

Conflict from Within: French and British Soldiers' Personal Accounts of Gas Warfare on the Western Front (1915-1918)

Le conflit vu de l'intérieur : l'arme chimique dans les écrits personnels de soldats français et britanniques sur le Front occidental (1915-1918)

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Abstract: The horror of the chemical weapons used during the Great War of 1914-1918 was evoked in the press, in poems, memoirs and fictions; but scholars have rarely examined it through soldiers' letters home. This article seeks to contribute to today's limited coalition warfare literature by exploring a neglected niche, namely French and British fighters' letters about the use of gas in the Great War, in other words by examining the inner front of war through the lens of history from below. By comparing various ambivalent personal accounts describing the emotional pain and the physical scars inflicted by this new weapon, a symmetrical depiction emanates, in which the "worst loss of all" was the loss of one's chivalrous fighting demeanour. The only hope left to the allied soldiers was the breath of fresh air brought by the act of writing, notwithstanding the formidable tooth of censorship. A striking similarity emerges from the examination of a sample of French and British soldiers' letters, offering a unique insight into their intimate encounter with gas. The psychological edge of this inner front will be unravelled by probing two key issues related to French and British soldiers' letters: the fighters' masculinity and their relationship with the Home Front.

Keywords: first world war, France, Great Britain, chemical weapons, soldiers, western front, history from below, letters

Résumé : L'horreur des armes chimiques utilisées pendant la Grande Guerre de 1914-1918 a été évoquée dans la presse, les poèmes, les mémoires et les fictions, mais les historiens l'ont rarement examinée à travers les lettres envoyées par les soldats à leurs familles. Cet article cherche à apporter une contribution à la critique actuellement peu abondante sur les guerres de coalition, en explorant un créneau négligé : les lettres de soldats français et britanniques sur l'utilisation du gaz pendant la Grande Guerre – en d'autres termes, en examinant l'état psychique des soldats dans une approche historique, dite d'en bas. En comparant divers récits personnels ambivalents évoquant la douleur émotionnelle et les cicatrices physiques infligées par cette nouvelle arme, une représentation symétrique se dégage, dans laquelle la « pire des pertes » est celle du comportement chevaleresque au combat. Le seul espoir restant aux soldats alliés était le souffle d'air frais apporté par l'acte même de l'écriture, malgré la redoutable dureté de la censure. Une similitude frappante apparaît à l'examen d'un échantillon de lettres de soldats français et britanniques, offrant un éclairage unique sur leur rencontre intime avec le gaz. La dimension psychologique de ce combat intérieur sera explorée en examinant deux thèmes clés liés aux lettres des soldats français et britanniques : la masculinité des combattants et leur relation avec le front intérieur de leur pays respectif.

Mots-clés : première guerre mondiale, France, Grande-Bretagne, armes chimiques, soldats, front occidental, histoire d'en bas, lettres

According to an anonymous French soldier during the Great War, life carried on by letters was a detached life span, different from anything he had to undergo in the trenches. It was a way of life that was straightforward. There was no need to embellish or adjust the ugly truth as he survived on a daily basis. According to that soldier, the moment he wrote, he sequestered himself, he turned a deaf ear to the bedlam surrounding him, the sound of shots abated, and the teasing of his friends no longer got through to him. When he wrote, he became again what he once was; he forgot his vulnerability and inner turmoil¹. The soldier wrote, remembered, hoped, and created dreams that would be shared. For the *poilus*², the post turned into a God, and the letters were a gift of providence and a blessing.

Letters were unequivocally spellbinding objects. They were akin to sailing devices for a journey through time and space that succeeded in effacing the very consciousness of the present, conveying the affectionate link which existed between the soldier and his pen and paper. The act of writing for a soldier was like riding a sinking ship which found a shore in a thunderstorm. A soldier escaped to his letter-

¹ These anonymous remarks were published in the *Bellica* issue of May-June 1916. They are quoted by Stéphane AUDOIN-ROUZEAU in *Men at War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 1992, 13.

² The French referred to their Great War soldiers as *poilus*. Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from French into English are the author's.

writing activity in order to transcend the sentiment of being dwarfed by a technology of unparalleled destructiveness. Letters were more than an essential and almost daily link between the Home and Western Fronts. They reunited soldiers with their former lives, restoring to them day after day the pattern of their existence before the trenches. A poilu maintained: “the post was our link between our current existence and our previous life, our good old way of life as civilians³”.

Gas warfare began on the Western Front in 1915, when the German army unleashed an attack using vapourised chlorine⁴. The use of chemical agents in France more than a century ago was highly controversial, not because of its ambiguous legality, or its novelty, but because of its unique physical and psychological impact upon soldiers⁵. Poison gas suffocated tens of thousands of soldiers, and poisoned their bodies. Gas was excoriated in the First World War as “diabolical,” “inhumane,” “destructive,” and “monstrous” to the fighting men on the Western Front⁶. To obtain a clearer picture of gas and its impact in the Great War, it is cardinal to delve into soldiers’ letters home, which authentically and intimately mirror their personal experience with chemical weapons.

