

# Volunteer Disaster-Relief Work with Peace Boat in Ishinomaki —A Volunteer's View from the Ground—

## 震災後の石巻におけるピースボートの救援活動

- ボランティア隊員としての体験 -

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2011年3月11日は、現代日本史の大きな転換点であった。岩手県、宮城県、福島県の太平洋沿岸地域は、地震と津波による壊滅的な打撃を受けた。日本人および外国人による幾千人ものボランティアが、復興努力を助けるために被害地域へと向かった。この報告は、宮城県石巻におけるボランティアに携わったピースボート隊員の目から見た、実際の救援活動の状況と、その前段階に必要とされた準備と手配に関する詳細な記録である。本報告においては、ある国際的なボランティアチームに焦点をあて、彼らの人生においてもっとも過酷な、あるいはもっとも達成感をもたらす経験となったその活動について詳述する。

**Why volunteer?** "Volunteering" indicates an activity that you do of your own free will. It is not something you have to do, so why get out of your comfort zone to do something that might be hard, dirty, exhausting, time-consuming, expensive<sup>2</sup>, even dangerous? It is not an unreasonable question.

In this day and age, we tend to focus on building our lives and fortunes through acquiring money and the things money can buy for us. Up to a point, there is nothing

wrong with this, as it takes a certain amount of finances to feed, clothe, and house ourselves, plus a modest amount of non-essentials that make life more pleasant and comfortable. In developed countries, however, we tend to forget just how good our lives already are, despite various worries and aggravations that come our way. Sometimes, a good jolt can help us understand once again the simple blessings in our lives, and that there are situations when one does not stop to ask, “What’s in it for me? How do I benefit?”

Such a jolt came our way on March 11, 2011, at 2:46 p.m. in the form of an earthquake and tsunami that struck the northeast Tōhoku coast of Japan, mainly the prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima. A few hundred kilometers from the quake, I watched books and videotapes tumble from the bookshelves in my office over several minutes and realized that this was probably the most severe quake I had experienced in a lifetime mostly in the notoriously quake-prone Pacific region.

TV news coverage soon revealed the scope and severity of the disaster. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) first reported the quake to have been Magnitude 7.9, but subsequent reports quickly upped it to M8.8, 8.9 (Boadle), and eventually to M9.0. Damage from the earthquake —actually, three in rapid succession— was bad enough, but then the horror of people, cars, buildings, and entire towns being swept away by the huge tsunami that the earthquake had caused stunned and riveted the world.

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men  
Couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

—Mother Goose

Clearly, this was an “All hands on deck” situation: the severity, scope, and intensity of the disaster were not something where we could just say, “Well, let the authorities take care of it. That’s what our taxes are for.” When your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t just sit down to dinner and go about your life as usual. If at all possible, you do whatever you can to help the neighbor, knowing that someday, your own house might be on fire and you might be the one in need of help.

**My own decision:** Already on March 11, I decided that I would go somewhere in Tōhoku to help. During my early years in Japan, I had traveled through most of Tōhoku, much of it on foot, running from place to place with a backpack. Amused by Inoue

Hisashi's novel, *Kirikirijin* (吉里吉里人), and the idea that this small district in Ōtsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, would declare itself its own nation (Kirikirikoku), independent from Japan, I made a special trip there. Now, Kirikiri and Ōtsuchi lay devastated by the tsunami that had surged into Funakoshi Bay, killing probably almost 9% of the population (799 dead, 608 missing out of about 16,000<sup>3</sup> as of August 31 (Fukada), including its mayor (Goldenberg). I had at least passed through here and many other now-destroyed coastal towns and had enjoyed the warm hospitality of the people, so in addition to simple human compassion, I felt I had a personal debt to repay.

**Timing — and Consideration.** But for me, or any other volunteers, to go in right away would have been inconsiderate and counterproductive. The whole coast was devastated, and they did not need an influx of hundreds or thousands of strangers, however well-intentioned, to add to the confusion. Where would we stay? Where would we get food and daily supplies? What would/should we do? The residents were still searching for loved ones and working out where and how they themselves would live. They did not need to worry about outsiders. Better to let the authorities sort things out first and figure out what to do and how. I figured that Golden Week, seven weeks later, would be a good time: I could get away from work, and the situation would have settled down somewhat and gotten more organized by then.

**A horrendous toll: where to begin?** The scope and severity of the destruction was beyond what any nation's government could handle, even when it is at its best. The devastation was everywhere along the northeast coast —the effects of the tsunami reached from Ōarai in Ibaraki Prefecture in the south to as far north as Erimo in Hokkaidō (Biggs)— and millions of people on the main island of Honshū were affected in one way or another. In two locations in the Omoe-Aneyoshi area a little south of Miyako in Iwate Prefecture, tsunami heights of 38.9 and 40.4 meters (127 – 133 ft.) had been recorded<sup>4</sup> (“Tsunami reached record”). Nine months later (December 7), the National Police Agency (NPA) report showed the figures below, which revealed that Miyagi Prefecture had suffered the brunt of the damage:

	Iwate	Miyagi	Fukushima	All Japan
Killed	4,665	9,504	1,605	15,840
Missing	1,391	1,913	221	3,529
Totally collapsed buildings	20,184	78,451	18,444	121,719

Partially collapsed bldgs.	4,551	100,663	58,129	199,684
Flooded homes, above-floor	1,761	7,053	62	10,973
Flooded homes, below-floor	323	11,009	339	13,383
Partially damaged homes	7,301	190,971	133,896	626,097
Non-dwelling buildings	4,148	27,819	1,071	48,417
Damaged roads (locations)	30	390	32	3,572
Damaged bridges (locations)	4	29	3	77
Landslides (locations)	6	51	9	197
Broken dikes (locations)	--	45	--	45
Damaged railroads (locations)	--	26	--	29
	Iwate	Miyagi	Fukushima	All Japan

The November 28 TBS “morning wide” show *Mino Monta no Asa Zuba!* cited salient figures from the November 25 NPA report and added that 328,903 people had sought shelter in evacuation centers at one time or another<sup>5</sup>.

One hardly knew where to start, and it appeared that there would be no end to putting things back together, and yet, we had to begin somewhere, with our individual selves and our own actions to —paraphrasing Laozi— begin a long journey with a single step, that of picking up a single stick, a nail, a shard at our own feet.

Going back to our initial question: Why, indeed, volunteer? This was in fact a question international volunteers were sometimes asked by the people of Ishinomaki. Why would we come all the way to Ishinomaki to help when Japan was not even our own country? For almost all of us, the answer was simply, “Why not?” We might not have Japanese citizenship, but we do live here and were part of our communities, and it was simply a matter of coming to the aid of anyone else who lived here, our neighbors and fellow human beings, Japanese or not.

Among us were those who did not live in Japan at all: some Peace Boat volunteers had come from New York, from Thailand, from South America, from Belgium, by August 31, from 49 countries in all (PB: 中間活動報告). Volunteers in other groups came because the disaster scenes were too much to bear without doing SOMETHing: Beth Worthington, 20, a California university student said, “I never thought that I would visit Japan before the disaster. I can’t speak the language and the culture is so different from the U.S. But I was so shocked by the news and pictures from the disaster, it broke

my heart. I knew I had to do something to help. So I decided to actually come to Japan to help out.” Another university student from Buffalo, New York, Frank An, put it another way: “I felt so broken realizing how many people lost their lives. Then I thought: ‘What am I doing at home? I should not be wasting the summer.’” Taking such a bold, selfless step was not cheap: it cost these young volunteers on the order of \$4,000 (approximately ¥320,000) to come to Japan (“Foreign volunteers”), approaching an amount our own students spend for a one-month study-abroad trip. These volunteers, however, would not be doing any sightseeing. A New Yorker in our contingent who had grown up in Japan returned at a cost of \$5,000, not to mention time off from work — and he even ended up losing his wallet and credit cards during his time here.

