

# The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

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## GASSING THE GASSERS

By William E. Moore

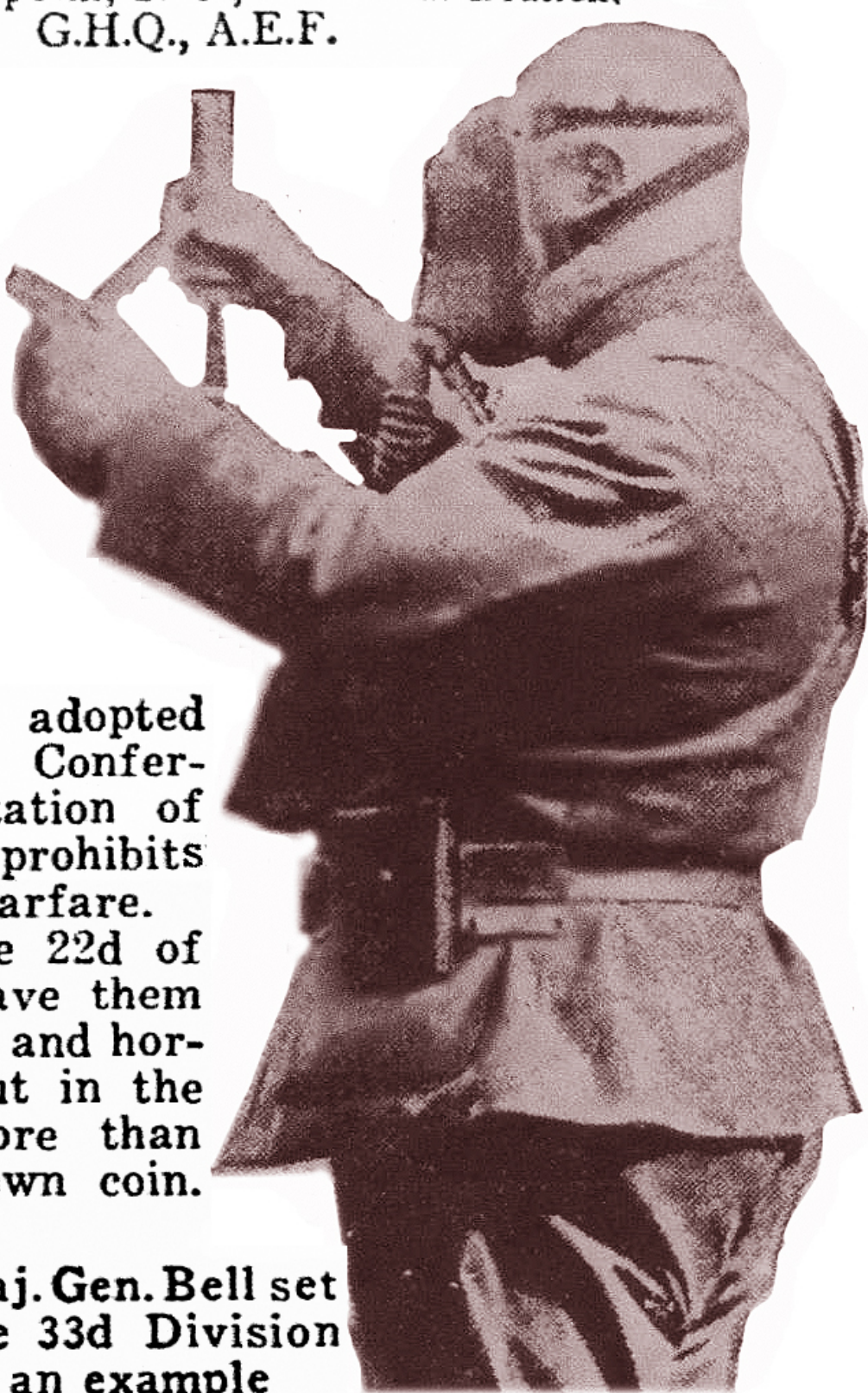
Formerly Captain, S. C., Historical Branch,  
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**I**T is more than an even bet that the ex-soldiers of the German army, if given a vote in the matter when their country is restored to good standing in the fellowship of nations, will subscribe to the Hughes resolution, adopted at the Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments, which prohibits the use of gas in warfare.