Personal letters of First World War soldiers are as familiar and compelling to read as other non-official historical primary sources belonging to different genres and categories. It is perhaps important at this point to pause and pose the following questions: Can letters be wielded as historical evidence? And what are the strategies a researcher can follow in her or his attempt to decipher these letters? First off, letters should not be viewed as a tool to complete a fragmentary archive. Soldiers’ letters have the benefit of belonging to the remarkable trend known as history from below or grassroots history. History from below is a far cry from the victor’s tale of events; it is rather the hidden side of history or the marginalised account of events. Letters by these *forgotten* ordinary men are unembellished, palpable, vigorous, and brimming with facts. They straightforwardly stem from the scribbler, lively and profound, giving the reader an unprecedented opportunity to discover the hidden side of the soldier, who he was, and his personal encounter with poison gas. Compared to many other non-official categories of primary sources, letters are conspicuously “private” kinds of writing. They allow us to fathom the past from the privileged point of view of the present. The *raison d’être* of letters is to be addressed from the “I” to a specific “other;” they invoke an exchange and are tweaked by a number of exigencies, namely distance and time, between the sender and the receiver. Over time, these personal accounts are dispersed across the board and must be compiled to construct a unified entity of writing. Letters play with the tension between concealing and revealing, between “telling all” and speaking obliquely or keeping silent. Michael Roper, in an article, draws on an analysis of unsent letters to explore the scope of psychoanalytic ideas in historical work on subjectivity⁷. His paper delves into the unconscious motivations, and how these are expressed in language. Composing in its own right is far from triggering subjectivity. It is a means of granting clues of intricate dialogues between reality, inner conflicts and their transfiguration via “cultural forms.” Crudely put, letters or personal accounts are a tool to elucidate such debates, for they are unobtrusive to some degree.

³ *L’Écho du Boqueteau*, 3 September 1918.

⁴ National Archives (Kew) TNA WO142/243, report No. 52/A2715, from Brigadier General H. Hartley to [n], entitled “German Chemical Warfare Organisation and Policy 1914-1918” [c.1921]; see also Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes SHD, 16N833, report No. [n], from Dr. Vaudreler to the Commander-in-Chief, August 1915, for a detailed account of the first German gas attack; see also SHD, 16N826, report No. 3,711, from Dr. Inspector Sieur Chief of Health Service of the Belgian Army to the General Director of the Health Service and the Commander-in-Chief, 25 April 1915. On 22 April 1915 around the village of Langemark, near Ypres, German pioneers discharged 6000 cylinders of chlorine. Documents show that primitive lachrymatory grenades were deployed in 1912 at Choisy-le-Roi, but that was a police use. In 1914, the French used an explosive charge, called Turpenite. RICHTER, Donald, *British Gas Warfare*, London, Leo Cooper, 1999, 6.

⁵ TNA PRO30/57/50, Kitchener Papers, report No. 127, from the British Army in the Field to General Headquarters, 30 September 1915; and TNA PRO30/57/50, report No. 128, entitled “Preliminary Report of Gas Attack on 25 September 1915,” [undated]. See also EDMONDS, J. E., *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1915. History of the Great War Based on Official Documents*, London, Macmillan, 1927, Vol. 1, 326-357.

⁶ *The Times*, 28 April 1915; *Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1915; *Daily News*, 28 April 1915; *Manchester Guardian*, 28 April 1915; *Daily Sketch*, 5 May 1915; and *Scotsman*, 6 May 1915.

⁷ ROPER, Michael, “Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity,” *Social History*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2001, 318-339.

In another article, Roper explores subalterns' accounts of the front line and the nature of middle-class men's emotional attachment to their mothers⁸. He also brings into question some of the established narratives of masculinity and trench soldiering. Taking into consideration the common intellectual and emotional properties of letters, I will examine how soldiers' letters provide a unique insight into their emotional responses to gas warfare. How did these letters reflect soldiers' understanding of the gas war and how did chemical weapons threaten their masculinity? What was the impact of gas on soldiers' concern about their families? To whom did soldiers communicate their encounter with gas? What do the letters tell us about relationships between soldiers and their mothers, fathers, wives and other members of their families? How did information flow from the War Front to the Home Front? What was the impact of censorship on their need to narrate their gas experience to their loved ones?

About twenty-eight billion letters circulated during the Great War. The British Army Postal Service delivered the gargantuan number of twelve billion letters with an average twelve million exchanged each week⁹. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to conduct a comprehensive examination of each and every letter; alternatively, in this paper I will opt for a qualitative approach based on an in-depth case analysis of a selected sample of British and French soldiers' letters. The objective is to provide a narrative analysis of the reaction of combatants coming from different walks of life and various social backgrounds.

Writing as a Psychological Activity: Soldiers' Masculinity versus Gas Warfare

At the beginning of the world conflict, the romantic view of nineteenth-century warfare or Victorian war ethos still prevailed. Soldiers were caught up in the pro-war fervour along with everyone else. As the war progressed, soldiers were among the first to express the feeling of disillusionment that would become widespread after the war. The first gas attack at Ypres heralded a grisly new chapter in the history of warfare. It had a devastating impact not only on the soldiers who were active in service but also on the generations that followed. The form of warfare was so new that the victims in the front line did not know what had hit them. A selective examination of soldiers' letters reveals a binary depiction of gas. The soldiers expressed their internal drama, and letter writing was a mechanism they used to give that internal drama an external dimension¹⁰. For instance, Doctor Nel, attaché to the 79th French Regiment, wrote a letter to his wife on 22 April 1915, saying:

The morning was flowing as usual. I was joking with Lieut. Delaunay. The weather was warm, beautiful, and sunny. A fresh northeast breeze blew very lightly... All of a sudden our conversation was interrupted by an acute and irritating smell, which affected eyes and throats. Intrigued we rushed to the middle of the road. The air beyond the Canal was tainted with a green-yellow colour. At first we thought it might be the outset of a terrible thunderstorm; the thick cloud, which was diving towards us, obscured the sun. We had a gut feeling that something really serious was happening over there... The number of wounded and gassed soldiers was so high that we could not move our feet to treat them. Myself and my colleague doctors were irritated by poison gas and we suffered from dry throats and burning eyes. The pictures of our daughters Violette, Yolande and Elza passed through our eyes. If they were attacked by gas, would they escape on time¹¹?

