

Cloudships of Mars

Introduction

In the late eighties, the American manufacturer GDW produced a role-playing system called *Space 1889*. For those of you unfamiliar with the game, it was based - as you might guess from the name - in an alternative Victorian past with all sorts of "Wellsian" and Jules Verne style science fiction additions to what is, in essence, a fairly historical, 'colonial' environment. Sure those colonies include the British Empire on Mars, and Germans on Venus oppressing the lizard men, and, yes: you travel between the planets on big boiler-plate ships, thrust along by Ether Propellers. But other than that, it's fairly 'straight', as fantasy/SF games go. But most gamers are, perhaps, at least on nodding terms with the literary and gaming environment I am describing: one that has sometimes gone under the name of 'steam punk'. For those that are not familiar, perhaps this article might serve as a taster.

On top of the role-playing system and some other add-ons for mass table top figure gaming, GDW produced at least one board game based within their universe: *Sky Galleons of Mars*. This came with player hex maps of the surface of Mars - the 'real Mars' mind you, with canals and so forth - and little plastic ships in, perhaps 1/1200th scale. The rules had a flavour of small colonial gunboat 'wet navy' rules mixed with bits of "*Wooden Ships and Iron Men*" - a board game dealing with Napoleonic naval actions. The rules are quite detailed, but also quite dated in style I have to say. They are also fairly unsuitable to an open-day game which was our intention from the get-go: we planned to put on a show game in 28mm "scale".

So our task ahead - our mission, which we chose to accept - was simple: scratch build up to a dozen 28mm scale ships and fiddle with the rules; build some bases and a floor 'map' and run it at Salute Zero Five. As I write this - December 2004 - we are *still* fiddling with the rules (of course...) so this article is going to be about the other elements of the game, specifically the building of the ships.

What Ships?

The Cloudships of the title fly. That they do so is due almost entirely to the bizarre properties of a special tree grown only in the highlands of Mars which - when correctly cultivated and processed - produces planks of 'Liftwood'. This rare and valuable liftwood is arranged in 'Venetian-blind' style panels which, in the hands of a skilled trimman, can be opened and closed to generate lift. Sure the Germans have mastered gas bags but they've mostly cornered Venus which - with it's soaking atmosphere and swamps - rots liftwood, so their airships suit their ends. But this game's on Mars, so it's all about liftwood ships. The locals - the Martians themselves - are humanoid types with a complex culture: certainly as complex as that of Earth itself. Although most regular trade and bulk cargo transport uses large ships on the canal systems, the most cultured and advanced of the Martians use liftwood to build Sky Galleons with which to advance their territorial demands. Enter the Earthers in the late 1870's with steam engines and what you have is Mars poised on the edge of a colonial precipice with various Earth nations and their Martian allies using their military muscle to carve up Mars anew and redistribute its resources mostly in favour, it has to be said, of the older warring nations of Europe. No surprises there, then...

While Earth war ships are armoured, steam driven and carry modern weaponry, the Martians are either powered by sail - called 'Kites' - or are driven through the air by the muscle power of their crews: called 'Screw Galleys'. In the latter case the Martians sailors stand either side of a long crankshaft that runs almost the length of the ship and - via a heavy, momentum conserving flywheel - power the ship via a propeller system in much the same way that renaissance ships (and earlier) were powered around the Mediterranean by oars and the sweat of men's brows.

The British

The first British gunboat to be developed from scratch - as opposed to simply sticking a steam engine in redundant Martian hulls - was the Aphid class. This vessel had a Naval 4 inch gun in the bow with support from two 1 pounder Hotchkiss Quick Firers and some 5 barrelled Nordenfelts for anti-personnel work. An improvement on that vessel was the Locust class which featured an additional 4 inch gun on a platform to the rear and two small rocket batteries at the front. We built three variants on these ships as models for the game: two Aphid class and one Locust.

The French

We wanted to build a model seen on the front cover of one of the Space 1889 rule books and decided to make it a French vessel - we've decided that the best balance for the game is for a mix of Earthers and Martians on each side so its going to be British with Martian allies and French and Americans with their Martian allies on the other side. This is (we concluded) the Napoleon, a Lafayette class and very similar to the Aphid with slightly more room on board and the 1 pounder guns in armoured positions.

The Americans

In the games history, the Americans are lagging behind the European powers somewhat in terms of colonial forces and most of their earlier ships – the ones we wanted to represent – were still of the type that relied upon steam engines bolted onto extant Martian screw galley hulls. The vessels we wanted to build were one from the Ranger class and a slightly less powerful one we called the Texas. These had good weaponry – 40 pounders and 6 pounder QF's with back up from Gatling guns (and a 4 inch short on the Ranger) – but lacked both armour (having only wooden hulls) and speed in comparison to the British or French ships.

