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PROMETHEUS TRAP/ 'Shadow units' (5): CRF units aligned against common enemy, the crippled nuclear plant

March 13, 2013

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Editor's note: This is the fifth 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 March 11, 2011, after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami struck a wide area of eastern Japan, then Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa issued an order at 7:30 p.m. to the Self-Defense Forces to prepare for deployment.

Their mission would be to deal with the crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, which was quickly spiraling out of control.

Under the direction of the commander of the Northeastern Army, SDF members based in Fukushima Prefecture, as well as the northern Kanto and Shinetsu regions, were among the first to respond to the nuclear accident.

But that deployment changed at 11:05 a.m. on March 14, 2011, when all response to the Fukushima nuclear accident was unified under the Ground Self-Defense Force's Central Readiness Force (CRF).

The CRF is made up of so-called "shadow units," which are trained for special operations and whose missions are shrouded in secrecy. The Central Readiness Regiment that was preparing for a possible rescue of employees of Tokyo Electric Power Co. is just one element of the CRF. The force has five major units with the equipment and capabilities to deal with various emergencies and a total of about 4,000 members.

The commander was Gen. Toshinobu Miyajima, 59.

He gave specific orders to the various units under his command. While the Central Readiness Regiment was given the top-secret order to rescue TEPCO employees at the plant, the 1st Airborne Brigade was ordered to prepare to evacuate residents in the event of an emergency. The brigade, the only parachute unit in Japan, is based in Narashino, Chiba Prefecture.

The Central Readiness Regiment set up its living quarters about 30 kilometers south of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. The 1st Airborne Brigade was divided into three units, which were dispersed to locations north, west and south along an arc 30 kilometers from the nuclear plant.

The Central NBC Weapon Defense Unit, which is specialized to deal with acts of terrorism involving nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, had already begun preparations by setting up its base in Okuma, the town where the Fukushima No. 1 plant is located.

The unit went into action when the Aum Shinrikyo cult spread sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995 and again in 1999 when a criticality accident occurred in Tokai, Ibaraki Prefecture. Unit members not only are accustomed to working while wearing protective gear and face masks, but are also knowledgeable about the dangers of radiation.

The 1st Helicopter Brigade was dispatched to Sendai and would handle the dumping of water on the Fukushima No. 1 plant as well as the transport of relief supplies and disaster victims.

In that manner, the various "shadow" units of the CRF were set up around the Fukushima No. 1 plant, almost as if they were surrounding an enemy force.

The most highly classified unit under the CRF is the Special Forces group, which specializes in taking on terrorists. The 300 members of that group were not dispatched to deal with the natural disasters, but were on hand to deal with any other possible military-related development.

The decision to deploy the CRF units was made by Gen. Ryoichi Oriki, 62, chief of staff of the SDF's Joint Staff, Japan's top military officer. As he observed the growing crisis unfolding at the nuclear plant, Oriki felt that the SDF had to be called into action. He also decided that a command structure to deal with the nuclear accident should be separate from that to help provide relief to the disaster-stricken areas.

The direct catalyst for his decision to deploy the CRF units was the explosion at the No. 3 reactor of the Fukushima No. 1 plant, which occurred at 11:01 a.m. on March 14, 2011. Four minutes later, command for dealing with the nuclear accident was shifted from the Northeastern Army to the CRF.

At that same time, an emergency report was filed with CRF command at Camp Asaka in Tokyo's Nerima Ward.

"Members appear to have encountered a problem," the report said. "We cannot make contact with them."

Members of the Central NBC Weapon Defense Unit had been sent to the No. 3 reactor to provide support for supplying water.

The emergency report said six members were missing, including the commander of the unit, Col. Shinji Iwakuma, 51.

"Don't die," was the thought running through the mind of CRF commander Miyajima.

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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>

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