Another letter in the form of poem was addressed by Théodore Botrel to a Lucie:

These are the martyrs of STEENSTRAAT
Upon whom the cursed Germans,
Those hobos, those bandits, those pirates

⁸ ROPER, Michael, "Maternal Relations: Moral Manliness and Emotional Survival in Letters Home during the First World War," in S. DUDINK, K. HAGEMANN and J. TOSH (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 2004, 295-315. On mothers and the Rear Front, see especially D. GRAYZEL, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill, 1999) and Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London, 1994).

⁹ MASON, Amanda and PARTON, Ellen, "Letters to Loved Ones," *Imperial War Museum*, <<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/>>, accessed in March 2017; ULRICH, Bernd and ZIEMAN, Benjamin, *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, South Yorkshire, Pen and Sword Military, 2010, ix.

¹⁰ Roper, "Splitting in Unsensitized Letters," *op. cit.*, 318.

¹¹ [?] Nel, *Témoignages Directs du Docteur Nel, Médecin Aide Major du 7e R.I.T.*, Rennes, Imprimerie Bretonne, 1922. Letters collected and published by the author himself.

Will fan out their suffocating gases.
Go to it, lads! Go to it,
The Granite Division¹².

These passages provide telling evidence of the actions and mentality of the French, British, and Commonwealth troops at the time of the first gas attack. What grabs the readers' attention here is the bulk of facts incorporated in the letters. The censor abstained from expurgating the events of the Ypres attack narrated by soldiers. Yet censorship was staunchly experienced by soldiers on the front. A French soldier asserted his malaise about censorship in a trench newspaper: "to the gentlemen of the censorship: letters take two days or two weeks to reach their destination... When they arrive... Just consider a little, gentlemen, that these are the only arrivals that give us pleasure¹³". Archival evidence about postal censorship at the time of the first gas attack on the Western Front is very fragmentary, but the inclusion of so many details in the soldiers' letters could simply mean that from the end of April 1915 up until early June 1915, the British and French press reported the event exhaustively, making censorship constraints unnecessary because those details simply expressed the general initial shock and disgust at the German act of barbarity. News coverage included war bulletins, eyewitness or medical reports, and depictions of soldiers' physical and psychological sufferings as a result of the use of chemical weapons for the first time in the history of warfare¹⁴.

At the outset of the war, postal control was not the main concern of the French military authority because it had in mind a rather short war during which the French would teach the Germans a jolly good lesson. As the war dragged on, on 26 January 1915, there were mounting concerns about national security. The General Headquarters envisaged taking drastic post censorship measures such as the bridling of letters and parcels sent and received by soldiers. As the war progressed, so did postal control. 1916 witnessed an increase in letter censorship. Each regiment was controlled for postal censorship once a month, with a minimum of 500 letters put under the microscope of the censors. An average of 580,000 letters were read and probed each week. Censorship was intensified in the spring of 1917, immediately after the French soldiers' mutinies¹⁵. In this respect, Jean-Jacques Becker noted: "from now on the military and civilian authorities would work hard to find out about morale in order to avoid any future surprises and maintain national security¹⁶". This process of letter censorship could be explained by the concern about public opinion and the wish to guarantee minimum public anxiety. Civilians were the rock of support for soldiers, and any deterioration in the morale of civilians would have resulted in the lowering of the soldiers' spirits. The strong bond that existed between soldiers and civilians made the combatants carry on fighting in the direst circumstances.

This exclusively masculine crowd instinctively endured unrelenting frustrations, at both physical and psychological levels. What is noteworthy in the letters examined is that they were addressed to female correspondents. The evidence advanced through these textual accounts reveals a great deal about the lives of the fighters. Their rhetoric underlines that they were a medium through which soldiers connected with a pre-war life by and large characterized by a sense of comfort and independence. Letters were the zest of their bygone existence; a scent and a piece from their beloved home. For them, women (mothers, daughters, wives and sisters) were the *bona fide* foundation of life itself. The thought of female family and friends, in one way or another, bestowed upon the soldiers breathing windows of felicity and exquisiteness after their first monstrous encounter with the green-yellowish cloud and the nasty suffocating odour of gas.

¹² Musée D'Ypres, Service des Archives de la Ville de Redon, journée du 22 avril 1915 sur le front, au nord d'Ypres, 37. Jean-Baptiste-Théodore-Marie BOTREL (1868-1925) was a French song writer, singer, poet and playwright. During the Great War he became France's official "Bard of the Armies."

¹³ *Le Vide-Boche*, 1 June 1918.

¹⁴ GIRARD, Marion, *A Strange and Formidable Weapon. British Responses to World War I Poison Gas*, Lincoln, U of Nebraska P, 2008, 126-162; and ZOGHLAMI, Hanene, *The Franco-British Gas War on the Western Front 1915-1918, and the Response of the Domestic Press in France and Great Britain*, PhD, London, Roehampton U, 2012, 302-316.

¹⁵ ROLLAND, Denis, *La Grève des Tranchées. Les Mutineries de 1917*, Paris, Imago, 2005.

