

9th AML Deploys to Japan

By COL Rachel Armstrong

The 9th Area Medical Laboratory, based at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, deployed in March 2011 to Japan in support of Operation Tomodachi, where a 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck and set off a massive tsunami that decimated cities and farmland in the northern part of the country, resulting in a substantial loss of life. As a result of the tsunami, Japan now faces a severe incident with several nuclear power reactors due to partial meltdowns and release of radioactive material into the atmosphere, groundwater, and seawater from the damaged Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant.

The 9th AML boasts a unique mission within the Department of Defense as one of two sophisticated mobile laboratories in the AMEDD inventory. Deploying worldwide at a moment's notice as a unit or by task-organized teams, the highly trained Soldier Scientists of the 9th AML perform surveillance, confirmatory analytical lab testing and health hazard assessments of environmental, occupational, and endemic disease concerns, in addition to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive threats.

Lab technicians and preventive medicine specialists from the 9th AML teamed up with the Air Force Radiation Assessment Team (AFRAT) to provide radiation surveillance and monitoring, air/water/soil sample collection, radioanalytical support, active dosimetry support, and training. Together, they provide rapid field analysis of air, water, or soil samples in order to provide actionable information to commanders in theater.

Radiation surveillance and monitoring is underway to ensure the safety and security of US Service members and their families. The 9th AML is supporting the efforts of Joint Support Force - Japan (JSF-J) by monitoring US installations to determine the extent of the contamination and to estimate the health impacts to the affected population. A key contribution of the 9th AML is the collection of a common set of radiological data for use by all Services by leveraging the Department of Defense's Occupational and Environmental Health Readiness System (DOEHRS). "The 9th AML prides itself on its technical knowledge and expertise. The 9th AML worked very hard this past year with the Public Health Command to increase our Force Health Protection capabilities," said Commander COL Rachel Armstrong.

In addition to the field and associated laboratory work, several officers from the 9th AML are working directly for the Joint Support Force Surgeon's Office, analyzing the health effects of radiation and serving as principal advisors to the Surgeon for environmental science, health physics, and preventive medicine. Other members of the 9th AML are at Camp Zama working with the Public Health Command in microbiology and biochemistry in support of food safety.

"This is a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. Our hearts go out to the people of Japan," said COL Armstrong. "We have a very difficult mission and a tremendous technical challenge, but the Soldiers in the 9th AML are well trained and very good at what they do – they are the best in the world. They are experts in environmental surveillance and public health assessments. We are all deeply honored to serve on this mission to help a nation in its time of need."