

Bangkok magazine

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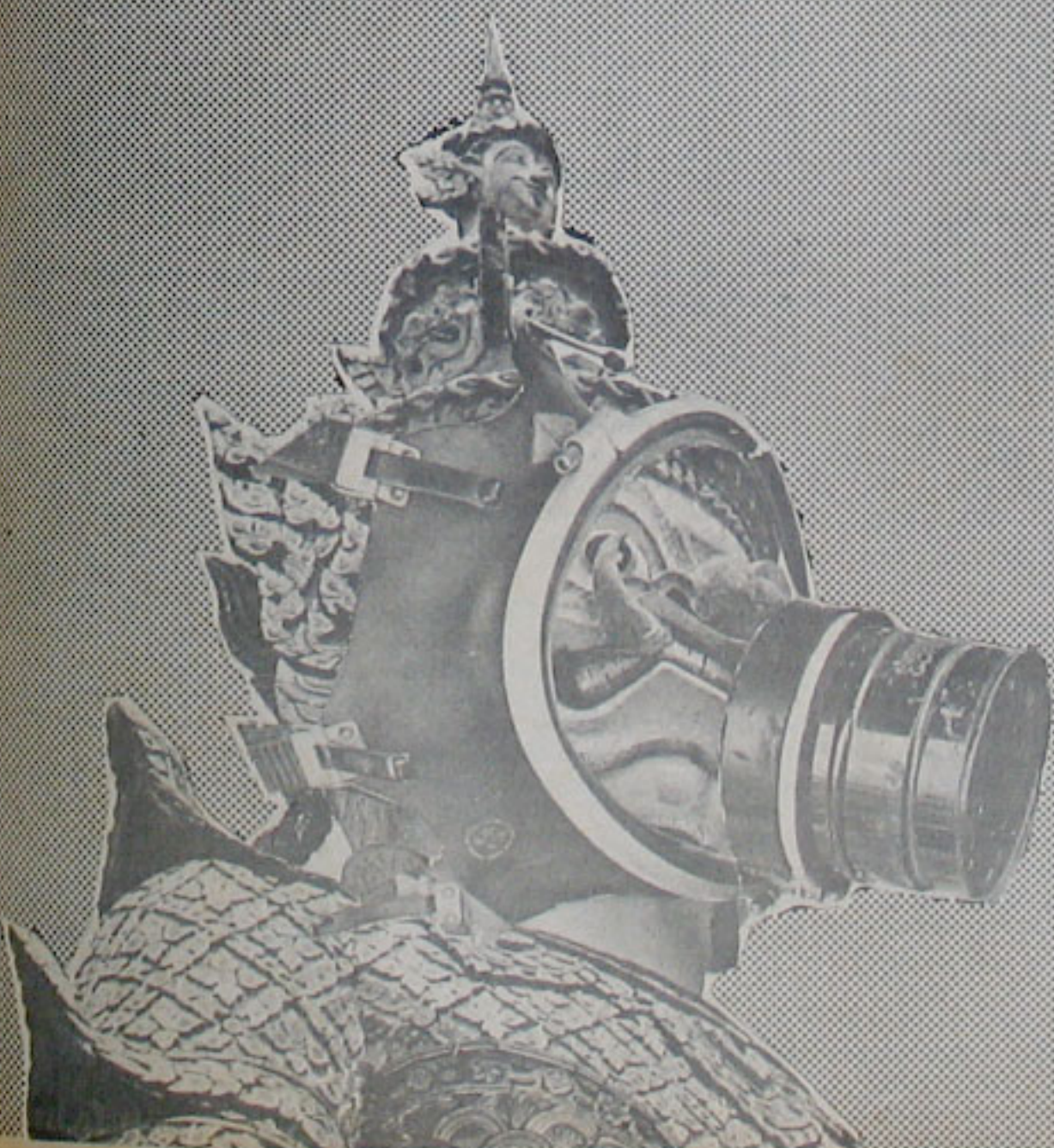
**GAS MASKS -
THE FACE OF
THE FUTURE ?**

SATIRE:

By A.A. Maytree

Dying Bangkok

GAS MASK - THE FACE OF THE FUTURE



Preface:

The black, dead planet earth which you see out your school porthole was once a bright blue and white color. The clouds of black gases covering it now are the result of uncontrolled pollution which grew unchecked all over the globe in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first.

