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Chemical/Gas Warfare - WWI Gas Mask

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, T. Gum, Site Admin.)

Tactics in The Great War were heavily impacted by emerging technologies, some of which were most terrible at afflicting great pain physically and cardiovascularly.

The use of chemical based weaponry was developed many years prior to World War One however the delivery systems and scale of use had not yet been seen. Used to demoralize, inflict terror, and wreak havoc in the enemy line, it was especially dreadful once trench warfare entered the framework. Many times the chemical agents (gasses) used were heavy and therefore would linger close to the ground slowly making its way into the trenches and dugout.



Photo of gas alarm, rotated by hand. Credit: War Museum Canada.

Protections against such weaponry included the uniforms themselves along with dampened or soaked blankets hung over the openings of the dugouts. When the alarm was sounded, by use of bells or clackers, or through men yelling, "GAS!", the men would don their issued gas masks, such as the one pictured. It would be swiftly yanked from its haversack, thrown over ones head and face allowing the user to breath easier.



MM2017.9.5A-C, photo of haversack, gas mask, and filter. PMM Collection.

The mask and haversack above was owned by William H. Klaban Sr.

William Harry Klaban Sr. was drafted in 1917 at age 27. He was working as an assistant superintendent at Carey Furnaces, Carnegie Illinois Steel in Rankin, PA. Klaban trained for 8 weeks at Camp Lee, VA as an infantryman and 4 weeks as an engineer. He went to France with the 80th Division (known as the Blue Ridge Division), 305th Engineers. According to family history, Klaban was gassed twice during his service in France.

The effectiveness of the gas mask depended on many things including but not limited to having a proper seal between face and mask, the mask canister being effective at filtering, and the type of gas/chemical being used.

World War One, The Great War, was indeed a war unparalleled... and one could argue with such death and destruction still yet unmatched.