



Where Did Everyone Go?

Former Minamisanriku Town Hall & Disaster Emergency Center



▲ The wreckage leaning against the right side of the Disaster Emergency Center is the remains of the second town hall building. The largest of the tsunami waves struck the center from the side opposite the fire escape. Densely built rows of houses and shops that had stood behind the center were destroyed without a trace.

On May 24, 1960, Minamisanriku was hit by a 5.5-meter tsunami triggered by the Chile earthquake, killing 41 people. The main government building, which then stood in the center of the Shizugawa district, flooded to a depth of 2.4 meters. This experience led Minamisanriku to build a steel-framed, three-story Disaster Emergency Center next to the town hall in order to ready itself for future disasters. Twelve meters in height, the building was equipped with a surveillance monitor and emergency communication equipment on the second floor and an in-house power generator on the third.

On the day of the earthquake, a staff member at the Crisis Management Department manned her post at the disaster-prevention loudspeaker system, broadcasting repeated warnings to residents to evacuate to high ground. Immediately after the main shock, the estimate for the tsunami's height was 6 meters, but this was updated to 10 meters at 3:14 p.m. After the broadcast of the 10-meter wave warning, disaster-prevention personnel, the Minamisanriku town mayor, and others evacuated to the roof of the building. The tsunami arrived very soon after that, at around 3:25 p.m. At 3:33 p.m., the building was engulfed by a 15.5-meter wave, which was much higher than the building itself.

It took about 2 minutes for the muddy waters of the tsunami to recede and for the Disaster Emergency Center to become visible again, now looking starkly different with its walls torn off. Only 10 people remained on the roof, clustered around the fire escape and antenna pole.

"Where did everyone go?"

No trace remained of the people who had been standing on the roof just a few minutes ago. Forty-three town hall officials and local residents had just lost their lives.