The following document, found in an urban megalopolis in the Southeast Asian region called Bangkok, gives us an insight into how such a disaster could come about without men trying to stop it.

Our ancestors were foolish people. It took several disasters like Bangkok (old cities like New York, Tokyo, Chicago also had to be abandoned during the late 1980's) before they began to fight the peril. But by then it was too late.

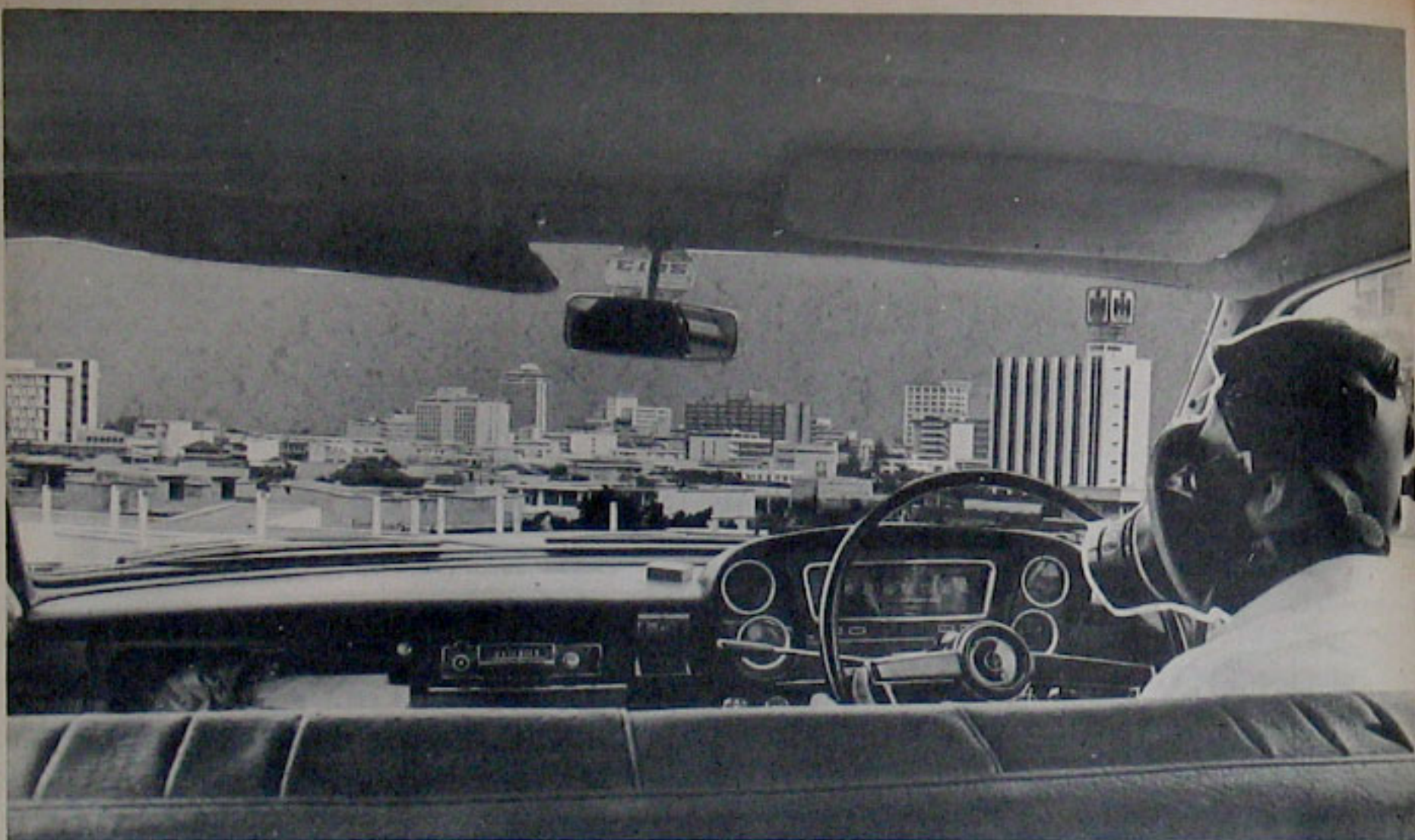
The author describes several things which most students have never seen, such as "tree" (a beautiful tall plant that does not grow on the moon, unfortunately) and "traffic policeman" (a government official assigned to expedite the movement of petroleum burning vehicles which emitted a poisonous gas called carbon monoxide).

