

On the Wavelength



Greg Kerry describes the

VOSPER MTB

Airfix 1:72nd scale

AIRFIX has recently re-released its series of 1:72nd scale motor boats and very welcome this range is too. Actually it's a great shame that the three original subjects have never been added as the range consists only of the German E-boat, the RAF Air Sea Rescue Launch and the kit I chose to tackle, the Vosper MTB.

Although it is now difficult to believe, this kit was first sent down the Airfix slipway back in 1972 when it retailed at a paltry 68p. Inflation being what it is now, the cost of the kit has risen to almost £5.00.

It portrays a boat of the 73 ft (Third Series) class. Such vessels were closely based on the earlier 70 ft (First Series) and 72 ft (Second Series) models. The 73 ft boats are readily identified by having a total of four torpedo tubes whereas the smaller boats had

only one pair of tubes plus four depth charge launchers. These larger vessels did not enter service until late in 1944 but they were a great improvement over their predecessors and were gratefully welcomed by their new crews.

Generally these boats operated under cover of darkness, frequently laying in wait with their engines stopped somewhere in the known path of an enemy convoy. Launching their torpedos while still under silent running and using their auxiliary engines alone, they would then crash-start their main engines and disappear before the enemy had a chance to retaliate.

Throughout the course of the war, in the coastal waters around Britain, a total of 269 enemy vessels were destroyed for the loss of only 76 MTBs. Apart from their primary task of disrupting enemy convoy

work these boats were also used for more clandestine tasks: minelaying, transporting secret agents and commando teams.

Normally a crew of 13 was carried. The boats were powered by a trio of Packard-built engines developing some 3,600 to 4,050 bhp giving a top speed of about 35 to 40 knots. The four 18 inch torpedo tubes were usually supplemented by a twin 20 mm cannon mounted on the forward deck and twin .303 inch machine guns mounted on each of the aft torpedo tubes.

THE KIT

Despite being almost 20 years old this kit shows little sign of its true age. All the parts are well moulded, there is almost no flash and no unwelcome distortion. The model can be improved quite a bit but only by replacing components like the mast radar arrays with thinly stretched sprue rather than using the slightly over-scale parts supplied with the kit.

However, there are two major areas of inaccuracy with this model. Both are easily corrected. The first isn't that

major and concerns the 0.5 inch machine guns intended to be sited on the forward torpedo tubes. In fact, these ought not to be guns at all but Holman-type flare projectors. These were employed during night attacks to illuminate the MTB's targets. The box top artwork, which is excellent, shows these as they should be. They look pretty much like heavy machine guns but with shorter, thicker barrels.

The other problem I found was not so simple to sort out. This concerns the painting instructions which are somewhat at variance with the available reference material. Essentially, the boat should be finished in the LCF/MTB Home Waters camouflage scheme. Confusion has probably arisen over this because it is such a peculiar scheme. The idea behind it is that those areas of the boat seen from directly above should be dark grey; those from the side a lighter grey and (this is the trickiest bit) those from the side which are normally in shadow should be white (white in shadow appears to match the other light grey areas).

On the model this means that the main deck and all

fittings are painted a dark, bluish grey with medium grey sides. The hull is painted white along its shadowed topmost portion and the undercurve of the bows with medium grey on the main side areas and black below the waterline. This may not sound too complicated after all but trying to work it out from a vague written description and poor quality monochrome photographs gave me so much trouble that I was obliged to repaint the complete model just when I thought it was almost finished. Even now I wouldn't swear to its absolute accuracy.