The Martians

The backbone of the Oenotrian (a Martian empire) sky navy is the 'Hullcutter'. Made at various yards all over Mars, to slightly different designs, it is a large screw galley, and – at nearly 700 tons - almost five times the weight of an Earth gunboat. It carries a spread of large, slow firing Martian ordinance and – by virtue of the numerous galley crew and a squad of marines – is a fearsome opponent in boarding actions, a method of attack enhanced by a dirty great ram on the vessel's front. But the Hullcutter is (understandably) slow and, despite having a large hull, well able to absorb a lot of damage, it is still un-armoured. We have built a couple of these ships.

We plan to build one or two other Martians in the run up to Salute, including an awesome 'Skylord', a 'kite' which should be about three feet long but that's still 'on the chocks' as it were! The Skylord, unusually for a Martian ship, has armoured deck housings for it's large broadside weapons but, like all 'kites', suffers in movement from the vagaries of the wind.

Building the models

The first thing we did was see what was out there in the gaming world already available: certainly no full sized ships that we actually liked the look of, it has to be said. But we found figures for Brits, French and Americans – not too difficult, obviously, from the Foundry and Copplestone ranges. More Brits and other Earthers could be had from the suppliers of the ordinance we were buying, like Lizard Grin (from the London War Room [in Mississippi]) but, to be honest, some of the anatomy on the colonial types was so strange, we kind of didn't bother and stuck with the manufacturers I mentioned earlier!

Martians, however, could be had from Bob Charrette's Parroom Station range, available from Newline Designs or London War Room (which have Earthers as well) or by scouring the internet for boxed sets of the original Space 1889 figure sets, from where we obtained various hard to get figures including flying Martians (wings and so forth: it's a long story...). The weaponry fitted came from all of the figure sources I've mentioned with probably the most finely detailed from Copplestone and Foundry, but there was a degree of mix and match as we didn't want the ships – even the Earther Brit gunboats – looking too uniform: this is, after all, for the Earthers at least fairly nascent technology and, we figured, they would still be trying out whatever they could to see what combinations worked. On the other hand the Martians would be building ships all over the planet in different ship-yards over considerable periods of time and so uniformity wasn't, we supposed, where they would be concentrating their efforts.

So, we bought guns and crew. What else did we need? Well 'fittings' for a start: ships' wheels and ladders and so forth. Other than some excellent ones from Reviresco, we bought some of these from specialist model shops by ordering them as we couldn't find a decent naval modelling shop in the area and the internet seems remarkably poor on the one thing we needed in this (for us) unfamiliar territory: illustrations. If we didn't know quite what it was we wanted (and believe me we didn't!) then page after page of listings of ships gee-gaws without pictures was no help! We got Earther propellers from an aviation modelling shop and built the Martian ones ourselves (as the illustrations in the books showed them as being quite crude). We built steam engines from model railway locomotive boilers, usually Airfix/Dapol kits and the like, or scratch built them from cylindrical household items.

But then there was the hulls... Let's start at the beginning:

Specifics on the ships

The first ships built by us were the Napoleon, the Texas and the Aphids.

The Texas was the easier of the three types because it was based on a toy: the *Star Wars Tatooine Skiff*. Just over a foot long and designed for "Action figure" size play, the toy ship had its various 'fun' items cut away or filled in. So out went the pop out, 'walk the plank' feature and the undercarriage was fixed in the folded away position. The rear area was turned into a gun platform using the single most useful product I found for any of the work I did on this project: Wills' Embossed plastic sheet. We bought packet after packet of the wood planking (item MP201) from the '00' scenic series and used it for floors, doors, hatches and so forth. I also used the Clapboard style for the liftwood panels on my ships.

I built a propeller for the model from the same wood planking material and added 1/50th scale ladders from the EMA (architectural supplies) catalogue. The central section of the Skiff was cut down slightly and a boiler built from component parts of the Airfix/Dapol Stephenson's Rocket model (I wanted the Texas to look quite crude!). The front position of the Skiff was again 'planked' over with doors and so forth added from the same material, making a forward cabin but with an ACW style gun-port opening featuring swing out hatches. This was fashioned to house the (Lyzard Grin – note these seem to be listed as Houston's Weapons, etc on the LWR site) cannon I was using as the 40lb forward gun. Finally, ships fittings – wheels, compass and such like – were more Lyzard Grin items (as was the 6lb QF on the rear) and a ram was fabricated from a lamination of 3mm plastic sheet and fitted into a slot cut into the hull. The mast (as indeed were all of my masts) was made from telescoped lengths of aluminium tubing superglued together. The crew were Foundry ACW and the flags were drawn in my favourite computer drawing program (including a stars and stripes with 40 stars), printed out and folded over on themselves with PVA glue to hold them together. Before the glue was set, curls were added following the shadows I had already drawn on the computer and - when dry - stuck into position with super glue.

