The United States has a large military presence in Japan and plays a strategic role in the alliance with the Japanese. Since the end of WWII Japan has had no military force. Since 1947 the Japanese Constitution forever renounced war as an instrument for settling international disputes and declared that Japan will never again maintain land, sea, or air forces or other war potential. In 1952, the Mutual Security Assistance Pact between US and Japan was enacted. United States forces stationed in Japan were to deal with external aggression against Japan while Japanese forces, both ground and maritime, would deal with internal threats and natural disasters. However during the epic earthquake and subsequent tsunami that occurred on 11 March 2011, the United States along with numerous other countries rendered all manner of aid including search and rescue dogs.

The earthquake was a 9.0 magnitude and its epicenter was approximately 80 miles east of Sendai which is northern Japan. The Japanese archipelago sits on three large tectonic plates; Eurasian plate, Pacific plate and the Philippine Sea plate. The magnitude of this earthquake rotated the earth 7 inches off of its axis, shifted the island of Japan approximately 8 feet and shortened the earth’s day by 2 milliseconds. The destruction of this earthquake caused over 20,000 deaths, destroyed a half million homes and caused approximately $500 billion in damage.

Search and rescue dogs from all over the world came to render help immediately after this horrible natural disaster. The US Army Veterinary Corps was able to take care of these dogs while in Japan. Search and rescue dogs are disaster relief force multipliers and their critical time is within the first 72 hours. The majority of these dogs were true rescue dogs and not Military Working Dogs (MWD). Where MWD are trained to scent by pressing their nose to a surface, have a previously trained scent to guide them and work best in controlled spaces, rescue dogs scent by keeping their nose high in the air with no previous scent to guide them and have a calm demeanor to enable them to work in stressful or dangerous situations.

The earthquake caused the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant to break down. This plant is located on the eastern coast and has 6 boiling water reactors. Nuclear energy provides approximately 30% of the total electricity production of Japan. The meltdown of this power plant caused increase concern of radiation exposure. Effects of radiation can cause genetic damage and increased mutation rates in reproductive and non-reproductive cells of humans and animals. Because of this radiation exposure threat there was the distribution of potassium iodide (KI) to humans and some animals including MWD.

If radioactive iodine is released into the air after a radiological or nuclear event it can be breathed into the lungs. In most cases, once radioactive iodine has entered the body, the thyroid gland quickly absorbs it. After it has been absorbed into the thyroid gland, radioactive iodine can then cause thyroid gland injury. Because KI acts to block radioactive iodine from being taken into the thyroid gland, it can help protect this gland from injury. It is also important to know what KI cannot do. KI cannot protect parts of the body other than the thyroid from radioactive iodine. KI cannot protect the body from any radioactive elements other than iodine. If radioactive iodine is not present, then taking KI is not protective.
In addition to the distribution of KI many people particularly US military families tried to leave Japan with their pets. This mass exodus produced widespread panic among US citizens. Leaving the country of Japan was not an issue however returning with their pets became a big issue later on.