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The day Ebola was almost released on U.S. soil: Doctor recalls 1990 race to stop epidemic after infected monkey in Virginia exposed four workers to the incurable virus in real-life inspiration for Hollywood movie

- **Gerald Jaax is one of the Army scientists that responded to the in Reston, started by lab monkeys infected with a previously unknown strain of Ebola**
- **Initially thought to be the same hyper-deadly strain as the current outbreak, the variant turned out to be nonlethal to humans**
- **Jaax and his team raced to contain the still mysterious strain in a saga later recounted in the book *The Hot Zone* and dramatized in a 1995 film**

By [Associated Press](#)

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It had all the makings of a public-health horror story: an outbreak of a wildly deadly virus on the doorstep of the nation's capital, with dozens of lab monkeys dead, multiple people testing positive, and no precedent in this country on how to contain it.

Americans' introduction to the Ebola virus came 25 years ago in an office park near Washington Dulles International Airport, a covert crisis that captivated the public only years later when it formed the basis of a bestselling book.

Initially thought to be the same hyper-deadly strain as the current Ebola outbreak that has killed hundreds in Africa, the previously unknown Reston variant turned out to be nonlethal to humans. But the story of what might have been illustrates how far U.S. scientists have come in their

understanding of a virus whose very name strikes fear, even in a country where no one has fatally contracted it.



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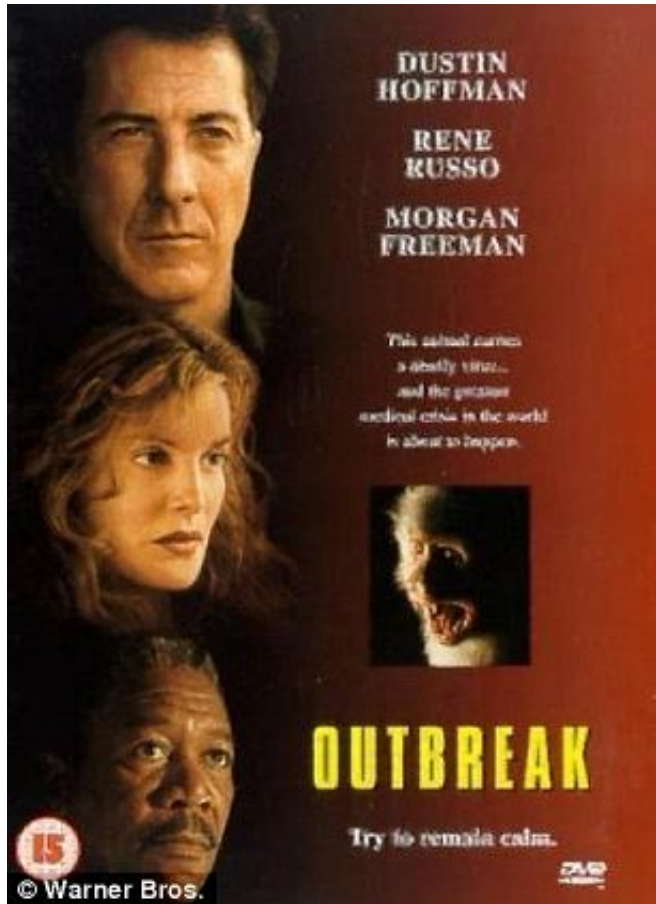
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Containing the outbreak: This handout photo provided by Dr. Jerry Jaax, taken in Dec. 1989, shows the Veterinary Medicine Division team from US Army Medical Research

Institute of Infectious Diseases in the hot zone, Nonhuman primate quarantine facility in Reston, Virginia where experts briefly feared an Ebola outbreak had begun on U.S. soil



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inspiration: Jaax and the his story helped to inspire a 1995 Dustin Hoffman film in which Ebola comes to U.S. shores

Gerald Jaax, one of the leaders of a team of Army scientists that responded to the 1989 outbreak in Reston, Virginia, closely watched the meticulously planned transfers this month of two American aid workers from Liberia to a specialized facility in Atlanta, the first Ebola patients ever brought to the U.S.

Jaax recalled his days urgently trying to corral the country's first known outbreak.

