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## PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (3): Keeping the public in the dark

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By HIDEFUMI NOGAMI/Staff Writer

*Editor's note: This is the third 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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The Ground Self-Defense Force's Central Readiness Regiment (CRR), a "shadow unit" trained for special operations, made every effort to guard the secrecy of their planned mission to rescue Tokyo Electric Power Co. employees from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant if the need arose.

The CRR had to ensure that even its training for this highly confidential mission would not be seen by anyone outside the organization.

Even TEPCO, the operator of the nuclear plant, was kept in the dark on the rescue plan.

Yoshifumi Hibako, 61, GSDF Chief of Staff, says TEPCO was then believed to be too preoccupied with dealing with the nuclear crisis to cooperate with the SDF in any way.

"We were also concerned that disclosure of the rescue operation could upset the company," he says.

Starting on March 21, 2011, members of the CRR expected to take part in the mission repeatedly practiced quickly donning protective masks and lead vests. They also practiced operating the armored vehicles to be used with the hatches closed. They carried out rescue drills to check if members pretending to be TEPCO employees could climb onto the roofs of the vehicles quickly.

The CRR members also did simulations of using loudspeakers attached to the vehicles to call on TEPCO employees within buildings to come out and get onto their vehicles.

What they would tell to the employees was as follows: "We have come to rescue you. Please get onto the roofs of our vehicles swiftly. Act calmly."

But the unit had to ensure that the voices saying these words in simulation exercises would not be heard. It was also necessary to prevent their exercises from being seen by the public.

Initially, the unit conducted rescue exercises secretly in an industrial park near the Iwaki Seaside Nature Center, the recreation complex where they were camped. But they changed the location after their drills were seen by local residents.

In its efforts to keep the mission secret, the unit constantly changed the locations for the exercises, using various sites between 20 and 30 kilometers from the disaster-stricken nuclear power plant, including a public playground and a municipal parking lot.

At 9:30 a.m. on March 26, the CRR conducted an exercise involving entry into the premises of the nuclear plant for the first time.

The unit asked TEPCO employees to guide the members to the plant, but didn't tell them that it was a rescue drill. The TEPCO employees were only told that the objective was reconnaissance of the route.

The massive armored vehicles to be used for the rescue mission posed a big problem.

During the actual rescue operation, a convoy of eight such vehicles would travel in a row. But a line of eight armored personnel carriers with reinforced tires would inevitably be very conspicuous.

The unit members told the TEPCO employees that they wanted to use a variety of vehicles because various situations would be possible.

The convoy used for the exercise was composed mostly of smaller four-wheel armored vehicles, with only one being the carrier that would be used in the actual mission.

Kazunori Yamaguchi, the regiment commander, was on board the personnel carrier. The convoy came to the side of a reactor building whose framework had become exposed due to an explosion.

At least once every week, the CRR rehearsed the entire operation, from receiving an emergency order to rescuing workers at the plant.

Maj. Atsushi Kikuchi, 37, who was the first company commander, imagined finding TEPCO employees lying on the ground when they arrived at the plant for the rescue operation. He thought that CRR members would also collapse as they exited their vehicles to save the employees. He prepared himself to die.

Master Sgt. Yasuyuki Machida, a 41-year-old member of the public relations section, produced an extra of the regiment newspaper to allay concerns among the families of the members. The extra, of course, said nothing about the secret mission.

The first extra after the decision on the rescue mission was made was published on March 29 in the middle of training for the mission.

The paper only reported on the CRR's operation of transporting local residents on buses from an evacuation center to a hotel where they could take a bath.

Beside a big headline saying, "Assistance produces smiles," was a large photo showing a girl smiling and waving.

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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>

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