

SCALE DETAILS

by Gary Weeks

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"Hello, my name is _____". That is what comes to mind when I study the exterior markings of an airplane subject. Full scale aircraft, and military subjects in particular, proudly display stripes, numbers, and insignias of all kinds. It's amazing how much character those badges and identification numbers add to a model when you watch a bland finish come to life as you apply them. This month I will discuss a few techniques that I like to use for creating and applying insignias.

There are two basic ways to go; you can paint the insignias on or apply them as a decal or sticker. Now before you jump down this article and look for the decal discussion, consider the advantages of painting them on. One advantage is that you can size them to whatever scale you are building rather than compromise on what is available as a commercial decal. Another advantage is that the painted insignia will perfectly follow the wing shape and surface detail such as rib stitching, rivets and hatch openings.

Painted insignias require a masking film if you are spraying the paint on. I am happy with the results that I get with making my own masks with blue painter's tape. In most cases it is not wide enough for my needs, so I simply laminate several strips using a 3/4 inch overlap. I do this on a sheet of wax paper for easy removal. The insignia is then drawn on the tape and simply cut out with a model knife. I also like to draw random pencil lines through the pattern before lifting it to use as alignment marks when placing the pieces on the aircraft. This is especially helpful with roundels. You want the pieces to line up perfectly.

With roundels you have many choices for the layering. My preference is to not layer the paint if I can avoid it. One reason is to prevent show-through if I happen to put a poor-hiding paint over a contrasting color. The other reason, and maybe the more important one, is that I have had bad incompatibility experiences trying to layer one color over another if the brands are different (and I can't even guarantee good results with the same brand). Some incompatibility problems occur when the paint is still wet, such as when the paint beads on the surface beneath it. Some problems occur after the paint has dried such as delaminating or cracking.

Now for the decals: Many commercial decal sets are available and some can be custom ordered. These may be wet transfer or of the peel-and-stick variety. The latter, along with your own numbers, etc. cut from Super Monocoat™ trim sheets, can be tricky to apply, especially if alignment is critical as with a series of numbers. Spray the surface receiving the peel-and-stick decal first with Windex®. Remove the backing and apply the adhesive decal directly over the wet Windex® film. The wet, soapy surface lets you slide and position your decal as you need to. If you need more working time simply spray more Windex® over the top. When you are satisfied with the position, gently blot with a paper towel and let it stand overnight. Don't ask me how it works, but the Windex® evaporates from underneath leaving no bubbles and a good strong adhesion.

Sometimes larger pieces going over compound curves will leave bubbles. After the surface has dried, pop the bubbles with a needle and squeeze the air towards the hole. The bubbles will be removed. For military aircraft, you can remove the gloss of the Super Monocoat™ with 1000 grit sandpaper before cutting. For commercial decals, the gloss can be removed after application by gently scuffing with 2000 grit or finer sand paper.

Nose art is another fun addition to your model. I have discovered a very easy way to adorn the cowling of a WWII fighter. Find your favorite pin-up or cartoon figure on the internet and print it out on regular paper to the size you need. Carefully cut out the figure and brush the back side with Formula 560™ canopy glue. Let the glue saturate the paper for a few seconds and then apply the art figure to your cowling or fuselage. After it dries, brush another coat of glue over the front side. You now have a fuel-proof nose art painting on your plane.