DIORAMA DISPLAY

Models like this benefit from being displayed in as natural a setting as possible for their best effect. Rather than putting my boat into a warlike situation

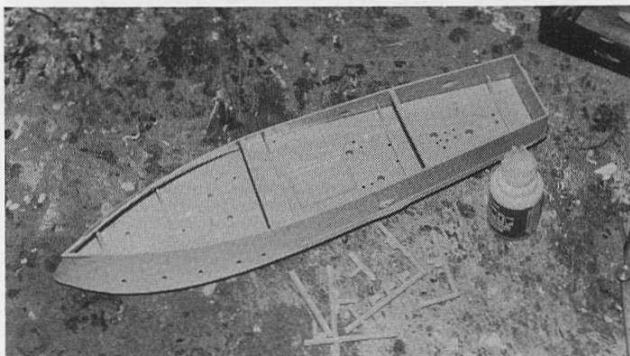
(as so ably shown by the box-top artwork) I decided to model it against a harbour berth, using the ambulance from the RAF Emergency Set and the old Matador Truck (both from Airfix again) for added interest. The idea is that the boat has supposedly just returned from a mission with empty torpedo tubes and a wounded crewman.

Several alternative ideas occurred to me when I was thinking about this. A similar scene might use the Matador Truck and the Coles Crane (from the other Airfix RAF Vehicles Set) to show torpedoes being loaded. A scene set completely at sea might perhaps show a deck full of Commando figures (from the Esci or Matchbox sets) or a few civilian agents (from a railway figure set) about to disembark into inflatable boats.

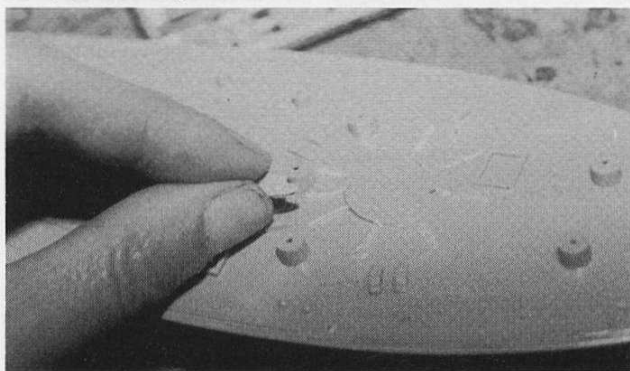
CONSTRUCTION

Stage 1 Main hull

All the kit transparencies are best discarded as they are rather thick and get in the way of painting if they are added when the instructions indicate. All the circular portholes and the rectangular wheelhouse windows can be replaced with Krystal Kleer once all the painting and weathering is complete. The topmost bridge transparencies can easily be cut from thinner plastic sheet such as that used in food packaging or shrink wrapping.



Building the kit as a waterline model, as I did, simply means not using the hull bottom (part 15). I found it best to glue the hull sides (6 and 12) together with the stern (14) before fitting the deck.

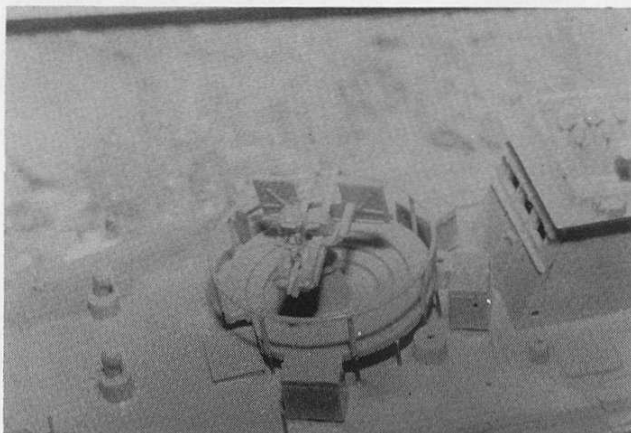


Prior to adding the deck one helpful improvement can be performed on the deck gun mounting. This is actually quite tricky and should only be attempted by those whose skill comes somewhere near to matching their confidence — which ought to mean that I had no right attempting it at all. The air ports below the cannon mounting should be thin vertical props rather than the crudely solid blocks moulded into the deck as they are with the kit part. The box art shows this well. To substitute proper supports means carving these blocks away. A tricky operation but quite worthwhile as it improves the look of the completed model considerably. The replacement props (from this sprue) should not actually be added until after the gun mounting is in place at a later stage.

