

Holding the Line

The Background

In early 1915, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division was sent to defend the Ypres Salient, a bulge in the long line of trenches that stretched from France to Switzerland. Ypres was the last Belgian city still under Allied control and a key part of the Allied defences protecting the English channel.

In April, the Germany army decided to conduct a surprise attack to destroy the Salient and test a new weapon – chlorine gas.

Canadians and the 2nd Battle of Ypres

The Battle

On 22 April 1915, the Germans launched their surprise attack, unleashing chlorine gas on the Allied line. The French Algerian troops to the left of the 1st Division fled, leaving a 6 km gap in the defences. The Canadians had to fill the gap and hold the line.

From 22 to 25 April, the Canadians defended the position, even though they were surrounded on three sides. The battle was ferocious, and involved artillery bombardments, hand-to-hand combat and gas attacks.

The Significance

Against great odds, the Canadians held the line and even gained ground back as they waited for British reinforcements to arrive. The Canadians had displayed courage and skill in their baptism of fire, earning a reputation as dependable soldiers that would only grow as the war went on. The price had been steep, however, and the Canadians suffered over 6000 casualties.

In Flanders Field

Many of the Canadian wounded in the battle were cared for by Dr. John McCrae (see photo). Shortly after, McCrae wrote his famous poem *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....