**To Freelance or Join an Organization?** There were two major options for doing volunteer work, both of which people from all over Japan were starting to move on, once the initial shock of the disaster had passed: (1) individual/private volunteering (2) volunteering through organizations.

I opted for the latter. Although I had traveled throughout the Tōhoku region many times, I had no detailed knowledge of each locality, and obviously, I had little way of knowing what was needed where and when. This struck me as a major weakness in individual/private volunteering: workers might be needed in a given location, but the area might not be ready or able to accommodate them. Workers and the areas might or might not have proper equipment or enough of it. It looked to be a rather hit-and-miss way of volunteering that lacked coordination.

We did see a fair number of freelancers during our week in Ishinomaki, and if there was work for them at the time, their muscle was appreciated, but sometimes, they would be in the right place at the wrong time and vice-versa. Time was spent (wasted?) on the road, looking for work. While they did retain their freedom from organizational constraints, it did not seem to be an efficient way of doing things.

Being part of a volunteer group meant, however, that one had to submit to the organization’s rules and restrictions, not to mention its particular “culture<sup>6</sup>.” But at least a fairly large and well-organized operation would be able to divide up what needed to be done: for example, surveying the Tōhoku region to see which localities needed the most help; negotiating and setting up accommodations for large numbers of volunteers; arranging transportation to and from the area; procuring and storing work equipment and supplies; meeting with local governments and affected businesses and families to

see what needed to be done, and prioritizing relief work; recruiting volunteers and training them so that they would know what to expect and be properly equipped and provisioned. An organization could do this for hundreds of volunteers at a time, doing away with unnecessary doubling up or repetition.

In the week following 3.11, I asked some of my Japanese colleagues to keep their eyes and ears open for information about organizations recruiting for disaster-relief work in Tōhoku, while I conducted my own searches via the internet. At the same time, however, I was busy preparing for a trip back to the United States so that I could continue to help my sister deal with our family home in California following the passing of our mother a year earlier.

As the days of the 3.11 – 3.18 week passed, we began to experience shortages of food, daily goods, gasoline, and electricity throughout the Kantō area. A major fire at Cosmo Oil's Chiba Refinery in Ichihara resulted in fuel shortages that lasted for months. Shortages of fuel affected transportation of goods and supplies, which resulted in bare supermarket shelves, not to mention snarled transportation and long lines at gasoline stations.

With the nuclear reactors at Fukushima damaged, energy supply took a major hit, and Tōkyō Electric Power began carrying out rolling power outages by Monday, March 14, three days after the quake, in an effort to keep electrical power consumption within the capacity of the damaged power plants (“Chaos erupts”). Train lines began cutting back their schedules and even turning off lights in the trains, especially in areas outside of central Tōkyō. Many commuters began riding bicycles to work, and bicycle shops were doing a land-office business in sales and repairs (Sagiike).

**Which organization to join?** In the week following the earthquake and tsunami, I trolled the internet for volunteer organizations recruiting for disaster-relief work in the Tōhoku region. The one that came up consistently and seemed to be the best organized and, what is more, had no problem dealing with foreigners, was Peace Boat (PB).

My impressions were not wrong. Months later, in October, a volunteer veteran of several tours to Tōhoku, Akiko Shimada, wrote of her mid-September tour in the PB-related blog *Voices from the Ground* (detailed first-hand volunteer reports): “This was my fifth trip to the Tōhoku region and the second one with Peace Boat. Having joined different volunteer tours, I have found that Peace Boat offers the most well-organized, efficient, and volunteer-friendly operation that involves unforgettable

exchanges with the local people . . . ”

**What is “Peace Boat”?** Peace Boat was founded in 1983 by then-Waseda University student Kiyomi Tsujimoto (辻元清美) (now a member of the Japanese House of Representatives (衆議院議員) from the Democratic Party of Japan (DSP)), along with other activist students in response to the way Japanese wartime history was handled in school textbooks. It describes itself as

. . . a Japan-based international non-governmental and non-profit organization that works to promote peace, human rights, equal and sustainable development and respect for the environment . . . [seeking to] create awareness and action based on effecting positive social and political change in the world (“What is Peace Boat?”).

The organization is probably best known for its chartered international Peace Boat voyages, initially within Asia and later around the world. In the mid-1990s, a graduate of this college, Hiroko Minato, participated in such a voyage. This was my first contact with the organization. Peace Boat’s first disaster-relief mission came in response to the so-called “Kōbe Earthquake” (M6.9) of January 17, 1995 that claimed 6,434 lives and completely destroyed 104,906 buildings (「阪神・淡路大震災の被害確定について」). Since then, it has participated in disaster-relief missions around the world<sup>8</sup>.

**Peace Boat Moves into Action.** Peace Boat staff did not waste time moving into action after March 11. While most people in the Kantō area were still coming to terms with their suddenly changed world —electricity outages, snarled transportation, shortage of gasoline, food, and supplies— by March 16, five days after the quake, Peace Boat had two advance teams on the ground, surveying damage and needs in Miyagi Prefecture and soon delivered 10 tons of emergency aid and supplies.

At the time, Ishinomaki dead and missing were estimated at over 14,000, with some 290,000 in the greater Ishinomaki area without housing. Coordinating with city officials and the Japan Self-Defense Forces, Peace Boat helped put emergency response measures in place for the city that had lost almost 30% of its civil servants. Discovering that only four of the 170 evacuation centers at the time had adequate shelter and a functioning food distribution system, Peace Boat stepped in to provide these basic needs, including up to 2,000 meals a day. From March 25, the first platoons of 50 volunteers

headed to Ishinomaki for one-week stints (*2011 Great East Japan Earthquake*).

**Applying and Orientation:** Those interested in participating in disaster-relief work were asked to submit relevant personal and contact information by email to Peace Boat headquarters in Takadanobaba, Shinjuku-ku, Tōkyō. With needs and conditions in Ishinomaki constantly changing, applicants were asked to apply no more than three weeks prior to their availability date.

Even after applications were filed and availability declared, participation was not guaranteed: especially in the first couple of months—which included Golden Week—the ability of Ishinomaki to absorb and accommodate volunteers was limited. Damage assessment and work assignments were not completely organized and were still being sorted out. As for accommodations, essentially, there weren't any: all volunteers were expected to bring their own tents and sleeping bags and stay as best they could on the track-and-field oval of Ishinomaki Senshū Daigaku.

Prospective volunteers were required to attend two orientation sessions, one a general briefing on the conditions in Ishinomaki and a broad description of the work and working conditions, the second a week before departure to form teams and ready themselves for the task. Even then, some attendees at the second session might not make the final cut. Prospective volunteers were reminded too that plenty of work needed to be done right in Tōkyō, preparing and loading supplies for delivery to Ishinomaki and soliciting donations throughout the city.

**First orientation.** For me, the first orientation was on April 9 at the Big Box complex next to Takadanobaba Station in Shinjuku Ward. There were almost 400 attendees, of whom almost 100 were “internationals” — that is, non-Japanese. After the briefing on general working conditions in Ishinomaki and declaring when we expected to be available, we clustered around several of the Peace Boat staff who had been in Ishinomaki and were veterans of disaster-relief work there, to hear about it “straight from the horse's mouth,” as the saying goes.

**Follow orders!** Non-Japanese applicants were advised in no uncertain terms that this was going to be a largely Japanese-style operation, hierarchical and frankly, rather militaristic (the assumption being that this would not be unexpected for Japanese). There would no room for those with independent streaks who preferred to do things “my way.” On the work sites, volunteers were expected to follow orders and just do the job as they had been told. There was just too much to do to get bogged down with conflicting

opinions and worksite debates about how things could be done better. If there were any such opinions—and they were expected—volunteers were asked to hold their tongues until the work was finished and to point out problem areas at evening team meetings, which would also serve as post-mortem<sup>9</sup> review sessions (反省会). Those who could not abide by these rules were advised to seek out other organizations.

