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PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (13): SDF members recruited for Fukushima mission brought emotional baggage

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By HIROYOSHI ITABASHI/ Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the 13th part of a new series that has run in the past under the title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with secret missions assigned to the "shadow units" of the Ground Self-Defense Force when the Fukushima nuclear disaster was unfolding following the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The series will appear on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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The hasty manner in which the Self-Defense Forces firefighting unit was assembled near the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant to send water onto the overheating reactors concerned Maj. Gen. Masato Taura, the vice commander of the GSDF's Central Readiness Force, who was in charge of operations at the site.

The firefighting unit was made up of members assembled from the three branches of the SDF from various bases in Japan. For that reason, most members did not know one another, and there was little conversation among unit members.

In addition to the weak sense of solidarity within the unit, Taura was also worried about the physical and psychological stress that unit members had undergone.

On March 19, 2011, Taura gathered unit members in a room in J-Village, the soccer training complex that was serving as the operation center for the SDF mission to deal with the nuclear accident. He had unit members sit in a circle, and he took out a notebook to write down their comments.

"I want to know the process that brought you here and anything else you may have in mind," Taura said. With that, he opened the floor to the other unit members and concentrated on writing down what they said.

One member said his wife angrily opposed having him go to the Fukushima nuclear plant.

In trying to convince his wife, the member told her, "Let me go. If I don't go, I will regret it for the rest of my life, and it would only mean that someone else had to go."

Another member spoke up. "I am originally from Miyagi Prefecture," he said. "A relative in Sendai died. I volunteered for this mission because I felt that would help disaster victims."

A Maritime SDF member who was close to retirement age gave his take on why he came.

"Younger members have a long future before them," he said. "I came here because I thought this was an opportunity for older members

Other members told about clashes that arose at their base over the selection of those to be dispatched to Fukushima.

At one base, members with families insisted that members who were single not go, while those single shot back, "Those with families have someone they have to protect. They should not go."

Another member told his superior officer, "Don't ask us what our wish is, but just tell us to go because you know we will go if you say

In the course of the meeting, some members began describing their thoughts at how the mission had fared so far.

"Because only 10 tons of water can be transported by a firetruck, that is all used up in under three minutes of spraying," one said. "I want to spray a much larger volume of water."

Another said, "We have to wear protective gear, goggles and a lead vest. The heat and weight of the gear saps our strength. Standing in front of the No. 3 reactor, I realized the seriousness of the situation. I cannot explain the reason, but tears welled up in my eyes."

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The previous installments of this series are available at:

- (1) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303040001>
- (2) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303060001>
- (3) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303080009>
- (4) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303110012>
- (5) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303130007>
- (6) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303150009>
- (7) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303180005>
- (8) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303200010>
- (9) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303250001>
- (10) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303250001>
- (11) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303270012>
- (12) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303290006>

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