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A Japanese Firefighter Talks Surviving the Nuclear Reactors

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Ken'ichi Kunisawa and his fellow firefighters braved boiling nuclear reactors for over 13 hours. He talks to Lennox Samuels about radiation fears and why this wasn't a kamikaze mission.

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Ken'ichi Kunisawa and his fellow firefighters braved boiling nuclear reactors for more than 13 hours. He talks to Lennox Samuels about radiation fears and why this wasn't a kamikaze mission.

Watching television images of reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant smoking and exploding en route to a possible meltdown, Ken'ichi Kunisawa knew he would be joining the battle to end Japan's worst crisis since the Second World War. Now, almost two weeks after he and his team rushed to help cool down the overheating plant, the Tokyo firefighter remembers getting as close as six feet to the radiation-spewing reactors, acknowledges that he will have to be checked for contamination for months to come—and almost cheerfully says he would do it again.



Kunisawa, the squad's deputy commander. (Photo: Lennox Samuels)

"It would be a lie if we say we did not feel the fear," says the 41-year-old father of three as he chats amiably in a conference room at the Tokyo Hyper Rescue Squad offices in the Tokyo suburb of Tachikawa. "We focused on doing our

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duty. We had been trained to do so. If they asked me, I'd be glad to go back there." And he says his was no suicide assignment. "Our safety was secured through skills and technology," he insists. "This is not a story about kamikaze."

The call came the night of March 17, six days after a 9.0-magnitude earthquake launched a chain of events that has so far left almost 28,000 people dead or missing, and driven Japan to the nuclear precipice. The caller was Kunisawa's boss: Authorities were dumping tons of water on the reactors using helicopters, and Tokyo Fire Department brass wanted firefighters to join the effort by spraying water from the ground. "We knew that the call might be coming that day and we did training for that," Kunisawa says. "We showed the department head that we could do this spraying-water operation. Then we went home, and later got the call."

It wasn't a particularly eventful night-before for Kunisawa, the squad's deputy commander. Like the other men, he felt a little tense, but there were no nightmares, no what-ifs. "We firefighters, even if we feel fear, we never show it to the others. We have high morale and were resolved to accomplish the duty. We only think how to accomplish our duty—even when we are afraid to do it." And, he added wryly, "When I heard that the operation was to spray water to the reactors, I felt that we were the right people to do it. We are good at spraying water." His wife, Tomomi, tried to be stoic. "She did not want me to go, of course, but did not say so. She is the wife of a firefighter, and understands what we do every day. I have never heard of any wife that complained or said, 'Please do not go.'"

"I admit we had concerns about [reactor No. 3], but we'd been trained to do this. That's how we became members of a special unit. We're proud of being special guys, like the Green Berets."

The following day, 32 men from the Tachikawa squad, including Kunisawa, left for Fukushima. A total of 140 firefighters converged on the stricken plant, where four of six reactors, including the troublesome Unit No. 3—which was to take on almost mythic status in the days ahead—were crippled in some way, with the remaining two, Nos. 5 and 6, fitfully showing symptoms of rising pressure. Kunisawa's squad took along two firetrucks. They rushed to the site, taking the time to execute one more simulation nearby, making sure all equipment was working well. The mission to cool down the reactors began in earnest on the 19th.

The men donned thin protection suits against radiation contamination on top of their regular uniforms, and flame-retardant firefighting suits over those—to reduce the risk of tearing the anti-radiation gear.

As they pulled up, the scene was as it had appeared on TV to millions day after day—debris strewn around, smoke billowing about, the reactors sitting stolidly—and dangerously—near the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

"We tried to reach to the reactors, but could not because of the rubble left by the explosion of the building [in which reactors are situated]. Then we changed our original plan, and tried to go again," Kunisawa says. But the men could not extend a fire hose by simply dropping it from a truck; there was too much debris around. So they did it manually—unfurling the 164-foot, 220-pound hose and carrying it on their shoulders. They got started around 11 p.m.

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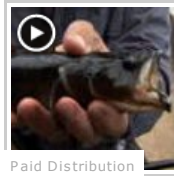
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