

## The Merit Badge Process - Revealed

### Overview:

- The Scout finds a merit badge he'd like to explore,
- The Scout requests a counselor to help him earn the badge,
- The Scout obtains a Blue Card and fills in the required information,
- The Scout obtains the Scoutmaster signature prior to beginning work,
- The Scout completes the requirements,
- The Scout submits the card to the Scoutmaster for approval,
- The Scout submits the completed card to the Advancement Chair for recording and processing of the award,
- The Scout is recognized with the patch as soon as possible,
- The Scout is formally recognized at the Troop Court of Honor.

For new Scouts and parents, earning a Merit Badge seems to be one of those more mysterious processes. This article attempts to shine a light on the process and help a Scout earn his first merit badge.

Most all merit badge work in Troop 96 is done outside of regular troop meetings. Why is this? Several reasons come to mind...

The merit badge in the Boy Scouts of America is designed to help a Scout explore subjects that interests him. As of 01 Jan 2010, there are 122 merit badges (with four more due out in 2010). This gives today's Scout a lot of subjects to discover. Doing merit badges at a troop meeting "forces" all Scouts to do the same one and to be more directed by the Merit Badge Counselor (more on the role of the counselor, later).

Earning a Merit Badge requires a Scout to take the initiative. He needs to decide what he wants to work on, when he wants to do it, etc. A Scout can choose not to do any merit badges, or he may earn them all (done only a few times in history).

Teaching a Merit Badge session in a large group, such as in a troop meeting, poses other difficulties as well. While the expertise of the counselor may be shared with the larger group, it does not allow for that extra inter-personal connection between a Scout and an expert as when they work closely on the subject together. Also, it's very difficult for a counselor to know who has mastered the requirements of the badge when in a large group. Finally, there is the issue of the Scouts who have already earned the merit badge that the troop is working on at a troop meeting. They easily become bored and frustrated that there is "nothing for them" to do at the meeting.

When a Scout is ready to begin a merit badge, consider having him find a "buddy" to complete the merit badge at the same time. It ensures a greater level of safety for the Scouts and increases their "Fun Factor." The BSA requires that

Youth Protection rules be satisfied at all times when a youth is working with an adult. Having a buddy makes following the Youth Protection rules easier, too.

### The Merit Badge Counselor

Work on a Merit Badge is to be initiated by the Scout. The first step is to select the Merit Badge and find a counselor. The Scout is responsible for making this happen. Counselors may be parents, another member of the Troop or another troop or even someone in the community who is interested and knowledgeable in the subject. The troop maintains a list of merit badge counselors and the Northeast Illinois Council maintains a larger, more comprehensive list from across northeast Illinois to help a Scout find a counselor.

The Scoutmaster or Advancement Chair can assist a person who wishes to become a merit badge counselor. There is no fee; however, there is an application process and the BSA completes a background check of every applicant. The background check must be complete before the individual can be approved as a merit badge counselor and listed on either the troop or council list.

### The “Blue Cards”



(front and back of the “Blue Card)

Merit Badge cards (also known by everyone as Blue Cards) can be obtained from the Scoutmaster or the Advancement Chair. The card has three sections. The Application for Merit Badge is to be filled out by the Scout. The Scout asks the Scoutmaster to sign this first section prior to beginning work on the merit badge. This is a necessary check on the process to ensure that the Scout has a qualified merit badge counselor as well as a check by the Scoutmaster to make sure Youth Protection rules will be followed.

Upon completion of the merit badge, the merit badge counselor signs-off indicating the completion of all requirements. The Scout then obtains approval of the Scoutmaster (or other unit leader). Finally, the Scout submits the Blue Card to the Advancement Chair.

The Advancement Chair will check to make sure that the Blue Card is completed properly. The Advancement Chair will record the merit badge in the troop’s

record system using TroopMaster software and file the advancement forms with the council office.

The Applicant section will be given back to the Scout, the Counselor's Record will be kept by the counselor and the last filed with the troop by the Advancement Chair.