**Second orientation.** Some applicants at the first orientation (April 9) were ready to go the following weekend and were immediately divided into teams and began getting to know each other. Like most applicants, however, I was aiming for Golden Week (end of April, first week of May), when we would be free of work obligations. Hundreds hoped to go during Golden Week and Peace Boat hoped to take hundreds, but that depended on Ishinomaki's ability to accommodate so many volunteers at one time. It remained to be seen who would be selected to participate.

**Accepted.** On April 21, I received notification from International Coordinator Arata Otake that I had been invited to participate in Golden Week work and should attend the pre-departure orientation on Saturday, April 23, at the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA<sup>10</sup>) Tōkyō International Center near Hatagaya Station in Shibuya. There were Peace Boat staff who were fluent in English and could lead “international” volunteers but their numbers were limited, so, because of my Japanese language ability, I was asked to serve on a Japanese team so that more non-Japanese could participate. That was fine with me, but I told them I would remain flexible. The next day, I was asked to switch to the “international” group, since more Japanese than expected wanted to participate and moving bilinguals to “international” teams would free up spaces.

Almost 400 volunteers showed up at the JICA center on April 23. In the general meeting, we were told that that only 360 (60 teams of 6 members each) could be accommodated in Ishinomaki during Golden Week, and asked that those not selected try for another time. The final 324 Japanese participants (54 teams) were selected by lottery. Forty-plus “internationals” —including bilingual Japanese— met in another room, but only 36 would go. Teams were formed, and those not selected were asked to try for another date or to go on “standby” status.

**Team 57 is formed.** The leader of our team (designated “Team 57”) was a bilingual Japanese woman, Chieko Azuma, a true international who had lived, worked, and studied in a number of countries, including Australia, U.S.A, Brazil, Mexico, and

Sweden. In addition to filling out and signing various forms, including “Terms and Conditions of Peace Boat Emergency Support Activity Volunteer Membership” and the obligatory “Volunteer Activity Insurance” provided through the Tōkyō Council of Social Welfare. The insurance was available for reasonable prices in three forms, Natural Disaster Plan A, B, or C for ¥600, ¥1,000, or ¥1,400, respectively. Almost everyone opted for Plan C, which had the highest, most extensive coverage.

**Team 57 Members.** Of course, we had first introduced ourselves and talked about any special skills or experiences we had had. Holly Thompson was from New England, America’s own “Tōhoku” region, a lecturer at Yokohama City University, and a writer (creative and academic writing, short stories, and American culture; in particular, stories and books for young adults, set in Japan). Kate and Remy Renaud: Remy was from France and Kate was from Sydney, Australia, an international corporate lawyer in Tōkyō. John McCullough (27) from Wisconsin was our youngest member but also the only one with prior experience in disaster-relief work: he had done volunteer work in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005).

**Talking over what to take.** Through the spring of 2011, conditions in Ishinomaki and other stricken areas were largely unsettled. Lodging was nonexistent, so volunteers were expected to bring their own tents, sleeping bags, waterproof sheets, sleeping mats, and blankets. Food and water supplies were unreliable, so we had to bring our own for a week<sup>11</sup>, including several liters of drinking water. In short, **with almost everything being unavailable or in short supply, volunteers were cautioned not to impose any burden at all on the local communities.**

In our team meeting, we went over what we should bring and what we could share. John did not have a tent and was going to buy one (probably costing around ¥40,000), but I had an extra one, purchased in the U.S., so I said I would lend it to him.

The list of clothing and equipment was extensive. Although it was getting warmer, low temperatures were still expected, so layers of clothing were recommended. High-top safety boots for working in water and mud were essential, as were steel-plated insoles, because of nails and broken glass; thin latex rubber gloves, oil-resistant rubber gloves, and leather gloves; gum tape; dust masks; helmets; headlights for working in dark, unlit places; protective goggles, raingear; cooking stove; plastic groundsheets; mess kit; flashlights and small lanterns (especially LED-type), extra batteries; sanitizing gel. Team member Holly Thompson has provided an excellent and comprehensive list of

what is needed on her blog (“If you’re thinking of volunteering in Tohoku . . . A Packing List”), which combines Peace Boat’s list with additions coming from onsite experience.

Leader Chieko would be attending one more meeting, a leaders’ meeting on Thursday, the day before departure, where she would get a final round of instructions and information updates.

**Friday, April 29, 2011: A last-minute change.** On the morning of Friday, April 29—departure day—I was busy with last-minute packing, hoping that I had everything or could get what I still needed, and finish packing in time to get to Shinjuku for our 21:00 assembly time. Around 11 a.m., I received a phone call from our team leader, Chieko Azuma—some last minute instructions or advice, I presumed.

Instead, she informed me that her uncle had just died that morning and that she would not be able to go to Ishinomaki with us. Then she asked me to take over as leader of Team 57. This was a bit of a shock, as I was not a veteran of Ishinomaki work and conditions, and did not even have the benefit of the previous day’s leaders’ meeting. However, as they say in show business, “The show must go on,” and I accepted my new assignment. I figured that, with the help of my team, I could do it, but it was very much unknown territory.

Chieko mailed and faxed me a set of materials, both in Japanese and English, which she had received at Thursday’s leaders’ meeting. However, my printer at home was not working and my little-used fax machine quickly ran out of printing carbon paper. I had not intended to take my laptop MacBook Pro—I had too much luggage as it was—but decided that I would have to take it after all, so that I could go over the various documents I had received.

**Chance Advice: Asbestos in the air!** Meanwhile, I still had some last-minute shopping for equipment to do at the Workman shop in Sayama. While there, I met a woman who was a local city employee. She was headed for Rikuzen Takata in Iwate Prefecture on official assignment for her third tour of disaster-relief work. When she heard that I was headed for Ishinomaki, she strongly advised me to buy an asbestos face-mask. I already had some inexpensive face masks, but she said that there was all kinds of asbestos in the air from the destroyed buildings. Peace Boat had not advised us to buy these more expensive masks (about ¥5000 for the mask with two asbestos filters, plus ¥2000 for a replacement set of filters), but I thought it a good investment. Air-borne asbestos is not to be taken lightly.

**Rendezvous in Shinjuku.** I left my apartment in Iruma, hauling two suitcases, a backpack, and a carrying bag, around 19:00, giving myself plenty of time to get to Chūō Kōen in West Shinjuku, across from the Tōkyō City Hall (Tōkyō Metropolitan Government Building). It was quite a struggle, carrying everything I would need for a week, but I made it on time, as did the other members of Team 57.

There was some confusion, with Peace Boat staff and some 360 volunteers with all their equipment milling around. We knew our bus number, but the buses parked as they arrived and in no particular order over several hundred meters, so some of us were running back and forth trying to find our bus before dragging all our luggage there. During that time, team leaders collected ¥5,000 from each team member for the round-trip transportation. The cost was quite reasonable, half the regular cost or less, and word was that the bus company, Chiba-based *Best Escort*, was providing transportation at cost because of the volunteer purpose of our journey.

**Departure at last!** Our own bus arrived late because of some mix-up in bus assignments, but it finally did arrive and six teams (36 international volunteers, less one) crammed their gear into the storage space under the bus. We also had to use the first two rows of seats for gear. It was around 23:00 that we finally departed Shinjuku and headed up the Tōhoku Expressway in the wee hours of the night, through Tochigi Prefecture (Utsunomiya, Nasu Kōgen), Fukushima Prefecture (around Kōriyama), into Miyagi Prefecture, inland from Sendai City, making “pit stops<sup>12</sup>” every couple of hours. For a couple of hours, I pored over the various Japanese and English documents that former-leader Chieko had forwarded to me that day, to familiarize myself with my new responsibilities, the types of work we would be doing, and camp rules.

