

Up, up and away: Girl Scouts work for new sky-high merit badge

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By Warren Kagarise, Staff Writer

VERO BEACH - The Cessna 172 Skyhawk idled on the runway at Vero Beach Municipal Airport. The pilot, not yet old enough to drive, could barely reach the pedals, but she took off with ease, banking gracefully over the Indian River Lagoon.

Marty Marugg sat in the copilot's seat.

There were a few crashes, he said later. No fatalities, though.

The pilot, a Girl Scout, and dozens of her counterparts logged a few minutes in a simulated cockpit on Jan. 6, part of their drive to earn aviation merit badges - new for Indian River County's two troops.

"My daughter, she wants to be a pilot," said Maureen Cummings of Sebastian, whose 15-year-old daughter is a Girl Scout.

With the aviation merit badge, the local scouts are joining a national push to encourage women to pursue math- and science-based careers, perhaps spawning the next generation of Amelia Earharts and Sally Rides.

Mrs. Cummings, a co-leader of the Sebastian-based Charon Troop, said the Indian River scouts had to design the aviation program themselves, creating a series of tasks to be completed and questions to be answered before the badge is awarded.

The badge, by the way, is still on the drawing board, but Mrs. Cummings said it would likely feature an airplane on a green background.

"This is pretty new for the Girl Scouts," said Dianne Pasqualone, a co-leader of the Vero Beach-based Polaris Troop. "It's mostly a Boy Scout thing."

Her daughter, Alexis, was working toward her aviation badge last Saturday.

The troops are named for celestial bodies. Charon is Pluto's only moon, while Polaris is commonly known as the North Star.)

The Saturday morning event, cosponsored by the Experimental Aircraft Association, Chapter 99, and FlightSafety International, walked the scouts through a pre-flight inspection, taught them how to plot a flight path and chronicled the Girl Scouts' close relationship with the wild blue yonder.

From 1916 to 1920, the Girl Scouts of America, as the national organization is now known, offered an aviation merit badge.

"We tell the girls, flying isn't something unusual for a Girl Scout," said Merana Cadorette of Vero Beach, who manned a history exhibit complete with a black-and-white photograph of Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low climbing into an airplane.

In 1941, an offshoot of the Girl Scouts, the Wing Scout Program, was launched. Piper Aircraft Co. donated a Piper Cub training plane to the scouts.

Coincidentally, Piper is now based in Vero Beach, less than a mile from the hangar where the scouts practiced on the simulator.

During the second half of the 20th century, however, the program fell out of favor, Ms. Cadorette said, as the scouts shifted emphasis to crafts and their trademark cookies.

In her display case, a silver Wing Scout chevron - now worth \$200 to \$400 - hinted at the program's storied history.

"I think it's really cool to learn this stuff," 9-year-old Megan D'Ambrosio said.

"I've always loved riding on planes," she added.

After a turn at the controls of the simulated Cessna, Mr. Marugg explained Bernoulli's Principle, the foundation of aerodynamics.

"Our intention is to introduce flying to children and get them interested," said Landis Ketner, secretary of the local Experimental Aircraft Association.

To that end, his organization provides free flights to children once a month as part of the Young Eagles Program.

There was no flying at the Saturday morning event, though. Girl Scouts rules prevent the scouts from flying at official functions, but they were invited back to take the ride they duplicated in the simulator.

"There are no limits to them," Ms. Pasqualone said.