When gluing the deck to the hull sides, use sticky tape or elastic bands to hold everything together overnight. Take care though, I glued these parts together with liquid polystyrene leaving the assembly upside down only to find that the liquid cement had run through the joints, pooled against the sticky tape and left unsightly ridges along the deck edge. Better to use tube cement applied from the inside, making sure none is allowed to run through to create similar problems.

Stage 2 Wheelhouse/bridge

Leave the front transparency out as I mentioned before. Otherwise there are no problems with this construction except slight gaps along the corners which require filling.



Stage 3 Cannon mount

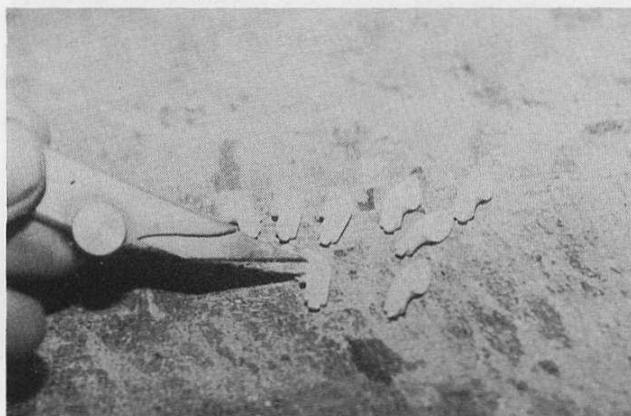
Getting the railings attached to the main mount is difficult. I suggest gluing just four of the verticals in place to begin with, then positioning the circular top rail (42) on to these, then, with that quite firm, adding the remaining verticals.

With the cannon itself, the shield (47) can be thinned down considerably by sanding with wet'n'dry. The sight (52) can be replaced by something more realistically fine like fusewire — bent to shape around a brush handle and then superglued in place. Also, there were several sink marks which I found needed filling on the gun barrels and magazines. The gun assembly is best painted separately before adding to the deck mount.



Stage 4 Deck fittings on the bows

The area immediately beneath the cannon mounting needs painting before this sub-assembly is fitted. Then those short vertical stays around the circular mounting can be added. The lockers (71, 73, etc) are all best painted separately too and only added after all the other painting has been done. This is also true for the anchor but not for any of the other various parts.



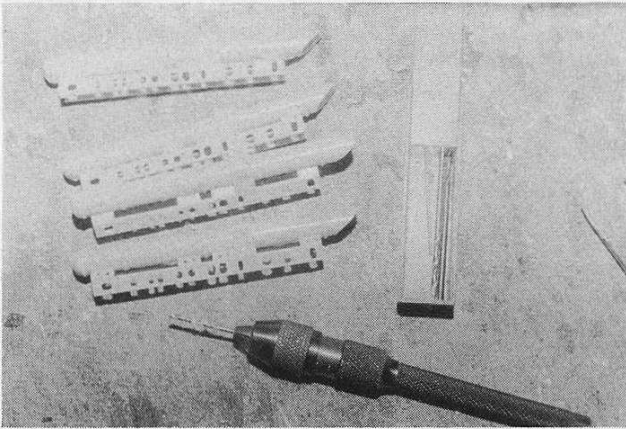
The air intake ducts (parts 61 and 62) can be thinned down to a neater appearance using a sharp knife.

Stage 5 Bridge fittings

Fitting these is basically straightforward. However, the fit of part 78 needs checking against the lockers (71 and 73) which flank it. On my model part 78 needed trimming before it would fit correctly.

