

# THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

## *Workbench notes*

### GRUMMAN F8F-1 IN 1/72 BY MONOGRAM

(January 2004)

The Grumman F8F was a highly successful attempt to put the most powerful engine possible into the smallest, lightest and most manoeuvrable airframe that could be designed around it. It was the follow-up to Grumman's highly successful F6F Hellcat that had done so much to wrest control of the air over the Pacific Ocean from the Japanese during World War II and it was intended to counter the latest Japanese designs and intercept Kamikaze attacks.

The United State Navy ordered two F8F prototypes on 27 November 1943 and the first one flew on 21 August 1944. It had the same engine as the F6F but was 20 per cent lighter and its rate of climb was 30 per cent greater, more than meeting the specifications set for it. Deliveries of production aircraft commenced in February 1945 and it began equipping fighter squadrons VF-19 and VF-21 in May 1945 but they were still working up to operational status when the war ended.

Production orders had been placed for 2023 F8Fs but, with the end of the war, production was reduced to 1266, the last one produced in May 1949. Despite its spectacular performance the F8F could not compete with the new jet engined fighters that began entering service in the second half of the 1940s but even so it was produced in several versions. The first, the standard F8F-1 followed by the F8F-1B which replaced the -1 version's four machine guns with four 20mm cannon to give it greater firepower. Next came the F8F-1N that was equipped as a night fighter and finally the F8F-2 with a redesigned engine cowling and enlarged tail fin for greater stability. By the time



production ended the F8F had served with 24 US Navy squadrons but they had all been withdrawn from service by late 1952 so it never saw combat with the navy.

Some retired F8F-1s and -1Bs were given modified fuel systems and supplied to the French Armée de l'Air for service in Indo-China where around 100 were based at aerodromes around Hanoi by 1954. After the defeat of the French in Vietnam neighbouring Thailand felt threatened and took delivery of 100 surplus F8F-1s and 29 F8F-1Bs that remained in service well into the 1960s. Also after the withdrawal of the French from Vietnam 29 ex-French F8F-1s were transferred to the newly created South Vietnam Air Force where the first fighter squadron was activated in June 1956. They remained in service until August 1959 when the F8Fs were grounded after one crashed due to suspected structural problems.

Some F8Fs remained visible in South East Asia for several years on public display. They also became a common sight in American skies after a number were offered for sale in the 1960s and bought by enthusiasts to be used in aerial displays and pylon racing. Many were converted to improve their performance and one held the world speed record for piston engined aeroplanes for many years.

My trouble was that I hadn't opened the box on one of these Monogram F8F-2 kits in many years and I remembered it from the 1960s as an excellent kit. Well, that was then and now it's the 21st Century so something that was a relatively good kit back then isn't quite what it used to be. There's really nothing wrong with this kit, it just isn't the wonderful little thing the way I remembered it to be. What is it they say about nostalgia?

There's really nothing serious to complain about even if I was disappointed. It is an honest little kit with few pretensions. The parts, what there are of them, fit together well enough but there are little touches missing that we just take for granted these days. For example, the little air intakes on the wing leading edges are nice and accurate enough but there is nothing behind them so you can see straight into the wheel wells through the gaping holes. It's not something that a little bit of filler



or a sliver of plastic can't fix... There are other little points but if this was a modern limited run kit it would be classed as a good kit.

Let me say again, this is a pretty good though basic little kit. The pieces are accurate enough and go together without too much trouble. What troubles there were I made for myself, generally speaking. My troubles began when I looked at the decal sheet and wondered if I could do something better and a little bit less anonymous. I found an old Esci sheet that had markings for a F8F-1 in South Vietnamese Air Force markings and, good luck here, a nice photo of the exact machine at it appeared sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s sitting outside some important looking building where it had been retired to.

Converting the F8F-2 into an F8F-1 isn't very difficult and basically involves removing about 3.5 mm (give or take a tiny bit) from the tail and knocking off the cannons and drilling holes for the machine guns in the wing leading edges. The photo of the F8F I used also showed it was missing the rocket stub rails so I trimmed them off too. The trailing edges needed thinning, the raised panel lines got sanded off and so on, all the usual stuff that most kits need. Then the troubles came.

The engine is very positively located on a couple of plastic pegs on one fuselage half but the pegs broke, leaving me with the engine rattling around inside the fuselage. I solved this by cutting the nose off, resetting the engine in place with something a bit more substantial and then gluing everything back in place. The result was only off by a fraction of a degree but it was obviously not quite right.

Then I had trouble getting the cockpit canopy parts to fit properly, in desperation I reached for the super glue and you know what happened. Not a total disaster, but not perfect. Then, as I was just touching up a couple of rough patches, the file slipped and broke off one of the undercarriage legs that went sailing away and into the black hole that all modellers have somewhere in their workspace. Bugger! Just as well my memory isn't what it used to be and I'd picked up a duplicate at some stage. This time everything went together very nicely because I knew what the problems were.



The colour scheme is dead easy, good old US Navy deep blue for just about everything. Esci decals are dreadful. They're thick, inflexible and dissolve if you even give them a whiff of Microset. Still, good old 'Future' (or whatever you bought locally) does the job. As it dries it drags the decals down to make them conform to most curves, a bit at least. All you need is patience. The next day a couple of coats of Testors Gloscoate finished it off nicely. It is a pretty little thing too, even after all that.

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