The author himself died in the Bangkok Disaster of 1980.

A final historical note: after the disaster a government panel convened in the then relatively unpolluted air of a northern city of Chiangmai and wrote up several more drafts of the "anti-pollution bill." It failed to pass, however, because by then most government deputies had villas in the country and refused to allocate any funds.

Bangkok was ultimately abandoned for good eight years later, in 1988.

(cont'd next page)



THE DOCUMENT

Sat. April 14, 1980.

As I write these last few words, I can barely breathe. My eyes are red and swollen. It is difficult to focus them on this page.

Outside my window, I can see the smog drifting slowly around the abandoned cars on the street below.

My watch says 7 a.m. The sun is up but it barely penetrates the clouds of poison monoxide.

My foot is broken. I cannot flee. I am doomed. I want everyone to know how it is to die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

My father told me Bangkok was once a beautiful city--trees, parks and canals. But that was when he was young, back in the 50's.

When I was born in the year 1961 they still didn't have to use gas masks to walk down Rajaprapop Rd. near the old flyover.

In 1970 the Health Dept. adopted a program of providing pure oxygen to traffic policemen at the end of a day on duty.

They were worried because they found carbon monoxide averaged 80 milligrams per cubic meter in the congested areas of Bangkok and Thon Buri!

People laugh at that when they read that today.

Only 80 milligrams--God, if it were only that pure nowadays!

I could cry.

The number of cars and trucks and motorcycles continued to rise in the 70's and the pollution level rose steadily too. Yellow alerts became

more frequent. But the government did nothing.

Then around 1973 some merchants started selling US Army surplus gas masks. They caught on quickly with the vendors who had to sit all day near the overpass next to the red light and had to breathe the truck and bus fumes during the rush hour.

Gas masks weren't compulsory then.

Then the traffic policemen started wearing them.

A lot of merchants, and some government officials with connections in the US, made millions of baht on them. Pollution was good business.

Then they moved out of Bangkok and built a villa in the country where the air was still fresh. The poor had to stay in the city. But nobody seemed to care about them. It's always that way.

In 1975, if I remember right, the big Japanese-American corporation "Amerija" finished its third gigantic shopping center-apartment house complex.

They built it right in the middle of the busiest part of the city. They tore down the old Erawan Hotel and cut down the trees along the street as far as the old AUA Center. Then they paved everything in and built a parking lot for the complex.

People came from all over the twin cities to shop there. But the roads couldn't hold the traffic. Nobody thought about that. The pollution even then, back in 1975, was at the

danger level. Bangkok had grown to a city of 5 million by then.

The Health Ministry opposed the complex but the Ministry of Trade vetoed their objections. There was just too much money in the deal.

So the government through the Public Relations and Information Division started a campaign to educate the common people to the benefits of "progress." Soon opposition disappeared.

In the last five years Bangkok really "progressed." New factories went up all around. The skyline was a jungle of smokestacks and TV antennas and everyone agreed that Bangkok was an "economic miracle," another Tokyo.

The opposition party in the 1977 elections tried to get an anti-pollution bill passed in Parliament but the Government party referred it to committee.

It died there after going through ten or eleven draft revisions.

In March 1978 the government passed its own version of the bill. It called for stiff 100 baht fines for companies not installing anti-pollution devices on their smokestacks. The people were beginning to complain too much.

But the industrialists in the big companies cried "harassment" and threatened to move out of Thailand. After three days the Bill was repealed quietly.

I remember the President of Amex Petrochemical Combine appeared on TV and explained that "Pollution is the price of progress."

He did promise however that he

would order the smokestacks to be discharged and cleaned only at night so that the ugly black clouds that appeared during the day would no longer be seen by citizens going to work in the morning.

Still, you could smell it--that and "nam plaa." The bus companies had begun to mix it with diesel fuel in the early '70's. Spoiled "nam plaa" was cheaper than diesel oil. So they never got their fare hike but we paid for it anyway.

So the government ordered all citizens to buy a gas mask. Then the problem would be solved!

In June of that year a group of pollution experts from the developed countries - America, Japan, Germany - came to Thailand at the invitation of the government.

They set up a modern, sophisticated "white-yellow-red" monitoring system for Bangkok and the government declared that the problem was "under control."

The whole city was linked by high-speed computer and a new 80 man Environment Committee was set up, with a special Director and Deputy Director. Now they could give citizens the latest news on how bad the pollution was.

