

CONVENTION OF WAR

Written by

Eric Shipton

FADE IN:

EXT. TOP OF HILL 143 - DAY

LT. RYAN and SGT. MILLER stare down as the tail end of their PLATOON trudges up the hill through a heavy mist. Ryan, 30, is aggressive but not overbearing. Miller, 22, is cynical and finds grim amusement at the folly that's ensnared him.

The men snailing up the hill are hauling heavy steel cylinders, three-feet long and 12 inches in diameter.

The rest of the soldiers in the platoon are digging three pits, 25 yards apart, six feet below the crest of the hill.

The soldiers are outfitted in olive-drab uniforms, great coats, and steel helmets, and armed with long Springfield rifles and short shovels. Gas masks dangle from their necks.

Near Ryan and Miller is CPL. DAVIS, an earnest 20-year-old, supervising the pit excavation.

SUPER: "France, February 1918"

SGT. MILLER

You don't think the Limeys will come looking for their stolen gas cylinders, Lieutenant Ryan?

LT. RYAN

To hell with the Brits. And we didn't steal them, Sergeant Miller. We found them. Isn't that right, Corporal Davis?

CPL. DAVIS

Yessir, they rolled right into our trucks. Most amazing thing ever.

(to pit diggers)

C'mon, dig faster, or those pits will be our graves!

Davis goes down to help the men coming up with cylinders.

SGT. MILLER

What do you have against the Brits?

LT. RYAN

Dublin. Easter. 1916. My uncle was executed by the bastards.

SGT. MILLER

I didn't hear about any executions
after the uprising.

LT. RYAN

What a surprise.

(to platoon)

Alright, lads, six cylinders to a
pit, just like the book says.

EXT. TOP OF HILL 143 - HALF-HOUR LATER

The finished pits hold six upright cylinders. The soldiers
attach 10-foot-long flexible copper pipes to the cylinder
outlets, then direct the ends of the pipes over the top of
the hill.

Davis goes from pit to pit inspecting the work.

CPL. DAVIS

Where'd you learn to use a wrench,
Ross? ... Perry, the gas is
supposed to go over the hill ...
Hit that cylinder again with that
shovel, Bell, and I'm going to
level you.

RYAN AND MILLER

look down at the mist-shrouded valley below.

SGT. MILLER

You sure the boche are down there?

LT. RYAN

I met a flyboy the other day at a
Red Cross tent. He spotted the
Germans throwing up a bridge over
the river down there.

He pulls out a hand-drawn map and shows it to Miller.

SGT. MILLER

Well, that sure looks official.

Ryan gives him the stink eye.

LT. RYAN

If you weren't our gas expert, I'd
drub you.

SGT. MILLER

Expert? I'm a chemistry major at a school no one's ever heard of.

(beat)

Aren't bridges a job for artillery?

LT. RYAN

If they can't see it, they can't hit it. Besides, I'm fed up with digging tunnels and laying out latrines.

SGT. MILLER

We're engineers first, gas soldiers second.

LT. RYAN

Our first job is to kill Germans!

Miller shakes his head.

SGT. MILLER

I don't know if you're aware of it, lieutenant, but talk in the regiment is that you're nuts.

Ryan laughs out loud.

Miller frowns.

SGT. MILLE

Shouldn't this hill be crawling with infantry?

LT. RYAN

Yep. The French abandoned it a week ago when they were shelled with mustard gas.

Miller looks around wildly.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)

(chuckles)

Relax. The snow's a good insulator. Why don't you go check on the men.

Miller nods and walks over to the pits. Cpl. Davis comes up, grabs a handful of snow and sculpts it into a ball.

CPL. DAVIS

Isn't it too cold for gas?

LT. RYAN

I think the mixture of chlorine and phosgene will work fine.

(beat)

As long as the wind keeps blowing away from us.

CPL. DAVIS

Uh, lieutenant, can I ask you a question?

LT. RYAN

If it's about girls, all I can tell you is that given half a chance they'll turn you inside-out.

CPL. DAVIS

Yeah, I already figured that out for myself. No sir, my question is about the Hague Convention. Corporal Jones and I have a bet on whether it outlawed gas or not.

LT. RYAN

A question without winners. Some people say yes. Some people say it only outlawed poison gas delivered by projectiles. Just don't gas civilians and you'll be alright.

CPL. DAVIS

Huh. Sounds like we need a new convention.

Ryan nods, claps Davis on the shoulder, then smiles.

RYAN'S POV

The mist slowly lifts like a curtain, exposing the snow-covered slope leading down to a river, across which engineers are erecting a wooden bridge. Armed soldiers clad in gray stand watch on the far side of the river's bank.

LT. RYAN (O.S.)

How about that. They're right where they're supposed to be.

BACK TO SCENE

Ryan whistles, drawing everyone's attention.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)

The boche are down there, waiting
for our surprise! We're going to be
the first unit of the First Gas
Regiment to use gas in this war!

The men cheer.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)

Turn the valves on at my signal.
Masks on!

While the men adjust their masks, none of them notice the
flash of LIGHTNING illuminating the sky above the fog bank.

Then the men take their positions around the cylinders, eyes
on Ryan, who stands off to one side.

