

## PROMETHEUS TRAP (10): SDF crew fought fear in dumping water on Fukushima plant

February 18, 2013

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*Editor's note: This is the tenth part of a series that has run in the past under the overall title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with the different responses between Japan and the United States in dealing with the Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011 following the Great East Japan Earthquake. The series will appear on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.*

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Early on the morning of March 17, 2001, six days after the Great East Japan Earthquake, Self-Defense Force members at Camp Kasuminome in Sendai received a sudden order to deploy toward the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Before 9 a.m., three CH-47 transport helicopters of the 1st Helicopter Brigade took off. Crew members took unusual steps to prepare for that day's mission. They wore lead vests weighing 20 kilograms and protective face masks. Each crew member also ingested two iodine tablets.

Sgt. Maj. Tsutomu Kimura, 42, a maintenance crew member on the lead helicopter, was taken aback by the bright red wrapping used for the tablets. There were five members on the helicopter--the crew chief, Lt. Col. Kenji Kato, 41, the pilot, Maj. Teruki Ito, his co-pilot and two maintenance crew members.

Two of the helicopters would handle the dumping of water while the third provided rear support.

Kimura's responsibility was to look down on the Fukushima plant from a hatch on the floor in the center of the aircraft and push the button that would release water from the bag that was hanging down from the helicopter.

On his hands and knees in front of the hatch, Kimura kept a dosimeter by his side.

The helicopter flew out over the ocean to the east soon after takeoff and scooped up about 7.5 tons of seawater. With the coast to its right, the helicopter flew due south.

Kimura informed crew members that there were no irregular readings at intervals of 15 minutes, shorter than usual procedure. He called out, "Maintenance panel, normal."

While the crew was used to flying over the Tohoku region during training exercises, what they saw below them that day was unlike anything they had ever seen before.

Kimura thought about the smile of his second daughter, Ruka. Her first birthday was just two weeks away.

He imagined what would happen if the nuclear plant exploded just as the helicopter flew right above it. He thought to himself, "Am I to die without seeing Ruka turn 1?"

The selection of crew members was left up to those who would actually do the work. The previous night, Kimura asked the 10 maintenance crew members what they wanted to do. Since no one spoke up, he decided to exclude single, young crew members.

Although two younger members insisted they be allowed to ride the helicopters, Kimura assigned them to rear-line support duties.

His thoughts while in the air were interrupted when the co-pilot said, "We have a reading of 100." The figure on the dosimeter, which had been at zero, slowly began climbing.

Kimura began perspiring profusely. He was also slightly hyperventilating, and began to drool and developed a runny nose. He turned to the side to avoid showing the younger crew member that he was becoming nervous. He inhaled for four seconds and exhaled for four seconds. Using this method he had been taught four or five times helped to calm him.

At 9:48 a.m., the helicopter approached the No. 3 reactor, where smoke was rising through the exposed framework of the structure.

"Prepare the water!" Ito shouted.

Kimura and the younger crew member placed their thumbs on the release button.

The tactical plan called for flying at a height of about 91 meters (about 300 feet), but the helicopter approached the reactor at a lower altitude.

Col. Masahiro Onishi, the unit commander who drew up the plan, watched the operation through a video monitor back at Camp Kasuminome.

"Don't fly any lower!" he shouted.

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The previous installments of this series are available at:

(1) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201301280006>

(2) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201301300006>

(3) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302010004>

(4) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302040001>

(5) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302060007>

(6) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302080003>

(7) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302110006>

(8) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302130005>

(9) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302150001>

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