its members, if only for the simple reason that the co-operation of both parties is required to complete the work.<sup>17</sup> The official historian also has the added burden of being

part of the organization about which they are writing which can place the interests of historical objectivity in competition with loyalty, friendships and patriotism.<sup>18</sup> Like the Canadian, British and Australian official historians, *Reichsarchiv* historians had to walk a difficult line between pleasing many of the officers with whom they had served in the Great War, while at the same time creating a work that was acceptable to both contemporary historians and the governments which funded the project.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary English-speaking historians were generally receptive to *Der Weltkrieg*. In a 1931 review of all the official histories published to date, Alexander Johnson wrote of *Der Weltkrieg*:

The military historians, who remain anonymous, deserve great credit for their splendid work. They present their story in simple, readable language that will sustain the interest of the lay reader and with a degree of fact-finding objectivity which commends itself to the military reader and student.<sup>20</sup>

More recently, some historians have looked far less favorably on the German Official History, citing alleged Nazi influence, the German Fraktur typeface or an archaic use of language as reasons for ignoring the 14-volume series.<sup>21</sup> Hew Strachan, however, points out that *Der Weltkrieg* is an invaluable resource, when read in its proper context:

...the availability, since the end of the Cold War, of the working papers of the Reichsarchiv...has done much to confirm the value of its published work. The reluctance to use inter-war German histories on the grounds that they are tainted by Nazism is not only chronological nonsense in some cases (much was in print before 1933) but also an absurd self-denying ordinance, given the destruction of the bulk of the German military archives in 1945. The *Reichsarchiv* historians saw material we can never see; not to refer to their output is a cloak for little more than laziness or monolingualism.<sup>22</sup>

To address this gap in the historiography, a project is currently underway to publish an English-language translation of the German Official History. This four-volume series in seven parts, tentatively titled *Germany's Western Front: Translations from the German Official History of the Great War*, edited by the authors of this introduction, will aim to provide as complete a

picture as possible of the German experience on the Western Front with a special focus on the operations in which Canadians participated. The first volume, to be published in 2008,<sup>23</sup> will cover the year 1915 when Canadians first arrived on the Western Front. The series will focus on the battlefield events of the divisions and corps, but will also relate events at the highest strategic and political levels. Supplementary chapters, translated from other publications of the *Reichsarchiv*, will enrich our understanding of the tactical level battles in which Canadians participated. While the purpose of the series is to further our understanding of Canada's Great War with a "view from the other side," the series will also help to place the Canadian experience within a larger context by examining the events all along the Western Front that directly and indirectly affected the British Expeditionary Force, of which the Canadians were but a small part. This project has been made possible by funding from the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University; a German-Canadian Studies Research Grant from the Spletzer Family Foundation (administered through the German-Canadian Studies Foundation at the University of Winnipeg); and additional support from Dr. Jonathan Vance at the University of Western Ontario.

What follows is a sample of the type of material found in *Der Weltkrieg*. It is an examination of the Second Battle of Ypres, first published in 1931. Interesting for its discussion of the reasons why the Germans used gas and the aims and objectives of the attack, it helps to contextualize our understanding of this important battle. Viewed from the Allied perspective, the German attack was a tactical failure because it did not eliminate the Ypres salient, a point also acknowledged in the conclusion of the German account. However, the Germans viewed the battle as a strategic success as it served to convince Britain and France that Germany did have an offensive capability on the Western Front.

Since the failure of the Schlieffen Plan at the Marne in the fall of 1914, the German High Command had fought internal battles over the direction that the war should take. Falkenhayn believed that the war could only be won if France and Britain were defeated before attention was shifted to Russia. However, the leaders of the



German army in the East – Hindenburg and Luddendorff – disagreed and argued that all available forces should be concentrated against Russia. After much intrigue and debate, which will be detailed further in the first volume of translations, Falkenhayn gave into their demands and the Western Front was stripped of all but those troops required for its defence. Not surprisingly, Falkenhayn was worried that the Allies would discover the size of the shift in the German forces and use it to their advantage. Despite fighting the French to a standstill in the Champagne in the first months of the year, the German army still needed to convince the Allies that its Western Front could not be breached so that its full attention could be directed to the Eastern Front. Gas, although unreliable, provided the German army in the West with the opportunity to punch above its weight. The fact that reserves could barely be scraped together for the attack demonstrated that the German army was overstretched, but the mere fact that it was able to launch an offensive that came so close to breaking the Allied line hid its vulnerability from the Allies. What the final outcome of the battle ultimately meant is up to the reader to decide, but this piece reminds us that history must be evaluated from both sides and that one person's "fact" is another person's interpretation.



### The German Supreme Army Command and the Forces on the Western Front in April 1915

During the early months of 1915, the German forces on the Western Front were involved in heavy defensive engagements culminating in the winter battle in the Champagne. Despite the commitment of their strongest forces and the bitter month-long fighting, the French did not manage to break through the front lines of the German Third Army. The British attempt to overrun the German Sixth Army at Neuve Chapelle also failed with heavy casualties, as did a French encircling attack against St. Mihiel salient.<sup>24</sup> So with the troops encouraged by a sense of superiority, and a regained sense of confidence (despite their smaller numbers), in the middle of April the German Western Front stood firm. According to General von Falkenhayn,<sup>25</sup> General Headquarters – *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL) – the conviction began to take hold,

that for the foreseeable future the enemy in the West will not be able to force a decision even if newly-formed German forces on the Western Front would have to be committed to the Eastern Front in order to break Russian offensive power.<sup>26</sup>

This realization encouraged the OHL to decide on 13 April to temporarily forego the implementation

of the offensive plans on the Western Front in favor of temporarily shifting the war's center of gravity to the Galician theatre of operations.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Even though major German offensive actions in the West had to be discontinued, the OHL was not ready to give the enemy the upper hand by entirely limiting itself to defensive operations. Lively activity in the front lines combined with offensive raids “were intended to hide the troop transfers to Galicia.”

Offensive operations were intended to be launched in Flanders as well as by Army Detachments Strantz and Gaede.<sup>28</sup> Fourth Army was finally to execute the long-planned gas attack, the commencement of which especially interested the Chief of the General Staff so as to allow him to determine the effectiveness of this new weapon.<sup>29</sup>

### The Gas Attack by the Fourth Army at Ypres

Prior to the Great War, only the French planned to utilize gas as a weapon. In their army, a 26 mm rifle grenade loaded with an ethyl bromoacetone filling, which had a suffocating effect, was

Crops at Ypres: British soldiers at Ypres in the Spring of 1915. Note the rudimentary nature of the trenches and the crops which are visible in the fields.



introduced as a weapon for attacking fortified positions.<sup>30</sup> At this time, however, Germany was not prepared for combat in which gas would be used as a weapon.

At the beginning of the war, foreign newspapers repeatedly reported – incidentally without any reproach – the use of new and sinister French weapons, which were said to be fatal without any external symptoms. The French chemist Turpin was named as the inventor and in fact he did offer such a weapon to the French Ministry of War, but it was tried and found to be ineffective. In the Prussian Ministry of War, similar proposals submitted at the outbreak of the war were ignored.<sup>31</sup>

Since the inception of static trench warfare in 1914, the proximity of the opposing trenches frequently impeded the firing of high explosive shells since one's own soldiers were naturally put at risk by shrapnel. Beyond that, the tactical situation meant that the potential of the explosive could not effectively be brought to bear against a deeply dug-in and entrenched enemy. At this point the search for a more effective weapon began. In the beginning of 1915, the French leadership requested all available rifle gas grenades for the front lines. On 21 February the French Ministry of War issued a manual to the armed forces regarding the utilization of the rifle gas grenades and gas hand grenades, which had in the meanwhile been introduced.<sup>32</sup> The order stated: "The fumes generated by these projectiles are not fatal, at least if they are not inhaled in excess." Since the amount of the gas inhaled was hardly up to the individual soldier involved, the potential for a deadly effect was, without a doubt, clear. By the end of February, numerous reports from the Western Front regarding the deployment of these weapons against German soldiers were received.<sup>33</sup>

The German leadership had to consider the possible deployment of chemical weapons by the enemy and was not willing to be taken by surprise. Initially the objective was merely to use gas to drive the enemy from the protection of their trenches into the effective range of artillery fire.<sup>34</sup> By the end of 1914, the development of an artillery projectile (15 cm HE Shell 12T) had been completed. In addition to its considerable explosive capability, it also contained the gas ingredient xylyl bromide which was similar in its



General Erich von Falkenhayn, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army and head of the OHL.

effectiveness, albeit less lethal, than the French version. This so-called "T-Shell" was first used on the Russian front in the beginning of 1915, however, due to the intense cold, the results were unsatisfactory.<sup>35</sup> A pre-requisite for a success was mass effectiveness. To achieve this with shells carrying gas was initially out of the question due to a lack of artillery pieces and suitable propellants. Therefore the alternative of releasing the gas where air currents were supposed to carry it towards enemy positions became the most viable option.

