

IN FIRST REACTION FOR DISASTER RELIEF OPERATION

“First Reaction - Disaster Relief Operation”

SGM Keikichi Hayata

First Reaction for Disaster Relief Operation 26 May 2003, 17 August 2005

1st Training Regiment, Japanese Self-Defense Force

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Abstract

I wrote this paper about my experiences on May 26, 2003 and August 17, 2006 when a strong earthquake hit the Miyagi-Prefecture Area. Just after the earthquakes, we are usually confused. The situation caused a lack of information, damage of facilities, and may other problems. Fortunately these earthquakes did not cause havoc over a wide area and we did not have to mount a rescue operation. I will review the two cases, when the earthquakes occurred, what we did, and what we will need for the next operation.

Outline

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Japan and earthquakes

Many earthquakes occur in Japan. Some past earthquakes claimed many lives and caused extensive damage. On September 1, 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake (7.9-8.4 on the Richter scale) hit the Tokyo area and killed more than 100,000 people. On January 17, 1995, the Great Hansin-Awaji Earthquake (7.2 on the Richter scale) struck the southern part of Hyogo Prefecture. This included the cosmopolitan city of Kobe. 6433 people lost their lives, and the infrastructure took heavy damage.

In our country, where earthquakes frequently occur, the Self-Defense Forces have very important mission to prepare for disaster relief operations. What causes the earthquakes, where they occur, or when they occur cannot be predicted. Since 1995, when the Great Hansin-Awaji Earthquake hit, citizens have expected to our forces to respond in the event of an earthquake. Many young people who saw our earthquake relief operations have wanted to assist our citizens. Many have joined our forces.

In Miyagi Prefecture (where I lived), there were several large earthquakes on June 12, 1978 (7.4 on the Richter scale), November 3, 2002 (6.3 on the Richter scale), May 26, 2003 (7.0 on the Richter scale), June 27, 2003 (5.5, 6.2, 4.8, 5.3 on the Richter scale), and August 16, 2006 (7.2 on the Richter scale). In addition to these earthquakes, the National Earthquake Research Committee made a prediction in for the probability that very strong earthquake in Miyagi area will occur in next 20 to 30 years (88% and 99% respectively).

In Miyagi area, when a strong earthquake occurs which requires the mobilization of the Self-Defense Force, the 1st Training Regiment (to which I am a member) has three missions. One is to conduct area reconnaissance/ rescue operation for periphery of the base. The second mission is transportation support to the 22nd Infantry Regiment which is located at the same base. This increases the effectiveness of the relief operations for the Miyagi area. The third mission is the maintenance and control of the base of relief operations. The

Regiment had only 110 soldiers (excluding recruits and students). This is a large mission, but we had to do it.

Preparation for Disaster Relief Operation

The earthquake strikes without notice. In some cases, we might be victims of the earthquake. Someone might die or become injured under a collapsed house. Others could not come to the base due to roads being destroyed. Electricity, water, and telephone systems which are needed to sustain our operations in the base may be rendered useless. We would be in a state of confusion, in a bad situation in a matter of seconds. However, we have to manage and overcome any difficulties to achieve our mission for disaster relief operations. Rescue operations for earthquake relief call for rapid action. Therefore, we always must be prepared in our hearts and in our minds.

While I was assigned to the 1st Training Regiment, there were three large earthquakes for which we prepared for disaster relief operations. Each one had a seismic intensity “Grade 5 - strong” or higher. This means that all soldiers in the Miyagi area are recalled to go their base automatically. In one of these three earthquakes, the local government requested a disaster relief operation. In next chapter, I would like to review the first reaction for these earthquakes.

May 26, 2003

Our training platoon (6 cadre and 40 recruits, platoon leader was absent at this day) had just finished conducting outpost training in our local training area. Each section (1 drill sergeant and 8 recruits) was deployed throughout the training area. Without any warning, the earth shook and rumbled. I recognized that it was an earthquake, and based on my experience, it was a very big one. I believed that we needed to regroup and prepare for a disaster relief operation.

I instantly thought of what I should do, both as the senior drill sergeant and leader of platoon. There were two answers. First and foremost was to confirm the security and safety of my soldiers. The second answer was to prepare for a disaster relief operation.

Sometimes earthquakes occur continuously or in rapid succession. To avoid any further injuries caused by other earthquakes, I ordered all drill sergeants to stop training and fall in. Shortly afterwards, the soldiers came out of woods and began to form up. I made each drill sergeant check their soldiers and their equipments carefully. Luckily, there were no injuries among the soldiers. However, they were scared of the earthquake. One of the senior drill sergeants recognized this fear. He started talking to the soldiers in order to ease their anxiety. He was one of the most experienced drill sergeants in our company. He often provided support to many drill sergeants.