Right from the start, three areas of the city were discovered to be under "yellow alert" already.

In 1979 there were, beside the three areas just mentioned, 43 days of yellow alert (disabling but not fatal pollution) and 7 red alerts (fatal if you were in the area for more than 12 hours).

It was a common scene during the red alerts of 1979 to see dogs lying dead on the street. Without masks they were quickly asphyxiated.

None of the dogs in Bangkok had any hair left and they roamed the streets coughing and choking.

No birds could live in Bangkok. You never saw a bird flying through the sky anymore. It was sad, really.

Still, the government did nothing. They had no reason to most of them had moved to the country. Although Bangkok still remained the capital of the country, they set up a "summer government" that year in Chiang Mai and never came back.

Only a few officials of high rank were condemned to live in Bangkok. The rest were lower grade officials and clerks, without money or money enough to buy a transfer upcountry.

Occasionally a foreign expert on pollution would tour the city and warn of the possibility of an "accident" like New York had experienced - a temperature inversion which would be disastrous to the city.

If the right set of atmospheric circumstances occurred at the same time - it was unlikely, but certainly possible well, he refused to predict the outcome.

Then, on Feb. 26 this year, they had two simultaneous red alerts in adjacent areas. Some motorists were caught in the traffic jam for 6 hours before police unsnarled it. Police went around in gas masks begging motorists to shut off their motors while they idled in line, but most refused.

Their air purifiers conditioners operated only when the car engine was running. To shut off their motors meant they would be asphyxiated and many had no gas masks with them.

It was a violation of the Government Decree of 1977 not to have a gas mask with you at all times but what could the police do?

Thirty pedestrians died that day. Some had no gas masks, or there was only one for a family of five. Before they realized it the colorless, odorless carbon monoxide had put them to sleep.

Several people with masks also died. Their filters were overloaded, dirty, old.

On that day the last tree in downtown Bangkok died also. Its branches had been drooping for the last few years anyway and its leaves had long since turned brown and dropped off.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: At this point the author seems to have fallen unconscious. When he begins again, the writing becomes more illegible.)

I must hurry. My filter is... being clogged. The smog is slowly poisoning me, putting me to sleep. Where was I?

Yes. Two days ago...no, yesterday - today is Saturday. Friday it hap-

pened. Finally.

That morning came without a breath of breeze. The pollution from the factory stacks cleaned the night before wasn't blown away. It hung in the air above the city - ugly, brown, low clouds of it, mixing with the normal yellow alert haze.

The air was incredibly foul, reeking of sulphur fumes and early morning carbon monoxide pollution.

The week before the pattern of red alerts had spread. The police had to remove by force inhabitants of one slum area near the Amex plant when the red alert there lasted 36 hours.

By 9 a.m. yesterday the normal morning traffic had caused a yellow alert in four places. It was the earliest ever recorded.

The areas: 1) near Memorial Bridge and Chakkrapiet Rd; 2) On Rama IV near Hualampong R.R. station; 3) At Democracy Monument; 4) at the intersection of Petchburi and Larn Luang St. where the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital was. By 11:30 the roads were still clogged.

Then somehow the normal MORNING traffic jam just seemed to merge into the normal NOON traffic jam.

People going out to lunch met the people who were still trying to make it to work. Extra policemen were called out.

Traffic got worse.

The day was incredibly hot and humid. It was the warm season and tempers flared as the hours wore on. Angry, irritated drivers tried to edge ahead in line. Fights broke out. People were on edge. Meanwhile the carbon monoxide sensors imbedded in the pavement continued to flash back warnings to Environment Control Center. Pollution rose by the minute.

By 1:30 the Deputy Director of the Environment Committee ordered two of the yellow alerts changed to red and added the traffic circle in front of the Dusit Thani Hotel to the growing list.

He tried to reach the Director but he had gone to Hua Hin for the weekend and couldn't be warned of the situation.

Back on the streets the situation was deteriorating fast.

As the afternoon wore on, people hoping to get a jump on the weekend rush started leaving work early, adding more traffic.

Red alerts went up at headquarters for Soi 4 and Soi 21, Sukumvit Rd. where the traffic lights were.

Monoxide was pouring into the air at an incredible rate.

Oil trucks in the weekly convoy to Nong Khai, bringing supplies to troops fighting in Laos, poured black smoke out their pipes into the air.

