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Chopper's flying visit surprises rural pupils

Annette Lambly | 9th September 2009

Class work for the pupils of the small rural Tangowahine School was disrupted when the Electricity Rescue Helicopter unexpectedly landed on their netball court.

Fortunately, this was not an emergency operation, but a secret visit planned by principal Shelley Gosse as a part of a school-wide study in flight.

The surprised pupils rushed outside the classroom on Friday to watch the chopper touch down only metres from the school.

Ms Gosse said the opportunity had arisen by chance.

Trust chairman John Bain had visited the school recently in his regional councillor role to present an environmental award.

On learning about the flight project, he suggested it might be possible for the helicopter to visit the school the next time the engines were being tested and the visit was confirmed a few weeks later.

"I kept the news from the children to surprise them," said Ms Gosse.

She said this year, the school raised funds for the trust fund and, during this time, they learned that at least 20 staff or pupils had a family member who had required the rescue service.

Pilot Peter Turnbull, with 40 years' flying experience, 14 of these with the Northland-based helicopter, was happy to answer questions.

He told the children that when he was young, he repeatedly told his father "when I close my eyes I see aeroplane", so becoming a pilot had been his obvious career choice.



Tangowahine students get up close to the helicopter. Picture/Annette Lambly

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The children were delighted to sit in the \$4million, 30-year-old Sikorsky and learn first hand about rescue operations and the mechanics of flying. Mr Turnbull said the all-weather service averaged about 600 calls a year.

The Sikorsky is able to carry two pilots, two stretcher patients, a paramedic and another person, usually a family member of the patient. Mr Turnbull said a new model Sikorsky was valued at \$15million.

The rescue helicopter also paid a visit to Tangiteroria School on its return to Whangarei.

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