¹⁶ BECKER, Jean-Jacques, *Les Français dans la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1980, 221.

Despite being less critical of the first gas attack compared to ordinary soldiers and officers, the letters of Dr. Nel and other French doctors nevertheless reflected the shock and contempt felt for the barbaric conduct of the German army. Nel's shift in his sentence from portraying the appalling physical suffering of soldiers to referring to his daughters suggests that "such communication was felt as nourishing the men¹⁷". The experience of the traumatic nature of war transformed soldiers. E. Ann Kaplan argues that "telling stories about trauma [...] may partly achieve a certain 'working through' for the victims¹⁸". In this respect, Roper argues that traumatic experiences, illness, or generally low spirits intensified the men's desire for composing letters. The moment at which morale was at its lowest was the time when they most needed the image of home to be renewed¹⁹. The moment of post distribution took on extreme significance: "the distribution of the letters is accompanied by shouts and childish jokes. It is the best moment of the day²⁰". The telling words of a soldier confirm Roper's view: "above all, at around 4 o'clock, as if to break into the oppressive hour of the sleepy afternoon, there was the emotional moment of distributing letters. How intently they were gazed at, with envious and covetous eyes, as they dropped like treasure into the tail-end of our day²¹".

The French, British and Commonwealth troops' letters followed the same vein regarding the initial emotions about the attack. The men were faced with the bitter reality that they were caught in a savage war and had to endure a great deal if they wanted to survive and return home to their loved ones. The front-line soldiers' tales reveal the heartless premeditated brutality and the ingrained bestiality of the German pioneer gas companies. There was a similitude in the depiction of the corporeal anguish of the French and British soldiers. The soldiers' accounts bring to life—through a vivid rhetoric—both their ordeal by this new, unseen, haunting death and the mawkish, magnanimous, heroic kind of war that they had imagined. In point of fact, their very masculinity was at stake. Michael Roper maintained that "the significance of war is the passage to manhood. Men were anxious... not only to endure the stresses of battle personally but to exhibit appropriate soldierly qualities²²". John Tosh noted that the significance of war service for this generation was the negotiation of adult masculinity and some of the tension this triggered²³. The sense of impotence and stoicism thus created, together with the feeling that they were facing a power that could be managed but not overcome, gives the soldiers' narratives about this new weapon their rough unity.

Letters of British and French soldiers in the Great War tend to follow common structures or approaches of what was thought to be tailor-made or convenient to divulge. Along these lines, although "private" in one sense, letters may also be perceived as fulfilling prevailing "public" cultural precepts of verbalisation. The individual soldiers' encounter with the Great Gas War made them prone to self-examination, a new requirement of modern warfare. For example, Maurice Antoine Martin-Laval, a doctor attached to the French Army on the Western Front, stated in a letter to his sister Marie in February 1915:

You can never believe the heroism and bravery of my fellow soldiers. It is not a cliché as talked about in the newspapers but the courage and boldness of them is so real. In one such attack, a lieutenant ordered us to attack the Germans only equipped with our bayonets. We launched our attack while singing 'la Marseillaise' [French national anthem] and shouting warrior phrases. My fellow soldiers suffered from horrible wounds and one of them who had three severe wounds and was wounded again whilst we were evacuating him said: I do not mind my pain, it is all dedicated to my beloved France²⁴.

When gas was deployed one month after this letter was written, the French and British soldiers adjusted themselves to this totally new weapon. Adjutant Captain Georges Gallois wrote to his parents in July 1916:

¹⁷ ROPER, "Maternal Relations," *op. cit.*, 301.

¹⁸ Quoted by Christa Schonfelder in *Wounds and Words*, Transcript Verlag, 2013, 37.

¹⁹ ROPER, "Maternal Relations," *op. cit.*, 301.

²⁰ *La Saucisse*, [illegible] April 1916.

²¹ *L'Écho du Boyau*, 1 August 1916.

²² ROPER, "Maternal Relations," *op. cit.*, 310.

²³ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁴ GUENO, Jean-Pierre and LAPLUME, Yves, *Lettres et Carnets du Front*, Paris, Librio, 1998, 21-22.

I am still alive and in good health, I am not even wounded at the hands of *Boche*, who made us undergo a thousand pains by flame thrower, tear gas, asphyxiating gas... This is war. I do not want you to worry because I hope that we have already received the German's big coup²⁵.

The heterogeneity of social, geographic and cultural origins impelled the variety of the soldiers' modes of expression. A case in point is how Lucien Papillon's style in describing gas attacks differs from Louis Monier's²⁶. Monier was a doctor when he joined the war, which explained why his style was poignantly richer and more magniloquent. Papillon's verbal sketch of gas was perfunctory and his writings were packed with spelling lapses. He was a builder when he enlisted and he was not educated. This was mirrored in his style of writing. His phonetics was also below standard:

J'ai reçu ta *laitre* [sic] ce matin qui m'a bien fais *plaisirre* [sic]. Tous [sic] le monde est *mallade* [sic]. On boit de l'eau qui est moitié *ampoisonne* [sic] a force de *gete* de[s] gaze *asfixcian* [sic]. On *marge* [marche] *ensamble* [sic]²⁷.

It remains true, however, that the universally shared crux of British and French soldiers' assumptions and intuitive responses created a congruous arena for soldiers, merging their personal demeanour to this new pattern of conflict. French and British soldiers' reaction to gas was very similar as they experienced the same scourge.