The existing conventions of international law – The Hague Land Warfare Conventions of 29 July 1899 and 18 October 1907 and the Hague Declaration of 29 July 1899 – did not anticipate a war waged with gas.<sup>36</sup> The Hague declaration merely forbade the use of projectiles that had the exclusive purpose of broadcasting suffocating and poisonous gasses. Based on the declaration's "all participation clause," the question as to whether this declaration was still binding on all the parties conducting the war after Turkey, as a non-signatory of the agreement, became a party to the war on 3 November 1914, remains debatable.<sup>37</sup> Even if one assumes that the declaration

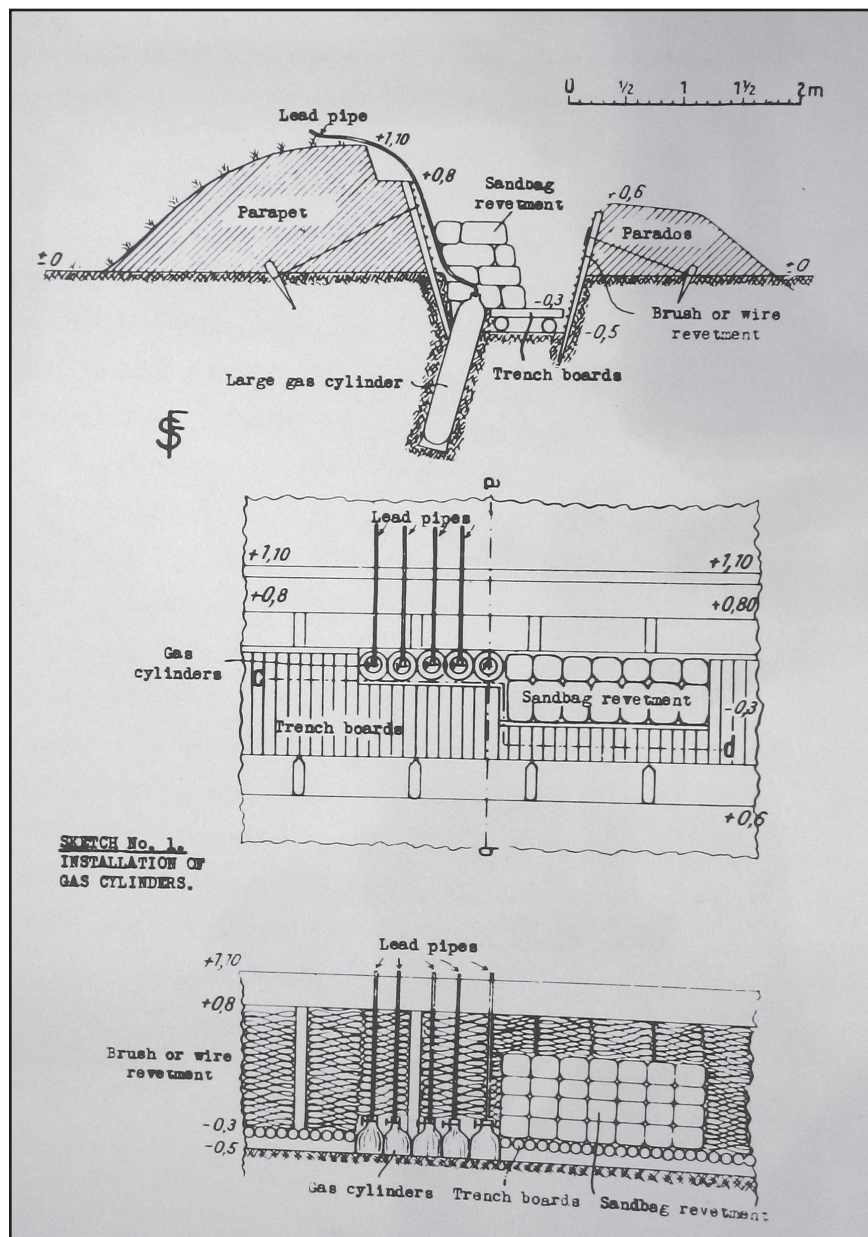


Diagram of the installation of German gas cylinders at Ypres.

Source: Rudolf Hanslian, *Der Chemische Krieg* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1927), translated diagrams courtesy of the US Army War College, Carlisle, PA.

affected by exposure to gas were almost always totally rehabilitated without any physically debilitating after-effects.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, chlorine gas was chosen to be used for combat because its production in sufficient amounts was possible without impeding the munitions industry in the homeland. The dispersion of liquid chlorine from numerous steel cylinders in the front trenches promised to create a chlorine gas cloud which would inundate the enemy positions in a sufficient density, even despite the loss of some of the gas to the air. Additionally chlorine gas had the right properties because it did not leave any appreciable residue, thus enabling our own forces to mount immediate attacks. Chlorine also had less of an effect on the human body than ethyl bromo-acetone and chloracetone, the gases used by the French. The creation of gas protection equipment was developed parallel to the production of this offensive weapon and during 1915 a gas mask was successfully developed for the German forces that protected their faces and respiratory systems.

remained binding among the signatories, the utilization of projectiles like the German T-Shell, which combined fragmentation with gas, was in accordance with international law since the dissemination of the gasses was not the "exclusive objective" of the weapon. This is in contrast with the French rifle grenade that had the single objective of spreading poison gas. Therefore the French rifle gas grenades represented the first violation of the international laws governing the waging of war with gas. The method of dispersing gas into the air [without the use of a projectile] was an invention of the German war industry and did not contravene any existing conventions of international law. Neither did the introduction of a gas weapon violate the laws of humanity since the percentage of casualties caused by shell fire was, and remained, considerably higher than by the use of gas in combat operations. Soldiers

In January 1915, the tests had progressed to the point that General von Falkenhayn decided to provide the Fourth Army with 6,000 large chlorine gas cylinders that were ready for deployment. Another 24,000 smaller versions were in the manufacturing pipeline. The OHL ordered Fourth Army to deploy the new weapon during an operation in the Ypres salient. It was calculated that an average of one large or two small cylinders were required per metre of front. The technical supervision was in the hands of the privy councillor, Professor Haber,<sup>39</sup> who had been entrusted with the management of the newly-formed chemical department of the Prussian Ministry of War and the execution was assigned to newly-formed pioneer units with especially assigned meteorologists under the command of Colonel Peterson.<sup>40</sup> Considerable difficulties,

however, remained to be resolved as commanding officers as well as rank and file soldiers regarded the untested weapon with distrust, if not with complete disapproval. Even the OHL viewed the gas weapon less than enthusiastically and refused to deploy it during the impending breakout-offensive in the Galician theater of operations because it did not want to be dependent on the timing of this apparently quite unreliable weapon. The operation in the Ypres salient was therefore intended to test its combat effectiveness.

