

# Easy aircraft figures By Rafe Morrissey



## Painting figures for aircraft dioramas in nine basic steps

If you're an inveterate aircraft modeler like I am, you've probably gotten into the habit of dumping any figures that come in a kit in the spares box thinking, "I'll get around to them someday" or maybe even, "I'll leave that to the armor guys." If you like to photograph your models, though, there's nothing like a figure to provide a sense of scale and to help establish a convincing scene. Unfortunately for many who specialize in finishing aircraft, painting figures can seem like a black art. The following method is designed to help a modeler produce convincing figures with a minimum of guesswork in a few easy steps.

This method is a simplification of techniques discussed by master modeler Sheperd Paine in *How to Build Dioramas*. It's broken into two stages: painting the flesh tones and painting the uniform and equipment. It is ideal for 1/72, 1/48, and possibly even 1/32 scale figures. Larger figures require the much more elaborate techniques contained in Mr. Paine's book, however.

### Getting started

As with any model, proper preparation of parts is the key. Wash the figure with soap and water to remove any leftover mold-

release agent. Most kit figures have mold parting lines and flash on them. Resin aftermarket figures, on the other hand, generally don't have mold parting lines but may have flash or blobs of excess resin that need to be removed. Begin by trimming away any flash and scraping off the mold parting line with a No. 11 hobby-knife blade. Afterward, wet sand the area with some 400-grit sandpaper followed by some 600-grit. This blends the treated area into the rest of the figure. Unlike airplane models, figures are best finished once they're completely assembled. Many resin figures have separate arms, legs, and heads. Kit figures may need an arm

attached, but most arrive in one piece. If the figure has a complex pose, like a pilot climbing into a cockpit, test fit it by temporarily attaching the parts with small bits of modeling clay to confirm the pose in relation to the model.

Resin figures must be assembled with super glue or epoxy. Be sure to fill any seams with putty. A quick way to fill seams on figures is to slightly overfill them with Squadron White Putty or any toluene-based filler. While the putty is still wet, use a cotton swab dipped in Cutex nail polish remover to remove the excess putty. Do not use the acetone free formula. It won't work. The cotton swab should be damp, not sopping. Repeat with fresh cotton swabs as necessary to remove any excess putty. This technique eliminates the need for sanding.

### Prime directive

The next step is to prime the figure. This highlights any remaining seams and provides an even surface for later paint coats. Usually, I drill a small hole in an

inconspicuous area of the figure (like the bottom of the foot) and insert a toothpick to hold the figure. In this manner, I can hold and move the figure during painting without handling it.

Vallejo paints will not stick well to bare plastic or resin so a primer coat is essential. I prime my figures with light gray paint. The particular shade does not matter much, but be sure to completely cover the entire figure. I used Testor Acryl light gray (FS 36495) on this project. Some modelers claim that only lacquer- or enamel-based primers should be used, but Testor acrylics work just fine for me. Wiping the figure down with a cotton swab soaked in isopropyl alcohol helps remove any traces of mold release, sanding dust, or skin oils, and is the key to successful priming with acrylic paints.

### Take a good look

Once the figure is primed, take a long good look at it under a strong light. Note the areas that are in shadow and those that are exposed to the most light. These are the places where darkened and lightened colors will be used to emphasize shadows and highlights. Keep a mental note of these areas in mind as you begin to paint, **1**.

### Faces and hands

Realistic flesh tones are the biggest obstacle when creating a convincing figure, so let's start there. It's best to paint the areas of exposed skin first, anyway. Picking the right colors to paint a face is one of the toughest challenges artists face. In these small scales, however, I've found a few colors in the Testor Model Master line of enamel paints that seem to work every time. The colors are tan (FS 20900), military brown (FS 30117), and radome tan (FS 33613). These are common colors and should be easy to find, but any enamel paint of the same FS number should work just as well. It is important to use only enamel paints for the skin areas, though. They have a more realistic sheen and allow for the subtle blending that is a critical part of the process. We'll use acrylics for the rest of the figure.

Begin by painting all the exposed skin areas with a basecoat of the Testor Model Master tan, **2**. Next, areas that are in shadow like eye sockets, wrinkles, and the underside of the chin are painted



Here is the primed navigator figure from the classic Monogram 1/48 B-17G kit. All flash and mold parting lines have been scraped away with a No. 11 blade and the figure given a light sanding with 400- and 600-grit sandpaper to smooth everything out.



Lay in the base flesh color with Testor Model Master tan (FS 20900) enamel applied with a fine-point brush.



Use a fine-point brush to lay in any areas in shadow such as eye sockets, under the nose, under the chin, and recesses near clothing with the Testor Model Master military brown (FS 30117).