Joanna Bourke has argued that for First World War soldiers, the bayonet was the weapon that symbolized "justice and right and the vengeance of a living God for outraged humanity²⁸". Even soldiers appalled by killing reckoned that "a bayonet-fighter of crusader faith" was closer to God than a machine-gunner²⁹. Cardinal Hinsly hinted at the abominations of the cutting-edge industrialized warfare and yearningly evoked the bygone days when sword was the weapon of wars—"the symbol of justice... the instrument of chivalrous defense of the weak against the strong"—now swapped with bombs, artillery, torpedoes or gas. The "high achievement of science," he moaned, had been "prostituted to severe barbarism³⁰". British soldiers revealed that gas warfare was a dirty game. The phlegmatic and calculated killing of defenceless fighters was devilish. Thence, they piercingly imparted the gruesome and inhumane ordeal of chemical warfare. They underlined the demise of chivalry or bravery in war, and the beginning of an era where this new weapon humiliated and dwarfed soldiers on the battlefield. Following the decision to discharge poison gas at Ypres 1915, one German General wrote to his wife: "war has nothing to do with chivalry anymore... the higher the civilisation rises, the viler man becomes³¹".

The literature of chivalry continued to be a component of the personification of the French *poilu*, even after the onset of the first modern world conflict in the history of mankind. By 1914, French soldiers' high-principled conception of warfare was still steeped in a romanticized version of their country's medieval past. The use of chemical weapons and the image of gassed soldiers therefore remained in the memory of individual soldiers, even those who had not seen it. The capacity of combatants to conceptualise themselves as intermeshed in a knightly *battle royal* similar to that experienced by the honourable fighters of yore was pivotal in their perception of manhood, dignity and gratification. Gas seemed to denude them of their individuality, and of their masculinity. Michel Lanson wrote to his wife lamenting a soldier's fate in modern war: "in fact, wherever you go, you bump into a machine. It is not a Man against a Man in a battle, it is rather a Man against a machine. An attack by a gas cloud, and twelve *mitrailleuses* are enough to annihilate a Regiment. With so little effort Boche achieved their war goals³²".

²⁵ GUÉNO and LAPLUME, *ibid.*, 146. Georges Gallois enlisted at the age of 29. He joined the 221st Infantry Regiment. Although he made a lucky escape from the inferno of the Great War, he was killed in a German air strike in the Second World War.

²⁶ See BOSSHARD, Madeleine and Antoine (eds.), *Marthe, Joseph, Lucien, Marcel Papillon: Si Je Reviens Comme Je L'Espère*, Paris, Perrin, 2003. Those are letters found in December 1991 in Vezelay, in the Papillon family attic. These letters, written by the Papillon family during the Great War, were collected and published by Madeleine and Antoine Bosshard.

²⁷ All the words italicised are grammatical and spelling mistakes.

²⁸ BOURKE, Joanna, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in the Twentieth-Century Warfare*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ ROBBINS, Keith, *The First World War*, Oxford, OUP, 1985, 88.

³² GUÉNO and LAPLUME, *Lettres et Carnets du Front, op. cit.*, 63.

Gas was seen as a terrible monster by British and French soldiers. They witnessed the dreadful outcome of the use of gas on them and their comrades-in-arms. Gas can slaughter in a hushed, prompt and ineluctable fashion. Since most gases are invisible and since some are odourless, the soldier is constantly exposed to a hidden death. A combatant may save himself from bullets, shrapnel, and grenades by diving into a trench or shell-hole when he hears them coming, while gas sneaks upon him unawares. Letter-writing helped soldiers find a balance in this treacherous atmosphere by creating a powerful link with home: in that, the activity of composing had almost a therapeutic and comforting function which helped the combatants transcend their inner anxiety. By writing a letter to a beloved “other,” a soldier attempted to create an environment of trust and comfort to face the treacherous and unknown gas foe.

Soldiers’ Letters, an Eye-Opener on Fighting Men’s Relationship with the Home Front

After witnessing the first gas attack, British soldier Basil James Green wrote his mother, giving her the following news:

Belgium April 29th 1915

My own dear Mother,

I know how anxious you all must have been during the past week or so, and yet I could not even get a card away to you to set you at ease, however, these two weeks of fierce fighting are over... I will not try to give you any of the details now, the papers will tell you all the facts of these engagements. One of the worst parts was the asphyxiating gas, which the Germans have been using on us. My dates are all confused but I think it was about 4 o’ clock [sic] on Saturday morning, (we had been standing to the parapet all night) when suddenly the whole line of German trenches was obscured behind a thick bank of rolling yellow black fumes, and the wind being right across our trenches, it was gently fanned across to the British Lines and came rolling slowly over the ground, and as they passed through us we experienced the most rotten choking feeling, many were killed... As we had had no sleep or proper rations for a week, some days we had but a biscuit or two each, so you can imagine the boys were ready to drop, I saw several fall at their sentry posts from sheer exhaustion, we changed every half hour to relieve the strain.³³