The small intake ducts (80, 81, etc) need trimming around their outside lips. The larger ducts require quite an amount of filling and careful sanding along their joint

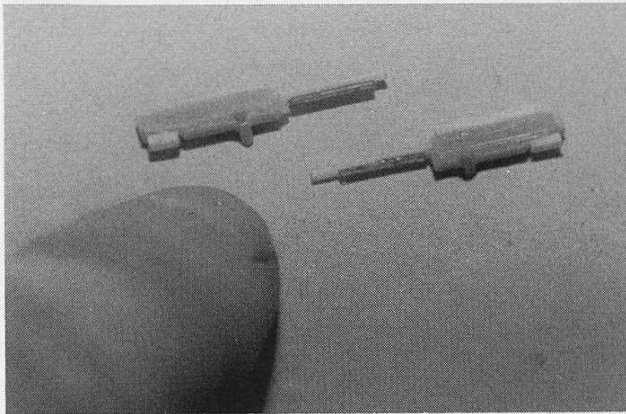
lines outside and, where visible, inside too. Lifebelts (87, 88) can be painted separately and added once all the other painting is complete.



Stage 6 Forward torpedo tubes

Before joining the two halves of these main constructions together a minor improvement is to drill pairs of holes in the face of each angled plate supporting each tube on its main mount. These are clearly shown on the boxtop art: four angled supports with a pair of holes in each.

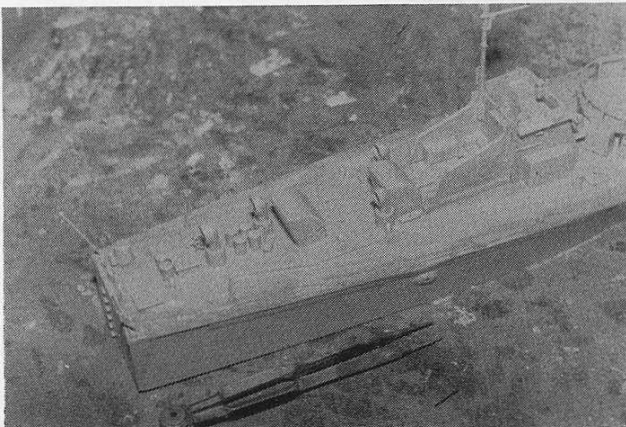
Joint lines on each of the tubes requires careful work to smooth down the circular surfaces. Similarly, the corner joints where the front and rear faces (e.g. parts 105 and 109) meet the main side supports. Part 118 is rather thick and is best replaced with thinner sprue bent to shape.



For the flare ejectors the breech of each heavy machine gun supplied with the kit can be used with the simple addition of thicker barrels (again, from sprue or plastic rod) and plastic card top and bottom strips. The torpedo tubes are more easily painted before they are fixed to the deck — in fact only after all other construction and painting has been completed. Note that the top inside face of part 100 (where it projects above the side of the bridge) also needs filling and sanding flat.

Stage 7 Stern torpedo tubes

Similar comments apply here as at the preceding stage. In addition, the life rafts (125, 126) are best painted and added later.



Stage 8 Stern deck details

Fixing these in place is no problem at all. Only the large intake ducts requiring yet more of that careful attention with filler and wet'n'dry. Special attention needs to be paid to the hinged tops (147, 148, etc) to the cylindrical units moulded into the deck: make sure the hinges all face the right way, which is to say, away from the stern.