The bus convoy went north as far as the Taiwa Interchange, where we got off and headed several kilometers east to a CircleK Sunkus convenience store in Ōsato-chō for a final rest-stop. At this point, it was about 4:30 a.m., the sky beginning to lighten. We were only about 35 km. from Ishinomaki, but Peace Boat teams from the week before us were still asleep in their tents on the college campus grounds. We needed to kill a couple hours in Ōsato-chō, to give them time to pack up and move out.

It was almost breakfast time, and we descended on the convenience store and soon saw the effect of a large horde like ours on such a store: sandwiches, *onigiri*, and drinks began disappearing from the shelves. “Ah, this is what we must not do when we get to Ishinomaki,” we realized. Doing so could seriously affect the lives of the residents. After

several weeks of such Saturday morning Peace Boat stops, Sunkus had arranged for resupply just at this hour. As we ate our “breakfasts” in the parking lot, we saw evidence that we were indeed close to the disaster area: the asphalt was broken and buckled in several places.

**Arrival:** From Ōsato-chō, we headed eastwards toward the coastal town of Ishinomaki. Reaching the outskirts, we began to see still-flooded fields and some wreckage. When we saw a convoy of Japan Self-Defense Force trucks with heavy construction equipment, we knew we were there. Finally, we crossed the bridge over the old (south) branch of the Kitakami River, went through a tunnel, and emerged close to Ishinomaki Senshū Daigaku campus, located in an elbow of the meandering river a few kilometers north of downtown Ishinomaki.

**Day 1: Saturday, April 30.** Our bus arrived on the Ishinomaki campus of Senshū University at about 8:30 a.m. Disembarking with our gear, we sat on the ground in the parking lot for a briefing on the day’s activities. Time would not be wasted: we would have only a couple hours to find a location on the perimeter of the track and field oval, pitch our tents, and re-assemble by 11:00 in order to head to our work assignments downtown.

There were **four main work assignments**, (1) **Warehousing**, (2) **Delivery**, (3) **Kitchen**, and (4) **Sludge Removal**. Leaving Shinjuku the previous night, we had been told that our Team 57 would be doing kitchen work at a site outside of town, but in Ishinomaki, word came that we had been switched to the clean-up group because there was so much work to do. This would involve not only sludge removal but also removal of wreckage.

Wearing our work gear, we boarded buses to head downtown, to the Peace Boat work headquarters at Ai Plaza (Ishinomaki Health Center<sup>13</sup>), about 500 meters southeast of JR Ishinomaki Station and only about 200 meters west of the Kitakami River. Several weeks earlier, Ai Plaza and most of the downtown area of Tachimachi had been filled with tsunami mud and sludge, but earlier Peace Boat crews had cleared it out.

**A theater from the 1970s.** We were told that our first assignment would be clearing sludge and wreckage from a movie theater. After lunch, we gathered our work equipment, which included wheelbarrow, shovels, dozens of white sandbags (土囊袋), rakes, brooms, buckets, and long-handled squeegees, and then a “leader leader” (“LL,” in charge of managing and advising team leaders) took us to our work site in Chūō 1-chōme, about 500 meters southwest of Ai Plaza, across from Eiganji Temple (永巖寺) and Daishō Fudōmyō-Ō (大聖不動明王).



(Fig. 2) The overall area volunteers worked in Ishinomaki during Golden Week. The “A” marker marks Ishinomaki Senshū University. Our HQ was near Ishinomaki Station (center left). Ibarazu, where the rotten fish collection project took place, is in the lower right, near Kazuma ES. ©2011 Google ©2011 Zenrin

It was not a modern cinema complex like we are used to these days but looked like something out of a “Tora-san” movie, a building that was probably built not long after the war. We set to work in the dark, unlit theater, scraping a layer of mud from the floors and ripping out theater seats and washed it all down with power hoses. During our work, we consulted frequently with the theater owner to ask what had to be done and where to dispose of the refuse. We filled countless sandbags with mud and sludge and piled most of it in a nearby lot or at the entrance of Daishō Fudōmyō-Ō for later removal by the city.

About an hour into the work, a fellow volunteer came and asked, “You know what kind of theater this is?” and beckoned us to follow him to the lobby. The lobby was adorned with several nude and semi-nude posters from featured movies and we realized that it was a soft-porn theater. Later investigation revealed that it was called the Nikkatsu Pearl Cinema 1・2. Nikkatsu, Japan’s oldest major movie company, is

well-known to older Japanese for its “pink” “Roman Porno” films of the 1970s, when television cut into its regular market. The posters and the featured actresses’ images were straight out of the 1960s and 1970s, and we all got a good chuckle, but we were of no mind to think ill of the proprietor, well into his 70s. It was how he had provided for his family for decades, and now, the theater was severely damaged. Yet, even at his age, he vowed to rebuild and carry on. More power to him, whatever his business, we thought.

After our work was finished, I contacted our leader-leader to get his OK to stop work. He came and checked out the theater and told us to take our equipment to the Kitakami River area, near the spaceship-like Ishinomori Mangakan to get washed off with power hoses. This would become part of our daily routine, to wash off the foul and sometimes poisonous sludge and other crud from our work clothes.



Peace Boat “takidashi” soup kitchens (Hagurochō 1-chōme)

Back at our camp, we prepared for dinner, but every evening at 18:30, there was a meeting of team leaders, so I had to put off dinner for another hour. We team leaders would report what had gone well and what had gone wrong during the day and get some advance notice on what was probably coming up the next day.

We would all try to “bathe” before going to sleep, but this would usually consist of wiping off with moist wipes or wetting a “te-nugui” towel with water. It also occurred to me to wipe myself off with alcohol-based sanitizing hand gel, since it killed off some of the bacteria. There was no running water for such “sponge-bathing” or brushing teeth, only small plastic tanks provided by the city in a couple locations.

**Day 2: Sunday, May 1.** From today, our days would begin with morning assembly (chōrei/朝礼 in Japanese organizations), beginning with taped NHK “Rajio Taisō,” (warm-up exercises on NHK radio), followed by briefings and work assignments for the day. It was not only a warm-up but also served to get everyone in step by doing something together. Anticipating some grouching from international volunteers who were not accustomed to this (“I don’t need to do silly exercises like this like the Japanese do...”), I explained to my crew and anybody else willing to listen that this was Japanese culture, live. Some might think of Japanese culture as things like *kabuki* or temples and festivals and such, but I explained that NHK “Rajio Taisō” was living, everyday culture right before our eyes: there is probably not one Japanese, from pre-school children to centenarians, who have not done “Rajio Taisō.” In an age when age-groups even a year or two apart, often lead very different, unconnected lives, “Rajio Taisō” was

something everyone shared. But indeed, one team felt that attending morning assembly was not necessary for them and never did show up.

**Entertainment District: Dark and dirty.** After we receive our assignments, we boarded the buses and headed for Ai Plaza. Our work site was in the same general direction as Day 1 but even closer, less than 300 meters away, in Tachimachi 2-chōme. The site was known as “PLAY Building,” a two-story structure with three Japanese “snack” operations in what we realized was Ishinomaki’s downtown entertainment district. Here, we could see the water marks on the walls, where the waters of the tsunami-flooded Kitakami River had been about three meters deep.

The three teams were each assigned a “snack” bar/club to clear out the sludge from. The “snack” bars were small and “cozy,” but the tsunami-borne sludge was a good 15-20 cm. (6-8 inches) deep, still wet and heavy even after almost two months and reeking of diesel oil and other unknown substances. Broken bottles and glass shards lay hidden in the mud, and serious injury was always a threat. We now knew why Peace Boat had insisted that we get steel-plated insoles for our work boots.