A salient feature of this letter is the powerful bond that existed between Basil and his mother. The use of the words “own mother” entails a staunch sense of belonging and an affectionate relationship between the fighting men on the Western Front and their mothers. Jenny Hartley argues that in the Great War, women were the axiological link between the Home Front and the combatants.³⁴ Most mothers wrote on a daily basis, and sons expected their mothers to keep on writing. The tangible process of dispatching and receiving letters bespeaks love and care despite the hostile environment. If we take a look at the average age of First World War soldiers, the vast majority were born in the 1890s and were in their late teens or early twenties during the world conflict. Theirs were Victorian working- or middle-class mothers who were involved in the ethical and sentimental upbringing of their offspring.³⁵ What seems clear from the letters combed for the present paper was that men wrote to their mothers when they encountered periods of acute imperilment. In his letter Basil sought to hatch a steady action. His obiter (“I could not even get a card away to you to set you at ease”) underscores tautness between what he wished to disclose about prevalent circumstances and his obligation to console his mother. As Michael Roper maintains, the surmise that mothers were edgy about the security of their sons had a far stronger impact on combatants’ letters than censorship. The capital ulterior motive of writing was to create that sort of sanctuary in their beloved mothers’ minds.³⁶ *Per contra*, this premise cannot be brought to bear in all conditions. For example, Basil’s accounts to his mother could be considered as confined by censorship. His letter was

³³ <<http://www.exchangeboard.co.uk/WWIgreen.htm>>, accessed in July 2010. Lt Basil James Green was born in 1893. He enlisted with the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force aged 21. He arrived in France on 12 February 1915.

³⁴ HARTLEY, J., “Letters are everything these days: Mothers and Letters in the Second World War,” in EARLE, R. (ed), *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-writers 1600-1945*, Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 1999, 185.

³⁵ ROPER, “Maternal Relations,” *op. cit.*, 298.

³⁶ ROPER, *ibid.*, 302.

poised between revealing and concealing. His reference to untold stories, using phrases such as “I will not try to give you any of the details now,” stresses the despicable events he may have experienced. Kleinian psychoanalyst and First World War veteran Wilfred Bion refers to “a containing” *raison d’être* of the mother towards her son. Bion suggests that, because she understands her child’s fear, a mother knows how to teach him that such fright is not life-threatening.³⁷ By writing to his mother in this particular circumstance, Basil perhaps shows that he yearned for her to support him, to make him fathom his anguish and brook his dismay. Writing home allowed him to see his physical agony as well as the torment of his gassed comrades with a mother’s eye. Having explained to his mother the gas attack and the shocking physical suffering that ensued, he shifted to pointing out the lack of sleep and food from which he and the “boys” suffered, as well as to the need to bury the dead. The fluctuation in his writing pinpoints the circumstances in the trenches and his role in boosting the men’s morale. These were the daily duties a mother was expected to carry out: preparing food for her children, soothing them to help them sleep comfortably, and cleaning. In this respect, however, Basil’s house-keeping included helping exhausted boys and burying the dead. Therefore, his house duties were radically different from his mother’s house chores, attesting to the extreme discrepancy between home and front. This stark dissimilarity between Basil’s daily duties and his mother’s created a sense of inner ambivalence which he transformed into writing, possibly in an attempt to alleviate the confusion.

Basil’s suffering, which one grasps in his letter, is echoed in another British soldier’s letter, also addressed to his mother. In February 1917 Arthur Joseph Dease wrote:

My Dear Mother,

A gas attack two afternoons ago, perfectly beastly & all had to wear masks, very thick & chokes you... On our way we passed through a dense cloud of it, like a thick mist rising, curious but once there it had passed & we were not troubled any more. I fear various poor fellows caught out without their masks had a bad time, some picked up unconscious & our cars carried several, some of course fatal & in any case I believe it leaves one bad for ages. It is a lesson to us, as often we went about without our masks, altho’ of course regulations are very severe that one should have them. It is my first experience of gas & I must say I don’t want another. In the Vosges, owing to hilly country, gas attacks were almost if not quite impossible. To see a gassed man is a most unpleasant sight; I think it a most fiendish method of warfare.³⁸

Canadian soldier Percy Leland Kingsley endeavoured to keep in touch with his family and beloved ones at home.³⁹ He wrote heart-felt letters about his daily experience of the conflict. His letters were candidly impartial and oozed with details about everyday violence. The letter dated 26 June 1915, quoted in the *Humboldt Journal* of 22 July 1915, was addressed to a woman named Miss Hanley:

That was the last sleep I had for seven days and nights. On the morning of April 22, as you know, the great German attack began... They turned the gas on the French [Algerian] troops, who held the trenches on our left, and they retired in disorder leaving 4,000 yards of the line open, and this left the Canadian division cut off... Well, to make a long story short, we were there for five days and nights without food and when relieved some of the boys could hardly walk. Our losses were terrible, and the sights I saw I shall never forget.⁴⁰

Obvious in this letter and in Dease’s account is the momentous upsurge of brutality. The accounts are a penetrating indication of the outstanding sacrifice of the fighters. It is to be noted that the prose is guileless and the content shows the rapid pace of soldiers’ lives.

Although the geographical, linguistic and military demarcation between French, British, and Commonwealth soldiers on the Western Front was very striking, there was a flagrant similarity in the emotions conveyed by combatants of both nationalities, due to the universal human dimension of

³⁷ ROPER, *ibid.*, 307. See also ROPER, “Splitting in Unsent Letters,” *op. cit.*, 320-321.

³⁸ Arthur Joseph Dease was born in a lower middle-class British family. Arthur enlisted at the age of 42 and served as an ambulance driver for the French Red Cross in the Section Sanitaire Anglaise. See <http://www.arthursletters.com/ww1-letters-february-1917.html>, accessed in October 2016.

³⁹ Percy Leland Kingsley was a Canadian clerk who joined the war in August 1914, at the age of 28.

