



In the trenches, 1915. Canadian troops in the frontline trenches just after arriving in France. In a very short time, their trenches would take on a much more advanced state. (LAC, PA-107237)

After two weeks, their British teachers judged the Canadians able to take over a section of the front, and on 3 March the division relieved the 7th British Division in the area of Fleurbaix, about 12 miles south of Ypres. The trenches in this area were very shallow because water was close to the surface of the ground and they had to be built up with breastworks of dirt and sandbags. The Canadians spent a rather quiet week during which little happened.

Things soon became more lively. Bowing to pressure from his allies, French agreed to undertake a limited attack on the Aubers Ridge near Neuve Chapelle, to the right of the Canadian sector. On 10 March the attack commenced and Alderson's Canadian division was tasked with distracting the enemy opposite by engaging in a concentrated display of artillery and rifle fire. The British attack was initially successful but a breakdown in communications, confusion and, above all, a shortage of artillery ammunition, limited its success. The Canadian Division, however, had a fine time making noise, although again the Ross rifle demonstrated that it was prone to jamming. Even worse, repeated firing often dislodged the bayonet, forcing a man to expose himself to recover it. The Canadians remained in the Neuve Chapelle area until early April when the division was sent to the Ypres Salient.

This Salient, a projection into the German lines around Ypres, had resulted from the fighting of the previous autumn. It was a low, flat area cut across by canals and dykes, and exposed

on three sides to German observation and artillery fire because the enemy held the higher ground. Between 14 and 17 April the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigades took up positions along the Gravenstafel Ridge northwest of Ypres, while the 1st Brigade remained out of the line as the corps reserve. On the left flank of the Canadian Division were two French divisions scheduled to be relieved in the near future by British troops. Along with the three other battalions of the 1st Brigade, the 3rd Battalion went into billets near the hamlet of Vlamertinghe, two miles west of Ypres. The men of the unit were glad of the rest period but what they did not know was that, shortly after the Canadians arrived in the Ypres area, German deserters brought disconcerting information that an enemy attack was planned on the Salient and it would involve the use of poison gas.

"Need ammunition and stretcher bearers": The 2nd battle of Ypres, 22-23 April 1915

This information was accurate. The Russians had recently launched a successful offensive against Austria-Hungary and Vienna's appeals for help forced the Germans to transfer major forces to the eastern front. To disguise this movement and to test out a frightening new weapon, the German high command decided to launch a limited offensive against the Ypres Salient. They planned to use more than 5,000 cylinders of chlorine gas and the attack was to commence at 5.45 A.M. on Thursday, 22 April, with the intention of erasing the Salient and capturing