On the morning of 21 April, General von Falkenheyn held a conference in Thielt with the commanding officer of the Fourth Army, General Albrecht Duke von Württemberg.<sup>41</sup> At this meeting he insisted on an early execution of the gas attack in which the Fourth Army “should not aim for too distant an objective, but rather execute the attack at the first favorable opportunity.” Based on the positive weather forecast, the operation was ordered to begin at 0645 hours on the morning of 22 April 1915.<sup>42</sup>

Fourth Army tasked the XXIII and XXVI Reserve Corps with the execution of the attack. The available gas cylinders had been installed in their positions north of Ypres from Steenstraate to Poelcappelle. Except for units of the 43rd Reserve Division, no larger forces were available for exploiting a potential advantage.<sup>43</sup> The XXIII Reserve Corps was assigned the difficult objective of fighting its way across the Yser Canal. The primary objectives were as follows: for the XXIII Reserve Corps a line from northwest of Steenstraate through Lizerne to southwest of Pilkem; for the XXVI Reserve Corps the high ground along the Boesinghe–Pilkem–Langemarck–Poelcappelle road. A further objective of the attack was “the capture of the Yser Canal, including Ypres.”<sup>44</sup>

Due to a lack of favorable winds on the morning of 22 April, the attack had to be postponed until the late afternoon. This caused a severe problem since all preparations were made for an attack at dawn. The commanding general of the XXIII Reserve Corps, Lieutenant-General von Kathen<sup>45</sup> immediately expressed his concern about mounting an attack in full daylight, while the commanding general of the

XXVI Reserve Corps, Lieutenant-General Baron von Hügel<sup>46</sup> emphasized that the success of his Corps could only be expected if his flank was protected by a simultaneous attack by the XXIII Reserve Corps. Fourth Army’s Chief of Staff, Brigadier Ilse, attempted to allay these concerns by telephone but issued the following unequivocal orders: “the commander-in-chief categorically expects the XXIII Reserve Corps to advance with XXVI Reserve Corps to reach Hill 20 near Pilkem without fail.”

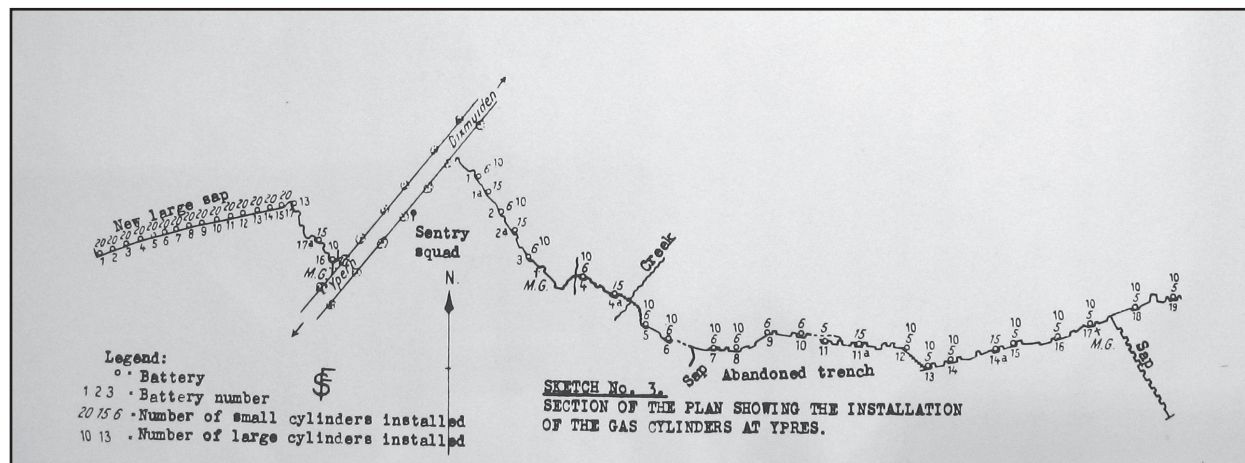
At 1800 hours, the gas cylinders installed opposite the French 87th Territorial and 45th Infantry Divisions were opened. The Belgian General Staff had warned the French High Command about the possibility of a German gas attack a few days previously but apparently the warning was disregarded. The wind blew from the north at approximately two metres per second and a solid white-yellow wall rolled towards the enemy trenches. Even before it reached them, in some areas the enemy was observed retreating after firing a few rounds. Simultaneously, the German trenches were hit with spirited enemy artillery fire. At 1815 hours, immediately following the gas cloud, the German infantry began its attack.



Source: Lutz Knieing and Arnold Bolsche. *Aus Deutschlands grosser Zeit: Heldentaten deutscher Regimenter*, Band 31: Reserve Infantry Regiment 234 (Zeulenroda-Thür: Bernhard Sporn, Buchdruckerei und Verlagsanstalt, 193?).

General der Infanterie Baron von Hügel, commanding general of XXVI Reserve Corps.





Source: Rudolf Hanslian, *Der Chemische Krieg* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1927), translated diagrams courtesy of the US Army War College, Carlisle, PA.

In the area of the XXIII Reserve Corps, in front of Steenstraate, the release of the gas was not entirely successful. As a result, the left wing of the 45th Reserve Division commanded by Major-General (*Generalleutnant*) Schöpflin was only able to advance slowly under strong enemy defensive fire. It was very late in the day when the village of Steenstraate was taken with heavy casualties by units of the 45th and 46th Reserve Divisions. A continuation of the attack in the direction of Lizerne was beyond the capabilities of the already exhausted units. The main body of the 46th Reserve Division, commanded by Major-General Hahn quickly advanced to the canal near and north of Het Sas, traversed it and took the western bank, while across from Boesinghe, they were only able to reach the canal in a few places.

In front of the right wing of the XXVI Reserve Corps, the psychological impact was massive. The assault units of the 52nd Reserve Division commanded by Major-General Waldorf proceeded without resistance and reached their objective, the hills near Pilkem, at 1840 hours. There they were halted since the neighbouring divisions had fallen behind. The advance of the 51st Reserve Division to the east was considerably more difficult. The gas in front of their lines near and east of Langemarck was either not effective or the units did not attack immediately. Therefore the extreme right wing of the French and the Canadians adjacent to the east were able to offer a stubborn resistance and it was not until 1900 hours that Langemarck – which had been the scene of heavy and bloody fighting in earlier battles – was in German hands. The commanding officer of the 51st Reserve Division, Brigadier (*Generalmajor*) Friedrich von Kleist, then received orders to take the bridges across the Haanebeek Creek south of Langemarck as well as St. Julien on the same day if possible.

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The 37th Landwehr Brigade, which was in immediate reserve, was made available by the order of corps headquarters to the successful 52nd Reserve Division and was brought forward to Pilkem. Around 1945 hours this division reported its attack on the heights south of Pilkem. In front of its advance, the artillery and reserves of the enemy were apparently swept back in a panicky retreat. In contrast to this, the enemy had moved reinforcements to St. Julien against the 51st Reserve Division thus impeding its advance. Aerial reconnaissance revealed train movements on the tracks between Hazebrouck and Poperinghe which led to the assumption that the enemy was moving additional reinforcements into the zone of operations. Consequently, the 102nd Reserve Infantry Brigade, which had been held back in the Houthulster Forest, was moved up to Koekuit at this late hour. Around 2130 hours, the 51st Reserve Division reported taking both bridges across Haanebeek Creek southwest of Langemarck while there was still fighting for the other bridge to the south. Both Divisions were ordered to hold their positions and to continue the attack on the next day with the 37th Landwehr Brigade ordered to establish a supporting position on the heights near Pilkem. The commander of the heavy artillery was instructed to advance and reposition his batteries during the night to be in a position to bring the enemy on the west side of the canal and in city of Ypres into range of the artillery.

In summary, on 22 April the XXIII Reserve Corps had thrown the enemy across the canal between Steenstraate and Het Sas and the XXVI Reserve Corps had penetrated to a line from south of Pilkem to northwest of St. Julien. The captured enemy forces amounted to 1,800 unwounded French and 10 British<sup>47</sup> soldiers and captured materiel consisted of 51 artillery pieces – including four heavy guns – and approximately 70 machine guns.



