

## DEPT. OF PREPARATION GET YOUR GAS MASKS HERE

THE NEW YORKER - TALK OF THE TOWN

Issue of 2001-10-15

The woman in the navy suit peered over the sales desk. "I'm looking to buy a gas mask?" she said.

Rich Kraus, a salesman, nodded and gestured toward the floor, which was piled high with boxes of respirators, protective full-body suits, and germicidal wipes. The woman's eyes widened. She had a particular style in mind—a military gas mask with a special nozzle fitted for a drinking straw — but was told that it was out of stock. "Please don't think I'm a frantic person," she said. "I'm not ordinarily like this."

"We understand," Kraus said. "Awareness is high."

Inside the fluorescent-lit office of Aramsco, a safety-supply company in Long Island City, phones were ringing, the fax machine was spitting out orders, and bewildered sales reps were trying to soothe bewildered customers. "O.K., do you have duct tape at home?" one saleswoman said into the phone. "Good, because duct tape is your best friend." Aramsco normally sells protective gear to contractors: hard hats for construction sites, respirators for asbestos-abatement projects, HAZMAT suits for chemical spills. Last month, it became a major supplier for World Trade Center rescue workers. But more recently Aramsco has found itself besieged by anxious civilians as well.

"We're not really set up to deal with individuals—we've never had foot traffic before," Kraus said. "I don't even know how these people found us." He rubbed an eye with the heel of his hand and stifled a yawn; the staff had worked until four o'clock that morning, hosting a group of Hasidic Jews who were eager to stock up.

In the warehouse, adjacent to the office, workers were busily rehangng the Budweiser bikini-babe posters that they'd taken down the night before, out of respect for the Hasidim. The warehouse manager, Bruce Schwartz, a man with a gray mustache and a black baseball cap studded with P.O.W.-M.I.A. pins, scanned the half-empty shelves. "This one's been our big seller," he said, pulling down a black gas mask (\$174.30) that Aramsco usually sells to police departments and prisons. Other items included nuclear-biological-chemical respirator filters (\$30), polyethylene protective suits (\$45), and the ominous-sounding "20-Minute Civilian Escape Hood" (\$75). There were hundreds of rolls of duct tape. "It's your best friend," Schwartz said. "You can use it to seal up your windows so nothing can seep in. You can use it to secure your booties and gloves to your suit. It's the greatest!"

Back at the sales desk, a Long Island couple was inquiring about deadly biological agents. "Would the germs go from Manhattan all the way to the East End?" the woman asked.

"Depends on the wind," the salesman said.

"Oh, my God!" the woman exclaimed, clapping a hand to her heart. "O.K., here's maybe a silly question. Do you have masks for dogs?"

"A lot of people have been asking, but no," the salesman said. He totalled up their order: four

protective suits, bootees, gloves, gas masks, and filters—\$1,109.13. “We were going to buy a home-entertainment system, but instead we’re getting this,” the woman said. Her husband had worked a block from the World Trade Center; their daughter had worked at Seven World Trade and had been having nightmares since the attack. “I don’t know if we’ll ever use this stuff, or if it’ll even help,” the woman said. “I just want to feel like I did whatever I could to protect my family.”

“Hey, do you guys have duct tape at home?” the salesman asked them. “Because that’s your best friend right there.”

One shopper wondered whether the Aramsco employees kept any protective gear in their own homes. “Of course not,” Schwartz said. “You can’t live your life worrying about that sort of thing.” ■