



News Release

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

437th AIRLIFT WING PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE
102 East Hill Blvd., Rm. 223, Charleston AFB, S.C. 29404-5154
Phone: (843) 963-5608, 5588 or 5589 Fax (843) 963-5604

PAO email: edmund.memi@charleston.af.mil
After duty hours, call the base operator or
command post (963-2531) & ask for a PA rep

Release No. 05-03

May 1, 2002

CHARLESTON AFB CAPTAIN VOLUNTEERS TO SWIM WITH SHARKS

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. – An Air Force pilot is realizing his dream of swimming with sharks while stationed here.

Capt. Ravi Chaudhary, 15th Airlift Squadron pilot, works at the South Carolina Aquarium as a volunteer research diver.

Chaudhary said when he was younger, sharks enticed him and he wanted to swim with them one day. Shortly after arriving at CAFB, Chaudhary visited the new aquarium with his family. He saw his childhood dream right in front of him in the Great Ocean Tank.

"I saw the divers in the GOT, and I knew I wanted to do this," said Chaudhary. "Right away, I went to the front desk and asked 'How do I do that?'"

At the time, Chaudhary said the aquarium was looking for advanced certified divers. He only had an open water certification, but once worked for NASA as a diver.

"NASA needed a diver to test some of their equipment," Chaudhary said. "I brought the astronauts into a neutral buoyancy tank to show them how to use it (so they would be prepared in space).

"With my additional experience as a diver, the dive certification officer agreed to give me a check dive," Chaudhary said.

A check dive, similar to a 'check flight,' tests a diver's ability in the water.

After Chaudhary's check dive, the DCO allowed him to volunteer for the aquarium.

"The DCO taught me how to relate with the animals in the tank," Chaudhary said. "He also taught me how to be his hands and eyes in the tank to check for problematic or sick fish, since he's not able to dive every day."

Although sharks may seem to be the main concern of his job, Chaudhary points out the true worry.

"The sharks are very standoffish," Chaudhary said. "The real problem is 'Caretta,' a large loggerhead turtle, the true bully of the GOT. It likes to nip at the divers and come after the food during the shows. There is always a diver in the background watching it to make sure it doesn't interfere."

Although diving is an essential part of his job, Chaudhary said it's not the most important part of his job.

"After the first few dives, I came to understand that the sea life is awesome, but it's the interaction with the customers outside of the tank that's most important," Chaudhary said. "The most rewarding part is having interaction with the younger children, because they get so surprised when they see the divers waving at them."

Volunteers are an essential part of the aquarium's makeup. Without them, the aquarium would not be able to exist.

"There are over 450 volunteers at the aquarium, with about 28-43 volunteers working each day," said Patricia Brooke, aquarium volunteer services manager. "There are about 20 jobs, ranging from the Outreach to Schools program to cutting up fish for food to testing water quality to watering plants."

Although each volunteer job has different requirements, there is something for everyone.

-- MORE --

“Almost everyone you come in contact with in the aquarium is a volunteer,” said Angel Passailaigue, aquarium public relations representative. “There are many different jobs that volunteers can do, and there’s a volunteer orientation program that teaches people what there is to do here if they aren’t sure what they want to do.”

The aquarium volunteer coordinators are flexible with Chaudhary’s Air Force schedule.

“With Operation Enduring Freedom, the people at the aquarium knew there would be lean times, and they have worked with me all the way,” Chaudhary said. “Usually divers have to come in two eight-hour shifts each month on any day of the week, to include holidays. We also have to make a one-year commitment to the program.”

Chaudhary loves his volunteer work with the aquarium and encourages others to join the aquarium volunteer staff.

“It’s a great opportunity with many benefits,” he said. “There’s not just the diving program, there’s also a great education outreach program that’s huge here. Kids of almost any age can get involved.

“When I first talked to the volunteer coordinators, they sent me to the website, www.scaquarium.com, where I learned any additional information I needed to know about the program,” Chaudhary said.

“I can’t think of a better fit for me, to come out and do something I wanted to do as a kid ... I would pay someone to be able to do this,” Chaudhary said. “And to be able to do it in a volunteer setting, it’s great.”

(These stories are public domain. You may use any part of the story for your publication.

For interviews with the family, contact 2nd Lt. Jennifer Andrews at 963-5537.)