

Following the horrific death of his young friend - Alexis Helmer - during the Second Battle of Ypres, Major John McCrae (a Canadian medical doctor from Guelph, Ontario) wrote "In Flanders Fields."

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*



McCrae's poem was published in the British magazine, *Punch*, in December of 1915. It was soon printed elsewhere, including the United States (then contemplating whether to join the war).

During the late afternoon of April 22, 1915, the Second Battle of Ypres began. (The First Battle of Ypres—near a town in northern Belgium of the same name—took place during the autumn of 1915.) The Second Battle produced massive casualties:

Finally, after four days of severe fighting, most of the Canadian forces were withdrawn on 26 April [1915]. About 6000 officers and men of the Canadian Division had been killed, wounded, captured, or had simply disappeared. ("Ypres: Inexperienced Canadians Hold the Line," article from The Canadian Encyclopedia online.)



During June of 1915, McCrae was transferred to Northern France where he set up a hospital (referred to as No. 3 Canadian) at Dannes-Camiers (near [Boulogne-sur-Mer](#)). The conditions were atrocious.

Still working near Boulogne, McCrae developed pneumonia and died on the 28th of January, 1918. By that time, he was a Lt. Colonel.

His poem remains the most famous written during the first world war. In this video clip, the 15-line work of art is read by [Anthony Davies](#).

It was also during the Second Battle of Ypres, in 1915, that Germany first used chemicals as a weapon of war on the Western Front. Chlorine gas (in April) and mustard gas (in June) caused men to die in horrifying ways.



One soldier - Lance Sgt. Elmer Cotton - lived to tell about it:

It [chlorine gas] produces a flooding of the lungs - it is an equivalent of death to drowning, only on dry land.

The effects are these - a splitting headache and terrific thirst (to drink water is instant death), a knife-edge of pain in the lungs and the coughing up of a greenish froth off the stomach and the lungs, ending finally in insensibility and death.

The colour of the skin turns a greenish black and yellow ... and the eyes assume a glassy stare. It is a fiendish death to die. (Lance Sergeant Elmer Cotton, quoted by Scott Christianson, in *Fatal Airs*, [page 31](#).)

Despite such awful reports, of battle activities on the fields of Flanders, red poppies were growing in those same war-scarred fields. What do we know about *them* ?

Credits:

Video clip, featuring "In Flanders Fields" - as read by [Anthony Davies](#) - is online, courtesy worcesterjonny's channel at YouTube.

The photos displayed inside the text, from [Library and Archives Canada](#) and [Australian War Memorial](#), have the following descriptions and sources:

Street in Ypres, during July, 1916. Online via [Library and Archives Canada](#); MIKAN no. 3403739.

A notice, on the ruins of Ypres Cathedral, says: “This is holy ground. No stone of this fabric may be taken away. It is a heritage for all civilised peoples. By order, Town Mayor, Ypres.” Online via Australian War Memorial, P00735.019.

Unidentified Canadian soldier, with mustard-gas burns, following Germany’s introduction of chemical weapons during the Second Battle of Ypres. Online via Library and Archives Canada; MIKAN no. 3194270.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/In-Flanders-Fields-Story-behind-the-Famous-Poem-by-John-McCrae>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/In-Flanders-Fields-Story-behind-the-Famous-Poem-by-John-McCrae>

Media Stream

Ypres - Street Scene July 1916

The Belgian town of Ypres was massively damaged during World War I.

More than one battle occurred there as German forces initially ignored Belgium's declared neutrality, then vainly tried, again, to capture the Allies' last-hold in Belgium.

This image, of a street in Ypres, depicts the damage which the town endured during July of 1916.

Curators, at Library and Archives Canada, provide the [background for the Battle of Ypres](#):

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the German army swept into France through Belgium. The invasion of Belgium, whose neutrality was guaranteed by Great Britain, brought the British Empire—including Canada—into the war.

The German offensive came close to capturing Paris, but it was defeated at the Battle of the Marne. By the fall, the opposing armies were deadlocked, occupying a line of trenches stretching from Switzerland to the English Channel.

