

Partake in a Little Hooch

A step by step guide to manufacturing from scratch a peaceful Vietnamese village or, alternatively, a strong hold of the VC and potential target just gagging for a 'Zippo raid'.

For the South London Warlords game Low Level Hell I needed to make some native Vietnamese buildings in 20mm scale. A Club member had some scratch built ones which were quite nice - if a little small - but he'd bought them rather than made them and so, as we needed more, I thought I might try making some. Not being a glutton for punishment, I did initially try to buy some 'off the shelf': I looked at resin items from commercial sources but what we saw (to be frank) looked fairly awful. So, as the other people contributing to the game were all painting aircraft and a silly number of helicopters as fast as their little brushes would work, I came to the conclusion that scratch building might be the only sensible route to take.

Research

Fortunately, one of the games creators - Mick Penver - was barking mad enough to shell out to do a little on the spot research... so Mick went 'in country' to the 'Nam early in 1998 and photographed some 'typical' dwellings. On his return, I studied the photographs long and hard and worked out what - in the limited time I had available (about five weeks before Salute) I could hope to manufacture. I sized up the buildings - worked out roughly how big they ought to be - and did some preliminary sketches. I decided, after some thought, that the best - or, at least, the *quickest* - way to proceed would be to buy in as much ready made material as I could and, with that in mind, I dusted off my modelling products catalogues to see what I had to buy to take as many short cuts as possible.

Mick's photographs revealed that the buildings he saw tended to be raised on stilts to get the floors level and keep them dry in all seasons; had mostly thatched roofs; and had walls made of platted vegetable material or laths of wood - almost like heavy duty venetian blinds. With the exception of the roofs (which seemed quite substantial) the walls appeared fairly flimsy and this was one of the things I wanted to try and reproduce. So: on to the modelling...

The Framework of the Buildings.

I bought some sheet balsa for the framework of the walls. The models were to be fixed to bases made from large sheets of styrene - 3mm thick for sturdiness. The raised floors of the buildings themselves were made of sheets of styrene moulded to represent "planking" (manufactured by Wills' Finecast which I'd had for ages, left aside from an un-finished project [Space 1889 space ships if you want to know...]). These were just about the right size for one 'standard' hut per sheet, which was a stroke of luck. The first thing I did was to 'distress' the 'planking' floors at the edges (to stop them looking too neat and tidy), and they were then supported from the base on piles made from wooden barbecue meat skewers and (for the smaller timbers) cocktail sticks.

I needed to drill holes in the base and the flooring that lined up so that I could pass the 'piles' from the base, right through the flooring to the roof for strength rather than simply 'butt' stick them onto the base. To line these holes up I first cut out the base from the 3mm styrene sheet and then I laid on top of this base a sheet of the planking. I then clamped these two together with a couple of small 'G' clamps to stop them moving about while I then drilled through both of them with a suitable sized drill so lining up the holes for the piles. The piles were then glued in place separating the floors from the bases by around 10mm - 15mm with the piles poked through the floors, as I said, to form the basis for handrails and wall/roof supports. This framework was all glued in place with a combination of super glue and - in places where finesse was less important - my trusty hot glue gun.

As an aside, despite the fact that I use nearly 4 tubes of cyanoacrylate glue on these five buildings, I came more and more to fall back on my glue gun and - in the end - used it for almost everything except the very finest of work. I cannot recommend hot melt Glue Guns highly enough - especially if you are as impatient as I am: they're fast; the glue (once you've bought the gun) is cheap; and you don't get a steaming headache in a badly ventilated work room like I did with the Superglue.

Anyway, when the framework had dried I went on to the walls.

Walls and Roofs

The walls were slung between the supporting 'timbers' by sticking sheet balsa between the uprights making sure to keep the grain in the horizontal direction. This meant that I could then score this to make the slatted wood effect I was looking for on some of the walls. Windows and doorways were, of course, cut in to the balsa. I then added supporting timbers to the outside from cocktail sticks supplemented by a bag of '1000 match sticks' for a bit of variation. You could always use expended matches but... the bag of a thousand was certainly cheap enough.

Next, I proceeded to fit the other wall materials: those designed to look like the platted "rushes". These were made from sheets of metal foil from "St Ivel Gold" spread which has a cross hatched design embossed into it. This design, when turned through 45 degrees, looks convincingly enough like platted vegetable material. Small sections were glued to the balsa walls in panels with either tube adhesive (Bostic or something similar) or, later on (and as time ran shorter!) yet more hot glue. Similar foil is available on other food products – I last saw it used on the pull of lids of a form of 'Pot Noodle' – but, at a real pinch, I guess foil could be actually embossed with a pencil and ruler (laborious) or actual woven cloth could be used, fixed with PVA glue. However...

The Roofs. Ah... here's where the pain started. After much head scratching the Blackwells (01702 541 555) catalogue was perused and some fake 'corn' - suitable for modelling fields of the growing plant on OO/HO railway layouts - was purchased (HK 3112 from the manufacturer Heki). For the thatched roofs this material - which comes loose in a roll looking like some five inch hay-bale - was stuck in two layers over various glues on to roofs assembled from various different materials!

