



## **The Special Companies of the Royal Engineers (poison gas)**

No Special Companies existed in 1914. They were a war time invention. The Great War was the first in which chemical weapons were deployed.

The first use of poison gas, 22 April 1915

The concept of large concentrations of a poison gas was unfamiliar, and barely believable from a practical or moral viewpoint. It was specifically banned by the Hague Convention of 1907.

The Germans attacked, on 22 April 1915 near Langemarck. Chlorine has a powerful irritant action on the lungs and mucous membranes;

Allied reaction was one of outrage and much propaganda capital was made of the German use of gas, but by mid-May 1915, after gas had been used again in the Ypres Salient on several more occasions, both French and British defences were already in place. The first batch of gas helmets (flannel bags with talc eye-pieces), enough to issue 16 to each infantry battalion, were provided for machine-gunners. Men already knew by then that a piece of gauze or cotton wadding, soaked in urine, provided a crude protection. Vermoral sprayers were issued, to neutralise any gas that hung in the trenches.

The first Special Companies are formed

As early as 3 May 1915 the British Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, authorised the preparation of measures to retaliate against the German use of poison gas

The Special Brigade is formed

Despite the limited results achieved by the cloud gas discharge at Loos, it was believed sufficiently successful to warrant further development. One of the first acts of Sir Douglas Haig on his appointment as Commander-in-Chief was to request that the War Office expand the four Special Companies of the RE into a more substantial force,

. The Flame Projector Sections arrived in France 26 June 1916. The principal base in France was established at Helfaut.