

THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

Random Modelling Notes

THAT WILL BE \$29.95 THANKS

(a refutation of the whig view of modelling)

(August 2005)

Several thousand years ago, or so it seems, one of the most advanced kit makers of the time released a kit of an obscure British aeroplane. Of course, Frog had always dabbled in oddities such as the Gloster E28/39 and the Bristol 138, but even by those standards the Westland Wyvern was an odd looking thing. Of course, I bought one for a few bob and had it together in a few hours. It was one of the more unusual looking models among all the Spitfires, Mustangs and Me109s that youngsters make. I liked it.

However, as I grew up the simplicity of Frog's Westland Wyvern made it less attractive in the midst of all the developments taking place in kit manufacturing. In particular the cockpit began to look very empty and the mouldings began to look cruder by the year, in comparison with the products of the new Oriental kit makers. To my mind one of the most annoying problems was that the exhausts of the turboprop engine were represented merely by suggestive lumps and holes on the fuselage side.

Later I learned how to correct most of the problems with the Wyvern; how the trailing edges could be thinned, how a fairly representative cockpit could be made without too much fuss and that a bit of plastic tubing of the right diameter let into the fuselage sides could improve the look of the jet exhausts. By that time, however, finding a Frog Westland Wyvern to practice all these new skills on had become the main problem. While most of the old Frog moulds went to Russia and appeared under the Novo brand, the Wyvern didn't seem to be among them.

Then, one day I was in the Victorian Hobby Center and, in a pile of obscure bits and pieces, I found a little cardboard box with a simple drawing of Wyvern on the top. This was in the days before most eastern European manufacturers had settled down to producing a constant supply of relatively good kits, so the contents of this box was something of a lucky dip. I might have asked to have a look inside but that didn't occur to me and so I paid my money and took it. If I had been lucky the kit might have turned out to be a new high quality product, but it could also have been junk. Instead, it was neither.

It turned out to be the old Frog mouldings with a little bag of white metal parts to make it into a Wyvern S.4, passable decals and a barely passable A5 size instruction sheet – the text was in English but so badly photocopied you could hardly read it. It was a lot better than having no Wyvern kit at all and the white metal, although far from perfect, was a worthwhile addition. To this I later added one of those vacform canopies that come in sets from the New Zealand Falcon company.

All I needed now was the time and patience to put the kit together to make a nice little Wyvern. Time passed and a rapid outpouring of kits of French subjects from eastern Europe distracted me from getting on with the Wyvern. Some time later Steve put a nicely made little Wyvern on the MoB table that demonstrated there were no serious difficulties with the Frog kit. Again I was encouraged to get out the kit and have a go, but again there were other distractions and

so ...

In the history business you learn the phrase 'whig history'. Its source is old and interesting but these days it means, more or less, the kind of history that sees the past as a succession of steps from worse to better so that today we are living in the best of all possible worlds. These days we have computers, mobile phones, airbrushes, Alcaid II, Superscale decals, etc, etc. We've never had it so good. The whig view of history also applies to plastic kits. We started off with primitive Airfix and Frog kits, and a number of now long forgotten but not regretted brands, evolved through the arrival and maturity of Hasegawa and Tamiya, the introduction and maturity of the eastern European kits and now the high quality and relatively inexpensive western European kits produced by Revell and Italeri. More recently we've also had the arrival of Dragon and Trumpeter from China. Modellers have never had it so good, according to his historical perspective.

When I was introducing poor undergraduate students to the idea of 'whig history' it was necessary to point out that not everything really gets better all the time. The environment, social cohesion, working conditions, and so on. Of course, the point of 'whig history' is that things are usually getting better for somebody at the same time they are getting worse for others. The rich get rich and the poor get poorer, for example. And I'm here to tell you that this kind of thing goes for modellers too. While things get better for some modellers they get worse for others. I'm one of the latter.

Like many modellers I've been watching the arrival of Trumpeter with interest. If nothing else, this Chinese company is not afraid to use lots of plastic and so they have been producing an expanding range of huge kits in big scales. I see they have a 1:48 Fw200 on the way. It comes complete with a home extension kit. They have also been doing bits and pieces in 1:72, memorably their Tupolev Bear that comes with a loan application form. They also produced a very tidy North American F-107 that seems to have disappeared from shop shelves these days. So when they said they had a Westland Wyvern on the way the general modelling populace waited expectantly.

This afternoon I happened to be in Melbourne for a meeting. Having a while to kill I took myself to good ol' Victorian Hobby Centre to ponder the prices of modern plastic kits. As I was walking down the aisle to the relatively inexpensive eastern European kits (also usually available from Mr NKR as superior prices) the person who had come into the shop after me struck up a conversation with the person at the counter.