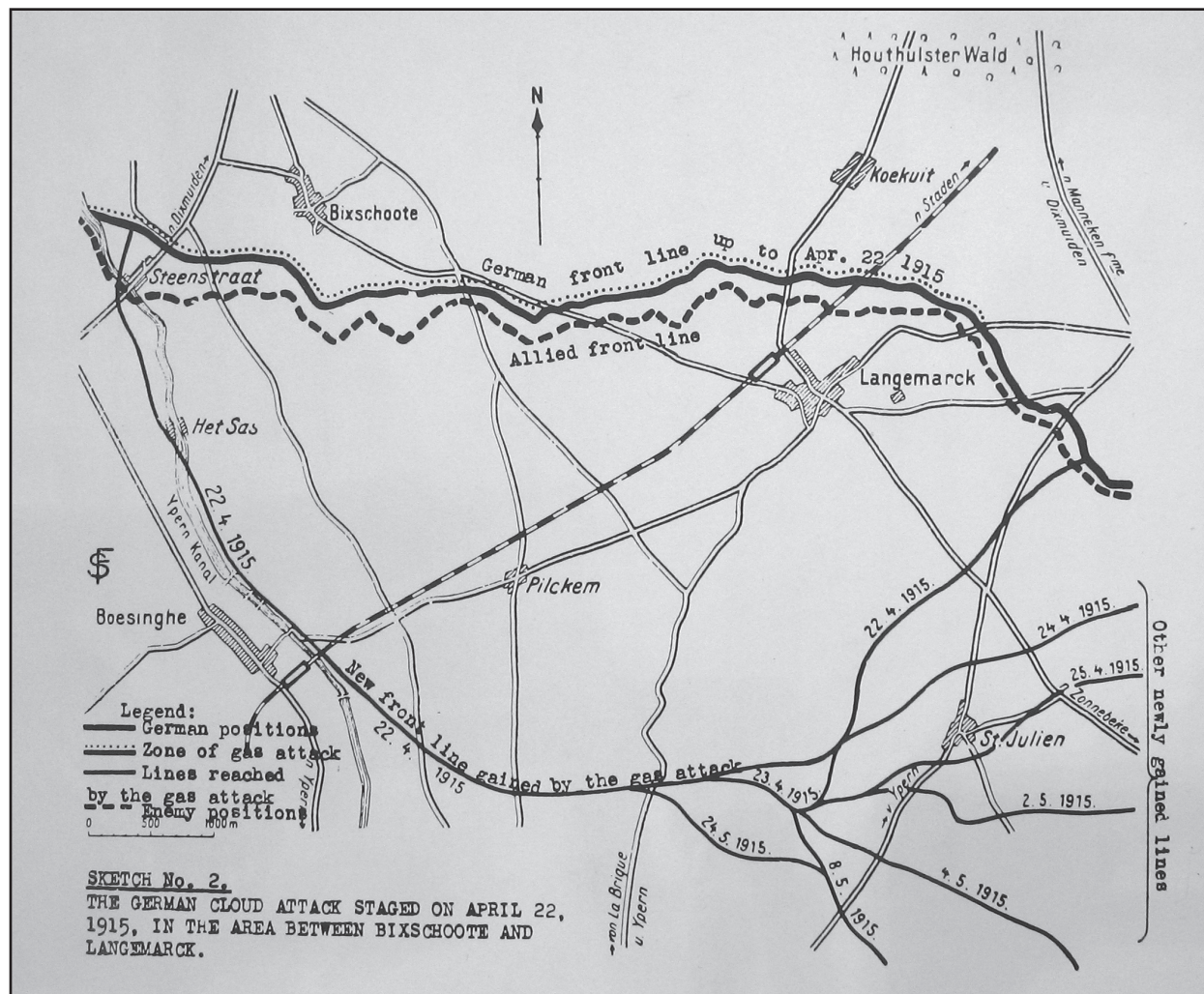
translated diagrams courtesy of the US Army War College, Carlisle, PA.

By the evening of 22 April, the enemy had suffered a wide breach between the canal and St. Julien. Only weak French forces remained southeast of Boesinghe and, mixed with Canadians, north of Keerselaere. The breach was only barely secured by British forces and a cohesive line no longer existed. Movements of reinforcements and supplies were severely hampered by heavy German artillery fire aimed at the canal crossings near Ypres. Consequently, the position of the enemy in the Ypres salient had become seriously threatened.

Encouraged by the successes of the first day of combat, Fourth Army's commander believed he was justified in expanding the original objectives which had only extended to the Yser Canal and therefore issued orders on the morning of 23 April to continue the attack in the "direction of Poperinghe." The XXIII Reserve Corps was given a line from Pypegaele-Gegend to southwest of Boesinghe as its next objective. The XXVI Reserve

Corps was ordered to continue the advance in a southerly direction, with its right wing along the canal, in order to attack the enemy positioned in front of the XXVII Reserve Corps from the rear. To accomplish this mission the Army Reserve (elements of the 43rd Reserve Division) commanded by Brigadier von Runckel was assigned to the XXIII Reserve Corps. The 86th Reserve Brigade was immediately engaged and replaced a brigade of the 45th Reserve Division, freeing that division for other combat missions. Additionally two regiments of the Marine Corps were moved into the area of Staden-Houthulst.

During the night of 22-23 April, the left wing of the 45th Reserve Division, in the sector of the XXIII Reserve Corps was repeatedly attacked in Lizerne. Although the German forces were able to repel these attacks, as a result they were unable to launch their assigned combat missions with any sustainable energy. Consequently the 45th Reserve Division was only able to reach the sector



Source: Rudolf Hanslian, *Der Chemische Krieg* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1927), translated diagrams courtesy of the US Army War College, Carlisle, PA.



Source: Lutz Knieling und Arnold Bolsche, *Aus Deutschlands grosser Zeit: Heldentaten deutscher Regimenter*, Band 31: Reserve Infantry Regiment 234 (Zeulenroda-Thür: Bernhard Sporn, Buchdruckerei und Verlagsanstalt, 193?).

**Above left:** German soldiers with rudimentary gas mask; **Top right:** Supply dump behind the front lines of Reserve Infantry Regiment (RIR) 234; **Bottom right:** The front line trenches of RIR 234 at Ypres.

of the Yperlée Creek west of Steenstraate on 23 April. The enemy had established defensive positions in front of the 46th Reserve Division along the Lizerne–Boesinghe road by adding reinforcements. Therefore the attack of this division met with limited success as well.

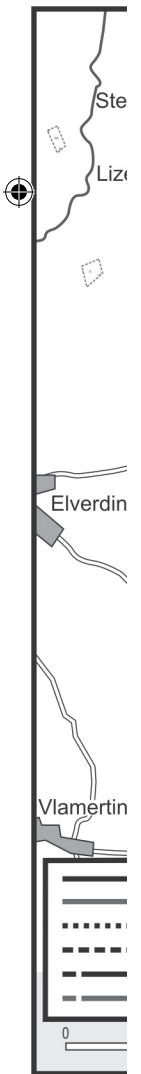
Initially on 23 April, the forces of the XXVI Reserve Corps had only to deal with British counterattacks. In order to support the advance of the 51st Reserve Division as early as 0845 hours, General Baron von Hügel ordered the commander of the gas units to install all available gas cylinders in the sector of this division. From the order to attack issued at noon, the Commanding General of the XXVI Reserve Corps assumed that Army Headquarters:

considered the operation against Poperinghe to be the main undertaking and the advance of the XXVI Reserve Corps to be of secondary importance. Since sufficient forces for advancing on Poperinghe across the canal were not available, the success of this venture was in question from the outset. The advance of the army corps on the right wing along the channel was also impossible, as long as the neighbouring corps had not taken Boesinghe and would be further advancing on

Poperinghe. This was thought to be the only way to remove the strong enemy artillery unit on the opposite side of the canal.

According to reports received by the XXVI Reserve Corps, the enemy had dug in approximately 500 metres in front of the German lines; reinforcements had also been brought in from Ypres. Around 1830 hours, English and French forces initiated a counterattack along both sides of the Ypres–Pilkem road with French forces striking across the bridges near Boesinghe. Although the enemy attack was repulsed, the forward movement of the XXVI Reserve Corps had been stopped. On 24 April, the 52nd Reserve Division was ordered to hold in the positions they had gained. Following a gas attack early on 24 April, the 51st Reserve Division with the 102nd Reserve Infantry Brigade, was ordered to take the ridge north of Wieltje and Frezenberg.

