

## Japan tsunami: Fukushima Fifty, the first interview

Exclusive: in their own words, members of the Fukushima Fifty - the emergency crew tackling Japan's nuclear crisis - tell of the dangers and fears they face



A member of the 'Fukushima 50' emergency crew is given a radiation check Photo: Robert Gilhooly

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They lined up to be checked for radiation, dressed for the most part in identical grey-hooded sweatshirts and brown tracksuit bottoms, their own contaminated clothes clutched in transparent plastic bags. Several looked utterly shattered – unshaven, haggard, with deep rings round their eyes. Hardly surprising, given where they'd just come from and where they must, in only a few hours, go back to.

The extraordinary courage of the “Fukushima Fifty”, the skeleton crew risking their own lives to save their country from nuclear disaster, has gripped the world. But the Fifty themselves – or the several hundred, in fact, with shifts and rotations – have been the invisible heroes, the darkness at the centre of the spotlight. Until now.

At a ruined port close to the leaking nuclear reactors, and a fire station in suburban Tokyo, *The Sunday Telegraph* became the first newspaper to track down the Fukushima workers. They turned from faceless supermen into real, scared people with names and families. They told of frightening

work in narrow, dark spaces, of their fear and the fear of their loved ones, but of their determination to go on.

“It was just pitch black,” said Kazuhiko Fukudome, who led a company from Tokyo Fire Brigade’s Hyper Rescue Squad to the collapsing number 3 reactor as it started to melt down. “It was the middle of the night and all we had to see with were our own head torches. We could see smoke and vapour coming up from the reactor. Everything else had failed, so they called us in to pump seawater to try to cool the thing. We don’t even work for the government, but for the city of Tokyo. They were desperate. They must have been on their last legs.”

The squad’s riskiest mission began with a phone call at 11pm. “I was at home,” Mr Fukudome said. “It was a very simple call – they just said gather your men and get to Fukushima, and then they hung up. I turned to my wife and said, ‘I’m going to Fukushima.’ She looked shocked, but then she put on her calm face and she just said, ‘Take care.’ She knows that if she keeps a brave face, it helps me.”

The thought of refusing to go didn’t even cross Mr Fukudome’s mind, but plenty of other thoughts did. “It was pretty quiet on the journey up to the plant,” he said. “There was a lot of worry among us. Most of the jobs we do, we practise for, but this was an unseen enemy. There was a lot of apprehension about that.”

Their fears were realised.

Arriving at the plant at 2am, the squad split into three. One of their Scorpion fire trucks went as close as it could to the seashore, to suck up the water needed. Another drove to within six feet of the reactor building itself, to do the actual spraying. The third fire engine was parked in between, as a relay point for the half-mile of yellow fire hose they were using.

“It was far worse than I expected. Everything was covered in rubble,” Mr Fukudome said. “There were concrete blocks everywhere, all the manhole covers had popped out, for some reason, and the road was impassable. We couldn’t drive down to pay out the hose from the sea. So we had to run, carrying the hose, half a mile to the sea, in total darkness.”

An escape car waited nearby, engine running, to whisk the men away if radiation levels spiked. But radioactivity harmful to human health was, of course, pouring from the reactor the whole time.

“We would call out to each other, ‘Only a bit more to go! Let’s keep going! Pull the hose out a little bit further!’, that sort of thing,” Mr Fukudome said. “We were wearing respirators, so we had to really

shout. We were yelling at each other. The moment we saw the water come out of the hose and hit the reactor, we all shouted ‘Yes!’ and clenched our fists in the air. Then we could go back a bit because the hoses could operate automatically.”

Respirators aside, they wore little more than their normal uniforms, orange boiler suits with a cartoon St Bernard dog patch on the upper arm. “I knew there was some radiation, but I never knew how much. We wore what I’m wearing now,” said Mr Fukudome. “Over our overalls, we had thin white suits and, over that, our uniform coats. Apart from the white suits, there was nothing else.”

Had he been irradiated? “Yes,” he said, not noticeably worried. “We were 26 hours on the site and then when we got to the rest place, they screened us. My clothes and socks had quite a bit of radiation, so they were confiscated. We were scrubbed, then they measured me again. I still wasn’t totally clear, but clear enough – so they let me go.” Was he feeling all right? “Yes,” he said, smiling. “Look, this might sound funny, but I think I will be safe. Even though my outer clothes were affected, not much got on my body.”

*The Sunday Telegraph* discovered that the rest place for many of the Fifty is, bizarrely enough, a beautiful, four-masted sailing ship, the Kaiwo Maru, pulled off a student training voyage to Honolulu and dispatched to a rather different kind of hot zone. At the tsunami-blasted port of Onahama, a few miles down the coast from the power station, ships have been tossed up on the quayside, cranes are bent at 20-degree angles and there is no electricity or sewage disposal. But the Kaiwo Maru, tied up at one of the less badly damaged berths, has its own generator, water, and all the supplies originally loaded for the Hawaii-bound students.

In the mess, on crowded benches at plastic-covered tables, some of the Fifty sit eating curry, the first hot meal they’ve had in days. Along the deck there are hot showers and bunk beds with real sheets. For relaxation, there is a library of comic books, widely read by adults in Japan, and sets of newspapers.

But nobody’s relaxing. Crushed by exhaustion and worry, the workers sit in silence. “They’re very quiet,” says the Kaiwo Maru’s chief officer, Susumu Toya. “Nobody speaks at meals.” Offers of beer have been refused. And when you talk to them, it’s the dark, and the fear, that come up again and again.