Testor Model Master military brown with a fine-tip brush, **3**. Be as precise as possible here. For example, apply a dab of the darker color on the underside of the nose, between the lips, and under the lower lip. Finally, use the Testor Model Master radome tan to apply highlights to the areas of the face and hands that capture the most overhead light, such as above the eyebrows, the bridge of the nose, the tops of the cheeks, and the point of the chin, **4**. When all the shadows and highlights have been added to the face and hands, blend everything with a clean, smooth-bristle brush that's slightly dampened with thinner. Make sure there's not too much thinner in the brush, or you will remove the paint instead of blending the differently shaded areas. Go slowly, and you will see the stark lines between shadow and highlight areas disappear. Photo **5** shows the final effect. You'll notice that I didn't worry about painting the eyes. That's because from a scale viewing distance, you can't really see the individual eyes. Try looking at people when you're walking down the street. They have to be awfully close before you can see the "whites of their eyes!"

### Clothes and equipment

Acrylic paints are ideal for painting clothing because they dry dead flat. For the same reason they don't work as well for flesh tones, the flat finish of most acrylic paints really makes cloth areas look realistic. My favorite brand of paint for figure painting is Vallejo's. These paints come in a rainbow of colors and are unrivaled in their ability to cover with one coat. Each bottle comes with a dispenser tip that lets you squeeze out just enough paint for the job while keeping the remainder from drying up.

In most cases, acrylic paints dry too quickly to be blended, so a different technique is needed. The initial steps are the same as those for faces and hands. First, lay in the base color of the garment. Paint the figure as though you were dressing a mannequin, **6**. Next, add a little black or dark brown to the base color and apply it to the areas where shadows fall from folds in the cloth or belts and other equipment. Keep in mind that the shadows are only on the underside of the fold and not in the entire recess. Next, add a little bit of

white to the base color and pick out the highlights, such as the top of folds and the upper edges of the cuffs. At this point, all of the highlights and shadows probably look too stark and unrealistic, **7**. Since it's impossible to blend them easily, create a very thin mixture of the base color and water and apply it to the entire area. Artists call this a "glaze," and it blends the highlights and shadows effectively. Just make sure the glaze goes on evenly and doesn't pool in recesses. If the shadows and highlights are still too stark, mix up a slightly thicker glaze and apply a second coat to the area, **8**. Don't make it too thick though, or it will cover everything and you'll have to start over.

**Vallejo is a relatively new brand of paint available to modelers. Each bottle comes with an applicator tip allowing you to neatly dispense precise amounts of paint.**



Next, lay in the highlighted areas like the forehead, bridge of the nose, tops of the cheeks and the tip of the chin with Testor Model Master radome tan (FS 33613).



Lightly draw the fine-point brush slightly dampened with mineral spirits back and forth over the face and hands to subtly blend the transition areas between dark and light areas. Don't use too much thinner or you will smear everything. Go lightly!



Use the Vallejo paints to lay in the base color of the uniform, life vest, and boots. Paint the figure as though you were dressing it.

Once the glaze has dried thoroughly and you are satisfied with the blended effect, you can go in and paint the smaller details, like the figure's belts, shoes, buckles, and equipment, **9**. Unless the detail is very small, you should follow the same procedure of laying down the base color, shadows, and highlights, followed by a glaze. Avoid using straight white or silver for detail. It looks too stark and unrealistic in smaller scales. Mix a little tan into white and black into silver and they'll have a much better appearance.

Hopefully the techniques I've described here will inspire you to pull the figures out of an old Monogram kit, or maybe even pick up a few new aftermarket ones. You may not take up figure modeling full-time, but a nicely done figure next to a model makes the perfect finishing



touch, and provides a change of pace between airplane projects. **FSM**

Besides being just plain fun to paint, figures are an excellent way to convey the immense size of the real aircraft in photos as in the case of this Revell Germany 1/72 P-47M Thunderbolt.

### Meet Rafe Morrissey

*Rafe Morrissey began modeling at the age of 6. His father, an Air Force pilot, who introduced him to the hobby, kindled his interest in military aviation. Rafe earns a living as public affairs consultant for a Washington, D.C.-based government relations firm. He fits modeling in between work and helping raise his two small daughters.*



Using a process similar to that with the flesh areas, add black and white to the base color and use the two altered shades to lay in the shadows and highlights. For some uniform colors you may need to use other hues to achieve the effect. In the case of the life vest, I used a mixture of black and red to create a dark orange tone for the shadows because straight black turned the shadow green. White uniforms are another special case. Use a very light gray for the base shade so you can use straight white for the highlights. A dark purple will work better than straight black for making the shadows on white uniforms.



Acrylic paints do not blend like oils or enamels. When they are dry, they are dry. Instead, make a thin mixture of the base color and apply it over the entire area. Don't load your brush up too much or let the mixture pool in recesses. Keep your mixture thin and reapply as necessary to achieve the effect of blending. Don't make your mixture too thick or it will cover everything and you'll have to start over!



Once the major elements of the uniform have been completed, finish the figure off by adding detail items such as parachute straps, buckles, and insignia. Tone down colors such as white, black, and silver by adding brown, white, and black, respectively. Otherwise, they look too stark and unrealistic.