Clearing sludge in Ishinomaki’s entertainment district

Lighting in the “snacks” was poor, and only our own headlamps made it possible to see what we were doing. Shoveling the heavy sludge into sandbags took all afternoon, and the backbreaking work seemed endless. Women on the teams were hauling the same heavy sandbags as the guys and getting just as muddy. We also hauled appliances and furniture outside to be disposed of; some of it required careful maneuvering in order to get through the doors. Later, we got some idea of what went on in the “snacks” when one of



Daily routine: getting hosed off

the teams came across some “adult toys” in the sludge, but this was after all a seaport town, and who were we to criticize how people made their living, especially after what they had been through?

The two other teams were pretty much able to complete their tasks, but Team 57 was working with a crew of only five, short its original team leader (Chieko Azuma). We got most of the heavy work done but were unable to complete the final

cleaning and washing down. After spending all day working in the foul-smelling mud, we were more than happy to go to the washing-down area to get ourselves hosed off. Back at Ai Plaza, a local man had heated up cans of coffee, which felt and tasted so good after being wet and dirty all day long.

Back at camp, a medical team had set up a stall providing hot meals for volunteers—vegetables in miso soup and bentō dinners— but I missed it because of the evening team-leaders’ meeting. My thoughtful team members had me covered, though: they had gotten my portions and had set them aside for me.

**Something’s Fishy Here:** The leaders’ meeting had been an interesting one. It was announced that 60 clean-up volunteers —10 teams— had been assigned to the “**Fish Project,**” to pick up dead fish that had been scattered over a large area of the neighboring town of Ibarazu when the tsunami had hit and destroyed some thirty fish-processing plants along the coast. The fish had been rotting on the ground for over seven weeks since March 11 and it would be extremely smelly and disgusting work, so if any volunteers or teams wanted to opt out, they could. At the meeting, no team did, but we were to also consult with our crews and inform the leadership the following morning. My team, bless them, was not about to chicken out: they were all for taking on the challenging if offensive work.

**Day 3: Monday, May 2.** After morning exercises, teams leaders assigned to the “Fish Project” were asked if they wanted to decline the assignment, but everyone was up for the task, even though we were not quite sure what we were getting into.

Buses took us to Ibarazu, across the river to the east of Ishinomaki, where we got off at a small hospital. A Mr. Onodera, one of the local leaders, explained that the tsunami had scattered an estimated 17,000 tons of fish from the processing plants and that we were going to start picking up as much of that as we could before warmer weather came. Teams were assigned to different neighborhoods, and local leaders guided us to our work sites.

The work was totally disgusting, and we were going to earn our stripes this day. We began at one house on a corner where hundreds of kilograms of salmon lay in the sun, some already in sandbags and others loose and lying on the ground. The salmon carcasses were wet, oozing, rotting, and stinking to high heaven. Some were crawling with maggots where flies had laid their eggs in the rotting fish. We loaded bag after bag onto trucks, some so heavy that we could barely lift them. The stinking fish oils soon covered our work clothes, which would never be the same again. We repeated this process in several locations and after a while, actually became inured to the filthy work.



Cars thrown around by the tsunami in Ibarazu.

Breaking for lunch, we walked back to the hospital grounds, shocked at the destruction we saw: houses that had been blasted and tilted over by the tsunami, cars tilted up

on their noses and balancing on garden walls or thrust right into living rooms, and wreckage everywhere we looked. It looked like a major war had been fought there.

For part of my lunch, I opened a can of tuna fish and asked if anyone wanted to share. Only John took up my offer. He then checked his iPhone and announced the startling news that U.S. Navy Seals had apparently found and killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, although the story and details had yet to be confirmed.

After lunch, village elders guided us to other neighborhoods to continue picking up fish, which were scattered everywhere. Our guide also participated in the work, working his fish hook with practiced hands. He told us that he had worked on Ishinomaki fishing boats for 45 years and had seen most of the world.

After the day's work was finished, we definitely needed to be hosed off with power hoses, but even that was not enough. Before heading back to camp, it was announced that there would be a second day of "Fish Project" work but that only half of the first day's crew, five teams (30 volunteers), would be needed and that this would be voluntary. I glanced at my team members, and they gave me the go-ahead. We were the first or second team to volunteer, and it was only a matter of seconds before the five teams were decided. That so many volunteers were so quick and so willing to do what had to be the most disgusting Peace Boat work to date made my eyes well up with tears.

The bus ride back to camp was most interesting. We could barely tolerate sitting next to each other, all of us still reeking with rancid fish oils, and jokes and mutual barbs filled the air. Back at camp, we were shunned and ostracized by other volunteers, but in a joking, good-natured way: "Good Lord, don't come near me!" "Could you guys move your tents somewhere else, like across the river?" But for us, the fact that we smelled so bad became a badge of honor, for we had done the worst of all jobs and were going to go back for more.

**Wind damage.** That morning, while we had still been sleeping, strong winds had swept through the Peace Boat camp site from the west, battering the tents. We had

weighted down our tents and added reinforcing tent pegs where possible, as more strong winds were forecast for the day. During our afternoon work, the winds did come again, and we worried about our tents, but there was nothing we could do. Returning to camp, we found that many tents had been flattened or partially collapsed, with tent poles bent out of shape. Our team site had only minor damage and made do with makeshift repairs.



Ishinomaki camp breakfast

**Day 4: Tuesday, May 3.** After morning exercises and briefings, the five “Fish Project” teams headed back to Ibarazu. This day, our main work was picking up fish scattered in open lots near the hospital. Once again, we picked up salmon—the flesh still pink but crawling with maggots— different kinds of tuna, sanma (saury) and several other kinds of fish (Team 57 members appear in NicoNico News and NicoNico Dōga

<http://news.nicovideo.jp/watch/nw5920>)<sup>14</sup>. Some fish were pinned under wreckage, which included upended cars, so we were cautioned to avoid more dangerous situations. Now and then, volunteers would get fingers pierced by fish bone. Here too, among the debris were nails, spikes, and broken glass, and steel-plated insoles served us well.

Worst of all were the bags of squid. As it was, we had to fight back the urge to throw up at the smell of rotting fish, but decomposing squid was at another level. We tried to keep the bags intact, but wet bags would occasionally break open, splashing on us and releasing the overpowering smell. It would not surprise me if some volunteers lost it at that point and gave up their last meal.



Ken drags a tuna in Ibarazu



Looking for fish in the wreckage

As we had done the day before, we put the fish into sandbags and threw them onto a truck. This day, several of us jumped aboard on its trips to the disposal site near the sea. We passed through the part of town where the fish processing plants were located, and it looked like a bombed out war zone. Many buildings were just shells, with girder frameworks still intact but

with walls badly damaged or simply gone. It was easy to see why all the fish being processed was now scattered throughout the town. Along the way, we saw fuel tanks, perhaps 10 meters tall, tipped over or lying on their sides on the side of the road. Near the sea, we threw the wet, heavy bags of fish onto the ground in a parking lot. This would later be loaded on barges and disposed of at sea. The bags were biodegradable, and we had been careful to separate out non-organic wreckage.



Topped fuel tank in Ibarazu

“Fish Project” teams cleared Ibarazu of an estimated 18 tons of rotten fish, and we were quite proud of our “heroic” accomplishment, until we realized that it had been not even a drop in a bucket: 16,982 tons remained, fish that would attract more and more flies as the days got warmer. And this was only Ibarazu, only one of dozens of towns on the Tōhoku coast with fishing operations and processing plants. It paralyzes the mind.



Team 57 with Ibarazu elders

Back at the hospital facility, scrub brushes and detergent were provided so that we could get off most of the gunk before being hosed off. Some of it stuck to our work wear and was embedded in the treads of our boots, and we needed each other’s help to get at it. When our turns came to get hosed, many of us asked to have our hair blasted with water to get the filth out.

**Day 5: Wednesday, May 4.** This day, work was of a more routine nature. Along with another team, we were assigned to clearing out belongings of a woman who had died. Her quarters were on the second- and third-floor of a corner building, above a shop. Her family wanted to move salvageable items to their home and dispose of the rest. The structure did not appear that stable, and the staircases were old-fashioned and narrow, so the quickest way to move furniture and boxes out was to form a human chain. Some discardable items were simply thrown from the second-floor windows to the pile of rubbish and wreckage that lined the street.