Ryan raises an arm, then cuts it down hard.

The men turn the valves simultaneously and a HISSING sound
follows the release of the poison gas into the copper tubes.

A CLOUD OF YELLOWISH GAS forms on top of the hill and the
wind carries it away.

Ryan signals the men to move down the hill, then steps up to
the crest and looks down the other side.

RYAN'S POV

A YELLOW CLOUD rolls down the hill toward the unsuspecting
Germans at the bottom of the valley.

Then the POV BECOMES OBSCURED as gas tendrils envelope Ryan.

BACK TO SCENE

Ryan crosses to his platoon 20 yards down the hill.

Miller and Davis take their masks off, while everyone else
keeps theirs on. Ryan slips off his own gas mask.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)

In a half-hour we'll go over the
top and put the surviving bastards
out of their misery.

SGT. MILLER

How long have you wanted to say "go
over the top?"

LT. RYAN
Shut up, Miller.

CPL. DAVIS
What's our story, again, sir?

LT. RYAN
(exaggerated sigh)
We got lost on the way to the new sector and stumbled upon the gas cylinders. So we found a safe place to set them off. And the Germans just happened to be there.

CPL. DAVIS
Gosh, lieutenant, that story kinda stinks.

There's such a disappointed look on his face that Ryan and Miller laugh.

Then the three freeze as a gust of wind blows past them...from the wrong direction! They turn their eyes to the top of the mountain:

THEIR POV

YELLOW PLUMES of smoke drift back in their direction.

LT. RYAN (O.S.)
Oh, hell no!

BACK TO SCENE

Ryan doesn't have time to say anything else because the hill is suddenly pelted by WIND-DRIVEN ICE PELLETS.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)
There goes my gas attack!

He slams his helmet on the ground--and it flies away as a STRONG GUST OF WIND blasts the platoon.

The soldiers try to maintain their footing, but the wind and treacherous footing sends them slipping and sliding.

Ryan tracks down his helmet and uses it to block wind-driven ice pellets as he yells at his men.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)
Stop that horse shit! Get your
gear! Stop it! For God's sake,
we're the US Army!

Miller laughs.

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)
Shut up, Sergeant Miller! Corporal
Davis, where are you?

Davis staggers up, a hand over his eyes.

CPL. DAVIS
Yes, Lieutenant?

Ryan throws his arms out, indicating the whole hill.

LT. RYAN
Corporal Davis, what is the meaning
of this fiasco?

Davis's mouth drops open and his eyes widen as he squeaks out
a response.

CPL. DAVIS
My fiasco?

LT. RYAN
There's one thing you need to know
about the army, corporal: gas isn't
the only thing that rolls downhill.
(indicates platoon)
Now straighten up that mess and
we'll forget about your foolish
plan to gas the Germans.

Davis nods warily and turns to the task of getting the men
into some semblance of order.

CPL. DAVIS
Stop flopping around like a bunch
of dying monkeys, you apes! Pick up
those rifles and shovels! Where's
your damn helmet, Thomas!

Miller steps closer to Ryan to be heard over the wind.

SGT. MILLER
Well, I can't say I'm sorry the
gassing didn't work.

LT. RYAN

A little late to develop scruples
about gas warfare, isn't it?

SGT. MILLER

Not that. I have scruples about
getting court-martialed.

Miller wipes ice pellets off his face.

SGT. MILLER (CONT'D)

So what's Plan B?

Despite the miserable conditions, Ryan's face breaks out in a
big smile,

LT. RYAN

Remember that cafe we passed in
that little village?

SGT. MILLER

Maybe...

LT. RYAN

The men need something to take
their minds off this morning's
disappointment.

SGT. MILLER

Yeah...?

LT. RYAN

I hear tell that cafe has a very
well-stocked wine cellar.

SGT. MILLER

So...?

LT. RYAN

So, we're engineers and we dig
tunnels.

SGT. MILLER

I'm not listening!

Ryan laughs, then shifts his attention to Davis, who's sorted
out the men.

LT. RYAN

Well done, Corporal Davis! Get 'em
down to the trucks!

Before they can lift a foot, the soldiers freeze in place
when they HEAR A NASTY STACCATO ZITT!

LT. RYAN (CONT'D)

Down!

Leading by example, Ryan dives to the ground.

A howitzer shell EXPLODES on the hillside above them, spraying snow, ice, and dirt over the platoon.

RYAN AND MILLER

Lift their heads from the snow, stunned. Then a SNAKE lands between them and they scramble away. Then the snake slithers away, giving them another start.

SGT. MILLER

What's that doing here?

BACK TO SCENE

The soldiers get to their feet shakily. Davis looks uphill.

DAVIS'S POV

YELLOW-BROWN SMOKE rises from the crater.

CPL. DAVIS (O.S.)

Mustard!

BACK TO SCENE

The petrified soldiers stumble down the hill, pursued by ice and wind and GAS EXPLOSIONS.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER:

"AFTER THE WAR...

Lt. Ryan became a respected figure in the Boston mob.

Sgt. Miller founded POW Chemical and provided many fine products to the War Department.

Cpl. Davis served fifteen years in Sing-Sing for a crime he didn't commit."

THE END