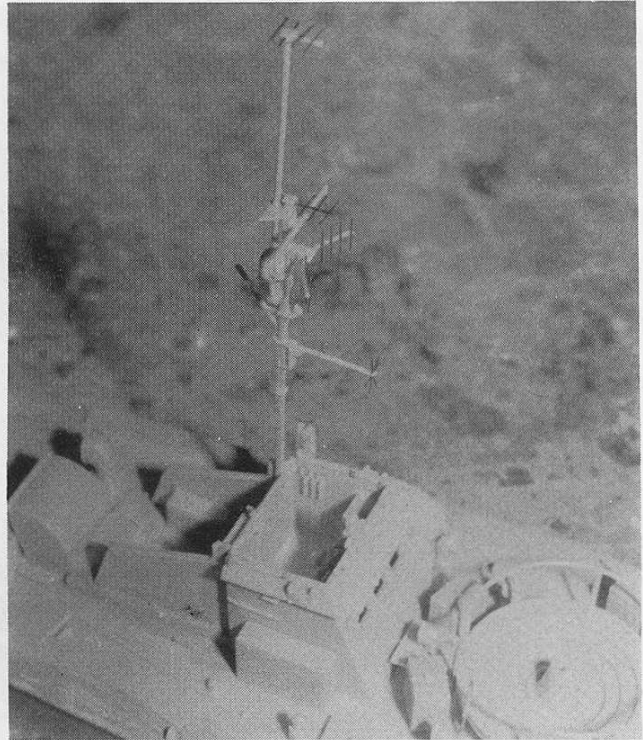
Stage 9 Propellers and rudders

Not used on my waterline model but no problems should be experienced with fitting these otherwise.

Stage 10 Mast and radar details

All the radar aerial cross-pieces are best replaced by finely stretched sprue. This also goes for the conical arrays projecting ahead of the lower mast. Again, these are shown on the box artwork — but be warned: working these complex shapes from sprue is extremely difficult so don't attempt it unless you are confident. And certainly don't throw the kit parts away too soon.

Leave the bridge transparencies off until final completion.



Stage 11 Completion

With all the painting successfully done as I explained at the beginning of this article all those separate components (apart from the torpedo tubes) can now be added. As also can the side number decals.

Only then should the model (and the torpedo tubes — separately) be given some sort of weathering wash. I used my normal medium of thinned black acrylic but have to admit that for once I may have overdone it. My model has all the appearance of a scruffy collier — more like a coal barge than a Royal Navy vessel. It might have been better had I used a similar wash of, say, dark grey or even brown. The black was really too harsh.

Once the weathering has been applied the torpedo tubes can finally be glued into place, as can the bridge transparencies and the hull portholes filled with Krystal Kleer. The ropes and stays can all be added from yet more stretched sprue. All of these are well illustrated either on the box artwork or on the instruction sheet.

Lastly, the anchor looks a little more convincing attached to a coil of rope-like thread and the ensign flag appears more genuine if cut from metal foil and hand painted rather than using the printed paper cut-out which is supplied with the kit. Also supplied are printed signals flags and useful instructions as to their appropriate deployment but I chose to simplify things by leaving these off completely.

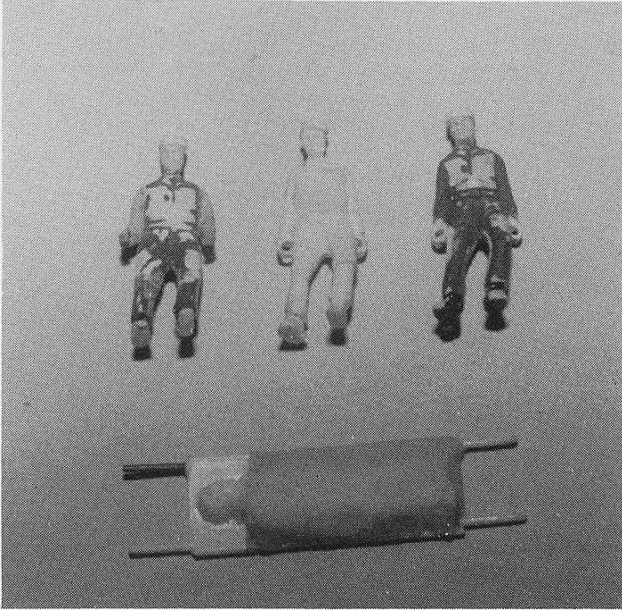


The Figures

All five figures included in the kit are quite nice mouldings but only one was in a pose

suitable for my diorama base idea — this was the one in the soft cap with his arms by his side doing nothing in particular. The three gunners were all in rather dramatic poses. These I converted to ordinary standing figures by amputating their widespread legs and re-attaching them in straighter positions. The arms were carefully trimmed away and replaced with whatever I could find in my spares box. The Captain figure, with the binoculars, had the whole of his upper torso cut away and replaced by the similar section of an Airfix driver from one of the vehicle sets. The sixth figure was a lucky find. This is actually the standing aircrew figure from the Airfix Roland biplane kit. The head was swapped for one wearing a British steel helmet and new longer legs came from somewhere else. The figure's bulky coat looks convincingly close to a thick duffel coat.