By 4:30 half the city was on red alert. Some had been on red alert for 3 hours already.

I left work at 5 O'clock with my gas mask on (with a mental note to myself to change the filter this weekend) and stepped out onto the street. I couldn't believe it.

It was almost as dark as night. Lines of stalled, idling cars stretched back down the street as far as I could see.

Up front, the line was moving as a snail's pace and motorists had switched on their lights, trying to cut through the smog.

I couldn't see more than 20 feet in front of me.

It was eerie as hell with those car lights beaming through the swirling clouds of gas and pedestrians on the sidewalks appearing and vanishing among the vapors. I just couldn't believe it.

Two motorists had left their cars and were arguing with each other. Both had gas masks on, pushing and shoving each other. Everyone was tense.

Red alerts continued to go up all over the city.

The eye plates on my gas mask were beginning to fog up.

I stopped for a second and removed the mask to clean the glass.

The first breath nearly killed me. I choked, nearly vomited, my eyes burning like someone had thrown acid in them.

I slipped the mask back over my face without cleaning it.

In my pocket was a transistor radio. I switched it on to see what the government was doing, the latest news on the traffic situation, and what my instructions as a citizen were.

The radio announcer was describing an accident on upper Paholyothin Rd. The same kind of thing was happening all over the city.

A taxi had collided with a bus near Sapan Kwai, blocking traffic evacuating north out of the city.

In a matter of five minutes, cars were backed up to Victory Monument, which rapidly became a gigantic mess.

Cars coming east on Rajvithi Rd. trying to cross the circle on their way towards Din Daeng Highway couldn't move through because a bumper to bumper line of traffic cut them off.

Traffic started piling up back towards Rama VI.

Meanwhile, policemen at the intersection of Rajvithi and Rama VI, unaware of the situation at Victory Monument, sent more cars through. When the light changed, traffic blocked Rajvithi Rd.

Motorists were forced to continue south - right into the Petchburi Street traffic jam. They were trapped.

On the other side of town, an old bus had broken down on Sukumvit Rd. in front of Seiler's bakery, near soi 49.

It stayed in the middle of the lane while the bus driver tried to

fix the engine. Behind it, more cars piled up.

Thon Buri reported two red alerts at 6:00 p.m.

The announcer on the radio introduced the Deputy Director of the Environment Committee who pleaded with motorists to turn off their engines if they were in a traffic jam and use their personal gas masks.

There was a barely controlled note of panic in his voice.

All through the evening the frustrated, angry wail of police sirens cut through the smog and gathering darkness. But the police car couldn't advance either.

Instead of getting out and walking they stayed inside their Chevrolets and leaned on the siren. The lines of motorists began to honk and beep too. It was a madhouse.

Earlier in the afternoon, a lot of people had fled to the movie houses to sit the disaster out and watch a film.

At 7 p.m. hordes of movie-goers all over Bangkok left the theaters and added even more cars to the crush.

On Pyathai Rd., just north of Rachaywee Circle, a car coming out of the old Athens cinema tried to make a U-turn back towards the Florida Hotel.

Before he could slip in line, angry motorists closed the gap, leaving him blocking the lane going the other direction.

More fights broke out. People were getting hysterical.

A lot of cars were running out of gas. Once they did, their air purifiers stopped, leaving them to die.

Two-thirds of the city was now on red alert.

Some sections of the city, such as Rajdamri-Ploenchit, had sustained red alert for almost eight hours by now.

In four hours not even gas masks would help.

Time was ticking away, minute by minute.

People with portable gas masks began to abandon their Mercedes, their Cadillacs, their Toyotas, to set out on foot, but once they left their cars they eliminated the last hope of keeping lines moving, no matter how slowly.

People without gas masks stuck to their cars, their only hope. They didn't even realize that it was all over now.

More accidents.

There was no way to get an ambulance in to the sick in most areas. Squads of policemen were trying to tip abandoned cars out of the way to clear the lanes.

The crowds on foot swelled into a flood because people began to realize that there was no hope of unsnarling the traffic.

(continued on Page 30)

DYING BANGKOK

(continued from Page 11)

Night came. The dim grey afternoon just melted into blackness.

You couldn't see the street signs. Landmarks vanished in the smog. No one knew the way out. People started dropping off to sleep, their masks overloaded, filters black with dirt. They never woke up.