(Note: when a Scout reaches the point of completing an Eagle Scout application, proof of completion of each merit badge will be necessary. Having three copies to reference increases the chances that a complete record of a Scout's merit badges will be available. Further, it is a good idea for a Scout to file his completed Blue Cards in plastic baseball card holders for safe keeping. )

During the time the Scout is working on the merit badge, it is his responsibility to retain the card. This helps him to remember what work is still incomplete and puts the responsibility on him to ensure progress toward completion.

### **Reward and Recognition**

The Scout should be recognized in front of the troop with an informal presentation of the merit badge patch and his portion of the Blue Card soon after completion by the Scout and purchase of the badge by the troop. (This recognition is bestowed upon the Scout to reinforce the accomplishment. It may take two to four weeks to complete the process and obtain the appropriate badge from the Scout Shop.)

Formal recognition of merit badge completion is made at the troop's Court of Honor. The Scout who has previously received his patch will receive the so-called 'white card' which signifies that the merit badge has been recorded in the Council office.

### **In summary:**

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## **Exceptions:**

As with nearly all processes, some variations are noted below:

### Ma-Ka-Ja-Wan Summer Camp

At Ma-Ka-Ja-Wan, the Scout has a chance to earn a number of merit badges while at summer camp. During the process of earning the merit badge, the Blue Card system is not used. Rather, the camp counselor keeps a record of each Scout's progress and his records are used to generate a computer printout of each Scout's progress. If a Scout completes a merit badge at camp, the Troop 96 Advancement Chair will prepare a Blue Card "after camp" to record the completion and the three sections will be distributed as described above. If the Scout begins the merit badge at camp, but does not complete all the requirements, the Advancement Chair will also prepare a Blue Card, indicating which requirements have been completed and the Blue Card will be given to the Scout for him to maintain as he completes the remaining requirements.

### Council Merit Badge Day

Each year, our Council hosts a Merit Badge Day. This event is a special opportunity for Scouts to concentrate on earning one or more badges in a single day. The advantage to this program is that Scouts can earn merit badges that are not easy to otherwise earn during one day of focus. The disadvantage to this program is that while a Scout works within a classroom setting, he may not be able to gain from the expertise of the counselor directly in this single day. Also, as stated earlier, in a large group, it is very difficult to ensure that learning as actually occurred. For this reason, Troop 96 discourages Scouts from earning the Eagle Scout-required badges at Merit Badge Day. It is our opinion that a single day in a classroom setting is not adequate preparation for the most important merit badges for a Scout to earn. For instance, First Aid merit badge is important, intense and complex. Some Scouts may be able to absorb all the information - but many may not. A Scout who earns this badge in one day may have false confidence in his ability - but only learn of his deficiency when in a critical situation. Troop 96 offers traditional approaches (i.e., working directly with a counselor over a period of time) to earn these most important badges.

For Merit Badge Day, the Applicant Section of the Blue Card should be filled in by the Scout for each merit badge he intends to complete at Merit Badge Day. The Blue Card is to be approved before the Scout begins work on the badge by the Scoutmaster (or other unit leader). Depending on the process used by the Merit Badge Day staff, the Blue Card may or may not be signed directly by the counselor. Nevertheless, our Advancement Chair will use the Blue Card as the official record of the merit badge, even it is was recorded differently during the program.

### Special Merit Badge programs

Occasionally, various merit badges are offered throughout the year as part of special programs. Atomic Energy, Radio, Law and Railroading are recent examples of merit badges offered as part of special programs. A Scout who wishes to participate in one of these events should follow the normal Blue Card process: the Applicant Section of the Blue Card should be filled in by the Scout for the merit badge he intends to complete. The Blue Card is to be approved before the Scout begins work on the badge by the Scoutmaster (or other unit leader). The Scout is responsible to ensure that the record of the counselor's approval is obtained. Once again, we discourage Scouts from attending special, concentrated programs related to Eagle Scout-required merit badges.

*If you have any questions about the process or philosophy of merit badges in Troop 96, feel free to contact either the Scoutmaster, Committee Chair or Advancement Chair any time.*