The model was painted with an overall grey primer and then dark earth (both as aerosols) and then dry brushed up with a mixture of acrylic and enamel (often alternating where speed – and the requirement not to pick up the layer of colour underneath - was important) from Humbrol, Tamiya, Foundry and Workshop.

Details of all the suppliers mentioned are given at the end of the article – usual disclaimer that we have no connection with any of them except as satisfied customers.

The Napoleon, Aphids (and Locust)

These were made with a wooden, scratch built hull 'keel' almost like one would expect a 'real' ship to be built. We wanted to mount the ships on clear acrylic bases and wanted to be able to stick those mounting rods into something secure on the models, so plain pine building timber was chosen for this (note to self – don't drill a hole in a toy plastic ship after you have already painted the model – do it before you start...). Car body filler was added to the wooden keel with a 2mm plastic sheet outer skin to get the correct amount of twist to the hull shape deemed necessary judging by the drawings of the Aphid in the rule books. A deck from plastic sheet was added, plus a rear engine area and bridge housing too, all from sheet styrene.

The Napoleon is slightly different. The deck was cut from a piece of balsa board. This is similar to foam board except that the outer faces are 1mm balsa. This was used because it was originally intended to scribe the planking for the decking. In the end it seemed easier to stick all the superstructure (which is made of sheet styrene) to a styrene deck so this was covered with a product in the 'Evergreen' range of styrene sheet which has a planked finish (sheet. 4125). As mentioned the superstructure is mainly styrene though the round boiler house is half of the cap from an aerosol can. The funnel is a brass tube with the lip at the top formed by soldering on a piece of wire. The keel is wood with the hull built up from sheet styrene – no easy job because of its angular pattern – if only Brian (who built this one) had discovered the delights of accelerators for superglue at this time!

Variations can be seen between the designs, not just in the actual native ship designs themselves: the Napoleon has the bigger deck structure with armoured emplacements for the guns and higher mounted Nordenfelts, the Locust has the platform for the extra 4 inch gun at the rear plus the rocket at the front (all scratch built from tubing, plastic strip and wire). But the different modellers involved had different takes on things like ships railings. One of us chose to solder up railings from brass or nickel silver wire. Another method used was via the manufacture of a jig. Each brass section rod stanchion was drilled and then threaded with thinner brass rod through each one. These were located in the deck by placing brass rods in the ends of each

one as locators. Rather than make a jig, I chose to buy ready made brass stanchions from EMA (at 50p each) because my soldering – despite (or because) of once working for BT – wasn't up to the task of producing railings and I haven't the patience to make a jig and drill all of those holes... These shop bought, turned brass stanchions were threaded with three strands of nickel silver wire and these were, in turn, stuck into pre-drilled holes in the Wills planking deck. Boilers on all of these ships were – as I indicated above – either from model railway locos or scratch built, with funnels added from plastic and brass tubing as appropriate.

The Napoleon has 'steel' rear control surfaces made from sheet styrene but the Brits have ones made from 'doped canvas' for a WW1 biplane kind of look. These were made by first making the tail pieces from 2mm sheet plastic, reinforced at the joints with brass angle pieces of the sort you might buy in a hardware shop for making boxes or shelves. These tail pieces then had lengths of strip styrene stuck on to make 'ribs', and then had foil stuck over this and pressed into place to make the 'canvas' surface. Initially I tried sticking this foil on with slow setting (ie 20 minute) epoxy to allow me to 'press in' the foil and enable the ribs to show through. Unfortunately, I became, through a combination of impatience and clumsiness, simply mired in foul smelling epoxy as it squeezed out over just about everything, and I soon resorted to what became my 'adhesive weapon of choice' for the whole project: superglue in various viscosities (though mostly thick) with or without spray on accelerator. Er, though mostly with... What a wonderful thing it is, thick superglue and an accelerator, for filling in gaps, not running everywhere (like the thin stuff) and just getting the job done quickly. I used so much of it on the models I was building I did something I've never managed in nearly thirty years of my use of the product – I got to the bottom of a quite large bottle of cyanoacrylate BEFORE it went hard on me and/or blocked it's own nozzle completely!

Fittings for the Aphids were either scratch built (control levers) or Reviresco items (wheel, some of the searchlights, ventilators and similar).