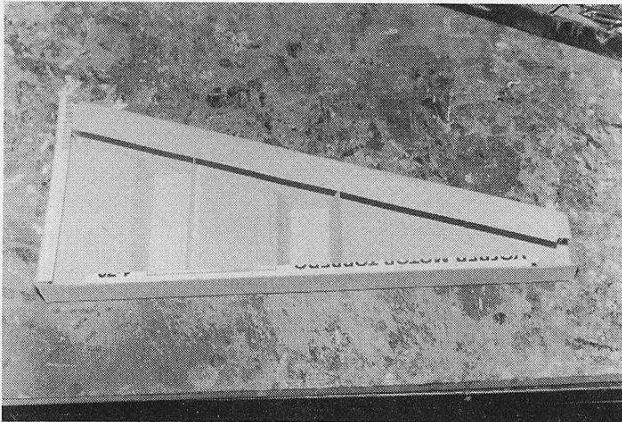
The stretcher part came straight from the Emergency set. The figure on the stretcher is a little overscale if anything and in any case is moulded as a pilot with flying jacket, leather helmet and so on. To remedy this I simply sanded the top of the body down to make it look thinner and then covered it with a blanket made from tissue paper, liquid polystyrened in place.



The stretcher bearers were made to look more like sailors than airmen by sanding off their uniform detail and then giving them different headgear. Their RAF caps were removed, replaced by scrap plastic shaped to resemble the sailor's characteristic soft, round cap. Otherwise I didn't spend much effort detailing these. A third stretcher bearer was converted slightly in order to appear like a standing driver waiting by the open doors of the ambulance.

The vehicles

Each of these were made up pretty much straight from their respective kits. Only additions were windscreens and side windows cut from thin transparent sheet. Also, the Matador had its gun position in the top of the cab blanked off with a piece of plastic card. Both trucks were painted in a vaguely naval shade of very dark blue and lightly weathered with dry-brushed brown. Later I chanced upon the motorcycle dispatch rider from the RAF Recovery Set and decided to plant him on the outskirts of the diorama as well.



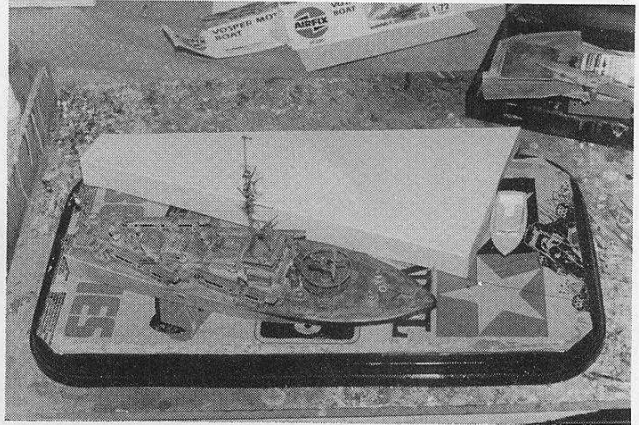
Diorama base

The base itself was the bottom portion of an old plastic display case of a type that is no longer available. However, any suitably sized piece of chipboard, plywood or wooden off-cut would have served just as well. There is usually no good reason for going to extra expense by buying a base like this. Just look around the garden shed or garage and use whatever comes to hand.