**Cross-cultural communication.** We finished up early and were able to relax a bit at the Ai Plaza HQ before returning to camp. Out front, two local shamisen musicians were playing up a storm. The actual music, however, was coming from a CD player. It turned out that they were tapping rhythmically on the metal blades of inverted shovels, using decorated bottle-openers as *bachi* (plectra) while approximating fingering on the

handle. The woman ran a local watering spot and her apprentice, a young man, were real shamisen musicians, but, as she explained it, they wanted to use shovels as a kind of tribute to the clean-up work we were doing. The young man had recently placed third in a national shamisen competition sponsored by famed Tōhoku (Aomori) enka singer Yoshi Ikuzō.

They invited people from the audience to join them, and our John, always game for a try, took up a shovel and joined in their performance. Then, out of the blue, these enka musicians put on Kenny Loggins' "Danger Zone," and John jumped at the chance. The song had been his college fraternity house's song back in Wisconsin, and he gave a full-on singing performance, accompanying himself on the shovel and jumping up on the chairs, much to the delight of the crowd.



Dinner by Nasu-Shiobara Onsen

Encouraged by his new-found success, John told me that he wanted to spice up the usual exercises the next morning by doing a number he often did with children in his pre-school English classes, and asked me to see if the PB leadership would OK it. That evening, I brought up John's suggestion at the team leaders' meeting, and they thought it an excellent idea to have an international team member contribute to the daily proceedings.

**Day 6: Thursday, May 5.** Instead of the standard NHK radio warm-up calisthenics, John led the entire Peace Boat contingent in his children's warm-up exercises to the tune of "Shake Your Sillies Out," by the Australian band The Wiggles via his iPhone and a loudspeaker, with everyone delightedly wiggling, twisting, and giggling at our own silly movements. We all headed to work with a smile on our faces and a giggle in our hearts.



Cleaning up Tōsuke Soba

**Tōsuke Soba:** From the Ai Plaza HQ, we walked with our equipment 500 meters west along the main street (Ishinomaki Hwy/National Hwy 398) to Kokuchō, where Tōsuke Soba was located, 200 meters south of JR Ishinomaki Station and just a few doors east of the Ishinomaki City Hall.

Like most places in this downtown area, the tsunami-driven back-surge from the Kitakami River, less than a kilometer east, had inundated the restaurant, leaving a layer of mud and sludge. The worst of it had already been cleared by earlier

crews, but there was still a coating of mud and oil that needed cleaning before the shop could open again. We washed down the floors and walls with countless buckets of water, scraping, washing, sweeping, and wiping. Some of the worst of it was under the sink and stove, which was tight and confined, and dark and difficult to access. John and I got on our stomachs and flat on our backs to reach all the way back, and got quite dirty doing so.

Morai-naki. The tragedy of the situation was that when the tsunami had hit, the proprietress, Ms. Kimura, had opened the shop only six months earlier, on September 21, 2010. Faced with yet another financial burden, she had just about lost hope of carrying on. Our efforts, however, seemed to lift her spirits enough to give it another try, and she broke down in tears, thanking us and Peace Boat for our work. We too had an attack of *morai-naki* and cried along with her (it was not the first time), vowing to come back for a reunion and devour several bowls of soba. Coincidentally, Ms. Kimura was a resident of Ibarazu, where we had been picking up rotting fish, and she had been staying in the Grand Hotel behind Ai Plaza. Seeing how dirty we had gotten cleaning her shop, she offered us her room there to shower, but we declined.



Homes in Hachimanchō on the east bank of the Kitakami River ripped apart by the tsunami.



During our lunch break, we had borrowed Peace Boat bicycles and had ridden across to Hachimanchō on the opposite bank of the river. There the devastation from the overflowing river was

horrendous. This was one of the areas that had been in the news clips. Homes and buildings had been knocked off their moorings, bowled over, smashed, and blasted open, exposing the inner rooms. Cars had been flipped upside down or wedged between buildings. A blue commercial fishing boat lay forlornly amidst the homes, a hundred meters from the river. Once again, we were stunned and speechless at the horrific scene before us, but we could not tarry long, for we had to get back to our afternoon work at the soba shop.



Fishing boat washed ashore in Hachimanchō.

**Cross-cultural sharing, Part 2.** A couple days earlier, I had sat next to a guy named Lee den Haan on the work bus. He had Pacific Islander looks and, from his accent, I had thought he might be Maori. He was indeed a Kiwi, but his background was Filipino. Encouraged by the success of John's unique morning exercise, I thought it would be interesting to add another contribution from the international team contingent and asked Lee if he would be interested in doing a Maori *haka* the next morning at morning exercises. The *haka* is sometimes performed in Japan too, at the opening of international rugby matches, when Kiwi teams come to town. These days, it is a highly entertaining prelude to athletic competition, but it had originally been a part of Maori warfare, when opposing sides faced off and shouted challenges and insults at each other, or for challenging/welcoming outside visitors. We too were at war, but our battle was with the destruction of the earthquake and tsunami, and I thought it would be a great way to rev up everyone's "fighting spirit" for our final day of work in Ishinomaki.

Lee thought it a great idea, and said we should meet that evening to go over the *haka*. He would bring along a friend, an actual Maori. Later, they came to our campsite, and the Maori fellow was Stefan Grace, a fellow team leader whom I had worked alongside at the Nikkatsu theater the first day. Because of his looks, some people referred to him "The Russian," but he was the one with Maori blood, not Lee. Lee, however, had been adopted into a Maori community and had fully absorbed Maori ways.

I was familiar with the New Zealand All Blacks *haka* chant that is most often performed at international athletic competitions and even understood a fair amount of it because of its similarity to Hawai'ian, but I thought Lee and Stefan should perform it, because, as they told me, it was not to be done casually or in fun: performers carry the weight of all the ancestors who had done it the past. They, however, insisted that I do it with them, because they saw that I had a good understanding of and respect for Polynesian culture. "I'm going to mess up," I told them, but they said everybody does in the beginning and that the only way to learn was to just jump in and do it.

Lee explained that when we slap our thighs and our chests, we had to slap really, really hard. "When the Maori elders teach us, they come around to see if our skin is bleeding. If it is not, they scold us and tell us to get serious." I was serious, but it was a struggle to remember all the words and to master the movements at the same time, but now having been invited to participate, I vowed to do my best.

**Day 7: Friday, May 6.** In crisp and cool morning weather (about 5° C./41° F.), Stefan announced to the assembled volunteers, in English and Japanese, that the New Zealand contingent would like to do a Maori cultural performance, the *haka*, to give everyone additional energy, fighting spirit, and *kiai* on this, our last day of volunteer

work; and that I would be joining them as a representative of closely-related Hawai'ian culture.

The crowd ooh-ed and aah-ed as we performers took off our shirts and stood bare-chested in the cold morning air. Lee then sent a shot of electricity through the stunned crowd as he shouted as loud as he could, *Ringa pakia!! Uma tirahia!! Turi Whatia!! Hope whai ake!! Waewae takahia kia kino!!* and then we launched into the main part of the *haka*: *Ka mate, Ka mate! / Ka ora, ka ora! / Ka mate, Ka mate! / Ka ora, ka ora! / Tēnei te tanagata pūhuru huru! / Nāna i tiki mai whakawhiti te rā! / Aa, Upane! Aa, Kupane! Aa, Upane! Kupane! / Whiti te rā!..... Hi!!<sup>15</sup>*

Our *haka* performance can be seen on YouTube: *Doing the Haka in Ishinomaki* at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SL3CyRhR2g>>.