⁴⁰ <http://greatwaralbum.ca/Great-War-Album/Battle-Fronts/Second-Battle-of-Ypres-St-Julien/A-Letter-from-Ypres/>, accessed in December 2016.

suffering, be it emotional or physical. For example, Louis Monier wrote two letters to his wife, dated 6 and 7 July 1916, in which he detailed the terrible events of 22 June 1916. He stated:

All of sudden [sic], at 8:30 pm, we heard a number of explosions... At the same time the guys who were out shouted 'gas!' We were ordered to put on our gas masks. A few soldiers lost their masks on the field, were very angry as a result and ended up in the misery of suffocation. It was horrible and painful to see my comrades agonise, we tried to give them oxygen when the gas attack abated but in vain as the Germans attacked again with gas. We tried to set fire around the trenches to block gas but it was difficult to move. What a night! Nothing but agony! Suffering! Many times I was irritated by gas!⁴¹

Unlike Basil's letter, where one grasps the placidity of mother-son correspondence, and where Basil wanted to put his mother at ease, there is a different message conveyed in Monier's two letters. Letters to mothers mirror the cohesion of the liaison between soldiers and their mothers. The biological union is instinctive and stable. Correspondence between sons and mothers differentiates remarkably from letters addressed to wives or lovers:

You are jealous, yes, for you can be jealous at a distance. A single word is enough to make the poilu tremble... One little word can mean as much as twelve pages in response... And after a clumsy phrase there are scenes: tears at home, le cafard in the trenches... One cannot know the intensity of feeling that is born and sustained in correspondence. How many women would have been loved at a distance during this war, more than they will ever be loved... close to!⁴²

The protracted absence of a soldier from his wife or lover increased his mental torture. The physical separation of a combatant from his better half upset him and made him an easy prey to haunting and annihilating cogitations. The soldier's heartache was hard to cloak in secrecy, especially when he was hit by the possible scenario of being stabbed in the back or forsaken by the woman he had left at home. A soldier's worst nightmare was to imagine his wife in the arms of another man.

One of the goals of those letters was to nurture existing relationships.⁴³ Louis Monier's two lengthy letters include emotional expressions to his wife that could be read between the lines, describing the horrific gas experience: "and in the middle of this entire asphyxiating atmosphere, deep down in my heart, I had hope because I was thinking of you." Monier goes on to delineate his physical suffering in a dramatic tone and style: "It was horrible to see the poor men agonising, we gave them oxygen but it was not helpful in the overwhelming gas odour, we set fire to hinder gas clouds from penetrating into French trenches, but still it was not easy."⁴⁴ His dashed hopes and forlornness in front of gas seem to accentuate his feeling of being physically separated from his wife.

For Monier gas clouds the Western Front with poisonous smoke, generating an unimaginable kind of terror in him and in his comrades. He emphasises that the heebie-jeebies caused by gas should not be underrated. He indicates how gas plagues the soldiers at the front, as there is no way out from the ubiquitous nature of chemical weapons. His description of the frightfulness he witnessed yields extra affirmation of the neuroticism in cases of gas attacks. The physical and emotional status of soldiers at a front engulfed in gas caused them to further epistolise with home. What Monier does in his letter is to steer the attention away from his own engagement with gas to that of other combatants. Censorship could be one of the reasons why he deflected the spotlight towards his fellow soldiers. Stefan Collini refers to this emotional ramification as the hankering to reinforce altruism by gauging self-conduct in terms of its contribution to the "social good."⁴⁵ Monier confesses to his wife how he ran deadly risks, including gas attacks, trying to salvage others' lives. His account rivets on his fellow soldiers and their suffering from a number of gas attacks in the space of one night only. Letter-writing empowers him to bring about an autogenous aspect through altruistic insistence on the actions of other men. Thereupon, he needs his family to be omnipresent in his thoughts to appease his restlessness. This is pronounced when he alludes to his daughter Renée in the middle of his lengthy letter.

⁴¹ LOISEAU, Laurent and BENECH, Géraud, *Carnets de Verdun*, Paris, E.J.L, 2006, 57-58.

⁴² *Bellica*, [illegible] May 1916.

⁴³ ROPER, "Maternal Relations," *op. cit.*, 309.

⁴⁴ LOISEAU and BENECH, *Carnets de Verdun*, *op. cit.*, 63-64.

⁴⁵ Stefan Collini is cited in ROPER, "Splitting in Unsent Letters," *op. cit.*, 323.