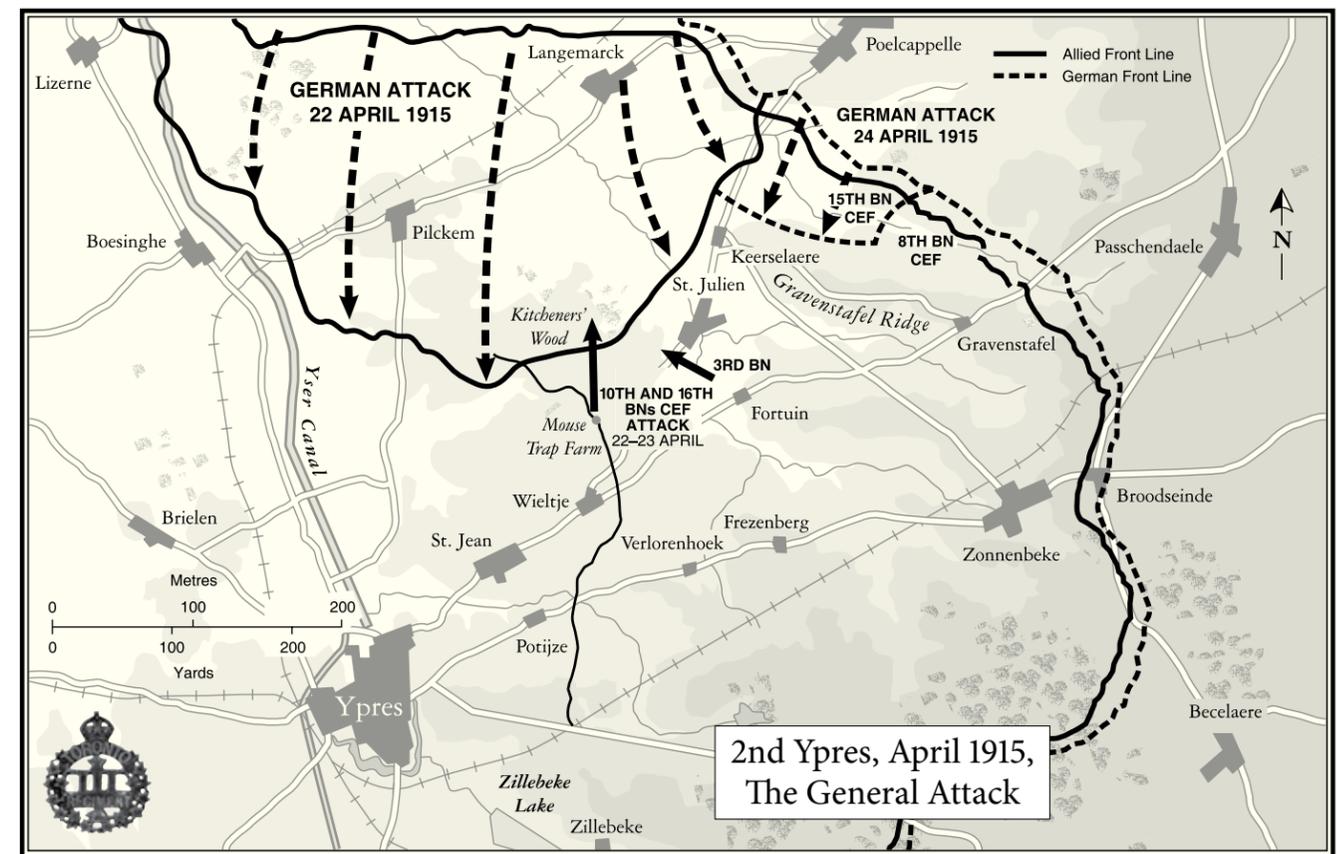
Ypres. Gas is a weapon dependent on the weather, however, and since the winds were not favourable, the attack was postponed. Late that afternoon, a southerly breeze sprang up and at 4 P.M. the German artillery brought down a furious bombardment on the French and Canadian forward positions. An hour later Allied soldiers saw a yellowish-green mist moving toward their trenches.

Although it did cause some casualties in the Canadian line, the two French divisions on the left of the Canadian sector bore the brunt of the gas attack. An alert medical officer, Captain F. A. C. Scrimger, quickly concluded that the gas in use was chlorine and saved many lives by telling men to urinate in their handkerchiefs and to hold them over their mouths and noses as urine would crystallize the gas and reduce its effect. The 2nd and 3rd Canadian Brigades stood firm but most of the men of the two French divisions fled south toward Ypres. A Canadian artillery officer, moving north from that town, watched in amazement as a mass of French ambulances, ammunition wagons and transport vehicles galloped across the countryside "through hedges, ditches, and barbed wire" with artillery horses "being used for quick transportation, sometimes with two and three men on their backs."³⁸ Isolated groups of French soldiers did make stands, but in the space of two hours the Germans (advancing slowly because they themselves were afraid of this terrible new weapon) had broken through four miles of front line and were less than two miles from Ypres, their primary ob-

jective. The left flank of the two Canadian brigades was now up in the air.

Thursday, 22 April 1915, was a glorious spring day, warm and bright, and wild flowers were blooming around the Toronto Regiment's billets at Vlamertinghe. Late in the afternoon many officers and men were playing baseball or watching two inter-company football (soccer) matches near their billets. Ypres had been under intermittent shelling for several days and the men of the 3rd Battalion were used to a steady traffic of civilians fleeing the bombardment. As the afternoon wore on, however, this traffic increased and men noticed that the people of Vlamertinghe were packing up to join the exodus. By early evening a new element had joined the columns of people moving south – French soldiers. "Reeling down the roads from the north, and across the fields," they could be seen "dropping into the ditches in convulsions of vomiting, and striving to assuage their torments with the polluted drainage water."³⁹ All attempts to halt these fugitives or elicit information from them proved in vain as the sufferers could only wheeze out the words: "Gaz! Gaz! Asphyxié! Asphyxié!"⁴⁰

Matters were almost as confusing at the higher headquarters but gradually some clarification was made. Brigadier-General Richard Turner's 3rd Brigade, whose western flank had been left wide open by the French flight, was trying frantically to cobble together a defence line. It ran along the road from Poelcappelle through Kerselaere to the village of St. Julien. In response to



MAP BY CHRIS JOHNSON FROM GRAVES, CENTURY OF SERVICE: THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTH ALBERTA LIGHT HORSE