In the meantime<sup>48</sup> the OHL intervened and informed Fourth Army Headquarters “that Poperinghe was not even considered an operational objective at this time, rather that at the present the closing of the Ypres salient could be the only concern.”<sup>49</sup>





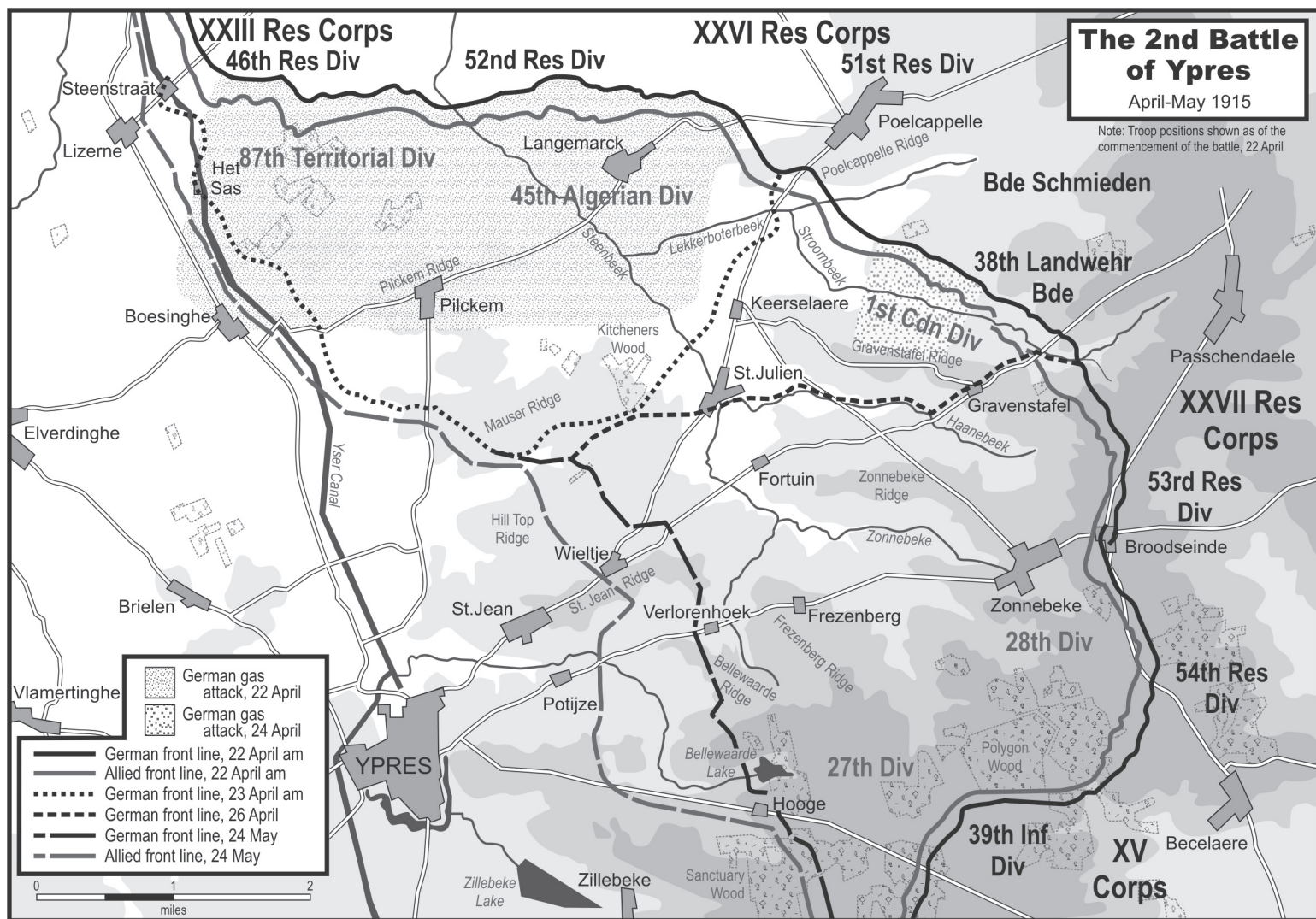
Source: Lutz Knieing und Arnold Boische, Aus Weischnans grosser Zeit: Heidentaten deutscher Regimenter, Band 31: Reserve Infantry Regiment 234 (Zeulenroda-Thür: Bernhard Sporn, Buchdruckerei und Verlagsanstalt, 1933?).

On the morning of 24 April elements of the 45th and 46th Reserve Divisions stormed the strongly-contested village of Lizerne. After heavy fighting with heavy losses that lasted late into the night, the left wing of the 46th Reserve Division managed to take the eastern bank of the canal opposite Boesinghe.

At 0500 hours gas was released north of St. Julien in the sector of the XXVI Reserve Corps and the 101st and 102nd Reserve Infantry Brigades immediately attacked behind the thinly developing cloud. After heavy fighting their attack slowly advanced during the morning, at first west of Keerselaere and later to the east of it as well. The fate of this village, that was defended by the enemy with tenacious determination, was not decided until mid-day. South of Keersslaere, in the farms and hedgerows of St. Julien, the enemy continued to resist. In the afternoon, Fourth Army Headquarters assigned both regiments

of the Naval Corps to the XXVI Reserve Corps and as a result General Baron von Hügel again ordered a penetration west of St. Julien at 1445 hours. The regiments of the 51st Reserve Division did not reach St. Julien until 1900 hours after heavy fighting and had to again vacate the village soon afterwards as a result of attacking British battalions. In the sector of the neighbouring 52nd Reserve Division, the day generally passed quietly. For 25 April, General Baron von Hügel planned the continuation of the ordered attack. The deployment was planned for 0515 hours. This time Colonel Peterson had been ordered to install gas cylinders in the sector of the 52nd Reserve Division east from the Ypres-Pilkem Road to the woods west of St. Julien.

On 24 April, the XXVI Reserve Corps and the right wing of the XXVII Reserve Corps stepped into the attack. The following plan was agreed upon: at the beginning of the day a combined





brigade<sup>50</sup> of the 53rd (Saxon) Reserve Division commanded by Brigadier von Schmieden deployed behind the left wing of the 51st Reserve Division was to join the attack, execute a turn and roll the enemy up from the northwest in front of the 38th Landwehr and 106th Reserve Infantry Brigades. During the execution of this attack, advancing from Poelcappelle, Brigade Schmieden faced a fresh enemy and therefore had to mount a frontal attack. It was not until this obstacle had been removed that the turn to the southeast could be executed. On the evening of 24 April, the right wing of the brigade had fought to a standstill on the hills northwest of Gravenstafel.

West of the canal, the artillery bombardment against the forces of the XXIII Reserve Corps had, on 25 April, increased to the point where a successful continuation of the attack was out of the question.

Early on 25 April the XXVI Reserve Corps regained possession of St. Julien which had been vacated by the enemy. The 51st Reserve Division had orders to reach the objectives established on 24 April: the ridge north of Wieltje and Frezenberg. The neighbouring 52nd Reserve Division was to enter the battle in a supporting role. At 0700 hours, seven British battalions launched a surprise attack southwest of St. Julien against the German forces that had been deployed for the attack. The incredibly forceful enemy attack that came in waves could not be entirely repulsed until 0800 hours. With that, the combat capabilities of the German forces had deteriorated; only the regiments on the left wing of the 51st Reserve Division gained minimal ground east of St. Julien in tenacious fighting later on.

On the right wing of the XXVII Reserve Corps, in the advancing darkness, the Fortuin-Mosselmarkt road was reached and approximately 1,000 Canadians were taken prisoner. However, with the aid of reinforcements south of the road, the enemy, who had previously been driven back, continued their resistance.

The intentions of the Commanding General of the Fourth Army became clear with the orders issued in the afternoon of 25 April following a conference with the Commanding General of the XXIII Reserve Corps. General von Kathen

emphasized the necessity to continue the attack in order to take Boesinghe. The Fourth Army Commander opposed this plan arguing:

The outcome of this attack is doubtful. It would take great sacrifices and it would be difficult to hold that much ground on the western bank. The Corps should be satisfied with its [present] accomplishment ... The Fourth Army's objective is primarily to close the salient east of Ypres with the attack by the XXVI Reserve Corps. Only then could an advance past Boesinghe be considered.

