

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## THE FLOOD ROOM

By Cammy Wilson

On a rainy afternoon in Bangkok late in the monsoon season, the telephone rang in my living room.

"We're at the New Imperial hotel," said a friend. "All eight of us (a couple, their four children and two dogs). We've got 18 inches of water in our living room."

My friends had moved from the neighborhood a few weeks earlier after we watched the soi, or lane, in front of our houses slowly disappear in murky, debris-filled water. My front yard soon followed the soi. Meanwhile, my former neighbors, secure in their new home, had basked in having a dry yard and a navigable soi. No more.

"You should see the leeches and the snakes out there," the friend continued. "There were snakes curling all over the gate, trying to stay out of the water."

"Well, at least you know they are not sea snakes (which are deadly poisonous)," I replied in an attempt at levity. We both knew that that left many other possibilities, including cobras, banded kraits and Russell's vipers.

"At least we're out of it," my friend retorted. "What are you going to do?"

A good question, I thought, and one that I knew I would have to answer soon. The water was lapping dangerously near the kitchen door.

Flooding at the end of the rainy season is commonplace for Bangkok, a city of five million, and the capital of Thailand. Flood waters from the north and incoming tides from the Gulf of Thailand combine to inundate low lying areas. At one time Bangkok residents responded by building their houses on stilts and surrounding their neighborhoods with open "klongs," or canals, that helped disperse

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the water. Then progress came. A filled-in, paved klong could add two extra lanes to the city's already congested streets and concrete houses built flat on the ground replaced many of the teak structures that had stood on stilts. With the expanded city streets and modern houses came a new breed of bureaucrat, the flood control expert. As the latter had not been altogether successful, I decided to set up what came to be known as "the flood room." This room -- an unused upstairs bedroom -- would be a repository for all supplies and a headquarters for the preparations necessary to see us through the flood. After all, peril lay ahead.

The very fact that the house has two floors is serendipity. No one points out the flood control features when you look at Bangkok property in the dry season. The garage roof is flat, for example, and you can crawl out onto it from the second-floor hall window -- another boon. Why? Because if worse comes to worst, you can haul your little charcoal bucket-stove out the window and onto the roof. There you can get a fire going with no risk of asphyxiation, a minor disadvantage to cooking with charcoal. You must be sure to remember packets of charcoal starter, which look like black Hershey bars -- the kind that come in the little squares. One or two squares should be sufficient for a nice, hot, little fire.

The scariest aspect of getting stuck in a flood in this house was the danger of electrocution. The kitchen is several inches lower than the living-dining area and would flood first. And once the wall outlets were under water, getting to the kitchen fuse box to turn off the electricity would be well nigh impossible. I could picture the very real prospect of waking up one morning with the flood in full swing -- electricity running riot through the water -- and with us stranded, on the second floor, cut off even from the telephone, which likewise was downstairs.

The first item I thought of storing in the flood room was -- no pun intended -- water, clean water. In Bangkok, under the best of circumstances, you must boil all drinking water or buy it in bottles. But bottled water was already impossible to get; deliveries -- even of mail -- were no longer being made at my soi, which was by now about 20 inches deep in swirling water.

Since no vehicles were entering the soi, it would be necessary to plunge through the rising waters on foot, not least of all to secure flood supplies for some time:

plastic buckets to hold water; batteries for radio and flashlight; rope; matches; candles; paper plates and cups; plastic eating utensils and disinfectant. Not only is the rising water a problem, but also the length of time the water levels take to go down can be considerable.

Another consideration was food: what would keep without refrigeration and what could be eaten with the least amount of cooking? Canned goods were the first choice: beans, soup and milk in boxes. Also, I bought kilos of rice; extra cooking oil; instant coffee; canned tuna; dried beans and last of all a supply of flour and meal, which, in an emergency, could at least be mixed with water and fried in cooking oil. For flavoring I stashed away garlic, soy sauce, nam pla (the ever present Thai fish sauce) and chili and curry powder. This would be no diet I would especially enjoy but it would suffice. It would staunch hunger. It might discourage it altogether.

The most exotic purchase, at least in the eyes of a Thai friend who acted as the procuring agent, was inner tubes.

"You sure you want?" he asked, followed by, "Madam, Madam, wait till flood comes."

"But if I wait until the flood comes, how would you get the inner tubes to me?"

He scratched his head and smiled. As he left, however, he touched the wall above the front door. "Madam, in 1948," he said, "flood water here only come this high." With that, I ordered two more inner tubes.

Just as the flood room was rounding into shape I had one of those marvelous strokes of luck that you come to take for granted when you live in an exotic country like Thailand: my Thai visa would run out shortly before the worst of the expected flooding. Thai immigration procedures rigidly mandate that you be out of the country before your visa expires. I would be forced to leave.

Streets all the way to the airport were by now under water. Downtown hotel notices to guests read: "If you are going to the airport, please leave at least 4 hours early because of the flood waters."

For one by this time skilled in flood preparation,

leaving was a cinch. It merely required a friend to carry my suitcase on his head half a mile down the soi to a main thoroughfare where I engaged a taxi -- at the exorbitant flood rates for the slow, squishy trip to the airport terminal.

Meanwhile, back at the flood room, all was quiet. Friends from out of country who had arranged to use the house for a visit arrived. I know, because they left me a puzzling note which I read on my return.

"Dear Cammy," it read. "Thanks for the hospitality but we moved to the Florida Hotel. The water was too much for us."

Sometimes you just can't understand people. After all, they had the flood room.

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