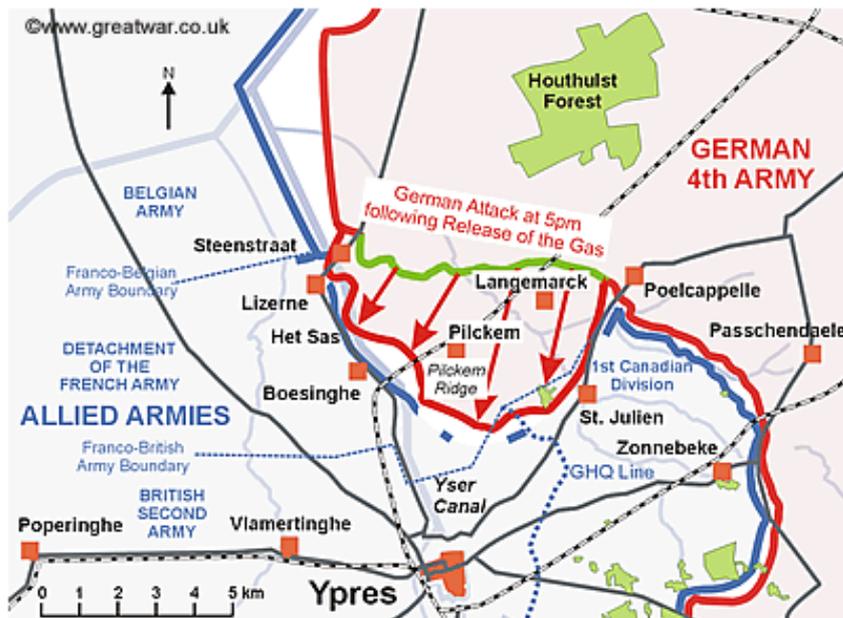


## The Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1915



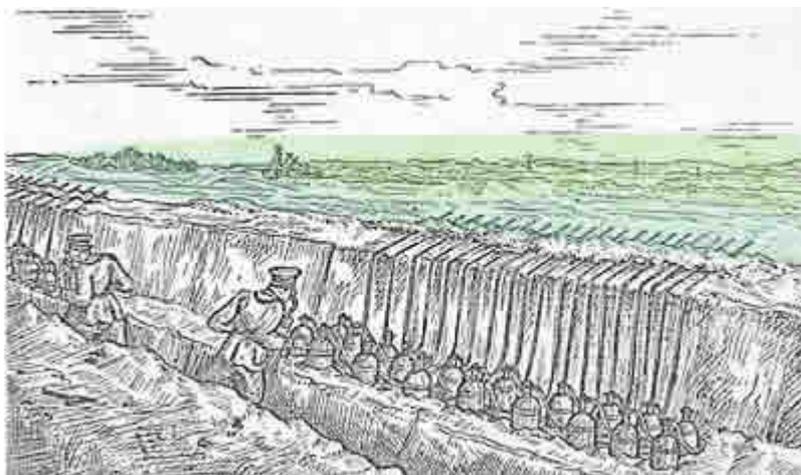
### The gas valves are opened

22 April 1915: 17.00

At exactly 5pm [*British time - 6pm German time*] the valves on the gas bottles were opened. The gas immediately began to flow through the lead pipes laid over the breastworks of the front line fire trench. Within 10 minutes the cylinders were empty. **Leutnant Max Tiessen** wrote in his history of the **213 Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment**:

“It was an indescribable, unforgettable image for those of us witnessing this first gas attack at close range.” (1)

“A hellish, sulphurous haze...”



These strange clouds were seen by many British observers and a number of senior officers, one being the Commander of the British **Second Army**, **General Smith-Dorrien**, who was returning on foot to Ypres after a visit to the fighting at **Hill 60**. The general commanding the British **27th Division**, **Major-General Snow**, witnessed the gas cloud from his divisional Headquarters at **Potijze**.

It was also seen by the general commanding the **1st Canadian Division**, **Lieutenant-General Alderson**, who was with the Canadian Artillery commander, **Brigadier-General Burstall**, visiting the 12th Canadian Field Artillery Battery located behind the **Gravenstafel Ridge**, about 900 metres north-east of **St. Julien**.

The British were witnessing the opening moments of the first gas attack on the Western Front.

The greenish-yellow clouds were seen to spread laterally along the ground. Carried along on a gentle breeze the two clouds joined up and turned into a bluish-white mist. According to the British Official History it looked like the sort of mist which hangs low over water meadows on a frosty night.<sup>(1)</sup>

Blown on a north-easterly wind, i.e. in a south-easterly direction, the bluish-white mist, which was in fact a deadly cloud of asphyxiating gas, rolled across no-man's-land towards the French troops on the left of the **1st Canadian Division**. The French troops would shortly find themselves enveloped by choking clouds of poisonous gas.

## **A Living Wall of Green Fog**

The following account by a British soldier was published in The Times newspaper after the event. When the gas was released from the German front line at 5.00pm this soldier was with his battalion at rest from trench duties. It is believed that he was located somewhere to the north-east of **Ypres** in the rear area of the British front line.

"On Thursday 22 April at about five-thirty in the afternoon, one of our patrols reported that our French Allies to the left of the Canadian division were suddenly withdrawing to their rear on the **Ypres-Langemarck road**. The strong north-easterly wind, which was blowing from the enemy trenches in the direction of the French front line, was carrying a suffocating and evil odour with it, which was evidently produced by some sort of poisonous gas.

A living wall of green fog, about four feet in height, moved towards the French line and spread out to a width of about 180 metres. As the wall of smoke grew higher the whole area disappeared into it. Suddenly the rifle fire from the French increased, but gradually died down, as is often the case where soldiers do not have a particular objective to fire at and are simply defending themselves by firing in the hope of hitting something.

Soon we heard strange shouts coming from the green fog. The cries became weaker and more incoherent. Then masses of soldiers tumbled upon us from out of the fog and collapsed. Most weren't wounded but they had expressions of terror on their faces. These piteous retreating men ranked with some of the best soldiers in the world; their cold-bloodedness and courage was almost legendary. Now they were staggering along like drunks."<sup>(2)</sup>