'The New Trumpeter Wyvern hasn't arrived yet?' He asked hopefully.

'We've just got them in', came the reply. 'They're down that aisle there.'

As I heard this I looked at the shelf in front of me and there were a couple of the new Trumpeter Wyverns. I took them out and handed one to the eager customer who could hardly wait to pay for it and get it home. There I was with the other one in my hand. What to do? There were none left on the shelves, new arrivals like this tend to sell out quickly and you never know when you will see another one. I looked at it and thought about the little Frog kit waiting for me at home. I looked at the price tag of \$32.50 and considered the problems that still remained in improving the old kit, including the business with the jet exhaust. After a moment or two of vacillation I gave into temptation. The fact that the shop gives model club members a discount would bring the price to under \$30, which is starting to be reasonable these days. It didn't even occur to have a look inside before I handed over my money. Quelle imbécile!

A little later I had the opportunity to sit down, open the box and have a look at the contents. My first impression was that there seemed to be a lot of space in the box (you could fit four Frog kits into the same space) and a cursory inspection of the various mouldings in their plastic bags suggested

that this kit is a good example of the Trumpeter house style. The decal sheet is pretty good too. So far, so good. It was only when I began to look at the details and flick through the 16 page instruction manual that the initial sense of enthusiasm began to turn to a kind of stomach churning dread.

This little aeroplane model which has (so the box top tells me) a wing span of only 186.5mm and a length of 179 mm, has 151 parts. Good grief, the original Frog kit had around 30 parts. So, if you measure the value of a kit by the number of parts it has, you certainly get value for money with this new Wyvern kit.

Where do all these extra parts go? First there's the cockpit of about 24 pieces, main undercarriage wheels of four pieces each and a veritable cornucopia of bombs, rockets, torpedoes and drop tanks. There are also two rocket packs to help the laden aeroplane take off (with all those underwing stores it's no wonder) that takes up another 14 pieces each. There's airbrake assemblies of three parts each, those little transparent bits that go on the wingtips and for other navigation lights and a 14 part propeller assembly. To top it off, you get folded wings with separate center section, outer wing panels and wingtips, with the folding mechanisms too. When you go on the internet to read reviews of this kit they will no doubt say this kit is fabulous. That, however, depends on your perspective.

My trouble is this. All I wanted was an accurate and relatively easy-to-assemble kit that took care of some of the problems of the Frog kit. What I got was enough tiny bits of plastic to enable me to win the 'out of the box' trophy at almost any competition around the world. For me 151 pieces of plastic is unnecessary and unwanted so, while this kit will be a step forward for most modellers, it is a step back for me. For example, this Trumpeter kit will have to be extremely accurate for me to be able to make it with the wings unfolded. Trying to get everything square and true is likely to be a horrendous task so that what should have been simple is now a source of unnecessary angst.

Four part main wheels is simply rococo embellishment, and even with the cockpit open most people won't be able to see most of the wonderful but unnecessary detail. To make this possible the cockpit canopy naturally comes in two parts, while I prefer a closed canopy – you know how difficult it can be to get the two tiny clear parts to line up accurately without smearing glue everywhere. To add insult to injury, this kit more or less replicates the same fault the old Frog kit with the jet exhaust stuck on the side of the fuselage, so the same surgery will be necessary on the new kit as it was for the old.

Following my realization of the terrible implications of the problems involved in making the Trumpeter Wyvern I sat for a while looking at this jigsaw of tiny plastic pieces, wondering what to do. With luck the old Frog wings can replace the Trumpeter wings to take care of that problem. The old Frog wheels will probably make life easier than struggling with the Trumpeter four part ones. Hopefully the Falcon vacform canopy would replace the Trumpeter two part canopy without too many fit problems. As for all the underwing ordnance; I can't use it all, the white metal rockets that come with the old Frog kit are pretty good and, anyhow, I usually like to leave armament off to show off the lines of the aeroplane.

After a deal of unhappiness and deep thought on the problems of making a nice little simple model from this kit, I think that maybe it could be done with a combination of Frog and Trumpeter parts. But it wouldn't be easy. And so a kit that many will regard as a masterpiece of the mould makers art is, to me, unnecessarily complicated and a retrograde step in the progress of kit making. What I wanted was a simple solution to a complex problem and what I got was a complex solution to a simple problem.

Then it came to me. There's a simple solution. I'll just make up the old Frog kit. I'll take this new Trumpeter kit to the next MoB meeting where you can buy it from me. That way I'll be happy and filled with a sense of relief. I don't know about you, though.

Leigh Edmonds

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