At Ypres, on the 22d of April, 1915, gas gave them a temporary victory and horrified the world, but in the end Fritz was more than paid back in his own coin.

He lived to curse the scientists and military leaders of

Maj. Gen. Bell set the 33d Division an example



U. S. Official.

There were smoke screens by land as well as by sea

his country who revived the use of gas as a weapon of war.

The word revived in this connection will be questioned by those who believe the Germans were the first people in the history of the world to use gas against their enemies. They were not. As far back as 673 A. D. the armies of the Byzantine rulers employed sulphurous dioxide in battle to confound their foes. It was generated then from

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quick lime, petroleum, sulphur and pitch. Whether some disarmament conference of those days decided that gas was too inhuman to be used remains a secret of history. We only know that from the days of the Eastern Empire until the Germans sent their lethal clouds against the Canadians at Ypres it was never employed again.

Because it was a new agent and an element not generally understood gas inspired a fear in all soldiers far out of proportion to its deadliness. Civilians and uninstructed troops thought of gas as an infernal and inhuman weapon, whereas available statistics indicate that it is not nearly so deadly as bullets and shells. Less than two percent of all the gas casualties in the American Army were fatal, while more than 24 percent caused death in the case of bullets and high explosive shells. German soldiers did not know this, however, in 1918, when they were being made the victims of heavy gas attacks by the Allies.

After Ypres the development of chemical warfare was rapid, so rapid in the Allied armies that it literally may be said to have left the Germans gasping for breath. The pace grew faster after the United States entered the field.

The Americans added several new gases to the chemical arsenal but they never invented anything that caused more discomfort than "skunk gas." That was not its scientific name, but the one given it by the men of the First Gas Regiment, who used it. The First Gas Regiment was the only American Chemical Warfare unit that reached France. Its activities are little known, even to the front-line troops with whom its elements fought, for in those days new tricks in gas were among the "hush, hush" features of the war. The Army talked about the death-dealing concoctions Edison and other wizards were rumored to be preparing but no one except a few scientists had any real information on the subject, and they did not talk.

"Skunk gas" never killed anybody, since it was not a lethal, that is to say, deadly mixture, nor was it intended to be. It was, however, the most unpleasant dose ever dished up by one army for another. Fritz hated it. When it fell in his territory he went away from there. On one occasion preciously preserved in the annals of the First Gas



*Gasping the Gassers*

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**Gas-mask drill at an American cantonment**

Regiment a little dose of "skunk" gave an American division two weeks respite from shelling.

Splendid soldier though he was, the Boche was exceedingly unimaginative. Anything that happened outside of routine confused and excited him greatly. The First Gas Regiment took particular delight in providing surprises for him. It never carried out two operations exactly alike. The British had previously given the Boche some bad turns, especially when they sprung the Livens projector on him. It took the German gas experts a year to solve that problem and by the time they had solved it the war was nearly over.

Besides introducing "skunk gas" to the Germans the Yankee gas troops took a hand in the biggest Livens projector attack ever directed against the Germans. It fell to the lot of one battalion of the gas regiment to go into action with the British, March 21, 1918, in the greatest gas bombardment in the world's history. The regiment at that time was only eight months old. It had been organized at Camp American University, Washington, D. C., in August, 1917. Originally called the 30th Engineers, it was popularly known in the United States as the "Hell Fire Regiment." On its arrival in France the name was changed to the First Gas Regiment. Colonel E. J. Atkisson was its commanding officer in the A. E. F.

Company B of the First Battalion was the outfit that participated in the first show. The attack was launched on a two-mile front extending from Lens to Hill 70 near Loos, and held by the Canadians. The British gas troops were from the Special Brigade, Royal Engineers. More than 500 tons of material had to be carried to the front lines in preparation for the offensive over ground that had been fought across for four years. Hundreds of men were engaged for almost a month in carrying forward the projectors, shells and other material. Since the sector was constantly raked by artillery and machine gun fire the work had to be done by night.



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A battery of Livens gas projectors being tried out at Chaumont

It was a tough job. The nature of the work was graphically described by a Yankee buck, who said in a moment of disgust: "This is a job for grave diggers, hod carriers and piano movers, instead of chemists, pipe fitters and mechanics."