I started off with balsa roofs but found the material a little too fragile and hard to work with: I glued and pinned together the only balsa roof I completed but was generally unsatisfied... In consequence, all subsequent roofs were made from 1.5mm styrene which was glued together with liquid poly. The thatched roofs mostly had similarly thatched eaves (although I made the occasional one with sheet corrugated iron eaves). I also made whole roofs out of this "crinkly tin". Sourcing this material was a little bit of a problem. I had tried to locate some 'free of charge' from suitable donors (like plastic drinking cups) but, in the end, time was against me and I looked in my EMA Architectural Suppliers (01932 228228) catalogue and ordered a sheet of Corrugated Iron in the right scale. In the end it made a lot of sense and really looks the part.

Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself: back to the Thatched Roofs. The thatch was stuck to that first balsa roof with PVA wood glue but that took an age to dry and wouldn't let the thatch material lay flat. On my subsequent plastic roofs I tried Bostic but, again, it was taking too long to dry. The last two or three thatched roofs were completed by laying the 'corn' material over ribbons of freshly laid hot glue and carefully (ie *not* using your bare hands and ending up in Casualty) pressing the thatch into place. A ridge was constructed for the roof of various materials - I tried both folded over, thin card and 'L' shaped angled plastic. These were finished with more corn stuck to them with hot glue and the completed ridge was then stuck onto the roof top, over the already set off 'corn' which had been carefully trimmed with the small scissors from my Swiss Army knife. When the hot glue had dried (all of 60 seconds: that's my kind of glue!) the thatch was painted with a mixture of PVA and water to the point where it was well saturated and allowed to dry (overnight, no matter how much I blasted it with a hot hair drier!).

The "crinkly tin" roof covering were made by the simple expedient of cutting the big sheet of the pre moulded material into realistic sized sections - say 20mm - 25mm by 10mm - using a scalpel and straight edge and then sticking them in an overlapping pattern to the 1.5mm styrene roofs I had already built with liquid poly. When they had set off (a few minutes at most) I made the odd hole in them using my minidrill with a cutting blade fitted and a cool'ish soldering iron to form torn edges and holes caused by shell fragments and the like.

Finishing Touches

I added handrails and ladders from my supply of matches, cocktail sticks and some long cotton bud type affairs - these look like a longer, wooden shafted version of the sort of thing you clean babies ears out with but are in fact designed for cleaning computer equipment and the like.

Basing

The bases were 'painted' with dark brown, acrylic Basetex. This isn't a material I've actually used before but, when faced with poking a spatula or similar between the pile supports to texture the bases and then poking a brush between them again to paint them I thought I'd try and cut my work time in half by performing both actions simultaneously. So I bought a big pot of the stuff at the Sheffield Tripples, tried it out and - especially if your basing veers towards the fast and nasty - I can thoroughly recommend it. I laid it on with a variety of implements including scrap styrene card; the blunt end of a Swan Morton scalpel and a wet brush and, before it had set, I pressed the odd handful of loose sand and other detritus into it. When all this was dry it made a very good basis for final painting.

Painting

The undercoat was the easy part: I sprayed all of the models with a light coat of Humbrol Dark Earth from an aerosol can. But the top coat... ah. I'll confess now that I didn't paint them all myself. In fact I painted just under one of them and my comrade in arms on this one Kevin Dallimore did the rest.

The bases (Kevin tells me) were first painted liberally with a mix of Plaka Brown and Plaka Yellow Ochre and then dry brushed with plain Yellow Ochre to try and replicate the rich, almost rust coloured soil that is often described in the area.

The platforms, slatted walls and planked floor areas were then all heavily dry-brushed Humbrol Acrylic Khaki over the sprayed on Dark Earth, and then lightened with a light dry-brush of a White and Dark Earth mix. The woven walling was given a more green tinge by using a mix of Humbrol Green (I think a Bronze green, or similar) and Khaki, again dry-brushed with white added to the mix to lighten.

The thatched roofs were painted Tamiya Sand lightened with white and with the brush kept exceptionally dry to avoid the highlight going to deep into the heavily textured surface.

The tin roofs were painted Plaka Red Brown, dry-brushed with a with Yellow Ochre and Red Brown mix (with the odd 'new' panel painted in plain grey), then treated to an oil-paint wash of Burn Umber (though inks could have been used) and then dry-brushed in silver at the edges and other points of wear. One further tip here was that we really should have primed any plastic surfaces that were going to receive paints like Plaka straight onto them: Acrylics like Plaka don't stick to well on bare styrene covered in my finger prints...

A final touch was some ground vegetation using chopped foam flock of the sort available from the likes of Carr's Modelling Products, Heki or EMA.

So that's it: VC buildings. My estimated cost of manufacture was only about 50% more than a comparable resin product... except that I couldn't find any manufactured items that I liked and - anyway - gamers now-a-days buy an awful lot of pre-made scenery. In *my* day we all had to make it out of toilet rolls and... etc etc etc.

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