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With help from Airmen, Boy Scouts earn prestigious merit badge

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – Nearly 100 Boy Scouts from 25 troops across Central Florida traveled to Patrick AFB March 31 to earn the much-sought-after Nuclear Science Merit Badge with the help of Airmen from the Air Force Technical Applications Center here.

AFTAC, the Department of Defense's sole nuclear treaty monitoring center, is filled with highly skilled and educated scientists, analysts, engineers and technicians with academic degrees and backgrounds in nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, geophysics and mathematics, just to name a few. The center is also filled with highly motivated Airmen who consistently volunteer their time to help the local community.



Capt. Sky Thai, this year's project officer and physicist at AFTAC's radiochemistry laboratory, coordinated a full day of events for the scouts that included classroom instruction, hands-on projects, and visual experiments and displays.

The boys' Saturday morning started early, with an introduction by Lt. Col. James Thomas, commander of the Air Force Radiochemistry Laboratory. The next several speakers briefed the scouts on radioisotopes, particle accelerators, nuclear medicine and its industrial applications, and what happens to when the forces that hold atoms together are broken, while boys took copious notes into their handbooks to ensure they captured all the pertinent information required to earn the badge.

Once the briefings were complete, attendees were broken up into smaller groups where they conducted hands-on experiments that included building a 3-D model of an element and its isotopes, drawing the nuclear fission process, and creating a cloud chamber.

After breaking for an outdoor lunch prepared at AFTAC's pavilion, the scouts were taken to the radiochemistry lab to get an even closer look at nuclear science in action.

One group visited AFTAC's Count Room, where briefers discussed how AFTAC employs alpha, beta, and gamma detectors to measure samples of radioactivity. A second group toured the lab's Sample Receipt Room, where they were shown the process of how real-world radioactive samples are brought into the facility. Group three saw a demonstration of a Thermal Ionization Mass Spectrometer and learned how it worked, while a fourth group was taken to the AFTAC Warehouse where Airmen demonstrated the properties of liquid nitrogen and the power of radioactivity in everyday common items.

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2-2-2 SCOUTS

Luke Seilger, an 8th grader at Milwee Middle School in Longwood, Fla., came with his fellow scouts from Troop #773 to participate in the day's events.

"This is so much fun!" Luke exclaimed. "When our Scoutmaster told us about it, I was the first one from my troop to jump on the chance to participate. I've been so excited waiting for this day to come. When I grow up I want to be an engineer, and now after seeing all this today, I'm pretty sure I want to be a nuclear engineer!"



In addition to the scouts and their leaders coming to the base, many parents accompanied their children to watch and observe.

Sherry Suarez came with her sons Joshua, 13 and Jacob, 12, who both attend St. Cloud Middle School. From all accounts, Suarez was very impressed with the program.

"Our boys have been counting down the days to come to the base, and quite frankly, so have my husband and I!" she said. "Unfortunately, he wasn't able to make it, so I'm trying to absorb everything so I can tell him all about it. Earlier today, the lab commander said something about how he hopes he can light the spark in just one boy to consider a career in science or the military. That's exactly what we want for our boys – we love the military atmosphere!"

Throughout the day, the Scoutmasters observed their troops interact with boys from other regions in Florida and work together on the hands-on projects. Norman Payson, Assistant Scoutmaster from Troop #192 in Osceola, enjoyed the day's events.

"This is the best kind of opportunity for the boys to earn such a technical badge," he said. "When you are learning about the subject from the people who actually do the job, you're getting it right from the source, which makes the badge even more worthwhile. I'm excited for them, especially since it's not an easy badge to get. Big thanks to the Air Force and AFTAC!"

Assistant Scoutmaster Shelle Pendergrast from Troop #330 in Ormond Beach said she was amazed at the skill level displayed by the AFTAC Airmen.

"It's very difficult to find places for the boys to earn merit badges from real subject matter experts," she said. "So when an opportunity like this arises, we seize the moment so our scouts can learn from those experts. I can't thank the men and women of AFTAC enough for putting this on for us, and I'm just so thrilled with the level of professionalism everyone had shown. It's so important for the boys to witness these successful leaders who run our Air Force – they're making a difference to our kids, and that's what Scouting is all about."

For many of the Airmen who volunteered, this wasn't their first time assisting with the merit badge event, and both military and civilian personnel signed up to help coordinate the day's agenda.

"This is such an enjoyable event," said Tammie Anglin, secretary at the radiochemistry lab. "I love seeing their faces light up and see our officers show off what they know and how smart they are—it makes me proud to be a part of AFTAC. I hope my little grandson gets involved in scouting someday because I can see him really enjoying a program like this. And I love being involved because it's my small way of giving back to the community. It's really a lot of fun!"

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3-3-3 SCOUTS



In 2012, AFTAC invited local scouts to the base to earn what was formally known as the Atomic Energy Merit Badge. That year saw 32 boys ranging in age from 11 to 16, and since that first year, the number of attendees has tripled.

“When we first started hosting the troops, we wanted to give the boys the best possible experience,” said Troy Porter, AFTAC’s equipment maintenance technician and Scoutmaster for Troop #314 in W. Melbourne. “We’ve continued to improve the program – from better, more interactive briefings to increased access to our lab and its equipment. It’s

been exciting to see how far we’ve come since the first year, and I’m always impressed with the level of dedication our Airmen put forth to make this worthwhile for the boys. I appreciate the effort by the boys, the support from the parents, the collaboration with the Troop Leaders, and the volunteer spirit from the men and women of AFTAC. I can’t thank everyone enough, especially Capt. Thai, for making this a first-class event.”

Thomas echoed Porter’s comments, and added a few thoughts of his own.

“If we can spark an interest in one boy – one family – towards a career in STEM, then my job is done,” he said. “When I look back, I never pictured myself becoming an Air Force scientist, yet here I am. I hope the boys had as much fun as we did, and I’m very proud of all the AFTAC volunteers who came out on their day off to make this a first-class event. Capt. Thai and his team did an outstanding job and set the bar high for next year’s team. We had a great time.”

According to the Boy Scouts of America web page, the Nuclear Science Merit Badge is earned by less than one percent of Boys Scouts worldwide. Porter said he hopes the tradition of hosting the event continues well into the future.