Hullcutters

We had two basic hull types and methods of construction for these two ships. One was build in quite a flat, slabby way from block balsa wood. Since we wanted the ships to be 'wooden' looking, having a wood surface wasn't too much of a bind so – except where the end grain was awful, the balsa ship needed less filling with 'Plastic Padding Elastic' and subsequent sanding. The other was built using a one inch thick slabs of dense grade styrofoam (from 4D Models) sold as, essentially, a 'balsa' substitute. Both have their advantages and draw backs.

The pink foam was probably easier to carve and shape – hence one of the ships being of a rounder design than the other. The best method proved to be a bread knife to do this with followed by lots of sanding and the overall model was lighter when completed – not something to be ignored since we plan to use the ships on 1 metre long poles! The hull was made in three sections glued to a deck cut from 2mm styrene sheet and reinforced with another piece of styrene sheet across the centre section. This has produced a light but strong structure. Care has to be exercised with the choice of glue, epoxy resin is fine and will happily bond the Styrofoam and the styrene sheet. The foam was then carved to shape with the aforementioned bread knife and a lot of sanding. The effect (apart from the fact that its bright pink!) was ok except for gaps at the joints between the sheets. As with the balsa hull this was overcome with copious amounts of plastic padding (it's probably worth mentioning that a well ventilated area should be used for all this work...). Several more acres of Wills sheeting was used to provide the top decking. Evergreen 4101 was used to give the 'venetian blind' effect for the liftwood panels. Styrene strip was glued on to the plastic padding (more superglue and accelerator!) to give extra ribbing and beak up the plane surface.

Both ships were 'clad' to varying degrees with Wills planking, copying to some extent the illustrations in the background material. Guns were purchased from the usual suspects with a little modification to carriages where appropriate. I scratch built one heavy mortar from the end of a Star Trek Enterprise warp engine (not a real one, obviously: one from a defunct novelty alarm clock).

The plating on the ram of one Hullcutter was made from foil folded over the wooden bulk of the shape and stuck down with superglue and then 'riveted around the edges using, er... rivets. There were small pins designed for fixing down model railway track and could be pushed through the foil into the balsa beneath using a pin-push bought for the purpose. Other riveting detail on the ships was simulated using small blobs of either PVA or thick superglue using a cocktail stick and a steady hand.

Rigging on the Hullcutters and other ships was carried out using rigging cord specifically made for rigging model yachts and so forth but brown thread would do well, though the cord could be bought in various thicknesses which was very handy. Painting on the Hullcutters was again down to spray cans and dry brushing for the most part, although a final layer of detail shadow was added via pastel chalks before spray varnishing.

Metal finishes were obtained from the Foundry or Workshop metallic colours but, where a metal finish was naturally present (like on some of the Aphids; searchlights, or the metal railings, stanchions and chains or the metal foil and rivets I used on the ram on the Hullcutter) they were left their natural metal colour with just a wash of something like Tamiya Smoked Lacquer to run into the grooves to darken them down and add some shading.

Some of the woodwork on the carriages of one Hullcutter was painted white and then wiped with oil paint to get a nice grainy, rich wood effect, whilst – in some areas – I used Workshop inks over some too-strident dry brushing to mute the tones and – again – give a ‘richer’ wood effect.

In all cases the figures were cut from their bases and glued and pinned to the deck.

More details on the models in their semi finished stage can be seen at the club web site www.warlords.co.uk.

Finally

The game will be making its debut at Salute Zero Five. We are still working on the bases (the cost of making these all in Perspex and clear acrylic is proving expensive but we hope it will be worth it) and the hexed play area - which will be a large painted and appliqué cloth - is, as I type, still in the construction phase. If we can simplify the rules down enough it will be a participation game but – if not – we will run it as a demonstration but, either way, the thin skies of Mars will be reverberating to the sound of steam engines, heaving Martian galley crews and cannon fire as the Cloudships do battle!

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Useful addresses and phone numbers:

Wills Kits, Ratio House, Buckfastleigh, Devon TQ11 0NR, obtainable from many shops which stock model railways, eg Scale Rail, 22-24 High Street, Horley, Surrey; www.scalerail.co.uk

EMA Architectural Supplies - 01932 228228

Squires Model and Craft Tools, 100 London Road, Bognor Regis, W. Sussex PO21 1DD (tools, glue and wire etc) - 01243 842424

London War Room, www.thelondonwarroom.com (Paroom station Miniatures, Lizard Grin guns)

Reveresco, www.tin-soldier.com (guns, ship's fittings)

4D Models, The Arches, 120 Leman Street, London E1 8EU, www.modelshop.co.uk (Evergreen styrene, dense grade styrofoam)

Hobbies, Knight's Hill Square, London SE27 0HH, www.hobby.uk.com (Airfix Dapol)

Newline Designs, <http://www.newlinedesigns.co.uk/> (Paroom Station Miniatures)