**Into the sewer gutters.** With that, we headed off into town, to do battle with mud, sludge, and wreckage one last time. Today, it was our team's turn to ride Peace Boat bicycles into town, an easy 4- km. ride to Ai Plaza over flat terrain. The work site was only about 500 meters from HQ, in Chūō 1-chōme, near Moriya Fruits (守谷フルーツ), which some of us had seen in news clips.



We spent the morning and early afternoon in this area, first lifting out the heavy concrete slabs covering the sewers, then clearing out dense, heavy tsunami mud and sludge from the gutters (側溝), standing in a foot or two of cold, smelly sewer water. It was back-breaking work, and even though we had sealed our boots and gloves closed with tape, sewer water still got in. After we had cleared several dozen meters of gutters on both sides of the street, we moved to another location on a street perpendicular to the river, cleared more sewers, and finally moved to Prefectural Highway 7, running along the river, to help other teams with a final stretch of gutter-clearing. By the time we finished this work, we were quite tired, having not only cleared gutters of mud and sludge but having also shoveled the mess into sandbags and lifted them onto trucks. Filled sandbags weighed between about 25 – 35 kg. Finally, we followed the trucks to an open area at the river and off-loaded a few truckloads of sandbags, before heading to the washing-off area. The cumulative exertion and stress and distress at working among so much devastation had exhausted our bodies and minds, and we were ready to call it a week and head home.

**Policy change: An invitation to stay longer.** Back at camp, at the evening team leaders' meeting, we each summed up our thoughts and experiences and made final comments about our work in Ishinomaki. Up until then, it had been Peace Boat policy to

limit volunteers to a week at a time in Ishinomaki. The work was too stressful, especially psychologically, and if volunteers wanted to work more, they had to return home for a week or more, to refresh and charge their “batteries.”

But now that Golden Week was over, volunteer numbers would drop to below 100, even down to several dozens, as people returned to work and school. Faced with this, PB revised its policy and was going to allow Golden Week volunteers to stay longer. Team leaders, especially, were asked to stay if possible, to put their experience to use and become “Leader Leaders” and advise and guide the next generation of team leaders. Since this was a sudden request, food supplies would be provided at no cost. A few did stay, but most of us had to get back to our regular lives. In the following weeks, short-term volunteer tours were arranged—basically 2-3 day weekend tours—so that people could do their regular jobs AND also do volunteer work in Ishinomaki.

In the evening, everyone started packing for departure the next morning. Leftover food, water, and other supplies were donated for Peace Boat use.

**Day 8: Saturday, May 7.** We took down our tents, broke camp, and scoured the grounds for litter. As we did so, the next crew of volunteers arrived.

Our buses departed later in the morning, and we headed back to Tokyo as scheduled. The journey home was uneventful, but as we passed Sendai City a few kilometers inland, we were impressed—and a bit shocked—at the landscape: it appeared to be very flat all the way to the coast. A cursory check of elevation profiles of the coastal area between Sendai and Natori to the south shows some places 1 km. inland to be 1-2 meters below sea level. At 8 km. (5 mi.) inland, the land is still only 8-10 m. (26 - 33 ft.) above sea level. It was no wonder then that on the ocean side of the highway, the land was barren except for tsunami wreckage and a few lonely trees that had been left standing, while on the inland side of the road, the scene was completely normal, with homes, trees, and greenery. The raised highway had acted as a dike, blocking the effect of the tsunami.

**Those who supported the Volunteers.** Golden Week was a relatively easy time to work in Ishinomaki. Earlier Peace Boat crews, in March and April, had to brave much colder, freezing Tōhoku weather, including snow and more frequent aftershocks. By Golden Week, mornings were cool but not really uncomfortable. The sharp edge of winter had, for the most part, already passed. There were occasional tremors, but nothing serious. The worst of the damage had been cleared by earlier crews.

By Golden Week, too, other volunteers started arriving to support disaster-relief workers. After they had finished their own work, a medical team cooked up meals of noodles and *bentō* for a few days. A painting contractor from Ōsaka had rounded up his friends and had come to Ishinomaki to offer his truck for wreckage disposal, hauling tons of rotting fish from Ibarazu and tons of sludge-filled sandbags. Back at camp, after

days of back-breaking work but still filled with boundless Ōsaka energy, they used their truck battery to charge volunteers' cell phones, made coffee for us and passed around huge bags of potato chips from Costco while we waited and entertained us with their barrel-of-monkeys slapstick/*manzai*-style antics. They also provided warm water for volunteers to wash their hair.

A crew from Niigata set up foot-baths for us and shampooed our hair. People from Nasu-Shiobara Hotsprings in Tochigi came mid-week and prepared hundreds of noodle-and-pizza dinners for us, along with drinks and snacks, and then asked us if we wanted more. They very frankly said they had come to promote their hotsprings: following the earthquake, guests had stopped coming, and they urged us to stop off there to rest and heal our weary bodies after our relief work was done. The next morning, they even prepared breakfast for us.

Around that time, news spread that someone had set up hot showers for volunteers. That someone was a Mr. Wada, who had hauled plywood, piping, tanks, and fuel all the way from Hiroshima, a distance of some 1,240 km. (770 mi.), to set up a makeshift shower facility for us. He was an engineer by trade and had carefully planned and designed his project, drawing on experience he had gained doing the same thing for victims of the 1995 Kobe earthquake. He set up his operation at the edge of campus, next to the house of a local school principal, who was providing the water. After nearly a week of sponge-bathing, piping hot showers after a day of work were the closest thing to heaven.

**In conclusion.** Doing disaster-relief work in Ishinomaki was very sobering, but at the same time very uplifting. For me, there was an added dimension. Remy Renaud asked me one day, “Ken, have you ever seen anything like this?” I said “No” but added that having seen and talked with so many Ishinomaki residents whose lives had been shattered reminded me not only of Japan at the end of World War II but also made me think of my grandfather and his family in 1942, following Pearl Harbor. He was 64 and had been in the United States some 38 years, since about 1904, and had built up a successful business. All West Coast Japanese Americans were carted off to “internment camps” —prison camps— for simply being Japanese. Not one had had any connection with the Japanese attack, but now they had all lost virtually everything: their homes, their belongings, their jobs, their friends. Like us carrying our belongings to Ishinomaki, they could take with them to the camps only what they could carry in two hands. My Ishinomaki experience struck very close to home, resonating with my parents' and grandparents' wartime experiences.

Without a doubt, we and the other volunteer crews before us and after us had done a good job, helping the residents clean up and carry on with their lives, and we were proud of our work. The disgusting, stinking work picking up rotting fish in Ibarazu,

however, seemed to capture the entire Tōhoku situation: we had moved mountains of fish, more than 18 tons, through heavy labor, and yet, that had been barely 1% of what needed to be done — in Ibarazu, that is. All up and down the Tōhoku coastline were dozens of towns with fish-processing plants that had been similarly destroyed. The fishing operations had been only a part of overall damage. Even in terms of mere money and things, the toll had been of an astronomical magnitude, to say nothing of the human, emotional cost. The fish — and everything that had been done so far — had been not even a drop in the bucket.

**Lest we forget...** Now that the March 11 earthquake and tsunami are becoming history —the better part of a year has passed— many of us are already starting to forget about Ishinomaki and other Tōhoku cities and towns and their residents. In this age of tweeting and instant messaging, we all suffer from attention-deficit. Although the bleeding in Tōhoku has stopped, the wounds are far from healed. Convalescence will extend years, even decades into the future. Some towns will never recover, and many lives have been forever altered. For many volunteers, watching videos of the disaster is painful, and it is hard to hold the tears back, even now. Months after working in Ishinomaki, I felt exhausted, and I do not think it was entirely physical.

**KIZUNA (絆).** One of the enduring terms that came out of this disaster is *kizuna*, human bonds. *Kizuna* is what made people all over Japan rally to the cause, even if they themselves were not suffering. It brought foreigners from all over the world to help people they had never met, whose language they could not speak. My memories of traveling in Tōhoku took me back there to help and will take me back again, until which time I help raise money in Tōkyō and do other support work. Holly has gone back to work again in Ishinomaki. As I write this, John is delivering much-needed supplies to Minami Sōma in Fukushima. Many volunteers have gone back. Peace Boat has committed itself to at least three years in Ishinomaki.

