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By Kyle Jarvis

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PETERBOROUGH — The U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps Monadnock Squadron is showing other units how it's done.

In a special ceremony attended by more than 100 people Sunday afternoon at South Meadow School, more than 40 cadets were officially commissioned after 15 months of active participation, a feat not achieved as quickly by most units.

The program began in 1958, with the mission of "providing American youth with a drug and alcohol-free environment to foster their leadership abilities, broaden their horizons through hands-on training and guide them to becoming mature young adults," according to the program's website.

"Only about 10 percent of units are commissioned in one year's time," said David Hull, the regional director for the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps' region 1-3, which covers New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, cadets, and I hope you enjoy this moment."

The program, for 11- to 18-year-old boys and girls, isn't meant to serve as a recruitment tool for the U.S. Navy, but rather to foster leadership skills with the hope that cadets will commit to serving their country in some capacity later, whether by joining the armed forces, or their local police force or fire department, Hull said.

Units, or squadrons, are commissioned when they've been in existence for at least a year, have at least 25 cadets enrolled in the program, and achieve a passing score in their annual inspections, and gives them the status of being an officially recognized unit, he said.

"This unit started a year ago with six to eight cadets," he said. "Within four to five months, there were over 40, which is unheard of."

Of the 350 active units across the country, the average squadron size is about 15, said Lt. j.g. James W. Letourneau, the commanding officer for the Monadnock Squadron and also Dublin's police chief.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this is the best program to put kids in a position of natural leadership," Letourneau said.

Units meet at least once a month to train and learn skills, with each first-year cadet attending a mandatory two-week "boot camp" at Fort Devens in Massachusetts, Hull said.

"Then they can start earning promotions," he said. "There are all kinds of training opportunities: construction, culinary, air school, explosive ordinance disposal, naval diving ... our goal is to get

them young, and teach them a little leadership, and this is the best opportunity for them to get that.

Josiah W. Adams, 15, of Greenfield joined the unit about a year ago.

"I was interested in joining the military when I get older, and I heard about the program from Chief Letourneau," he said. "I went for a drill weekend, and I absolutely loved it."

Josiah went to boot camp last summer.

"Before (boot camp), I was really pumped to go," he said. "Then, while you're doing it, it's more stressful than anything. But after that I felt great. It's something bigger than yourself."

Andrew E. French, 16, of Dublin also joined the Monadnock unit a little more than a year ago.

"I was interested in the military, and the way it can help you," he said.

Andrew said he's enjoyed learning about military customs, while also learning about patriotism and integrity, he said.

Dayne E. Vargas, 16, of Peterborough has been in the program for more than a year.

"A friend of mine was telling me about it, and I went and fell in love with the program," he said. "The discipline, the way everything works like a well-oiled machine, and the ability to go and do training, it's a good feeling."

Dayne said he's changed since joining the unit.

"I'm much more disciplined, more restrained and definitely healthier," he said.

Unlike Josiah and Andrew, who plan to engage in service but aren't sure in what capacity, Dayne is looking forward to joining the U.S. Army by winter.

"I put a lot of thought into it," he said. "I'm just going to go and see what's available."

Congressman Charles F. Bass, who lives in Peterborough, was on hand for the ceremony, and offered a few words of encouragement for the young cadets.

"This is a special day," he said. "You've distinguished yourselves at a very young age. For you to have the commitment, integrity and interest to participate in this program when others may not, that makes you the future leaders of America."

John F. Fletcher, a veteran and commander of the American Legion Post 24 in Marlborough, said Saturday's ceremony says a lot about the youth of today.

"It goes to show that our youth, there's a lot of good going on, and with the guidance of adults,

they have goals for the future," he said. "They've done themselves real proud in a short time, to be commissioned in a year and half."