

PRIMARY SOURCE **Poison Gas**
by William Pressey

During World War I, the Germans introduced the use of poison gases—chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas—in warfare. William Pressey, a British bombardier or noncommissioned artillery officer, was gassed by the Germans at Messines Ridge on June 7, 1917. According to this excerpt from his eyewitness account, what were the effects of phosgene gas?

We had been shooting most of the night and the Germans had been hitting back with shrapnel, high explosive and gas shells. With the terrific noise and blinding flashes of gunfire, if a lull occurred for only a few minutes and you were leaning against something, you had just to close your eyes and you were asleep. Nearing daylight we were told to rest. We dived into the dugout, I pulled off my tunic [a type of military jacket] and boots and was asleep in no time at all.

I was awakened by a terrific crash. The roof came down on my chest and legs and I couldn't move anything but my head. I thought, 'So this is it, then.' I found I could hardly breathe. Then I heard voices. Other fellows with gas helmets on, looking very frightening in the half-light, were lifting timber off me and one was forcing a gas helmet on me. Even when you were all right, to wear a gas helmet was uncomfortable, your nose pinched, sucking air through a canister of chemicals. As I was already choking I remember fighting against having this helmet on.

The next thing I knew [I] was being carried on a stretcher past our officers and some distance from the guns. I heard someone ask, 'Who's that?' 'Bombardier Pressey, sir.' 'Bloody hell.' I was put into an ambulance and taken to the base, where we were placed on the stretchers side by side on the floor of a marquee [a large tent with open sides], with about twelve inches between. I suppose I resembled a kind of fish with my mouth open gasping for air. It seemed as if my lungs were gradually shutting up and my heart pounded away in my ears

like the beat of a drum. On looking at the chap next to me I felt sick, for green stuff was oozing from the side of his mouth.

To get air into my lungs was real agony and the less I got the less the pain. I dozed off for short periods but seemed to wake in a sort of panic. To ease the pain in my chest I may subconsciously have stopped breathing, until the pounding of my heart woke me up. I was always surprised when I found myself awake, for I felt sure that I would die in my sleep. So little was known about treatment for various gases, that I never had treatment for phosgene, the type I was supposed to have had. And I'm sure that the gas some of the other poor fellows had swallowed was worse than phosgene. Now and then orderlies would carry out a stretcher.

*from William Pressey in Michael Moynihan, ed., *People at War 1914–1918* (David & Charles, 1973). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., *Eyewitness to History* (New York: Avon, 1987), 473–474.*

Research Option

Writing Expository Paragraphs

Find out more about the use of poison gas by both the Germans and the Allies during World War I. What were the effects of different types of poison gas? How did soldiers avoid being gassed? How were victims treated? Has chemical warfare been practiced in other modern wars besides World War I? Share your findings by writing a column for a health newsletter.