In the fall of 1989, dozens of macaques imported from the Philippines suddenly died at Hazelton Research Products' primate quarantine unit in Reston, where animals were kept and later sold for lab testing.

Company officials contacted the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland — Jaax's unit — concerned they might be dealing with an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever among the monkeys.

Initial testing revealed something much worse: Ebola, specifically the Zaire strain, which had a 90 percent fatality rate in humans. Four workers at the quarantine facility tested positive for exposure to the virus.

Amazingly, they never even got sick.

Researchers eventually realized they were dealing with a different strain, one now known as Ebola-Reston. Though its appearance under a microscope is similar to the Zaire strain, Ebola-Reston is the only one of the five forms of Ebola not harmful to humans.

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But Jaax and his unit, including his wife Nancy, also a scientist, did not know that while at the monkey house. They just knew they had to clean it out, and do it while keeping a relatively low profile that wouldn't scare the neighbors.



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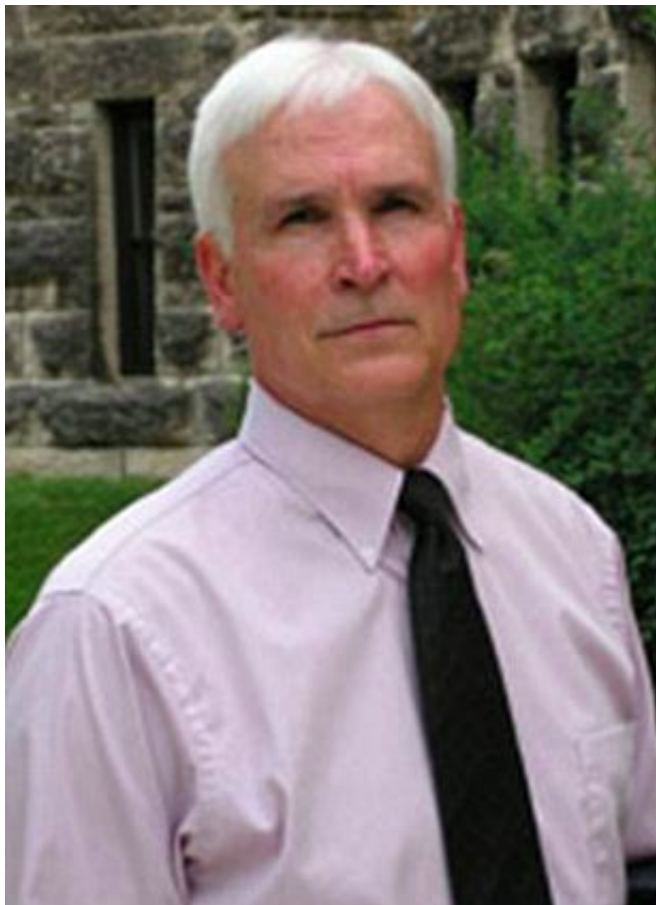
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Vectors: In the fall of 1989, dozens of macaques imported from the Philippines suddenly died at Hazelton Research Products' primate quarantine unit in Reston and were later found to have a strain of Ebola

'You could walk in and smell monkey everywhere,' said Dr. C.J. Peters, who oversaw the Army's response to the outbreak. 'There was a little shopping center nearby. ... There was plenty of opportunity for trouble.'

While the Army scientists had strong protocols in place for studying viruses safely in a lab, they were not well prepared to stabilize and contain an outbreak in a private facility. At the time, Jaax said, nobody — including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control — had that kind of experience. In the Reston incident, the CDC took the lead in managing the human-health aspect of the response, while the Army dealt with the monkeys.

Back in 1989, there was concern that Ebola could spread through the air, said Peters, now a professor with University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. Indeed, researchers concluded there must have been some sort of aerosol spread of the virus within the monkey house, Jaax said.



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Lesson learned: Gerald Jaax says one of the most important legacies of Reston was that none of the dozens who worked to contain the outbreak was exposed to the virus

The Reston animals had to be euthanized from a safe distance — 'monkeys are aerosol-producing machines,' Jaax said. In his 1995 book 'The Hot Zone,' Richard Preston described how Jaax modified a mop handle so it could be used to pin a monkey in its cage where it could safely be