

THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

Workbench notes

MIL MI-6 IN 1/72 BY SOUTHERN FRONT AND AEROSPATIOALE/BAC CONCORDE IN 1/72 BY HELLER

(May 2008)

My sister and I have one thing in common (apart from our parents). We both buy boxes of jumbled up, odd shaped pieces and then bang our heads against the proverbial brick wall trying to figure out how to put them together. In her case it is jig-saw puzzles, in my case it is plastic model kits. When she has finished putting together her 5000 piece jig-saw of a polar bear in a blizzard she takes a photo of it and throws the thing out. I find this an odd thing to do, but it certainly saves on space. On the other hand, I often feel like throwing out a kit that isn't going together properly, it would save on space and it would also save on my aching brain.

For the past year or so I've had two model kits sitting on my shelf, half finished because my brain hurts too much to think about them. These two monsters have been the *Southern Front* Mil Mi-26 and the *Heller* Concorde. Both promise great things before you open the box, both turn out to be real puzzles when it comes time to try assembling them. Let's start with the *Southern Front* kit.

Having put together the *Amodel* Mi-6 I thought it would be nice to have a Mi-26 to stand alongside it. At about the time I finished the Mil-6 the *Southern Front* kit of the Mi-26 appeared on the NKR web site. I thought it could be no more difficult than the *Amodel* kit to put together so I ordered one. I was wrong. The outside of the box looks promising, huge with a nice photo of a Mi-



26 on the top, but when you open the box you find what is essentially an *Amodel* kit. Perhaps *Southern Front* is a new manufacturer but I bet it's getting its kits moulded by *Amodel* because, like all kits from the manufacturer, there are a myriad of little sprues of soft plastic so that the rather large fuselage of this huge helicopter comes in six parts. And, like most *Amodel* kits, the parts don't exactly fit together perfectly.

The other annoying - infuriating might be a better word - feature is that none of the parts has a number, you have to refer to the illustrations at the front of the instruction booklet to find out what number a part is. Thus, the assembly process involves identifying parts from the exploded diagram, then finding out which sprue it is on from pages earlier in the booklet and then shuffling through the sprues to find one that looks the right shape to find the part you want. After that it is a matter of tidying up the part and then trying to find out why it doesn't quite fit and fiddling with it until it does. This made assembling the Mi-26 less than a happy project. Now, on to the *Heller* kit.

There used to be a time when *Heller* made some of the best, most precisely engineered kits going around. For my tastes the kits they made in the late 1970s and early 1980s are some of the best kits you will ever find and I prefer them to later kits made by some of the Japanese companies. However, this kit of the Concorde seems to be a collaboration with the British company *Airfix*, just as the original Concorde was an Anglo-French collaboration.

You can get this kit in an *Airfix* box with British Airways markings or this *Heller* kit, the only difference is that it comes with far more desirable Air France markings. The result is that we get an *Airfix* kit in a *Heller* box, which means most of the failings of modern *Airfix* kits like the TSR-2, without any of the delights that we used to get from *Heller*. To my mind this includes things like the large trenches that seem to have been made by the resurrected *Matchbox* trench digger and some rather dubious part alignments. Again, this was not a kit that became fun to put together.

The most astounding challenge of all came in getting the engine nacelles to fit under the wings, a problem only solved by carving away something like a quarter of an inch of plastic from the inboard sides of the nacelles, whereupon they fit perfectly. It seems that the original plan was to fit the nacelles into a gap left for them in the lower wing surface but then the kit maker decided to make the lower wing into one solid piece that the nacelles would attach to, but forgot to change the nacelles to match the new plan.



Let me amuse you with just a few of the problem that confronted me along the way in assembling these kits.

The plastic of the *Southern Front* kit is so soft that it was obvious that the thin rods attaching the rotor blades to the hub would break under the weight of the blades. The solution was to replace them with brass rods, but getting them into the rotor blades was the big, time consuming and fiddly problem.

The Mi-26 has a ladder built onto the port fuselage side but the kit parts were too thick, poorly moulded and some were not fully formed at all. The solution was to make a dozen or so tiny steps from craft wire and then figure out how to get them attached to the fuselage so they looked like an evenly spaced ladder.

The *Heller* kit suggests that you can make the Concorde with a moving visor. This may be true but the mechanism that allows this to happen was made from brittle plastic that snapped the first time I tried to use it.

Making models is supposed to be a pleasure, not a mental torment. So why continue? Because, I hoped that in the end the results would be worth it. Looking at them at the end of the process, they are.



THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

W086