

## What do the stories of the 'often forgotten armies' reveal about the Western Front?

It is **22 April, 1915**. It is a glorious spring day in **Ypres**. Birds sing. The day wears on in cigarettes and quiet talking. It is almost boring. If the clock in Ypres town square could still chime, it would ring four times: 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The Germans begin shelling the British and French lines. The men retreat to their dugouts.

Then the shelling stops. Some soldiers from Algeria – now part of the French army - hear a 'hissing' noise. They watch as yellowish-green clouds drift towards them across no man's land.

The **Algerians and Moroccans** fighting with the French are both North Africans and white colonialists. They watch as the clouds come closer. They think it is smoke and prepare for attack. There are no gas masks in their packs.

But no men appear. They do not realise that the clouds are the enemy. Not until the heavy vapour slides down into their trench. Then the gargled screams and desperate splutters begin.

Many collapse, others cough up a burning yellow fluid. The **chlorine gas** attacks tissue and membranes: most are temporarily blinded, while others die with frothing bubbles gurgling in their throats.

The French and North African troops who leave their trenches to escape this new weapon are struck down by old ones – machine guns and rifles. As the gas spreads, birds literally fall from the skies. The rats die, too.

The Africans try to communicate their distress and desperation in broken French and in their own languages. They are without officers, and many are without weapons. They rush backwards through gas and bullets. A French soldier later wrote:

*'It was impossible to understand what the Africans said, but from the way they coughed and pointed to their throats, it was evident, if not suffering from the effects of gas, they were thoroughly scared.'*

Meanwhile, the Germans advance into the four-mile-wide gap opened up by the gas attack. The Germans advance two miles, capturing a large portion of the Ypres **Salient**.

*Chlorine gas was first used on the Western Front by the Germans in the Second Battle of Ypres. The heaviest part of the gas cloud hit the Algerians. Other troops, including Canadian soldiers, were also affected. On this day (22 April 1915), 6,000 men fell victim to poison gas.*

*During the war, around 30,000 Africans died fighting on the side of France alone.*