Rescue work at night was a nightmare as panic gripped one crowd of motorists after another. Everyone was shoving and clawing and fighting towards what he thought was the way out of the city.

Motorcyclists still had the best chance of making it through the traffic jams. But as things got worse, the crowds got uglier. They started jumping motorcyclists.

Guns appeared from glove compartments and motorcyclists were shot and killed for their bikes. People went crazy with fear.

Memorial Bridge was the scene of wild disorder. Through the narrow streets of the Chinese section, along Mahachai, Chakkrapetch and Jawaraj Roads, cars, trucks and buses slowly advanced on the bridge which acted like a funnel, squeezing the flood of cars into a trickle before letting them pour out into Thon Buri.

But Thon Buri was no escape. Every area bordering the Chao Phya River was on red alert. The first relief area was a yellow alert amphoe fully 22 kilometers outside the city.

But the radio announced that it too had been reclassified red.

Like an ink stain on a blotter the disaster spread across the face of the city. The air was horrible.

Where I was, on Petchburi Rd., near the Metro Theater, motorists had been waiting five hours on full red alert before people began to realize that no one was going to come and save them.

Panic reached epidemic proportions.

One car was ramming a stalled "rot-tuk-tuk," trying to drive it out of the way.

I was packed in a crowd of fleeing people, shoulder to shoulder. Occasionally we would stumble over some poor devil lying dead on the sidewalk. Old people died quick.

The minutes ticked away.

I was frightened of losing my mask. I protected it with my arms to keep someone from knocking it off.

My radio continued to blare away, giving useless instructions.

Even inside the luxury hotels like the Siam and the Rama-Hilton, air purifiers were being taxed to the

breaking point. Lobbies were choked with motorists fleeing on foot from stalled vehicles.

There was a limit to the air available. Managers had begun locking their doors. Too many people in a crowded space. Like a submarine trapped on the floor of the ocean. Soon the air is used up.

But the crowds outside broke the doors down. The hotel staff drove them back with gunfire, and barricaded the doors with chairs and desks.

People were screaming "Air!" "Air!"

Suddenly I heard shouting and screaming behind me.

A car had jumped the curb and was pushing its way down the sidewalk, trying to advance in line.

People were being crushed to death. The mob of people began to push and shove to escape the car.

I found a niche in the street and pressed my body against the wall but my foot got caught in a tangle of legs and feet.

Seconds later I felt a sharp pain sear through my ankle and the car wheel rolled over my foot.

I knew it was broken.

The pain was incredible. I got up and limped a little farther, then collapsed on the pavement and passed out.

I awoke to someone tugging on my gas mask. A man dressed in a gas mask with a baby in his arms was trying to get it away from me. The baby had no mask. He probably thought I was dead. When I jerked awake he seemed surprised. For a second our eyes met.

He held up the baby, pleading for the mask.

Poor man. The baby was already dead. He was crazy.

I passed out two or three more times with the pain till finally I found an open door along the street and crawled inside, away from the mob.

I found the light switch and pushed the button.

Nothing happened. No light.

I tried again.

Nothing.

Then I looked up at the ceiling. The light was so dim you could barely see it. It had been on all the time. The room was filled with smog. I lay on the bed and cried.

Around midnight I switched the radio on again.

The announcer was saying that the whole city was under red alert. The government had ordered all citizens to leave the city, "for health reasons." They didn't say how. They never do.

It is 8 a.m. now. There's a pale grey light out on the street. Fumes and smog are drifting around the rows and rows of abandoned cars out

there.

Bangkok is a gas chamber.

I cannot get out. My filter is saturated. It is only a matter of minutes now. Already I am breathing in gulps, and getting almost nothing. I will have to take it off soon, before

it is totally clogged. Perhaps I'll last three minutes in this air without the mask.

What fools we were to think that progress was so important. All I want... If only I could have... one last... breath of... clean... air... ●

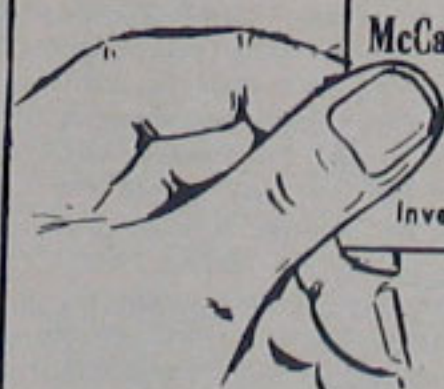
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