On the afternoon of the 26th, a number of strong French attacks were directed against the area of Steestraate and Het Sas. They were conducted by territorial forces and elements of the recently activated 153rd Infantry Division supported by effective British and Belgian artillery support. The 46th Reserve Division thus found itself in a precarious situation and the enemy took the position west of Het Sas, although the locks on the canal could be held. In the meantime Lizerne was also attacked at 1800 hours from a northerly direction and was taken by the enemy. The Germans occupied the old French trench east of the town but due to heavy enemy fire, a planned counterattack did not materialize.

Reports received by the XXVI Reserve Corps during the course of the morning revealed that the enemy had assembled two fresh Corps in the area east of Ypres and was clearly planning a counterattack which was initiated with aggressive artillery support. Shortly after noon strong enemy forces – part of the British 28th as well as the 4th, and 50th Territorial and Lahore Divisions – attacked from the Canal to St. Julien but every attempt failed due to the unswerving stand of the German infantry.

As at St. Julien, the enemy counterattacks on 26 April in the area of Gravenstafel prevented a further advance by the XXVII Reserve Corps.

During the following days, enemy attempts to push the badly-mauled regiments of the 46th Reserve Division (part of the XXIII Reserve Corps) back to the eastern bank of the canal failed as again the waves of the attack broke against the German lines. The division was able, however, to hold the new positions on the Yperlée Creek with the support of the 45th Reserve Division.



The XXVI Reserve Corps Headquarters abandoned the continuation of the attack since the number of installed gas cylinders was considered to be insufficient and, in view of the well entrenched enemy, and the weakness of the German artillery, an attack without the support of gas was considered to be almost hopeless. Therefore, a further advance by the strong right wing of the XXVII Reserve Corps with the objective of breaking through to Gravenstafel from the north was delayed.

In the meantime the British Commander in Chief, Field Marshal Sir John French, began to doubt the advisability of holding the threatened Ypres salient. As early as 27 April, he had ordered the local commander to initiate preparations for a withdrawal to a rearward position in the area east of Ypres. In response to emphatic protestations by General Foch, and despite the development of the precarious military situation, the execution of this plan was postponed. A British signal intercepted on the evening of April 29 carried the following message: "The situation of our forces, British as well as French, in Ypres is critical. We must be prepared for bad news." Fourth Army Headquarters saw this as a confirmation of its opinion that the enemy considered the salient east of Ypres to be more and more difficult to hold and, with a continuation of pressure, an evacuation in the near future could be expected.

On 2 May, combat units designated by Fourth Army and supported by gas, renewed the attack north of Ypres.

Shortly after 1800 hours both divisions of the XXVI Reserve Corps reported the opening of the gas cylinders installed between Pilkem



The ruined village of Langemark (**Top**) and St. Julien (**Middle**) as photographed by soldiers of RIR 234; **Bottom**: Captured English (possibly Canadian) trenches at Ypres.

and St. Julien. The effect on the enemy was lessened as the transmission of commands was badly hampered by destroyed telephone lines, which prevented a coordinated simultaneous release of the gas. The density of the gas was also diminished by gusting winds and the effect on an enemy equipped with simple protection devices was negligible and the attackers met insurmountable resistance.

Source: Lutz Knieling und Arnold Bolsche, *Aus Deutschlands grosser Zeit: Heldentaten deutscher Regimenter*, Band 31: Reserve Infantry Regiment 234 (Zeulenroda-Thür: Bernhard Sporn, Buchdruckerei und Verlagsanstalt, 1937?).



On 3 May, the 51st Division, which was to transfer the weight of the attack to the left wing, was reinforced by a marine infantry regiment. Aided by the terrain which featured numerous individual farms, the enemy resisted tenaciously.

On the right wing of the XXVII Reserve Corps, however, the 38th Landwehr Brigade managed on 2 May to gain some ground on the Mosselmarkt-Fortuin road. The 105th Reserve Infantry Brigade (Schmieden) adjoining in the east was stalled in front of a ferociously defended trench network in a forest north of Gravenstafel. Considering these small and unimportant gains, which had resulted in high casualties, the Commanding General, Lieutenant-General (*General der Artillerie*) von Schubert, proposed to Fourth Army that they abandon the costly preliminaries at Zonnebeke and put the available forces that would result – at least a division – in the vicinity of Keerselaere at the disposition of the General Officer commanding Fourth Army in order to support a decisive attack by XXVI Reserve Corps on Ypres. Fourth Army, however, did not accept this proposal. Therefore on 3 May, the 105th Reserve Infantry Brigade had to continue attacking the trench network occupied by the enemy. This attack, which was executed with determination, was crowned with total success.

Under the pressure of these attacks, on the night of 3-4 May, the British forces evacuated their positions from Fortuin to southwest of Gheluveld. XXVI Reserve Corps Headquarters immediately ordered the 51st Division to attack. Despite continuous fighting against stubborn resistance, only a line from Vanheule Farm to the Haanebeek Creek was reached.

The XXVII Reserve Corps and the XV Corps on the left in the southern part of the Ypres salient, however, did not initially meet any resistance. General von Schubert deployed the right wing of the 53rd Reserve Division in the direction of Frezenberg and the left wing of the 54th (Württemberg) in the direction of Eksterneft. The XV Corps reported that the right wing of the 39th Infantry Division was also in the process of advancing on Eksterneft. Around 1600 hours, the divisions were again facing strongly-fortified enemy positions in the area to the northeast of Wieltje and Frezenberg and to the east of Hooge,

which necessitated a carefully planned attack; this was ordered on the afternoon of 6 May.

Motivated by the urgent desire to push the enemy across the Yser Canal as soon as possible, Fourth Army intended to continue the attack with an encircling movement from three sides. With this in mind, XXVI Reserve Corps was supposed to advance in a southerly direction in order to take the hills around Wieltje, XXVII was to attack the high ground facing it to the west and XV Corps was to push the enemy back in a northwesterly direction between Bellewaarde Lake and Zillebeke Lake. The commencement of the artillery barrage was set for 0800 hours on 8 May.

The main burden for the attacks was born by the XXVII Reserve Corps. At 1030 hours on 8 May, after a three-hour artillery preparation, the regiments advanced under favorable weather conditions against the British 27th and 28th Infantry Divisions but found the forward trenches deserted. After coming under strong enemy artillery fire, the advance over open ground soon ground to a halt. As night fell, at least the commanding ridge west of Frezenberg and Eksterneft was in German hands.

Around 1440 hours on the next day, XXVIII Reserve Corps Headquarters received the following message from Fourth Army:

His Royal Majesty informs that according to an intercepted British order to retreat,<sup>51</sup> all indications are that the British have abandoned all resistance on the eastern bank of the Yser. At the present time the Sixth Army is under attack by strong British forces. All indications are that the British are assembling all available forces in front of the Sixth Army.

As the result, General von Schubert ordered a new artillery preparation from 1530 hours to 1700 hours, which assisted the attacking forces in making small gains in terrain up to the Verlorenhoek-Bellewaarde Lake. The objective “to push the enemy into his final position near Potijze” was not accomplished despite the sacrificial valor of the attacking regiments.

On 9 May, parts of the XXII Reserve Corps joined the battle along the coast, but in connection with the XXVI Reserve Corps and the right wing of

the XV Corps, were able only to make insignificant gains. Their attacks failed too because of the strong resistance in the enemy trenches

\* \* \* \* \*

By 9 May, the fighting around Ypres was generally over. The entire attack up to then had cost the Germans more than 35,000 men while the British lost 59,275 men between 22 April and 31 May; according to their own calculations, the French losses were extremely high. On 22 April alone they lost 18,000 soldiers.

Despite the new gas weapon, the success of the action at Ypres did not extend past the initial gains and the objective of closing the Ypres salient was not accomplished. The primary reasons for this are that on 22 April the surprise of the enemy could not be sufficiently exploited due to the approaching darkness. Although in early May the enemy had retreated to the prepared positions between Wieltje and Little Zillebeke, in spite of pressure from heavy losses, they repeatedly attacked the forces of the XXVI and XXVII Reserve Corps. The initial successes north of Ypres were, however, mostly due to the employment of gas, which demonstrated to the command and rank and file its usefulness as a new weapon,<sup>52</sup> despite its intrinsic shortcomings.

