6. In the Jaws of Hell

"What! Of course there was no panic! What do you mean? Would I lie? If we are called, are we not always glad? Ready for anything – even to die?"

Vladimir Shovkoshity

It was September 1986. Public dis-information reached its highest level. The attention of the whole world was focused on the Special (10-km) Zone. Many people had already died and were buried in lead graves in the Mitinsk cemetery near Moscow. The press reported that we had managed to overcome the consequences of the disaster very speedily, yet, it was the time when we were just entering the high radiation fields: 1000, 2000, ... 4000 rem per hour. Such were the radiation levels that we encountered in early September 1986 on the roof of Block 3.

Then it should have been the time to stop, to wait, think, and prepare special routines and procedures to tackle the problems in these deadly conditions. But no! “Press on, bring the remaining three blocks of the damaged power station back to production quickly!” – those were our orders.

But work came to a halt. German, Japanese, Soviet robots – none of them were designed to endure such superhigh radiation fields. The solution was simple: allow a one-time dose of 20 rem per person and send soldiers onto the roof. “Biorobots”.

On September 19, 1986, people were sent into the jaws of hell.

Preceding page, the bitterly named “biorobots” at work, dressed in futuristic protective gear, which offered only inadequate protection against the lethal levels of radiation. (Photo taken in September 1986.)
6.1 The Roof of Block 3

In the most dangerous parts of the post-accident Chernobyl site, accident radiation levels exceeded 500 Roentgen/hour. The area around Block 4 was one such zone – the level there was 400 Roentgen/hour; others were zones "N" and "M", the rooftops and the structures of Block 3, where radiation levels reached 800 to 1000 Roentgen/hour or more, and the chimney platforms.

Fig. 6.1. A sketch of the roof of Block 3 with its high-radiation fields. The circle denotes the base of the ventilation chimney (shown in the photograph at the beginning of Chapter 5). L, M, N, refer to the different zones described in the text; VSRO is a Russian abbreviation referring to the installation in which liquid radioactive waste is dealt with.

Zone N is the roof of building 6001 of the ventilator house. The zone measures 24 x 24 meters. The height of the zone is 61 meters. Around the perimeter of the roof is a raised edge 0.4 meters high. The covering of the roof is made of ferroconcrete slabs measuring 585 x 100 cm and weighing 1 – 3 tons. On top of these is a bituminous layer 5- to 10-mm thick. A pipe 150 mm in diameter runs around the perimeter of the zone.

Zone N is right up against the side of the vertical wall of building 7001. Protruding across part of the zone through this wall is an air pipe 1000 mm in diameter. Zone N is the middle step in the roof shared by Blocks 3 and 4.

The explosion in Block 4 broke through the ferroconcrete roofing slabs of the central reactor hall and hurled them in all directions. Some landed on zones N and M. The components of the reactor – partly destroyed fuel rod assemblies,