

No Sweat Building This Wildcat



By Dick Smith

It was originally designed as a bi-plane in a time when monoplanes were coming of age. Some described it as a “barrel with wings.” However, in combat, Grumman Aviation’s F4F-4 Wildcat was able to absorb serious punishment and return a full measure of devastation with bursts from its six .50 caliber machineguns. Marine Corps First Lieutenant James Swett was one of those pilots who took advantage of the rugged fighter’s resilience and armament to shoot down seven Aichi D3A “Vals” during one mission.

To build a replica of Lieutenant Swett’s Wildcat, we’ll use Tamiya’s 1/48th scale kit considered to be “the best.” Cutting Edge produces a decal sheet that contains all of the markings for Swett’s F4F-4.

Construction begins with the painting of the cockpit walls “interior green,” FS-34151. A reference photo of an F4F-4 cockpit appears in the book, “Cockpit.” by Donald Nijboer. After the sidewalls are painted, glue the fuselage sides together. The horizontal tail is then slipped into a slot in the vertical tail and cemented into place. Adjust the horizontal plane so that it is absolutely perpendicular to the vertical tail. The rudder can then be set into place to complete the empennage. The cockpit interior is made up of nine pieces that are painted interior green or flat black, FS-37038, according to the instructions. Place “dots” of clear gloss or Future on the faces of the instruments to simulate the glass lenses. Make a set of paper seat belts, painted tan, to finish off the interior. Before inserting the completed cockpit into the fuselage, paint the upper portion of the landing gear struts and gear bay bulkhead gloss white, FS-17925. Carefully insert the cockpit and upper landing gear assembly into place. Skip the assembly and painting of the lower portion of the landing gear for now.

Glue the upper portion of the wings to the lower piece. Before cementing the completed wing assembly to the fuselage, paint the lower, interior portion of the landing gear bay gloss white. I cut a tiny circle of brass mesh to fit the front of the oil coolers and then attached their covers to the underside of the wings.



The wing-to-fuselage fit is excellent and little or no filler will be needed. Assemble and paint the Pratt and Whitney R-1830-86 Twin Wasp engine. I used “gunmetal gray” on the cylinders and light gray, FS-16320, on the crankcase. A wash of gloss black will bring out the details of the powerplant.

Using white glue, temporarily attach the cowling, without the engine, to the fuselage. In preparation for painting, stuff some damp tissue into the cockpit, cowling opening, and gear bay to keep out any overspray. Apply a coat of light gray over all of seams and check if any filling and sanding is necessary.

On April 7, 1943, First Lieutenant James Swett was assigned to VMF-221 based at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. Wildcats located there were painted “Navy blue-gray,” very close to FS-35190, on the topside and light gray on the undersides, FS-36492. There are few markings for the aircraft. The national insignia, consisting of white stars on blue disks, are found on the wings in all four positions and the fuselage sides. White identification numbers are centered at the extreme front of the cowling and just ahead of the national markings on the fuselage.

Cutting Edge decal sheet, CED-48120, has the complete set of markings for Lieutenant Swett’s Wildcat including the “caveman” cartoon figure that appeared on the vertical tail for a short time.

(Indications are the “caveman” only appeared on the starboard side and was ordered removed shortly after it appeared.) It should be noted that, after shooting down the seven Japanese Val dive-bombers on April 7, Swett himself was shot down on the same mission, so applying the “kill markings,” included on the decal sheet, to this model would be incorrect. Be sure and check your references.



Using a wet cotton swab, remove the temporarily attached cowling, glue the engine inside, and re-cement the engine and cowling to the front of the fuselage. Go back to step seven in the instructions and assemble the lower portions of the landing gear struts and paint them gloss black, FS-17038. (This assembly is tricky, so follow the instructions closely.) Slip the lower landing gear assembly into position inside the gear bay.

E-Z Masks, Sheet #31, includes precut vinyl masks that fit neatly over the clear parts and produce excellent results when painting the canopy and windscreens. Paint the propeller and tires flat black and attach them to the model. Your replica of James Swett's Wildcat is complete.