The physical and psychological effects of under-protected troops had already been painfully demonstrated after the initial German gas attacks. Failure to adequately protect troops had grave implications on the morale of soldiers on the Western Front. The continuous development of new chemical weaponry led to panic-stricken combatants, especially when their families were potential targets. The letter which Marcel Papillon addressed to his parents on 26 May 1915 is very telling in terms of the anxiety felt daily by the fighting men. Marcel sent his parents a parcel containing a compress and a nose clip.⁴⁶ These were part of the first military protective equipment on the Western Front employed soon after the Second Battle of Ypres. Revealing in this letter is how the gas mask bypassed the censor's radar. This leads to many questions regarding censorship of soldiers' letters on the Western Front, and the measures implemented by the censor to control soldiers' correspondence. Notwithstanding, any appraisal of the combatants' letters must be carried through in light of censorship, even though its imprint was not "predictable or uniform."⁴⁷ An examination of the correspondence of the Papillon family during the Great War provides a trenchant illustration of the censorship of French soldiers' letters. Mrs. and Mr. Papillon had four sons and they were all enlisted in the French army. Joseph, one of the middle sons, was gassed in October 1915 and died.⁴⁸ In 1914, when the *esprit de corps* was still high and the belief that the conflict would be over by Christmas was widespread, the letters of the Papillon brothers were frequent and alive with details. This state of affair seemed to persist in 1915. In point of fact, details about the Ypres attack and the following German gas attacks were included in their letters until September 1916. The letters became intermittent and brevilouquent in 1917 and 1918. A detailed examination of these letters lays bare the brothers' concern about their parents in Vezelay and their sister Marthe in Paris. In one letter, dated 19 November 1915 and addressed to her parents, Marthe was very worried about the use of gas and about the fact that her brother Joseph suffered a lot from gas before being sent to hospital. Marthe lived in Paris and therefore was right in the midst of hot spots and national press coverage of the first four months of gas warfare, unlike her parents who lived far away in the countryside. She was perhaps under the influence of French national newspapers, which reported the early stage of gas war with both hysterical language and a sense of shocked indignation. This language, which alarmed and inflamed public opinion, led to a lingering phobia among civilians about the gas scare.⁴⁹

The oblique way in which the Papillon brothers transmitted their sentiments and pathos to their parents evinces how in a middle-class household, the chief role of male figures was to take their families under their wing notably because these sons were considered the embodiment of integrity. The Papillon brothers wrote letters home when they faced acute predicament. For example, when their brother Joseph was gassed and killed on 22 October 1915, Marcel, the eldest, wrote to his parents searching for heart-warming connection and inner stamina to assuage the herculean impact of the sombre tidings. He promised his parents that when the war came to an end, he would join them and they could count on him.⁵⁰ Being the eldest, all the burden fell on his shoulders. He maintained: "I asked about Charles and Lucien and they are all well. Mum, Dad, if I return home, I would look after you and you can rely on me." He then signed his letter "your loyal son, Marcel," a phrase which Marcel interpolated only once in his correspondence. In the gender libretto of France's middle-class Third Republic, just as in late Victorian and Edwardian eras in Britain, eldest sons were a class apart from the rest of their kinfolks. In both France and Britain, they were highly regarded. Their duty was to be the breadwinners of their families, and the robust rocks on which their parents could lean when they got older.⁵¹ Marcel felt that it had become incumbent upon him to search for the ins and outs of his younger brother's death and, as a result, he sent a

⁴⁶ BOSSHARD, *Marthe, Joseph, Lucien, Marcel Papillon, op. cit.*, 149.

⁴⁷ ROPER, "Maternal Relations," *op. cit.*, 301.

⁴⁸ BOSSHARD, *Marthe, Joseph, Lucien, Marcel Papillon, op. cit.*, 246-247.

⁴⁹ *L'Éclair*, 25 April 1915; *Le Siècle*, 25 April 1915; *Le Journal des Débats*, 26 April 1915; *Le Temps*, 26 April 1915; *Le Petit Parisien*, 28 April, 1915; *Le Petit Journal*, 6 May 1915; *L'Homme Libre*, 10 June 1915; and *La Gazette de France*, 16 May 1915.

⁵⁰ BOSSHARD, *Marthe, Joseph, Lucien, Marcel Papillon, op. cit.*, 252-253.

⁵¹ GARRIGUES, Jean and LACOMBRADÉ, Philippe, *La France au XIXe Siècle 1814-1914*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007, 104-110; see also YVOREL, Jean-Jacques, *L'Exclusion des Femmes. Masculinité et Politique dans la Culture au XXe Siècle*, Brussels, Complexe, 2001, 221.

letter to his parents on 13 January 1916. This letter contained clarification of Joseph's death by gas and an official document explaining the October attack when "Boche used gas against Joseph's battalion."⁵²

Soldiers' letters corroborate the unprecedented encounter of soldiers with gas warfare on the Western Front. Letters transmitted the harsh experience of soldiers with gas without *retouches*. The importance of these letters in the hostile environment of the front reveals the value and sinews of the link they created between Home and Western Fronts after the first few months of the war. Letter-writing forged a connection between civilians and combatants and by extension between existence and demise. Thereupon, the very act of composing created a breathing space in which the combatants broke the paradigm of daily hardships obscured with the asphyxiating smoke of death.

It ought to be pointed out that these soldiers were common people who made the bulk of those who were involved in the Great War. History from below's approach to the understanding of that conflict is a unique route about the unascertained scope of the past. As unofficial primary sources, letters nurture one's excitement in bringing to light and untangling the past from a private perspective. So much of the (inner) lives of these soldiers is still *terra incognita* for current scholars. Examining their personal accounts—despite the tight grip of censorship—makes many of us relate to these anonymous fighters. The letters scrutinized for this paper demonstrate how the ordinary men who were caught up in the maelstrom of the Great War were obliged, for their physical and psychological survival, to deal with war and technology on a more direct and intimate level. Their struggle to make sense of gas was a dominant motif in their personal accounts, creating the image of frail and impotent men against overwhelming weaponry. There is a rough unity in the sufferings of officers and soldiers, urban and rural.

The value of these unofficial primary sources is the exploration of an unknown dimension of the past. The focus is no longer on discovering a bygone age but on explaining it by providing a link with the present. In that, soldiers' emotions and the ties with the Home Front can only be documented through their personal accounts, regardless of the subjective edge of such testimonies. Unwrapping the lives and thoughts of these soldiers constitutes an attempt—among others—to unleash them from the "enormous condescension of posterity."⁵³

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