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PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (17): SDF 'suicide mission' considered for dealing with nuclear accident

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By HIROYOSHI ITABASHI/ Staff Writer

Editor's note: This is the 17th part of a new series that has run in the past under the title of The Prometheus Trap. This series deals with the 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.

About two weeks after the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, the 1st Airborne Brigade had set up one of its bases at a sports park in Iitate, Fukushima Prefecture.

In the evening, Kiichi Takahashi, 63, a local resident, showed up at the base where brigade members were planning the evacuation of residents living in a radius between 20 to 30 kilometers from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in the event of an emergency.

"This is from everyone," Takahashi said.

With that, he presented brigade members with "amazake," a sweet, low-alcohol beverage, as well as 10 kilograms of pork.

"When all of you came dressed in a very intimidating manner, everyone here became frightened that this was not a safe place to be," Takahashi said. "Now, everyone has calmed down and are confident everything will be all right, even if we have to evacuate."

Although almost the entire village of Iitate is located outside the 30-kilometer radius, SDF members visited homes to inquire about senior citizens requiring special attention.

The members also visited Takahashi's home and after talking with them, he gradually began to understand the objective of the 1st Airborne Brigade.

It was at about that time that Maj. Gen. Tetsuro Yamanoue, the commander of the 1st Airborne Brigade, received an order from Ground Self-Defense Force Chief of Staff Yoshifumi Hibako.

"Move the base immediately. The radiation levels in the vicinity of Iitate are high."

At the end of March 2011, radiation levels in Iitate were about 10 microsieverts per hour and there were localized hot spots of high radiation levels.

Yamanoue discussed the matter with Lt. Col. Toshio Akabane, the regiment commander in charge of the base at the Iitate sports park.

"We should remain here," Akabane said strongly.

The structure for a possible evacuation had just about been put in place. If the regiment left immediately, it would needlessly heighten the concerns of residents.

At the same time, Yamanoue also realized the importance of the reason Hibako had given for leaving, namely, the members might not be of use in an emergency.

Yamanoue called Hibako. "We will move after looking at the situation," he said. "Please give me more time."

Hibako replied, "Is that so? I understand."

On March 29, Hibako made an inspection visit to the base. The reasons for leaving the village were explained to Yamanoue and Akabane.

"We are concerned about radiation doses SDF members are exposed to because we want them to continue their mission in the vicinity of the nuclear plant until the very last minute," Hibako said.

He also revealed another plan that he had in mind.

"There might be the possibility we will have to ask brigade members to parachute toward the nuclear plant and scatter boric acid to suppress a nuclear fission."

Akabane was taken aback because he couldn't believe there was a plan for a possible suicide mission.

After Hibako left, Yamanoue and Akabane decided to strengthen measures for managing exposure to radiation.

On April 5, brigade members left Iitate and moved their base to the Kashima district of Minami-Soma, about 30 kilometers north of the Fukushima No. 1 plant.

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>

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(11) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303270012>

(12) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303290006>

(13) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201304010003>

(14) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201304030091>

(15) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201304050004>

(16) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201304080001>

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