

2. The Use of Poison Gas

22 APRIL 1915

North of France, April 24. – There is no doubt that the action which has been proceeding about Ypres for a week, and which will probably be known in history as the second battle of Ypres, is the hardest and hottest which has yet developed on the extreme Western front. Indeed, no battle of the war has developed so much action on so concentrated a front. It is the third desperate attempt of the Germans since this war began to break through the combined British and Belgian lines and take the all-important City of Calais.

This series of attacks and counterattacks running along the whole line, developed into that general attack on the British lines with Calais for objective which the Germans probably had been planning ever since matters began to come to a deadlock in the Carpathians. The Germans, making full use of their artillery, launched infantry attacks in their old manner – close-locked. As formerly, the British and French slaughtered them heavily with machine-gun and rifle fire. Then on Thursday the Germans suddenly threw in that attack its asphyxiating bombs, which will doubtless become famous in this war. It succeeded in breaking the line of French near Bixschoote, although not to such an extent as the Germans claim in today's communique.

The nearest British support was a part of the Canadian contingent. Fighting with desperate bravery, the Canadians succeeded in recovering part of the lost ground. They are still at it today. On a favorable wind the sound of cannonading can be heard as far away as the coast towns.

The nature of the gasses carried by the German asphyxiating shells remain a mystery. Whatever gas it is, it spreads rapidly and remains close to the ground. It is believed not to be specially deadly – one that rather overpowers its victims and puts them hors de combat without killing many. Its effect at Bixschoote may have been due to panic caused by the novelty of the device. Its composition and manner of discharge are probably no mystery to the scientific artillerymen of the Allies. That such devices might be used in war has been known for a long time, but the positive prohibitions of The Hague Conference have prevented the more civilized nations of Europe from going far with experiments in this line.

(New York Tribune, April 27, 1915)

Boulogne, April 25. – The gaseous vapor which the Germans used against the French divisions near Ypres last Thursday, contrary to the rules of The Hague Convention, introduces a new element into warfare. The attack of last Thursday evening was preceded by the rising of a cloud of vapor, greenish gray and iridescent. That vapor settled to the ground like a swamp mist and drifted toward the French trenches on a brisk wind. Its effect on the French was a violent nausea and faintness, followed by an utter collapse. It is believed that the Germans, who charged in behind the vapor, met no resistance at all, the French at their front being virtually paralyzed.

Everything indicates long and thorough preparation for this attack. The work of sending out the vapor was done from the advanced German trenches. Men garbed in a dress resembling the harness of a diver and armed with retorts or generators about three feet high and connected with ordinary hose pipe turned the vapor loose towards the French lines. Some witnesses maintain that the Germans sprayed the earth before the trenches with a fluid which, being ignited, sent up the fumes. The German troops, who followed up this advantage with a direct attack, held inspirators in their mouths, thus preventing them from being overcome by the fumes.

In addition to this, the Germans appear to have fired ordinary explosive shells loaded with some chemical which had a paralyzing effect on all the men in the region of the explosion. Some chemical in

the composition of those shells produced violent watering of the eyes, so that the men overcome by them were practically blinded for some hours.

The effect of the noxious trench gas seems to be slow in wearing away. The men come out of their nausea in a state of utter collapse. Some of the rescued have already died from the aftereffects. How many of the men, left unconscious in the trenches when the French broke, died from the fumes it is impossible to say, since those trenches were at once occupied by the Germans.

This new form of attack needs for success a favorable wind. Twice in the day that followed the Germans tried trench vapor on the Canadians, who made on the right of the French position a stand which will probably be remembered as one of the heroic episodes of this war. In both cases the wind was not favorable, and the Canadians managed to stick through it. The noxious, explosive bombs were, however, used continually against the Canadian forces and caused some losses.
