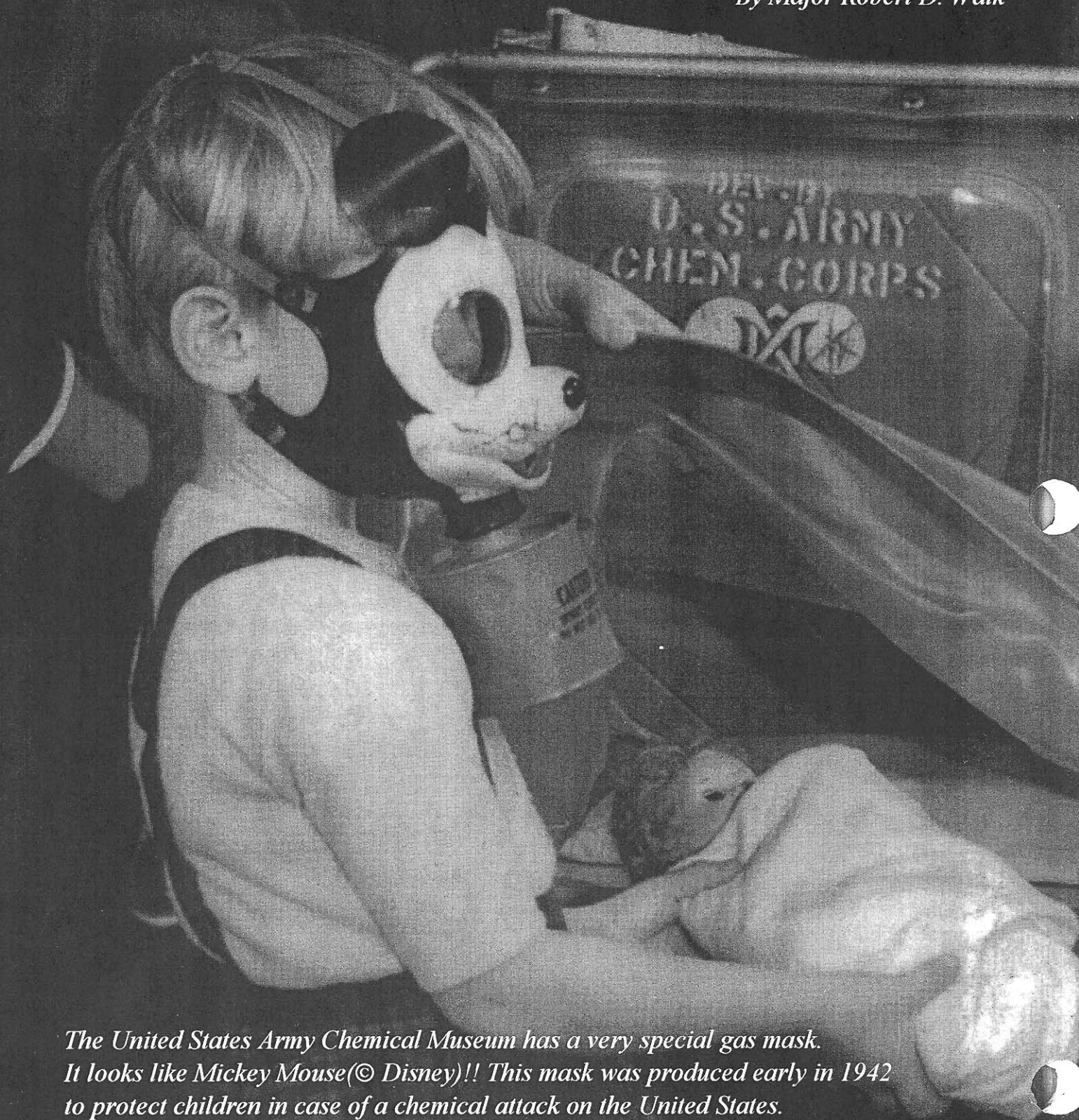


The Mickey Mouse Mask

By Major Robert D. Walk



The United States Army Chemical Museum has a very special gas mask. It looks like Mickey Mouse(© Disney)!! This mask was produced early in 1942 to protect children in case of a chemical attack on the United States.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii with massive force that destroyed the battleships of the Pacific Fleet. In the dark days of early 1942, the US government was faced with the specter of defeat and gloom. Our military was fighting a losing battle on all fronts and fears of saboteurs and submarines attacking the US were high. A critical need existed to protect the civilian population, especially children, from gas attacks. Hawaii was of special concern and thousands of US military training masks were rushed in for the civilian population's use. No masks were available to protect children, so the Hawaiian Department used a locally fabricated expedient that consisted of a hood with bunny ears.

