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## PROMETHEUS TRAP (11): We are still alive!

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By HIDEFUMI NOGAMI/ Staff Writer

*Editor's note: This is the 11th 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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At 9:48 a.m. on March 17, six days after the nuclear crisis broke out at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, the lead aircraft for the water-dropping mission, a helicopter belonging to the Ground Self-Defense Force's 1st Helicopter Brigade, reached the sky above the plant's crippled No. 3 reactor.

The captain of the helicopter, Maj. Teruki Ito, a veteran pilot, pushed the collective lever, located on his left side, forward while pulling the cyclic stick he was holding with his right hand. He moved the helicopter at a slower speed and lower altitude than planned in advance.

Ito was looking at the building that housed the reactor through the narrow space between his legs. The moment the building disappeared out of sight, he growled a command. "Drop water!"

When Ito slowed the aircraft further, bringing it close to hovering speed, the flight engineer pushed a button. Seven and a half tons of seawater fell into the building, whose ceiling had been blown off.

Ito felt the helicopter become lighter as it released water.

The document describing the water-dropping mission showed one number in yellow to draw special attention: 250 millisieverts. It was followed by a comment: "clinical observations necessary."

That means an accumulated radiation dose of 250 millisieverts can cause significant adverse health effects.

The figure 250 had been etched into the minds of all the crew members involved.

Then, the co-pilot, looking at a dosimeter, cried out, "256! We are going to die!"

Ito yelled back, "We are still alive, aren't we?"

When the captain started working the flight controls hastily to get the helicopter away from the site, a radio call came in.

"Order from the brigade's commander to all the aircraft. Drop water again!"

The order was passed to the crews by the Air Self-Defense Force's flight control. When asked about the reading on the dosimeter, the co-pilot answered, "Two, five, six!"

“Man! We went the whole nine yards because we were told to do it just once,” Ito said in his mind while dipping the bucket his helicopter was carrying in the sea to fill it with seawater. Then, he steered his aircraft toward the No. 3 reactor again.

The two helicopters assigned to the mission released water on the reactor twice each for a total of four drops.

After the mission was carried out, the aircraft landed in the J-Village, a soccer-training complex in Fukushima Prefecture, located 20 kilometers south of the disaster-stricken plant. The complex was now serving as a staging area for efforts to contain the nuclear crisis.

After Ito stopped the engine, the co-pilot began to cry, saying, “I’ve been exposed to radiation.”

“Don’t cry,” Ito said harshly to the co-pilot, but felt sorry for the man, whom he had chosen for the mission without asking his opinions.

As he took off a lead vest and got out of the aircraft, the captain of a logistics support helicopter that had been on standby came running toward the crew. “Let me take a look,” the captain said and grabbed the dosimeter from the co-pilot.

“It’s in micro. Don’t worry,” he said, referring to the fact that the dosimeter’s readings are shown in microsieverts.

The co-pilot mistakenly thought that the reading was in millisieverts, 1,000 times larger than microsieverts.

Ito breathed a long sigh of relief.

Thirty minutes after the helicopters dumped water on the overheating reactor, Prime Minister Naoto Kan was speaking with U.S. President Barack Obama over the phone.

“We Japanese, including the SDF, are making all-out efforts to deal with the situation at the nuclear plant,” Kan told Obama.

Obama responded by saying he thought Japan was working hard.

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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>

(10) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201302180005>

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