

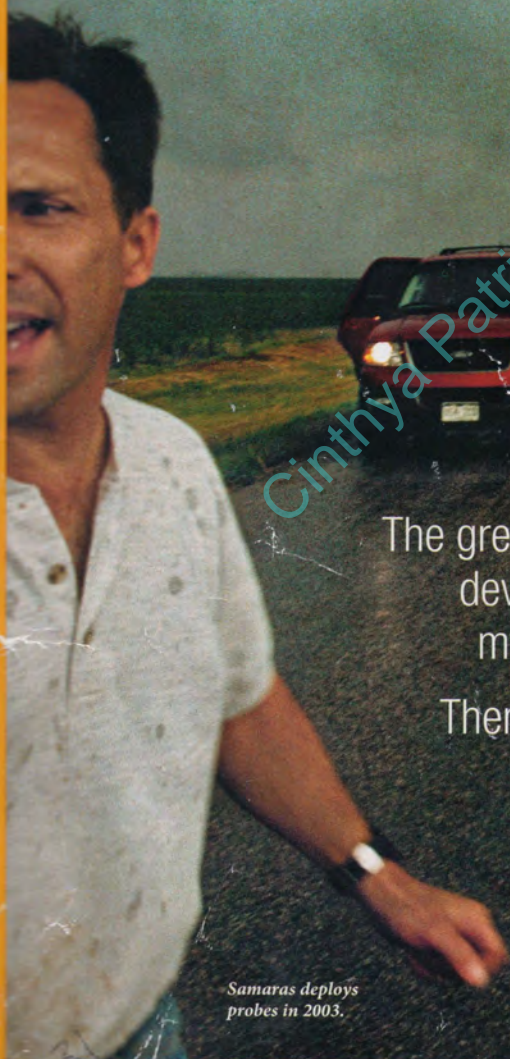
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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

THE MONSTER STORM



The greatest storm chaser, Tim Samaras devoted his life to unlocking the mysteries of extreme weather.

Then came the tornado of May 31.

Samaras deploys probes in 2003.

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Cinthy Patricia López Navarro

By Pat Walters Photograph by Marco Grob

Virus Catcher

VICKI JENSEN read Richard Preston's hit book about deadly viruses, *The Hot Zone*, as a freshman in college and thought, I want to do what those guys do. Today she does. The 38-year-old is a virologist in the Biosafety Level 4 lab (aka the hot zone) at the U.S. government's Integrated Research Facility at Fort Detrick, Maryland. Her team works to develop drug treatments and vaccines for the most deadly viruses known to humanity.

How does a typical day for you begin?

You get up, and you don't drink a lot of coffee. I would have to take a seven-minute chemical decon shower just to get out for a bathroom break.

Plus you'd have to take off your airtight space suit. How does the suit work?

Your air comes in through a hose in the side. You're always tethered to something. And it's pressurized, so if it ever got punctured, air would rush out from it like a popped balloon, keeping any viruses out.

Has your suit ever popped?

No.

Seems like we don't hear much about Ebola anymore.

The number of outbreaks is on the rise. But in terms of total number of people who have died, you can't even compare it to something like flu. But it's so deadly. And there's still no proven treatment. So it's gotten a lot of attention from a biodefense perspective.

Doesn't Ebola spread only through exchanging bodily fluids?

For now. We've looked at whether someone might be able to make it aerosol transmissible—an Ebola that acts more like the flu. That's the worst-case scenario.

Does working with such deadly stuff frighten you?

Ya know, not really. It's funny, I do get scared about viruses sometimes. But only in uncontrolled environments. When my son was born, he was very sick. I got a stuffed doll of the Ebola virus and put it in his crib. My mom was like, "Why did you put an Ebola in his crib?" I told her, "To chase away the lesser bugs."

Does your son still have his Ebola doll?

Yeah. He's five now. He sleeps with it every night.



Watch Marco Grob's video interview with Vicki Jensen on our digital editions.



Cintha Patricia Lopez Navarro

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