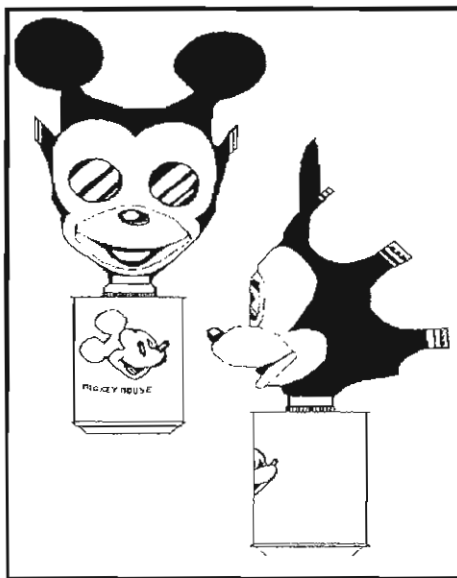
On January 7th, 1942, one month after Pearl Harbor, T.W. Smith, Jr., the owner of the Sun Rubber Company, and his designer, Dietrich Rempel, with Walt Disney's approval introduced a protective mask for children. This design of the Mickey Mouse Gas Mask for children was presented to Major General William N. Porter, Chief of the Chemical Warfare Service. After approval of the CWS, Sun Rubber Products Company produced sample masks for review. Other comic book character designs were to follow, depending on the success of the Mickey Mouse mask.

The mask was designed so children would carry it and wear it as part of a game. This would reduce the fear associated with wearing a gas mask and hopefully, improve their wear time and, hence, survivability.

The protection of children was a primary concern of all nations during World War II. Germany had a child's gas protective crib for infants and a protective hood for toddlers and children unable to wear the adult noncombatant mask. The United Kingdom had a similar program. In the United States, the M1 Infant Protector was developed, using a standard civil defense filter with bellows to push air into a layered protective sack. The M1 series of Noncombatant Gas Masks was produced in large numbers for older children and adults. The Mickey Mouse Gas Mask was designed for small children in a valiant attempt to give them something that would work and still be fun. Ultimately, the Office of Civil Defense bought the M2 Noncombatant Gas Mask

for small children to protect them from chemical agents. In tests, with proper coaching and good salesmanship by the leader, young children could be induced to wear the gas mask for extended periods.

The Mickey Mouse Gas Mask was produced as part of the war production program. The Sun Rubber Company produced approximately 1,000 Mickey Mouse gas masks and earned an Army-Navy 'E' for excellence in wartime production in 1944. Overall, production of the Noncombatant Gas Masks (and in fact, all gas masks) was one of the most successful production programs of the war. In fact, production had to be curtailed early due to the vast quantity produced.



Mickey Mouse (© Disney) mask drawing provided by the Walt Disney Company Archives.

Thankfully, no chemical attacks occurred in the United States. Mickey Mouse Gas Masks were distributed to senior officials and others during the war as keepsakes. When the war ended, further desire for the mask vanished. It became an old idea whose time had passed.

Very few of the Mickey Mouse gas masks survived. The US Army Chemical Museum at Fort McClellan, Alabama, has a hand-made prototype. The 45th Infantry Division Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, has a production specimen on permanent display with other gas masks in the combat support area of the museum. The Walt Disney Archives, Burbank, California, has a facepiece without ears, lenses, or a canister, and a mask owned by the founder of the Sun Rubber Company was on display at the Summit County (Ohio) Historical Society's "Toys Made in Summit County" exhibit in 1982. Have you seen one of these masks?

At the time this article was written, Major Robert D. Walk was the Weapons of Mass Destruction Individual and Instructor Training Officer at the US Army Reserve Command. He is a graduate of the Command and General Staff College (Resident and Correspondence), the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, the Chemical Officers Advanced Course, and the Chemical Officers Basic Course. Previous assignments include Commander, 184th Chemical Detachment; Commander, HHC, 59th Ordnance Brigade; Acting Commander, 1st Battalion, 377th Regiment, 95th Division (Institutional Training); S-3, 1st Battalion, 377th Regiment, 95th Division (Institutional Training); S-3, 197th Ordnance Battalion; Chemical Officer, Readiness Group Stewart; and Chemical Officer, 60th Ordnance Group.