

Plane Gauges Storm's Power

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ABOARD NOAA43 - Just before noon Tuesday, a Tampa-based hurricane hunter plane cut through the eye wall of Hurricane Rita as it churned toward the Gulf. The storm's intensity surprised researchers.

"It's definitely getting its act together," Mike Black, a researcher with the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, said as he looked at colorful instrument panels.

From his window seat in the P-3 turboprop plane, Black offered a play-by-play of what was happening with Rita's swirling winds. Sensors and radars spiked with new wind-speed numbers. Barometric pressure dropped, signaling a strengthening storm. The plane shuddered. Despite the turbulence, fuzzy pink dice hanging over the cockpit swayed only gently.

"It's a Category 2 now," Black said.

The plane, part of the NOAA Aircraft Operations Center at MacDill Air Force Base, made six passes through Rita's hazardous eyewall, each at 8,000 feet. The course zigzagged south of Key West through the Straits of Florida, at times providing a glimpse of Cuba's glistening white sand beaches to the south.

The missions, which take place when hurricanes threaten the coast, provide invaluable data to the National Hurricane Center. On Tuesday afternoon, Rita strengthened from a Category 1 to a Category 2 with sustained winds of 105 mph. Forecasters expect the storm to grow more powerful before it makes landfall by the weekend.

Although the P-3 was jolted a couple of times during Tuesday's 4 1/2-hour flight, NOAA pilot Tom Strong said his missions are often more violent in Midwest thunderstorms than in tropical weather.

Tuesday's mission was a relatively short one. For longer flights, the crew brings along plenty of coffee to brew. "It's an absolute must for us," said co-pilot Mike Silah.



NOAA navigator Pete Siegel directs a P-3 Hurricane Hunter airplane into the hazardous eyewall of Hurricane Rita.

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Although caffeine may be needed to endure long hours, it's evident these men and women thoroughly enjoy both the science and excitement of their jobs. When the flight director suggested shortening Tuesday's mission mid-way through, crewmembers had no qualms voicing their resistance.