

# Leo Mooney's Gas Mask

by Lynne Belluscio

I knew that there was a box of things from World War I in storage, so I went looking for it and brought it downstairs. Inside was a metal mess kit with a knife, fork and spoon, a canteen, and a sealed first aid kit, a pair of boots – the soles had holes, a belt, and a canvas pack with straps and pockets and flaps. I learned that these packs were totally worthless. When they were filled, it was impossible for the soldiers to maneuver in the cramped quarters of the trenches. And they really weren't a pack as much as a "wrapper." Everything would be wrapped up like a package, but when the soldier needed anything, he had to lay the pack down and unfold it and get out his socks or blanket. Even though they were impractical, the army used them in World War II. But the treasure in the box was the canvas bag and gas mask. The canvas bag was the clue to who owned all the stuff in the box – Leo Mooney. He had written his service record on the outside of the bag. I sent a photo of the bag to Terry Krautwurst who has been helping with the WWI exhibit and he shared information about the 27th Division: 'Most were assigned to British command for most of the war and fought primarily in Belgium and the Somme area straddling Belgium and France. The Hindenburg line battle was an incredibly bloody one for western New Yorkers. On the day of the attack, seven Genesee County soldiers were killed outright and another three died of wounds. Leo Mooney's unit was literally in the middle of it - at the center of the attacking first wave. All four of Company I's officers

were killed. Of the 108th Regiment at least 192 died that day and about 600 were wounded. The descriptions of the fighting are boggling. Mont Kemmel refers to the Ypres/Lys offensive in Belgium a month earlier. The 108th lost 30 men including Leo Fiorito who was killed by an enemy bomb and who was also a member of Leo Mooney's Company I. (The LeRoy American Legion chose Leo Fiorito and George Botts as the namesakes of their post.)

The gas mask was in pretty tough condition. Both eyepieces are broken and the charcoal canister has rusted away. Gas attacks were one of the horrors of World War I. Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't the Germans who first used gas on the battlefield, it was the French in 1914. This was in violation of the 1899 Hague Peace Convention which prohibited the use of gas in battle. The French offensive wasn't particularly effective, but soon the use of gas escalated. According to some historians, gas never proved to be a decisive, battle-winning weapon but without question, poison gas became one of the most feared experiences of the war.

There were several types of gas used. At first, it was tear gas, which was an irritant and forced men out of the trenches. On April 22, 1915, at the Second Battle of Ypres, the Germans used deadly chlorine gas for the first time. Instead of using artillery shells, the chlorine was released from storage cylinders and allowed to drift with the wind across "no man's land." The results were catastrophic for the British, French and Canadian soldiers. In September



1915, the British retaliated at Loos in France, with gas attacks. Chlorine gas reacted with moisture in the throat and air passages and formed an acid that burned the passages and victims suffocated. An American chemist, James Bert Garner discovered chlorine could be subdued with activated charcoal made from natural fibers such as found in walnut shells and peach pits. This spurred community drives to save peach pits for activated charcoal.

In 1916, the Germans began using diphosgene. A year later, in July 1917, the Germans began using mustard gas. While phosgene accounted for the majority of gas casualties during the First World War, the use of mustard gas represented one of the most significant advances in gas warfare. Mustard gas is a vesicant that can burn any exposed skin, eyes, or other tissue, unlike other poison gasses that primarily affect the victim's lungs. The fact that mustard gas also took longer to dissipate than other types of war gasses - sometimes injuring soldiers who came into contact with the chemicals even days after deployment - added to the difficulty of protecting soldiers against it. Gas masks only protected the face. Mus-



tard gas burned any exposed skin, even through clothing.

Ed Mooney stopped by today and I showed him his father's things. I even found his father's trenching tools – a shovel and pick. Ed said that he remembered his father having terrible nightmares, and waking everyone up. After the war, his father worked at the LeRoy Post Office. Ed said his father had survived two gas attacks and he wondered if the lasting effect of the gas hadn't contributed to his father's death. He said, that he knew that his father, once in a while, would have a drink with some other veterans, and they would share war stories, but his father never talked about the war with his family.