“The fact that electricity has been restored at the plant [on Tuesday] was a blessing, because it was horrible working in such dark conditions. It made me feel really unsafe,” said Akira Tamura, from Iwate, a young man in white Converse trainers. “Some of the cables we have to work on are really high up. The operations are not going as smoothly as I thought they would, and that’s causing us some worry.” He refused to elaborate further.

Like the firefighters, these workers have only the most basic protection. Everyone has a respirator, but the full, lead-lined “Noddy suit” is worn by only a few dozen senior people who spend virtually all their time at the plant. There aren’t enough for anyone else.

The majority wear simple white disposable overalls made of Tyvek, an artificial, non-rip fibre – the same garments used in Britain by spraypainters and industrial cleaners. These prevent radioactive substances touching the skin or entering the body, but do not shield against most types of radiation. Each suit is worn only once to avoid radioactivity building up on its surface, with hundreds of discarded white suits building up at the plant, the workers said.

The main protection are the two badges, tracking radiation exposure, which are supposed to alert them when dangerous levels have been reached. “Our main hope is that we are not in the worst area for all that long at a time,” said one man, who declined to be named. “They have told us that the build-up should be OK if we are not there the whole time.”

These workers can only trust that that is the truth. But there are increasing indications that it is not.

The day we spoke to them, two of their colleagues were sent to hospital with serious radiation burns after contaminated water spilled over the tops of their wellington boots, on to their legs and feet, while they were walking through a coolant pool in reactor 3. A third was spared by his taller boots.

The amount of radiation in that water was an astonishing two to six sieverts – 10,000 times the normal level, and up to 24 times the workers’ entire yearly exposure allowance, even on the elevated emergency limits instituted last week. If the water was absorbed by their bodies in any way, those two workers will almost certainly die.

But the discovery is almost as serious for everyone else, since such high levels of radiation suggest that there has been a leak from reactor 3’s core. Naoto Kan, the Japanese prime minister, yesterday admitted that the situation at the plant was still “precarious” and urged “voluntary evacuation” from a buffer zone between 12 and 20 miles from the plant – a zone including the dock where the Kaiwo Maru is moored.

After the battle to cool the reactors, the race to restore power – and thus bring the plant’s systems back under control – is the other main task. Mr Tamura, who has been closely involved in that fight, said that he and his colleagues were sleeping on the floor at the plant to begin with. “There isn’t a shift system as such, we’re on call 24 hours,” he said. “I’ve only come here to take a shower, then tomorrow I’m back on. We’ve been working one hour on and two hours off to minimise our exposure.

The group doing our task started off as 10 people. Now there are 30, it's given us a chance to come here and eat."

They are fighting blasts of heat and waves of radioactive steam. Though there are now hundreds of people on the site, only a minority have the skills to do the specialist electrical work required. And though the outside world has the impression that the situation is improving, the workers themselves don't seem entirely confident that they've got it licked.

The group's leader, Nobuhide Suzuki, said: "The team is extremely nervous. It's pretty tense in there, but we just have to carry on. We are all feeling a huge weight on our shoulders to see it through – knowing that the world is watching and everybody's behind us has given us a huge boost. It makes us feel like we're not on our own."

Did he have a message for the people reading this story? "All I can think about now is being able to keep going," he said. "We're fighting every day. Please keep supporting us."

Most of the Fukushima complex is still too irradiated to stay in for any length of time, the workers said. In their two hours off – and whenever radiation spikes – they retreat to a "safe haven", a two-storey earthquake-resistant building at the centre of the complex constructed in July last year. Respirators can be taken off here and basic food stuff – instant noodles and bottled water – consumed sitting on the ground against a concrete wall. About 50 of the most senior management and operators, including the plant's director, are living more or less full-time in this building. The headquarters of the reconstruction effort is its "emergency task room" – not the plant control rooms, which are still heavily contaminated.

Mr Tamura and others painted a vivid picture of the strain of life at the plant. "I find it terrifying, and I'm scared the whole time," said a 32-year-old man, who declined to give his name. "But I know it's important and has to be done – that's what drives me on."

Workers told how the earthquake ripped through the plant, immediately knocking out the main power. A ghastly boom was heard in the suppression chamber of reactor 4, said Kenji Tada, who was there at the time. Cracks started ripping in the asphalt and the sides of the building. They fled before the tsunami arrived and did its worst. As the situation deteriorated, the first explosion, at reactor 3 on March 14, happened at the precise moment that six soldiers from the Japanese Central Nuclear Biological Chemical Weapon Defence Unit arrived at the reactor in two vehicles. The six of them are now dead, buried under flying concrete.

No one on the ship has seen their families since being drafted into the rescue effort. “If there was one thing I could have, I’d really love to see my wife and parents,” said Mr Tamura. “I’ve been able to email them and they emailed back saying they were really worried.” Mr Suzuki said: “I’ve only been able to make contact with my family once, by phone. The kids told me they’re rooting for me. My wife couldn’t really speak, she was too upset.”

As well as temporarily losing their husbands, the Tamuras, Suzukis and many other families of the men on the Kaiwo Maru have lost their homes. They are now in shelters. If the tsunami didn’t sweep away their houses, the nuclear evacuation zone has made them homeless, probably for the foreseeable future.

Courage isn’t the absence of fear. It’s going on, even though you are terrified. By that standard, these are very brave men indeed. But there may be one other reason, apart from pride and duty, why they have stayed at their posts: they have nowhere else to go.

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