### Notes

1. Mark Humphries also wishes to acknowledge the support of a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship.
2. See Robert Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870–1916* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997); Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: New York University Press, 2001).
3. In recent years the literature on Germany in the Great War has grown immensely. See, for example, this very select list of recent English-language monographs: Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: Morrow, 1991); Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and The Great War, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (New York: Praeger, 1989); John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (London: Yale University Press, 2001); Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German*

*Occupation In World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martin Samuels, *Command Or Control? Command, Training And Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth And Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4. See Mombauer, pp.9-10; Foley, pp.10-11. A Canadian example is Andrew Godefroy, "The German Army at Vimy Ridge," in Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechthold, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p.225.
5. The raid of 14 April was especially disastrous as several five-ton bombs fell through all seven floors of the *Reichsarchiv* storage building outside Potsdam and exploded in the basement. The explosion collapsed the building in on itself and the subsequent fire resulted in the near total destruction of the building's contents. See Uwe Löbel, "Neue Forschungsmöglichkeiten zur preußisch-deutschen Heeresgeschichte," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 51 (1992), 143-149.
6. After the Second World War, thousands of pages of documents were acquired by the German *Bundesarchiv* from collections in the American, Hungarian, Finnish, Romanian and Polish national archives. These documents, however, are extremely fragmentary. The American documents, for example, were copied from the German *Reichsarchiv* in the 1920s and 1930s on behalf of the US Army War College and, with few exceptions, pertain only to some of the German units that were opposite American forces on a very select number of dates in 1918. For more on the origins of the American part of this collection see Charles Burdick, "Foreign Military Records of World War I in the National Archives," *Prologue*, Winter (1975), 212-220. These records are in the *Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv* (BA-MA) in Freiburg, Germany in the files of the Prussian Army (*Preußische Armee 1867-1918/19*). For the scope and origins of the files see the archival finding aids online at <www.bundesarchiv.de>
7. After the collapse of communism, thousands of additional documents were returned to the German national archives from the USSR and the German Democratic Republic. The most important block of returned files pertaining to the Great War are the records of the *Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres*. Similar in scope to the files of the Canadian or British Historical Sections, these are the working files of the German historical section and, as Helmut Otto states, are made up of "business documents, correspondence, research notes, studies, field reports, manuscript drafts, copies of corrected drafts, galley proofs, copies of documents from military and political authorities and agencies, excerpts from officer's personal war diaries and writings with notes from the editors and newspaper clippings." While one of the few excellent primary sources on Germany's Great War, it must be remembered that these files do not provide a raw look the documentary record, but rather a view of the past that is filtered through the lens of the official German historians who shaped this collection and the official history directly. For more on the documents and their background see Helmut Otto, "Der Bestand Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres im Bundesarchiv-, Militärisches Zwischenarchiv Potsdam," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 51(1992), 429-441. These files are in the BA-MA in the files of the Reichsheer,





- file block 61 (RH 61, formerly W-10) Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres.
8. Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung, 1914-1956* (Schöningh: Paderborn, 2002), pp.82-84 and Otto, p.430.
  9. Pöhlmann, pp.104-105 and Otto, p.430.
  10. Otto, p.430. See Pöhlmann for more on the continuities and discontinuities between the writing of official military history before the Great War and after.
  11. *Ibid.*, 432. See also I. Zandek and H. Böhm, *Bestand RH 61 - Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres* (Freiburg: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, 2002), pp.i-ii.
  12. They were entrusted with writing a comprehensive Weltkriegwerk (World War Work) which included the more popular series of histories of individual battles in 36 volumes (*Schlachten des Weltkriegs*) as well as a copious number of German regimental histories. See Pöhlmann.
  13. *Ibid.*, pp.432-3.
  14. Markus Pöhlmann, "Yesterday's Battles and Future War: The German Official Military History, 1918-1939," in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.229. See also Zandek, p.iii.
  15. Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte*...., 163.
  16. See Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte*.... See also his English language article cited in note 12.
  17. On the perils of being an official historian see Wes Gustavson, "'Fairly Well Known and Need Not be Discussed': Colonel A. F. Duguid and the Canadian Official History of the First World War," *Canadian Military History* 10, 2 (2001), pp.41-54 and Andrew Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories 1915-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. See Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte*.... pp.162-195.
  20. Alexander L.P. Johnson, "Review: Military Histories of the Great War," *Journal of Modern History*, 3, 2 (1931), p.280.
  21. For a discussion of the work's potential weaknesses from a Canadian and British perspective see Godefroy, p.225 and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: the Untold Story* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p.219.
  22. Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume 1 - To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.xvi-xvii.
  23. The first of two parts on 1914 will be published in 2008-9 to be followed by the remaining four volumes each year until the hundredth anniversary of the war in 2014.
  24. For an English language description of the French battles in late 1914 and early 1915 see Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), pp.105-152. For the British battles during the same period see J.E. Edmonds and G.C. Wynne, *Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1915, Volume 1-Winter 1914-15: Battle of Neuve Chapelle-Battles of Ypres* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1927).
  25. Erich von Falkenhayn (1861-1922), a Prussian staff officer by training, was appointed as Prussian Minister of War in 1913 and served in that post until he replaced Helmut von Moltke as head of the German General Staff on 14 September 1915. Falkenhayn, who believed that victory would be won or lost on the Western Front often clashed with those members of the army who believed that the war would be won or lost in the East. After the failure of his strategy of attrition at Verdun during the spring and summer of 1916, he was removed from the OHL on 29 August 1916 and replaced by Hindenburg. For more on Falkenhayn see Robert Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Erich von Falkenhayn, *The German General Staff and its Decisions, 1914-1916* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1920).
  26. A footnote in the original reads: "Erich von Falkenhayn, "Die Oberste Heeresleitung, 1914 - 1916," p.56.
  27. On 2 May 1915, Mackenson's new army would launch the Gorlice-Tarnow Offensive. By the time the campaign ended in the autumn, the Russians had been forced to evacuate Poland and Galicia and had suffered more than a million casualties including more than 800,000 prisoners of war. See *Der Weltkrieg*, Vols.7, 8, 9.
  28. Army Detachment *Strantz* controlled the area surrounding the St. Mihiel salient, while Army Detachment *Gaede* was responsible for the front on the Swiss border.
  29. It had originally been intended that the German Fourth Army would launch the gas attack in the sectors of XXVII Reserve Corps and XV Corps in the area of Gheluveltdt at the beginning of March, but the attack was repeatedly postponed because of unfavourable weather conditions. On 25 March, Fourth Army Headquarters decided to deploy those gas cylinders that had not yet been installed in the sectors of XXVI and XXIII Reserve Corps to the Northwest. See *Der Weltkrieg*, Vol.7, pp.63-64.
  30. These grenades, weighing about half a pound and fired from a specially designed rifle, were known as "cartouches suffocantes." Introduced in the French army before the war, these projectiles were intended to have a noxious, rather than asphyxiating, effect, and were used against fortified positions during the first months of the war. See also Foley, pp.148-149; Doughty, p.148; Ulrich Trumpener, "The Road to Ypres: The Beginnings of Gas Warfare in World War 1," *Journal of Modern History*, 47, 3 (1975), p.462.
  31. A footnote in the original reads: "Investigating Committee of the German Constitutional National Assembly and of the Diet, 1919-1928, Third Series, Vol.IV, pp.3-42."
  32. Gas hand grenades were introduced into the French army by April of 1915. See Foley, p.148.
  33. A footnote in the original reads: "War diary 27th R.I.R., 28 February 1915 and other reports from the front."
  34. In the fall of 1914, the German army used 3,000 converted howitzer shells, known as 'Ni-shells' that contained the irritant "double salts of dianisidine." This first German foray into chemical warfare went unnoticed by the Allies. Trumpener, p.465.
  35. In January 1915, T-Shells, named for German chemist Hans Tappen, were used by the German Ninth Army near Bolimow on the Eastern Front with little or no effect. Trumpener, pp.465, 469-70.
  36. Article 23, however, banned the employment of poison or poisoned arms and an annex to the declaration of the same date read, "The Contracting Powers agree to abstain from the use of projectiles the object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases."
  37. Article 2 of the 1899 Convention read: "The provisions... are only binding on the Contracting Powers, in case of



