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PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (2): SDF rescuers don heavy protective gear plus diapers

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Editor's note: This is the second 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.

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On the night of March 20, 2011, the Ground Self-Defense Force's Central Readiness Regiment (CRR) started preparing for a secret mission to rescue Tokyo Electric Power Co. employees working at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

The CRR left Camp Koriyama in Fukushima Prefecture and moved to Iwaki Seaside Nature Center, a seaside recreation complex, located 70 kilometers southeast of the camp.

The complex, which features accommodations, a gymnasium and various facilities for camping and other outdoor activities, is often used by elementary and junior high schools for their summer school camps.

Located in an inconspicuous place on a hill at 60 meters above sea level, the facilities are ideal for launching such a secret mission.

At 9:30 p.m., Kazunori Yamaguchi, the regiment commander, held a meeting to discuss the game plan. Some 30 GSDF officers, including company commanders and section chiefs, gathered in a meeting room.

Yamaguchi briefed the attendees on an outline of the operation, drawing charts on a whiteboard.

According to the plan, the regiment was to move from the recreation center to J-Village, a soccer training complex located 10 kilometers north, and use the facilities as the operation base for the mission.

From J-Village, members of the unit were to make a round trip to the nuclear plant, 20 kilometers north, in a convoy of eight-wheeled armored personnel carriers.

The TEPCO workers rescued and carried back from the plant as well as the vehicles would be decontaminated at J-Village.

Yamaguchi told the attendants to make the necessary preparations to conduct the tasks they were in charge of by March 25.

Details of the rescue plan were gradually worked out.

The vehicles would use the highway in their travel to the nuclear plant as much as possible. But other possible routes, including those using narrow farm roads, were also checked to secure alternatives in the event of the highway being totally or partially impassable.

After entering the nuclear plant, the unit would use loudspeakers attached to the vehicles to announce their arrival and urge workers inside buildings to exit them and get on the roofs of the vehicles quickly.

The CRR hastily converted the vehicles for the special rescue operation.

The regiment began training for the high-risk mission on the morning of March 21.

The regiment members assigned to the mission would wear 20-kilogram lead vests over their protective suits to shield their bodies from radiation and also put on protective masks. The garments were the same kind of heavy protective clothing as that worn by members of the GSDF's 1st Helicopter Brigade when they carried out the mission of dropping water on overheating reactors from the sky.

In addition, all members of the regiment participating in the mission were to wear disposable diapers because there would be no time for them to take off their gear to go to the bathroom.

One round of the rescue operation, from leaving J-Village to finishing the decontamination, would take at least five hours.

If there were many workers to be rescued, the process would have to be repeated many times without rest.

At a corner of a room with a straw-mat floor used for standby, Sgt. 1st Class Takayuki Saito, 36, who was assigned to serve as the driver of a vehicle, tried both urinating and defecating while standing.

Saito decided to cut back on his intake of both water and food.

It was decided that each vehicle would be manned by a team of just two--the driver and the commander.

Typically, the driver operates the vehicle with his head sticking out of the hatch. But the hatch would remain closed during the mission for safety, forcing the driver to operate by using only three periscopes provided for observation.

Depending totally on the three periscopes, which are each roughly the size of a rear-view mirror, meant there would be many blind spots.

However, there are six periscopes for wider observation available to the commander seated to the rear of the driver. The commander would help the driver operate the vehicle by providing supplementary information through in-vehicle radio communications.

Covered with a protective sheet, the interior of the vehicle was extremely narrow, effectively immobilizing the crew inside.

Their protective masks caused their faces to be drenched in sweat and made it difficult to breathe.

Some members vomited due to the heat and a feeling of being suffocated.

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The previous installment of this series is available at:

(1) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/fukushima/AJ201303040001>

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