Poisonous Gas

In their search for a weapon that could break the stalemate on the western front, generals turned to a frightening new weapon - poisonous gas. On 22 April 1915 near Ypres, the Germans released chlorine gas from cylinders and allowed the wind to blow the thick, green vapour across to the Allied trenches. The first to suffer were Algerian soldiers of the French army. Their throats burned, they spat blood and struggled to breathe. Thousands died.

As the war went on, gas technology developed. Gas masks were issued. Gas-shells were fired into trenches. Both sides used new gasses, which could blister skin, eyes and lungs. Gas did not help either side to win the war, but soldiers came to see it as a terrifying weapon and a sign that war had changed forever.

Over 60 different types of gas were used. It was the hardest of all the weapons to control. No matter how gas was delivered, a change of wind direction could blow it back at the side that had used it. Even when an attack had finished, gas could be dangerous. Mustard gas soaked the trenches and could cause blistering for days afterwards. Although relatively few soldiers were killed by gas in the war, others found that it caused long-term health problems and even helped to kill them over forty years later.