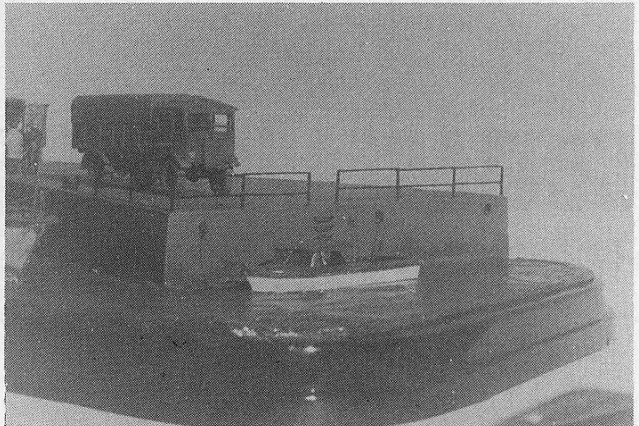
The centre hollow in my plastic base was first covered by a section of cardboard which was itself covered by a piece of old plastic bag. This was intended to seal the cardboard in order to avoid it soaking up the moisture from the filler to be applied later.

Having decided that the MTB would be tied up in harbour I then looked around for

an economical means of constructing a section of harbour wall. The most obvious thing near at hand was the MTB's box. Clearly a more craftsmanlike job could have been constructed from something like a balsa wood framework with plastic card walls but I was working to a budget and wanted to utilise whatever I had laying around rather than buying more materials.



I ensured that the cardboard box was well braced internally with other card off-cuts (from the kit's box lid). I then covered the coarse cardboard with smoother thick paper taken from an old calendar. Unfortunately, this proved not to be wholly successful as the thick paper didn't glue completely flat, humping up where too much glue had been used. So I actually ended up veneering the basic cardboard structure with plastic card anyway. This was probably as good a way to do it as any. As a last cost-cutting exercise I would recommend using something like sheet plastic cut from old margarine containers rather than proper polystyrene sheet — this costs nothing and is perfectly useable.



For my diorama the exact size of the solid harbour structure was determined by the dimensions of the kit box. This left one corner of the diorama conspicuously empty. Rummaging around in the spares box yet again I came up with an old Matchbox toy boat — a relic from my childhood of 25 years ago which has finally come in useful. This, suitably modified and painted, I decided, would look fine tied up round the corner from the MTB and even offer an interesting size comparison to the larger, more warlike vessel.

These three main elements were tried for size and position on the base although the actual placings seemed pretty obvious. Basic law with this kind of diorama is that the main subject should not be positioned in parallel with any of the sides of the base — it always looks best set at an angle.

The harbour section was painted medium grey on top with walls of more greenish grey. No other details were added until this was in place on the plastic base.

Tetrium was used for the sea. This is slightly cheaper than Polyfilla but just as good for this kind of work. Wave effects were kept to a minimum as this was intended to be a sheltered harbour.

With the Tetrium dry, the boats in place and the harbour section set firm I added the railings and other bits and pieces.

The railings were made from plastic rod and stretched sprue. I found it most convenient to construct these by fixing the vertical uprights to the harbour section first, drilling small holes and super-gluing them in place. When these were firm, the horizontal sections were carefully cut to length and cemented into position.

The three large bollards to which the MTB is secured are sections cut from the tail cones of large bombs — all I could find in approximately the right shape.

Detailing the short end of the harbour section needed more attention I thought. Hand rungs leading up from the small boat to the gap in the railings were made from stretched sprue bent to shape. The rings to which this boat is attached came from more stretched sprue formed into a ring, glued to a circular disc of thick sprue and superglued to the wall itself.

All these fittings were then painted a metallic brownish-black.

The gangplank leading from the MTB to the harbour section was made from plastic card scribed to resemble wood planking with lengths of plastic strip for the handrails.

With all these details in place the sea was finally given a coat of greyish-green paint and then gloss varnished. The varnish was deliberately brushed up the sides of the boats and the harbour wall to make them look wet.

A thought occurred at this point. It would have been a nice touch to add a few pieces of flotsam and jetsam to the Tetrium water, say, half a petrol drum or other scrap — the kind of rubbish seen floating in the filthy waters of every harbour in the world.

All the ropes tying up the boats were added last of all. These were all cut from carpet thread darkened with acrylic black paint to appear dirty and well used.