When the Germans turned loose their first gas offensive at Ypres they employed cylinders about the size of ordinary oxygen tanks. These were placed on the parapet and uncorked when the wind was blowing in the Allies' direction. But in March, 1918, the technique of gas warfare had progressed far beyond such simple devices. Captain Livens of the British Army invented the projector which took his name in 1916. With that projector eight-inch drums containing thirty pounds of liquefied gas were hurled into the enemy trenches by high explosives, electrically fired. Upon landing among the enemy the drums, or bombs, were exploded by a timing device.

The Germans were a long time solving the mystery of the Livens projector. German pamphlets captured by the British contained the statement that the gas bombs were propelled through the air by a winged apparatus which flew off before the bombs alighted, and vanished no one knew where. However, when a complete British installation was captured before Cambrai in the fall of 1917, the mystery was dispelled and the Germans began to copy and even to improve upon the Englishman's invention.

For the combined Anglo-American attack of March 21st a position was selected just back of the outposts and directly opposite thickly-held sectors of the enemy trenches. Each night for three weeks, as soon as darkness fell, the material was pushed forward by trench light railways and hand trucks. From the trenches it was carried over the top by hand. Batteries of projectors were established in shallow trenches dug in the chalky soil.

These had to be carefully camouflaged to prevent detection by German aerial photographers. The foot tracks of the carrying parties had to be erased each morning at the end of the night's work. This was done by spreading loose soil over the paths with ordinary rakes.

In the Allied camps it was known that a big German offensive was about



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to open and the gas troops were worked overtime to forestall the attack in their sector of the line.

Everything was in readiness to "shoot the gas" on the night of March 18th but on that night and on the two succeeding ones the direction of the wind prevented. Weather conditions had to be absolutely favorable in order to protect the Allied troops. The danger area usually was considered to be about five miles deep but fatalities had been known to occur at a distance of twenty miles. Therefore, it was unsafe to take a chance of the wind changing and blowing gas back over the miles of ground jammed with British troops awaiting the expected onslaught.

Under such conditions the day of March 21st broke. The Kaiser's lines surged forward, but the attack swept to the right of the Canadians, leaving undisturbed the dispositions of the First Battalion of the American Gas Regiment. That night the wind blew gently over the Allied lines toward the enemy. Zero hour was set for 11 o'clock. Ten minutes before the hour shells fired in preparation for an enemy raid fell on the position and cut some of the wires connecting the projector batteries with the exploders.

Repairs were hastily made. At 11 o'clock all eyes were turned to the rear, searching the darkness for a signal. Right on the hour a red and green rocket soared up, a mile back of the gas troops. A soldier bent down and touched a button. A flash swept the sky, the earth trembled and there was a mighty roar as the projectors discharged their gas-filled drums.

Four thousand gas bombs fell on the German position and exploded in the trenches, releasing sixty tons of gas. The efficient "skunk gas" had been combined with the death-dealing stuff. Its nauseating fluid penetrated masks and caused severe vomiting among the German troops. They were compelled to remove their protectors and thus immediately fell victims of the lethal poison fired at them. Not a sound was heard from the German front line trenches the rest of the night.

But if the gas-drenched German infantry remained quiescent, their comrades made up for their inactivity. Immediately after the gas drums had exploded the rear areas woke into frenzied action. The enemy outposts filled the sky with Véry lights which illumined the sector so clearly that the gas clouds hanging over the earth could be seen from the American position. The Véry lights were followed by other signals, red and green, and then by a golden rain effect which fell like a cascade over the enemy territory. These signals were calls for a protecting artillery barrage. The German artillerymen complied, putting down an intensive curtain fire of shells which, fortunately, was slightly miscalculated as to distance and fell in the rear of the American projectors. After a moment of sharp, fierce shelling the guns ceased firing. The gas troops took advantage of this pause to withdraw to the shelter of the Canadian support trenches.

Their retreat was well timed. They were scarcely within the protecting dugouts before the Boche shells began coming over again in even greater numbers. The German artillery had begun firing before learning that their



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comrades in the advance trenches had been treated to a gas bombardment. When the "alert" sounded the gunners had paused long enough to adjust their gas masks. In that interval the Americans got away, but not entirely without casualties. Several men were wounded and Private William K. Neal was killed, the first member of his regiment to lose his life in action.

