The Reader's Digest

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The Truth About Poison Gas

Condensed from McClure's Magazine (Oct. '23)

Related by Gen. Amos A. Fries to H. A. Mount

POISON GAS is forever outlawed! Universally condemned in public opinion, its use was specifically renounced by resolution of the Washington Conference. And yet, each of the four signers of this pact is going ahead, today, full tilt with the development of poison gas as a weapon! So is every other important nation on earth.

Why? *Because of the practical certainty that the next war will be fought with poison gas*— with devastating gas used on a scale we have never even imagined hitherto. In spite of all our statesmen have done or can do, that is the inescapable fact. And for this we have the word of no less an authority than Brigadier General Amos A. Fries, Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service, of the United States Army.

"The time has come to tell the truth about poison gas and chemical warfare," General Fries declares. "In speaking on this subject, I am treading on forbidden ground. The official position of our Government, and of this department, is that chemical warfare is a closed incident. We have agreed never again to engage in it. Why then do we continue to maintain this Chemical Warfare Service?

"I will tell you: it is because we dare not do otherwise. Knowing what we do about the use of chemicals in war, it would be indefensibly negligent to send an army into the field unprepared to defend itself against attack by poison gas. It would be more than that; it would be suicidal. Such an army would be foredoomed to defeat before a gun was fired.

"No one ever obtained an overwhelming advantage over an enemy by using dum-dum bullets, or by poisoning wells. When one combatant engages

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in the use of either of these, the other immediately retaliates in kind, and neither gains an advantage; and so it is possible to get an agreement to refrain from the use of such weapons and such methods.

"But the report of the surgeon general shows that while gas was used in great quantity only in the closing days of the war, it accounted for close to 30 per cent of the casualties reported in the A. E. F. By casualties, I mean the number of men put out of action by injuries great or small. No other single weapon accounted for so many casualties—not even the big guns. *Poison gas is the most effective weapon mankind has ever devised.* Will any nation with its back to the wall, and fighting for its life, hesitate to use it?

"Poison gas does give an overwhelming advantage against an enemy unprepared for that form of warfare. We know almost for a certainty that a country the size of Norway could whip a nation like England, if Norway had poison gas and England had none.

"Furthermore, no other arm can be prepared for use so quickly. It takes months to build a submarine, years to build a battleship, a long time to build big guns. For all of these, special factories and machinery are necessary. But every chemical laboratory in the land is a potential arsenal, with almost no change in personnel or machinery. A factory which one day may be turning out perfume and toilet articles may within 24 hours be turning out poison gas. The most effective gases known are intermediate products in the manufacture of many common dyes, cosmetics, and drugs. It is hard to believe, but it is a fact, that more poison gas is being manufactured and used today in the United States than was used at any time during the war. What nation, overrun by an enemy and having at hand such an effective and quickly available weapon, would hesitate to use it?

"Chemical disarmament, then, is practically impossible. Germany has been as completely disarmed as is possible, and yet, so far as chem-

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icals are concerned, she is ready to begin another war tomorrow. . . . Furthermore, realizing the commercial as well as the military advantage which came to Germany because of her highly developed chemical industry, all of the leading nations are making strenuous efforts to build up their own chemical plants. This fact makes it increasingly certain that chemicals will be used in the next war.

"But all this is not so terrible as most people suppose. I said that poison gas accounted for more than 30 per cent of all casualties in the A. E. F., but of this number only about 2 per cent died. But, of approximately 70 per cent injured from bullets, high explosives, and all other weapons, more than 28 per cent died. Neither does poison gas maim for life as do many of the other weapons. Of the gassed patients, 4 were blinded in both eyes, and 25 in one eye. These 29 men were 3.85 per cent of the total number of those suffering blindness in one or both eyes from all causes. Gas does not cause the loss of legs or arms. In fact, a very thorough study of gassed patients shows that there are practically no bad after-effects from being gassed. One of the popular misconceptions is that gassed passed patients develop weak lungs and tuberculosis. Yet, there were *almost twice as many* cases of tuberculosis among the rank and file of the army, per thousand, than among the gassed patients.

"In the war of the future every effort will be made to avoid a concentration of troops which might be easy victims of a gas attack. The front-line battle area will be longer and deeper. Gases which remain on the spot which they fall for days will be used. Therefore, it will be necessary not only to wear gas masks all the time, but to wear protective clothing as well. The battle will be carried on at night as well as by day, because night is the best time to fight with gas. More than ever

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before, it will be a war of brains pitted against brains.

"We have a new gas which is about three times as effective as the most effective gases used in the World War. We have gas masks which can be worn for long periods without discomfort—it is possible even to sleep in them. A little diaphragm device enables one to talk through his gas mask. We have improved guns and shells for sending over gas, and we have, besides, a long list of other new devices. But the most important thing is that the technique of using gas has been vastly improved. The aim of the modern strategist is not to kill as many of the enemy as possible, but to put as many as possible out of action *without* killing them. The whole technique of modern battle is founded on that fact, and there is no weapon so effective for this purpose as gas. I do not believe that another war is imminent, but I do say of chemical warfare, that if and when war does come again, we shall have to face these conditions beyond a shadow of a doubt."

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