**And now what?** Japan has always suffered from natural disasters and will again in the future. Applying its hard-won experience from Ishinomaki, Peace Boat set up in October 2011 the “Peace Boat Disaster Relief Volunteer Leader Training Programme” in Ishinomaki, to train people in areas such as disaster-relief fundamentals, psychological first aid, safety and disaster management, and making judgments in the field, so that relief teams can get on the ground and running more quickly in future disasters, both here in Japan and abroad. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in 1936, “We have only just begun to fight.”

Finally, a message from the people of Tōhoku. Please watch it.

“We will always remember you” – A message from earthquake/tsunami victims...

< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpFroWi1IP0> >

\* \* \* \* \*

**To help out:** Disaster-relief work will continue throughout Tōhoku for a number of years. During the 2011 Golden Week, when we were in Ishinomaki, the average number of volunteers in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures was around 12,000 per day, but by December, daily average for the three prefectures had dropped to less than 1,000 per day (「ボランティア激減」).

During the first few months, volunteers were asked to stay in Ishinomaki for a full week, but now, short-term (two-day) weekend stints are also possible. Volunteers are also needed in the Tōkyō area to collect monetary contributions, as well as goods and supplies, and to help prepare them for transport to Ishinomaki.

Anyone interested in volunteering can contact Peace Boat at:

<<http://peaceboat.jp/relief/volunteer/how-to-apply>> (English)

Email: [relief@peaceboat.gr.jp](mailto:relief@peaceboat.gr.jp)

<<http://pbv.or.jp/volunteer.html>> (Japanese)

## Volunteer Disaster-Relief Work with Peace Boat in Ishinomaki

Midterm Report Summary of Overall Peace Boat Operations through August 31, 2011

(Source: 東日本大震災緊急支援中間活動報告 2011.3.11 – 8.31)

### Overall Activity Flow

Advance safety and survey teams deployed to site  
Decisions on relief activities to be carried out, volunteer dispatch; solicitation of goods and contributions  
Recruiting of volunteers through Tōkyō headquarters  
Explanatory briefing meetings, team formation, safety lectures  
Readying individual provisions, insurance; coordination w/ disaster-relief site  
Travel to disaster-relief site (bus)  
Arrival at disaster-relief site, engagement in disaster-relief activities  
Repeat weekly until completion of disaster-relief efforts.

Ishinomaki population: 162,822 (as of end of February 2011)

Deaths: 3,170 Missing: 759

Partially- or totally-destroyed buildings: 22,419

Peace Boat Volunteers: 6,695 (34,388 working days)

(as of end of September: 8,200 (41,000 working days))

International volunteers: 9% (49 countries)

Students: 19% Retirees: 2%

Part-time workers: 20%

Corporate volunteers: 20% Company employees: 19%

Other (civil servants, medical, self-employed): 11%

One-week volunteer dispatches: 22 times

Short-term (2-3 day) dispatches: 37 times

Explanatory meetings: 42 times (central/western Japan)

Meals served: 101,483

Relief goods, supplies distributed: 1,780 tons

Area served: Ishinomaki, Onagawa Town, Higashi Matsushima (36 areas including evacuation centers)

Evacuation center support:

60 locations in Ishinomaki, Onagawa Town, Higashi Matsushima

Volunteers stationed on-site: 110 volunteers at 3 locations  
Bathing facilities: 3 locations, serving 5,353 residents  
Drying, disinfecting of bedding: 7,846 bedding items at 59 locations  
Screen doors set up: 465 units at 10 locations

Mud and sludge removal, wreckage clearing: 1,776 operations  
Gutters cleared: approximately 43 km

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- <sup>1</sup> After graduating from college, the writer spent three years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the (then) Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (now the Federated States of Micronesia) on the remote islands of Fais and Satawal in Yap District, followed later by another year on Satawal doing volunteer teaching and linguistic research out of the East-West Center and the University of Hawai‘i. Peace Corps is administered by the U.S. Department of State (国務省). The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (青年海外協力隊) is more or less similar to the Peace Corps.
- <sup>2</sup> Personal expenses for Ishinomaki were well over ¥100,000.
- <sup>3</sup> Ōtsuchi’s population has been dropping steadily in recent decades. A 1995 chart

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shows a population of about 18,300 (WolframAlpha). Wikipedia gives 16,727 for 2003 (“Ōtsuchi, Iwate”), and the aforementioned chart gives 16,516 for 2005.

- <sup>4</sup> Iwate’s zigzag, fjord-like coastline and mountainous coastal valleys are especially vulnerable. Such terrain squeezes and propels tsunami waters to incredible heights.
- <sup>5</sup> January 12, 2012 Japan Times update: 15,844 dead (Miyagi 9,506; Iwate 4,667; Fukushima 1,605); still missing: 3,450 (Miyagi 1,861; Iwate 1,368). Of the estimated 24.42 million tons of debris (Iwate 4.35 million tons, Miyagi 15.69 million tons, Fukushima 4.38 million tons), less than 4% had been disposed of by the end of 2011 (“Police hunt for missing”).
- <sup>6</sup> By an organization’s “culture,” I mean its particular way of doing things. In Japan, as undoubtedly elsewhere, companies that merge often spend years going through the difficult and often painful process of getting people from each organization to work out how things will be done in a unified setting. Whose ways will prevail? How will compromises be worked out? and so on. Many Japanese banks have endured this process in the last couple of decades.
- <sup>7</sup> Officially, the Great Hanshin Earthquake (阪神・淡路大震災).
- <sup>8</sup> Past PB disaster-relief efforts include Turkey 1999, Taiwan 1999, Algeria 2003, Niigata 2004, Sri Lanka 2004, Pakistan 2005, USA (Katrina) 2005, Indonesia 2006, Korea 2007 (“Peace Boat Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Emergency Relief Mid-term Report”), as well as in Samoa, the Philippines, and currently, Malaysia (“2011 Japan”).
- <sup>9</sup> From Latin “post mortem (examination)” literally indicates “(examination) after death”; that is, an autopsy (検死(解剖)), but the term has come to often be used to refer to an “after-the-fact” examination or analysis ((失敗の)事後検討/分析, 反省会).
- <sup>10</sup> 国際協力機構
- <sup>11</sup> For my own food provisions for a camping lifestyle, I thought about the kind of food our ancestors ate in old Japan, before there was electricity and refrigeration. For the most part, I chose fermented foods that did not need refrigeration, such as miso, kim chi, tsukemono (pickled vegetables), fermented soybeans, tofu, umeboshi, katsuo-bushi (dried bonito flakes); cheese and yogurt; also dried fish and surume (dried squid and cuttlefish).
- <sup>12</sup> Pit stop: originally an auto-racing term, meaning “to make a stop in the service area for refueling, repairs, tire-changing, changing drivers.” It is now also used for regular highway travel or even daily life to indicate “taking a break, stopping for refreshments, or answering the ‘call of nature.’”
- <sup>13</sup> 相プラザ・石巻健康センター
- <sup>14</sup> Also on YouTube: <[http://www.youtube.com/user/lovemar777#p/a/u/0/1X\\_nV1qxFbk](http://www.youtube.com/user/lovemar777#p/a/u/0/1X_nV1qxFbk)>.

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<sup>15</sup> Slap the hands against the thighs! / Puff out the chest / Bend the knees! / Let the hip follow! / Stomp the feet as hard as you can! .... “Tis death! ‘Tis death! ‘Tis life! ‘Tis life! / ...This is the hairy man / ...Who brought the sun and caused it to shine! / A step upward, another step upward! / A step upward, and another! / The sun shines! / Rise!!”  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ka\\_mate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ka_mate)>.