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## PROMETHEUS TRAP (9): Politicians pushed for quick SDF water drop on nuclear plant

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*Editor's note: This is the ninth 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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The first attempt to use Self-Defense Forces helicopters to dump seawater on the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant on March 16, 2011, was called off due to high radiation readings.

That night, Prime Minister Naoto Kan called the Defense Ministry with instructions to proceed with the mission the following day.

A consensus was developing among Defense Ministry officials that the flights could be attempted because helicopter crews would not be exposed to very high levels of radiation.

The order was immediately transmitted to Camp Kasuminome in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, where snow flurries were falling.

Col. Masahiro Onishi, a unit commander at the 1st Helicopter Brigade, received a phone call from the brigade commander, Maj. Gen. Akihiko Kanamaru, 51.

All Kanamaru said was, "Dump water one time tomorrow, no matter what."

After a short pause, Onishi replied, "I understand."

In the SDF, the response to orders is usually a more obedient, "Roger."

However, Onishi chose to use a phrase that he has used whenever he felt uneasy about a particular order. That was his way of showing a little resistance.

The real meaning behind Kanamaru's order was to dump water regardless of the radiation levels in the air above the Fukushima No. 1 plant.

At about the same time, in Washington, Kurt Campbell, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, was referring to the need for "heroic sacrifice" in dealing with the Fukushima accident during a meeting with Japanese Embassy officials.

What gave Onishi a degree of hope was the plan to spray water from the ground in the direction of the nuclear plant before any water was dumped from the air. That spraying would likely lower the radiation level in the air.

However, at 7:30 a.m. on March 17, Onishi received another phone call from Kanamaru.

"Head to the area immediately."

That meant the dumping of water from the air would precede any spraying from the ground.

Again, Onishi said, "I understand."

With a tight grip on the phone, Onishi said, "Give me 100 minutes to prepare for the deployment." That led other unit members who were

standing near Onishi to realize there had been a sudden change of plans.

Onishi slammed the phone down and shouted, "Damn it!"

He slowly became angry at himself because he would be unable to provide sufficient safety or training to unit members flying in the helicopters.

Onishi's shout froze unit members, but Maj. Teruki Ito, 42, a veteran pilot, realized what was behind Onishi's frustration and knew there was only one thing to do.

"Prepare as quickly as possible," Ito said. "Let's go."

It was the decision of the prime minister's office to first dump water from the air.

There was a planned phone call between Kan and U.S. President Barack Obama for the morning of March 17. As was made clear in the top secret diplomatic cable sent from the Japanese Embassy to the Foreign Ministry, Obama was clearly concerned about how the Japanese government was leaving the response to the nuclear accident up to Tokyo Electric Power Co., the plant operator.

About 90 kilometers from Camp Kasuminome stood the No. 3 reactor of the Fukushima No. 1 plant toward which Ito and his crew were headed. White smoke had been billowing from that reactor from the morning of the previous day.

Steam containing radioactive materials was spreading rapidly.

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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>

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