I sent a drill sergeant to the company orderly room in order to gather information about the scale of earthquake. I also wished to find out what the Regiment would be doing for relief from this earthquake. I hesitated to continue training. I needed information to properly make a decision.

The information from the company was what I had expected. The scale of the earthquake was “Grade 6 - weak”, and the Regiment had been ordered to prepare for mobilization. I ordered all soldiers to prepare for the expected disaster relief operation.

Of the four training platoons in the company, our platoon came back to the barracks first. We had finished the final preparations for mobilization and were ready. Fortunately, the damage by the earthquake was very limited. We did not have chance to execute the disaster relief operation.

August 16, 2005

On August 16, 2005, the base was very quiet. I stayed on the base. I could observe the entire base from end to end, but I saw few soldiers on the base. The only personnel on duty

were the staff duty sergeants. We were all on a national summer vacation. Many soldiers went back to their hometown or were traveling. The earthquake hit us whether we were on vacation or not.

When I got to the company, a duty sergeant was preparing to set up the company's command post. She had done all of this by reading the manual which I had prepared before the vacation. TV news reported the scale of the earthquake was a "Grade 6 weak" earthquake. All soldiers were ordered to come back to the base. However, we were all on summer vacation. I wondered how many soldiers could or would come? Could we conduct operations for disaster relief with a limited number of soldiers?

In the next room, the earthquake had destroyed parts of the room. There were overturned lockers, scattered stationery, and broken glass. I quickly saw that other rooms had also had sustained damage. I went to check the Headquarters and company area to assess the damage.

When I was checking the damage in the Regimental area, I met only five people (one officer and four NCOs) who were on the duty. At each company, a duty sergeant had prepared for relief operations. However, at the Regimental Headquarters, no one had taken this step. An officer and a NCO were on the Regimental duty, but they were too busy to make this happen.

The Regimental Commander's aide told me that the Regimental Commander should arrive in 20 to 30 minutes. I thought that if this situation were to continue, the Regimental Commander could not get any information to make a good decision. We work for the Regimental Commander. I decided to assist at the Regimental Headquarters, even though I was not part of the Headquarters staff. I began to implement the plan for disaster relief. I made junior NCOs collect information from various source. I used this information to prepare the summary to report the Commander.

When the Regimental Commander arrived in the office, I reported the condition of each company, the damage of Regimental facility, etc. After the brief, the Headquarters staff arrived at the office, and I handed over the situation report to them.

When I got back to the company, the duty sergeant and some other NCOs had set up the Command Post and prepared for whatever may be next. There were fewer numbers of soldiers than usual on duty, but they knew what they needed to do. They executed the plan without any orders or direction. Almost half of the soldiers, including the Company Commander, could not come to the base. Despite being short of personnel, we worked positively, and finished the preparation.

This earthquake caused more 500 injuries. Fortunately, there was no large scale damage. There was no need to mobilize the Self-Defense Force. This preparation for disaster relief operation lasted about seven hours.

Lessons in this event

During the first earthquake, I decided to stop training and made the soldiers prepare the disaster relief operation without any orders or instructions. I sized up the situation quickly, determined what was important, and decided what needed to be done.

In order do this, we have to understand the unit's (Regiment and Company) Disaster Relief Operation Plan, our leader's intent, and our soldiers and equipment. Lessons learned from past earthquakes and realistic training also assist in forming good judgments about disaster relief. We have to learn these though various training, self-development, and routine practice.

In the case of the second earthquake, I had taken over the preparation at the Regimental Headquarters. No one had begun the preparation there. I decided to work there with no clear orders or instructions. The plan for the original operation no longer applied and the Commander's intent (respond quickly) had not been realized. In this confused situation,

taking initiative is important. If there are no orders or directions, we have to think for ourselves and take action positively to carry out the missions.

In my company, our NCOs worked with half the usual number of soldiers and without the Company Commander. We figured out what we needed and what we should do. We took action. The soldiers worked well and were effective. Their initiative did not appear naturally. We had developed this through disaster relief operations in the past. I could confirm that our training program to develop initiative was effective.

Another lesson that may be learned is the presence of the Commander or Leader. I realized it is very important. When the Regimental Commander arrived at the unit, I felt the atmosphere of unit had changed. The Regimental Commander gave the will and determination to achieve our mission.

I also could see a difference of morale between our company and other companies. Our company commander could not come the base because she had stayed her hometown which 300km away from the base. I reconfirmed that no matter what his/her rank is, the leader can demonstrate a presence and should be the spearhead for their soldiers.

Conclusion

As a senior NCO, I have served 25 years in the Self-Defense Force and have experienced many things. I have an obligation to pass down the experience, knowledge, wisdom to all soldiers.

People say that “A natural disaster ends when we forgot it”. This may be true, but when a natural disaster does strike, we never forget our training.