As soon as the gas forces had reached the shelter of the trenches Canadian machine gunners opened fire. They were joined by all the Allied artillery; which roared on a ten-mile front with guns of every caliber. This harassing fire was kept up all night. The enemy gave back in counter fire shell for shell. Throughout this big gun duel nothing was heard from the German infantry.

The reason for this was learned next morning when Allied airplanes soared over the enemy lines to ascertain the effect of the gas attack. This reconnaissance revealed terrible havoc in the German trenches. Reports of the attack issued by the German General Staff, and captured later, stated that the total casualties from the gas had exceeded five thousand and that it had been necessary to relieve the entire division on account of its shattered morale.

Thus, near the same spot where the Germans had shocked the civilized world in 1915 with their gas attack they learned the heavy penalty they were to pay for having introduced this new element into warfare. Developments indicated that they had learned the lesson well. When they renewed the offensive eighteen days later the American gas regiment's sector was not disturbed.

Before the First Gas Regiment withdrew from the British front one of its members won the first Distinguished Service Cross that fell to its lot in France. While returning from the front lines on the morning of April 9th, Sergeant A. W. Jones came under heavy shell fire with other members of his platoon. Several men were killed and others wounded. Sergeant Jones reached cover safely but persisted in returning to the exposed ground to search for wounded comrades. He carried four of them to safety through the barrage.

By the time the Yankee gassers reached the St. Mihiel salient in July they looked upon themselves as veterans. They had measured themselves against the Boche and felt that they were not only his equal but his superior in ladling out toxic doses. Whenever the enemy grew particularly obnoxious in any quarter these newly-trained chemical warriors delighted in treating him to something nasty.

When the 82d Division was holding a part of the line in the Toul sector in July there were several spots so active that the men usually came out of the line with bad cases of nerves. The Germans were very touchy about the Metz road. The 82d Division held the Bois de Jury, a strongpoint which commanded part of that road. To insure against attack there the Germans shelled it and the adjacent villages of Mandres and Beaumont every day, making circulation thereabouts both difficult and dangerous.

The target to which the Germans gave their greatest attention was the intersection of the main street in Mandres with two other roads, one of



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which connected with the Metz road about eight hundred yards away. At this intersection an American M. P. was stationed to halt all vehicles and make the occupants proceed on foot. There were almost daily casualties.

The French Intelligence Section reported a German battalion P. C. opposite the Americans in the Bois de Jury and it was concluded that this P. C. was responsible for the shelling. Colonel Atkisson was asked to give the German outfit a dose of gas. "Skunk gas" had not previously been employed in that part of the line and therefore it was decided to mix some of that choice concoction with the lethal gas that would be used.

The projectors were to be placed in the Bois de Jury. On the first night of the preparation the lorries carrying up the material were allowed to pass the Mandres crossroads and proceed to the Metz road, but the Germans heard the noise of unloading and got busy with their artillery. Thereafter all equipment was carried a thousand yards by handpower.

Company C finally dug in 560 projectors, each weighing 90 pounds, and placed alongside them the necessary gas drums. D day was set for August 5th, with midnight the zero hour. The company left its quarters in Mandres after dark and went to its position.

Captain Lowenberg, commanding, was at his post receiving wind reports. These were favorable and a light, drizzling rain helped still more. The captain sent two runners with duplicate messages to fire at zero hour. The guns were all electrically connected to be fired in unison by mine exploders.

The hour arrived.

Five hundred and sixty gas-filled projectiles, with the roar of as many express trains, fell upon the German P. C., five hundred yards away. After an interval of twelve seconds the eight and a half tons of lethal and "skunk gas" burst on the target.

The doughboys knew the animal in whose honor "skunk gas" was named. Wherever its odor spread people, as has been said, had to leave suddenly.

As Company C boarded trucks to return to quarters an observation balloon and an airplane rose out of the mists of dawn and sailed away to check up on the results of the midnight shoot. The report came back that the Germans had evacuated their P. C.

For several weeks thereafter the Metz road around Mandres was a quiet highway.

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