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PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (14): SDF commander had to see for himself if order could be carried out

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Editor's note: This is the 14th 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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A few hours after the meeting with the Self-Defense Force firefighting unit tasked with dealing with the Fukushima nuclear accident, M Gen. Masato Taura received an urgent order from the central government's nuclear emergency response headquarters on the evening of 19, 2011.

"Spray water from the ground onto the No. 4 reactor before the day is out."

A series of explosions had rocked the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant over the past week. Explosions hit the No. 1 reactor building March 12, the No. 3 reactor building on March 14 and the No. 4 reactor building on March 15. Problems had also emerged at the No. 2 reactor, leading to the spewing of large amounts of radioactive materials.

There was concern about the large number of nuclear fuel rods stored in the pool of the No. 4 reactor building. Failure to maintain cool that pool could lead to a catastrophic problem.

Cooling of the reactors began with the dropping of water on the No. 3 reactor from an SDF helicopter on March 17. However, no spray of water into the No. 4 reactor had been attempted until the March 19 order.

Taura had many questions related to the instruction, including if space could be obtained for the firetrucks to spray from, considering the amount of debris that had been scattered throughout the plant by the explosions.

On the previous night, a unit from the Tokyo Fire Department needed more than six hours to remove debris before its members could begin spraying the No. 3 reactor.

Those concerns led to hesitancy on the part of Taura in immediately replying to the government order.

He turned to a veteran member of the Air SDF firefighting unit who had just taken part in the meeting of all members.

"Do you think we can go ahead right now?" Taura asked.

During the exchange between Taura and the ASDF member, an official with the central government's response headquarters called frequently wanting to know when the water spraying operation would begin.

Taura felt he could only make a decision on whether to send the unit to the No. 4 reactor after checking conditions at the site.

"I will take a look," Taura told a subordinate.

Even though the subordinate said it was too dangerous, Taura refused to listen, and he got into the retrofitted Pajero SUV to drive to the Fukushima No. 1 plant, about 20 kilometers away. The headlights pierced the darkness, revealing the structural skeleton of the No. 4 reactor building. Debris lay scattered about from the various explosions.

Taura called the central government's response headquarters.

"Come morning, we will remove the debris to clear a space for spraying and for a possible escape in an emergency," he said. "We will try to carry out the spraying, but we cannot do it tonight."

Those at headquarters agreed to the proposal, and spraying of the No. 4 reactor began from after 8 a.m. on March 20, 2011.

At about that time, reports were emerging of high radiation levels in the vicinity of Iitate, located between 30 and 50 kilometers north of the Fukushima No. 1 plant. This was despite previous reports that areas beyond 30 kilometers from the plant were considered safe.

Even as Iitate residents continued to stay in their homes despite the various concerns they held, they were joined by another SDF unit, the 1st Airborne Brigade. The brigade had been given the special mission of rescuing residents in the event of an emergency.

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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>

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