

Gas Warfare

Gas had been considered as a weapon before war, but there was a general consensus that it was wholly “uncivilized”. Yet all that changed with trench warfare, a development that sparked a wide-ranging search for technologies that could break the deadlock by forcing soldiers to leave the trenches. Gas became acceptable and the types used changed from mere irritants with only short-term medical impact to ones with almost immediate lethality.



The Germans were the first to use gas on the battlefield on the Western Front. The amount of gas used was small and the results were not promising. The small quantity of the irritant gas released froze due to the cold weather and therefore did not disperse. Nevertheless, the Germans persevered and introduced



much more dangerous gases and these did have a significant effect. Chlorine gas, which destroys the respiratory organs in a few seconds, was used to devastating effect on the battlefield. In the war as a whole Germany was the greatest user of gas, followed by France and Great Britain.

The most widely used types were the aforementioned chlorine gas and the almost odorless mustard gas, a slow acting agent that causes internal and external bleeding and vomiting and frequently leads to death. Some supporters of gas warfare concluded that the lethality was neither necessary nor desirable. They reasoned that gas casualties who survived were a constant drain on medical facilities and detrimental to the enemy morale in the long-term.

Gas was not truly effective as it needed a long list of ideal conditions. It often failed due to adverse weather, especially the strength and direction of the prevailing wind and the temperature. It was quite common for gas to be blown back into the attackers’ faces by contrary winds. Aside from the drawbacks, gas attacks became more frequent as the war progressed. All sides quickly developed gas masks and became more sophisticated with time. These masks contained a filter which neutralized the gas.