- war between two or more of them. These provisions shall cease to be binding from the time when, in a war between Contracting Powers, a non-Contracting Power joins one of the belligerents." Article 2 of the 1907 convention contained a similar clause: "[the regulations] do not apply except between Contracting Powers, and then only if all the belligerents are parties to the Convention."
38. These assertions about the legality of the use of gas were based on very literal readings of the conventions governing land warfare and, while technically correct, it could be easily argued that both German (as well as French) actions violated the spirit, if not the letter of the law.
  39. Fritz Haber (1868-1934), who would win the Nobel Prize for his synthesis of artificial ammonia in 1918, was director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical and Electro Chemistry in Berlin.
  40. Colonel Otto Peterson (later a brigadier) commanded a unit known after the Second Battle of Ypres as Pioneer Regiment 35. Made up of civilian scientists, chemical experts and soldiers, this and similar units were responsible for conducting the German army's chemical war. Turmpener, pp.471-2.
  41. General Albrecht Duke von Württemberg (1865-1939) had commanded the Fourth Army during the battles of the frontiers, the first battle of the Marne and at Ypres in 1914.
  42. The gas attack had been planned since the beginning of March and on 10 April, Falkenhayn, and the Chief of Staff of the Fourth Army, Brigadier Ilse, had again scheduled the attack for 15 April in anticipation of more favourable weather. However, on the morning of the 15th, the winds remained calm and the attack again had to be postponed. See *Der Weltkrieg*, Vol.7, p.64.
  43. In the spring of 1915 the German Army was significantly overstretched on the Western Front, mainly because any expendable troops had been transferred to the East, and as a result few reserves were available to exploit successes. Indeed, Falkenhayn wanted to "get the gas attack out of the way at the earliest opportunity" as he "planned to extract the XXIII and XXVI Reserve Corps as well as the 4th Ersatz Division" from the area around Ypres for deployment elsewhere. See *Der Weltkrieg*, Vol.7, p.64. A footnote from the original text reads: "Lieutenant General Ilse provided the Reichsarchiv with a report dated 16 November 1931 as follows: 'The High Command of the Fourth Army had requested the availability of a division to provide the capability of taking advantage of the potential success of the gas attack with a strong follow-up attack in order to roll up the Ypres Salient. General von Falkenhayn turned this request down because he did not have sufficient forces at his disposal in the spring of 1915 and also because he doubted the success of the gas attack. Another contributing factor for his refusal of the request for the disposition of a division was the concern that many weeks could pass before the gas attack would become a reality. Von Falkenhayn could not and would not release a division for that period of time.' The files of the Reichsarchiv do not contain this information. It appears that the request and refusal were verbal."
  44. The Army orders of 8 April and 14 April identified the mission of XXIII and XXVI Reserve Corps as "the capture of the elevations north of Pilkem and the adjoining areas to the East." It was expected "that the enemy would find it to be impossible to stay in the salient around Ypres. Additionally the offensive had the mission to take the Yser Canal up to and including Ypres." See *Der Weltkrieg, 1914 bis 1918, volume 7*, p.64.
  45. Lieutenant-General Hugo von Kathen (1855-1932), an infantry officer, was military governor of the Fortress of Mainz from the outbreak of war until December 1914 when he assumed command of the XXIII Reserve Corps, a position he held until the end of July 1918 when he took command of Eighth Army.
  46. Lieutenant-General Otto Freiherr von Hügel (1853-1928), an infantry officer, was commanding officer of XXVI Reserve Corps from August 1914 to March 1918 when he was "sent on leave."
  47. The word "British" is used in the original but this could easily refer to Canadian soldiers.
  48. A footnote in the original reads: "This was probably ordered by telephone on 23 April and afterwards confirmed in writing."
  49. A footnote in the original reads: "In this regard General Ilse stated in his comments dated 16 November 1931 addressed to the Reichsarchiv: 'This message was... correctly received. However the OHL was mistaken and has admitted this error because 4th Army Headquarters did not establish Poperinghe as the operational objective but explicitly mentioned attacking in the direction of Poperinghe, the village located on the road running straight in a westerly direction from Ypres. As mentioned, this was meant to merely indicate the general direction of the attack by the XXIII Reserve Corps...'"
  50. Subsequently referred to as Brigade *Schmieden*.
  51. A footnote in the original reads: "As far as can be determined, no order to retreat had been issued. It is a fact that orders in the case of a retreat and evacuation of the positions east of Ypres were issued by the local Commander, General Plumer on April 29 and May 1. See the *British Official History, Volume III*, pp.404-10."
  52. A footnote in the original reads: "In his memorandum to the Reichsarchiv dated 30 August 1931, General von Schubert emphasized that the use of gas during the Ypres operation was only effective one time and that was on 22 April north of Pilkem. The flaw in the use of the gas was mostly caused by the differences in the terrain and that consequently on an extended front it was impossible to achieve uniform results. Additionally, the usefulness of the gas was limited since the timing of the release could never really be maintained."

Mark Humphries is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario where he holds a SSHRC CGS and is completing his dissertation on the 1918 Influenza Pandemic under the direction of Dr. Jonathan Vance.

John Maker is a PhD candidate at the University of Ottawa where he is currently working on his dissertation, which examines what Canadian soldiers did with their 'spare time' to stave off boredom and to maintain morale during the Second World War.



Dear sir,

The analysis of death sentences and commutations in "Arbitrary Justice?: A Comparative Analysis of Canadian Death Sentences Passed and Commuted during the First World War" by Teresa Iacobelli (Winter 2007) has been long overdue.

Though the sample investigated was biased, because all instances were Canadian, it seems quite likely that a wider probe would reveal similar inconsistencies attributable to the timing of operations (planned or in process) and to concerns about the state of individual battalions.

A fundamental question here is why, given the Australian experience, the British and Canadians persisted in their belief that the application of the death penalty improved the discipline of their troops and the performance of their battalions.

Whatever his military shortcomings might have been, no Australian soldier was executed during World War I. Yet the Australian divisions were consistently among the best-performing divisions on the Western Front.

J.F. Doig  
Wolfville, NS

ps. Was the sketch accompanying the article correctly titled? It looks more like an interrogation by a "bad cop," prior to turning the prisoner over to a "good cop" who will offer him a seat, a



cigarette and a bit of sympathetic conversation. [Eds. note: the caption was the origin written by the artist.]

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Sir,

I have just started reading through Spring 2007 issue of CMH and as always I completely enjoy the magazine contents. While reading "Fighting Time: Gregg Centre and Royal Canadian Engineers Join Forces to Record New Brunswick's Past," by Lee Windsor and Lee Ellen Pottie, I was a more than a bit shocked to find that the Royal Canadian Engineers are being credited with helping you clear the Red Head site. Guys, I hate to tell you this, but the RCE has not existed since 1968!

A-JS-007-003/JD-001  
Customs and Traditions of the  
Canadian Military Engineers  
para 56, page 7-19 states:

In reaction to the public's rising criticism of the peacetime defence budget, the Federal Liberal Party promised in the 1963 election a full review of Canadian defence policy. In 1964 the Bill C-90 passed Parliament integrating the three services' headquarters and other activities such as recruiting and basic training. The unification of the services into a single force was presented to Parliament in Bill C-243 in December 1966. On 2 February 1968, the three traditional services of Canada's fighting force passed into history to be replaced by a single unified service, "The Canadian Forces." The Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, the RCAF Construction Engineering Branch and the RCN Civil Engineering Branch also ceased to exist at that date. A review of the engineering tasks facing the Canadian Forces (CF) led to the merging of the combat engineering, construction engineering, survey, and fire protection into one organization. It was named the Canadian Military Engineer (CME) Branch and officially designated as such on 1 April 1968.

Such was the case with all of the army Corps who during the same period became Branches. I hope this information clears up an apparent confusion over the correct name of the Engineers and that credit will be given to the CME for helping you with your project.

WO Storey, CD  
Mapping and Charting  
Establishment  
Canadian Military Engineers