

Cockpits the Easy Way

By Jim Baker

To many, cockpits are the bugaboo of building airplane models. How in the world do you ever get all those tiny little details painted? Do you use a paintbrush with only two bristles?

I used to. And then I made a friend who built nothing but tanks. He taught me how to do airplane cockpits with a minimum of effort and a maximum of effect. In order to pick out details, military vehicle modelers and figure modelers use the drybrush. I have found that drybrushing is an extremely easy way to bring out the details in even the most complex cockpit interior.

I use exclusively Polly-scale acrylics, so I thin my paint with water. However, if you use enamels and other paints, here are a couple of things to remember:

1. Don't overlay an enamel with a lacquer. Chances are, your lacquer will eat away the enamel and leave you with a nasty finish.
2. Likewise, don't overlay acrylics with enamels or lacquers. This may well do the same thing.
3. Wait until the bottom layer is dry before adding layers.
4. You CAN use acrylic paints to wash over lacquers and enamels, and you can usually use enamels over lacquers. If in doubt as to whether one type of paint is caustic to another, dig something out of the scrapbox and test, test, test.

Here's the total sum of the stuff I use to paint my cockpits:

- Paintbrushes
- Interior color (this varies with the nationality of the airplane)
- Flat black
- Bright silver
- Color a couple of shades lighter than the original interior color
- Very light color, off-white or white or very light gray
- Other miscellaneous colors like red and yellow or whatever else the real airplane has in it.

- White glue
- Clear gloss
- Water

Wow, this sounds much more complicated than it really is.

1. First, assemble most of the cockpit, usually the first subassembly anyway. I usually will add the seat, the rudder pedals, the stick, and whatever else needs to be all the same color. This helps eliminate glue spots from the assembly, the annoying rough spots that say "Hey, the person who built me painted all the parts before assembling me!"

Note: Often, after the first primary assembly, I paint the whole cockpit with Testors Liquid Cement. Not enough to melt the cockpit, just enough to cover any glue spots that may exist. This makes the entire cockpit a glue spot and the little ones disappear into the morass.

2. Next, paint the cockpit parts with the interior color and let it dry.. For our purposes, I'll use as an example an American WWII aircraft. So I'll paint the cockpit interior green.

3. When the interior green is dry, thin some black paint very thin and run it along the edges of the widgets in the cockpit. Don't paint the whole cockpit with the wash, or all the wash will concentrate in the middle and not sink into the crevasses and creases in the cockpit, the parts you're trying to deepen.

Note: The darkness of the wash is entirely dependant on your personal taste. If black looks too stark to you, use a lighter color like RLM 66 or even olive drab. Whatever looks good to you-remember, who's the modeler, and who do you have to please?

4. When the wash is dry, dip a paintbrush into the lid of the original interior color and drybrush out the raised areas with the original color. Take it slowly and don't eliminate all the dark areas or you'll have to do it all over again.

5. Clean out that brush and set it aside to dry. You need your brushes to be completely dry to drybrush. Duh.

6. Repeat Step 4 with the light color. For example, for an American Interior Green cockpit, I would use either RLM 02 Gray or British Sky. Again, how much you put into this is your choice. But also keep in mind you're trying to highlight your cockpit and add depth, not outline it.

7. If you've overdone it, go back with the original interior color and drybrush once again to subdue the highlights.

8. Paint the consoles and black boxes on the side of the cockpit. Here's also where you want to paint odd-colored knobs and so on, like flap and gear levers.

9. Go back over it very lightly with the light color or white. This will bring out your buttons and switches.

Note: If you accidentally slop some silver off onto the black console, a dark black wash will cover up all but the most heinous sins while leaving the switches bright.

10. Take a small brush or toothpick (I sometimes use stretched sprue) and apply silver paint to all the switches and knobs that should be silver.

11. Drybrush heavy-wear areas with silver. On larger models (1/32 and 1/24) you probably also want to add such colors as earth and green too, to simulate whatever's on the bottom of the pilot's boots-engine oil, dirt, grease, dog poo, and the like.

Note: Make sure that your weathering on the inside of the model matches quantitatively with that of the outside. Don't weather the inside of you're not planning to weather the outside.

12. Sometimes I'll go back over the black areas with a black wash; this subdues the white while retaining the highlights.

13. Add seat belts and harnesses and you're good to go. You can also add miscellaneous stencils and so on for placards.

14. Instrument Panel: Paint the panel black or whatever color it's supposed to be. Let it dry.

15. If your panel is a different color from your instruments, say, grey, paint the instrument faces black.

16. Paint any instruments that should be a different color. For example, Japanese artificial horizons were blue on top and brown on the bottom.

17. Drybrush the panel with the lightest gray you can find. Light Ghost Gray works well for this.

18. Drybrush again with white. It's okay to outline the panel-remember, the pilot needs to be able to see it.

19. Go AROUND the instruments with your dark wash and a small brush, or with a wash of your original color. Don't fill in the instruments with the black or your highlights will disappear. Use enough wash to mute the highlights on the panel itself.

20. Thin white glue with water and use a toothpick or small paintbrush to apply it to each instrument face. Let it dry thoroughly

21. Dab clear gloss on the white glue. This will simulate the glass faces on the instruments.

22. Do any extraneous painting (control stick and knob handgrips, etc) and then assemble your cockpit. You'll be amazed at the results.

23. Remember, Practice Promotes Proficiency. (**Jim's profession is Teaching, he had to tack on #23- Ed.**)