Early in 1915, the first Canadian troops arrived in Europe to serve with the British Expeditionary Force. In April, the Canadian 1st Division took up position in the front lines northeast of the Belgian town of Ypres, beside an Algerian division of the French army. As it happened, this was the spot the Germans had chosen for their next attempt to break the Allied lines.



The Germans launched their attack on April 22, 1915. They began their assault by releasing a cloud of chlorine gas, the first time that lethal gas had been used in warfare.

The gas cloud rolled over the Algerian troops, who were suffocated or fled in terror. This opened a four-mile hole in the line on the Canadians' left flank. The Germans advanced through the gap, but Canadian units were shifted over to contain the damage. A series of desperate counterattacks, including Canadian assaults on Kitcheners Wood and Mauser Ridge, managed to stabilize the line.

On April 24, the Germans launched another gas attack, this time directly at the Canadians. Despite having only clothes wetted with water or urine tied over their mouths as a defense against the lung-searing gas, the Canadian infantrymen stood their ground.

For a week, the fighting see-sawed around Gravenstafel Ridge and the village of St. Julien, as the British and Canadians fought tenaciously against overwhelming odds. In the end, the Germans failed to break through.

Most Canadian troops were pulled out of the fighting by April 26, but one battalion—the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, which was attached to a British division—served through to the end of the battle in late May.

The Second Battle of Ypres was the Canadians' introduction to the First World War. They had proved themselves first-class soldiers, but the cost had been high: 6,714 Canadians were killed, wounded, or made prisoners of war in defending Ypres. Click on the image for a better view.

Image online via Canada. Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada/PA-000316.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ypres-Street-Scene-July-1916>

Ypres - Holy Ground

This sign, along a road in Ypres, notes the profound sacrifice made in the Belgian town where so many people died during World War I.

The image, online courtesy the Canadian War Museum, has a story behind it. [The story](#) includes why the town was so important to the Allies:

The Second Battle of Ypres marked the Canadians' first major engagement.

An Important Allied Position



In 1915, the Germans were attacking Russia in the east. On the Western Front, they were mostly on the defensive, though they continued to mount local attacks if conditions were favorable.

To probe Allied defenses, cover the movement of troops to the Eastern Front, and test their new weapon, chlorine gas, the Germans prepared for a limited offensive in Belgium in spring 1915 against the Ypres salient, a bulge in the Allied lines. The last major Belgian town in Allied hands, Ypres provided a defensive position from which to protect French ports on the English Channel.

It had to be held.

Click on the image for a better view.

Image online via [Canadian War Museum](#).

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ypres-Holy-Ground>

Ypres - Mustard-Gas Burns

When Germany began to use chemical weapons, during World War I, one of the soldiers who was badly injured from a gas attack was the unidentified Canadian depicted in this photo.

He is suffering from mustard-gas burns.

The Canadian War Museum describes what happened when Canadians were impacted by these [gas attacks](#):

Canadians Gassed in Battle

On 22 April [1915], two Canadian brigades were in the front lines, with a third in reserve near Ypres. At 5 p.m., the Germans released gas against the French 45th (Algerian) Division to the Canadians' left.



An enormous green-yellow gas cloud, several kilometres long, drifted towards the French lines. When it rolled over their positions, French troops either suffocated or fled, their eyes and throats burning from the chlorine.

Most of the gas missed the Canadians, but the French retreat had exposed the Canadian's left flank and threatened the destruction of the whole Allied position in the salient. General Alderson's units shifted positions to cover the gap, but the German gas attack had torn a huge hole, several kilometres wide, in the Allied line.

From 22 April to 25 April, the Canadians fought tenaciously to defend this exposed position. Outnumbered, outgunned, and outflanked, on the 24th they faced a second, this time direct, chlorine gas attack.

The Canadians counterattacked to stall the German advance, and then slowly gave ground, buying precious time for British troops to be rushed forward.

The photo, of the Canadian soldier, is online via the Canadian War Museum.

Image online via [Canadian War Museum](#).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Ypres-Mustard-Gas-Burns>