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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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## Chemical weapons: The Devastating Effect Of Their Use Throughout History

This Wednesday marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first large-scale implementation of chemical weapons (CW) in warfare. On Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1915, near the Belgian town of Ypres close to the French border, German forces released a deadly greenish fog into the air – chlorine gas – and watched as it dissipated, caught the wind and drifted silently towards Allied soldiers.

Chlorine gas was only one of around 50 different such weapons to be used by troops during the First World War. One of the most popular and most shocking was mustard gas, which affected not only the respiratory tract, but skin, too.

Photographs of soldiers suffering from the devastating effects of mustard gas – a “blister agent”- can be easily found, and make for extremely distressing viewing. In one example, a soldier is bolstered up in bed by two nurses, his eyes shut tight with pain, his skin marked by large, bulbous blisters.

In John Singer Sargent’s 1919 painting *Gassed* a line of nine soldiers blinded during a mustard gas attack walk single-file, aided by two others, while around them other affected men lie bandaged and incapacitated.

Chemical warfare was used by all sides during World War One and is estimated to have caused 90,000 deaths, as well as more than a million casualties between 1915 and 1918. By the end of the war, 125,000 tons of chemical weapons had been expended.

Despite the horror caused by CWs during the First World War, and contrary to the terms of the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which prohibited their use in international warfare, many countries continued to deploy them in the succeeding years.

Although they were scarcely used in Europe during the Second World War, their terrible efficacy was exploited by the Japanese in China during the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), primarily against prisoners of war and civilians.

According to the website for the Royal Society of Chemistry, since 1945 over 50,000 Japanese chemical weapons have been found scattered across 90 sites in China and have “reportedly caused 2000 injuries and even a few fatalities”.

This last example demonstrates one of the most significantly harmful characteristics of chemical weapons: the long-term damage to victims. CWs have a sustained effect upon the human body and these effects can even be passed on across generations.

Between 1961 and 1971, at the height of the Vietnam War, US forces used a cocktail of herbicides known as *Agent Orange* to defoliate areas of the country in order to expose North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces.

The harmful effects of these chemicals have since been strongly felt by US veterans of the war and members of the Vietnamese population. Among the illnesses now considered to have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange are Leukemia, Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma and prostate cancer.

Whilst acknowledging the damage done to US veterans by *Agent Orange*, the US government has failed to accept responsibility for the prolonged effects of the operation on the Vietnamese people, whose claims have since been supported by independent investigations.