

NEWSLETTER

EDITED BY KEVIN CALLAHAN

NOVEMBER 1995

Mailorder Model Retailing

Maybe I never seem to finish any modelling projects these days because I spend more time talking about aspects of the hobby than actually *doing* them. In any case, the latest round of gabfests had to do with mailorder hobby retailing.

Truly, it would be wonderful if mailorder hobby shops were unnecessary. If we could all go down to the local hobby superstore and see all of the latest kits, decals, detail sets, vacuforms, resin conversions, books etc, and then buy them at a solid discount, we'd all be a happy bunch of modellers. But I can only think of a couple of stores on the west coast that have that wide a stock, and their prices are generally MSRP. And none are in the Northwest. So if you want the weird stuff, or if you want deep discounts, you're pretty well limited to ordering by mail.

It seems to me that mailorder shops should expect to have to live by three major goals: fast turnaround, simple

operating competence, and decent pricing.

I've always found it strange that modelling -- given that the process itself is slow and meticulous -- is such an impulsive hobby. You go to an airshow, or see a nice old car going down the street, or watch something on TV, and suddenly you want to do a model of it. You don't want to build it next year (the enthusiasm will have passed and you'll be panting to build something else by then), you want it *now*. How discouraging, then, to make your order and have to wait weeks for the merchandise to arrive. I recently ordered some kits from Discount Hobby Center in New York, and it took no less than *five weeks* for the order to show up. I can get merchandise from the UK in less time. The only reason I, or anyone else, put up with this nonsense is that DHC is pretty much the leader in discounting. That's their market niche: great prices, minimal service.

At the other end of that scale is Squadron Mailorder in Carrollton, Texas. Though I usually place orders by FAX, whenever I have had occasion to talk to their customer service reps, they have been very helpful. They may not all be modellers, but as long as the online system is up, they can tell you what is in stock and how much it costs. And, of course, their stock is very wide and deep. They don't stray very far into the one-man cottage industry operations, but they carry just about everything that is produced by a major kit or decal maker. The prices tend to be MSRP, but they do have monthly specials that occasionally dip into DHC territory.

One thing I have noticed about SMO in the last few months is that they have begun to discount certain new releases, something that is quite a departure for them. Though it is a nice thing for us to see, it does make you wonder about the health of the hobby as a whole.

Besides the obvious benefits of good price, decent service, and quick turnaround, the main thing I would ask for in a mailorder house is simple competence. I'm sure we've all gotten orders with the wrong merchandise, half of the items out of stock, or items included that just leave you scratching your head (I got someone else's refund check once). Again, Squadron has the right idea: someone other than the packer reviews the order and initials the invoice before it goes out the door. This seems to have eliminated most of the mispacking problems.

There are other aspects of mailorder hobby shops that seem to be important, such as a wide, deep inventory.

Often, mailorder hobby shops are the only place where one can find the more esoteric kits, decals, and accessories. Many of what would qualify as one-man operations in Europe just aren't large enough to deal directly with the big international distributors, and tend to strike up relationships with the retailers themselves. Lencraft and Washington's own Aviation Usk are two of the big US players in this market niche.

Lencraft is a friendly operation, stocking a good cross-section of unusual aircraft modelling products. They are especially good at getting the box back to you in record time, though it helps that they are also on the west coast. The downside is that they do not take Visa (and therefore have to wait for your check to arrive) and that their prices are all MSRP, aside from the occasional sale.

Aviation Usk is a known mecca for all that is odd and unusual in aircraft modelling. Resin kits, short runs, strange untranslated books and magazines. The prices aren't hideous (though you have to keep in mind that even the MSRP's for this sort of esoterica are pretty high), but the problem is knowing what is in stock at any given time. If you have ever received one of the hefty AvUsk brochures, you've seen how many products are theoretically "available". What is actually in stock is dramatically less.

But this is hardly limited to Av Usk. You've probably seen the catalogs from other mailorder operations, and noticed how every kit from every manufacturer is listed. But it is probably naive to think that all of those kits are actually in stock and on hand at the mailorder shop's location. What is more likely is that those are the kits the company *can get ahold of* through their distributor. If an order is placed for one of the kits on the list but not in stock, the retailer places an order for it and doesn't ship your order until the missing kit arrives. This would basically be invisible if the distributor was across town and all you had to do was drive over and pick it up, but if the retailer is dealing with MMD (Squadron's wholesaler division), they have to have the item shipped to them before they can ship it to you. And because it costs more to ship small orders than large ones, the retailer will probably wait until he has a group of orders to make an order with MMD. Meanwhile, you're fuming at your mailbox each day.

I think this is basically how Usk does its business. I've been to one of Tom's chili feeds, and was surprised to see how little actual stock he had on hand. It would appear logical that he is grouping orders as they come in, making an order to a distributor (or directly to the manufacturer) when he has enough to order, and then filling our orders when the merchandise eventually comes in. This would explain the rather long turnaround time that one can experience in buying the admittedly oddball items that he carries.

But have you ever been told this by a mailorder retailer? "Sorry, it's not in stock right now but we can get ahold of it in a few days. Do you want me to hold the order for this item, ship it separately, or delete it from the order?" Usually, they just take the order and short you that item. Or they hold on to the order until the item comes in, costing you a number of days in the process. Both practices are really on the fringe of the concept of good customer service.

Now admittedly, this is not a problem for everyone. Many are willing to wait as long as it takes, if they can get items that are generally unavailable, or if they can get the deep discounts that DHC provides. And that's fine. But for those of us who would really rather have it **NOW**, this can be a truly frustrating bother.

Actually, the subject of mailorder didn't exactly come out of the blue. There is a continuing analysis going on by a couple of IPMS-Seattle members as to whether they can feasibly enter the wild world of mailorder retailing.

And one of our members (Bill Gruner) has been doing this for quite some time. But it was interesting to think through an aspect of the hobby that just about all of us have used at one time or another, but so few of us are satisfied with.

Kevin Callahan

This was originally supposed to be the October issue, but it has barely been finished in time for the November group meeting. I seem to be heading for a publication rate that is only marginally better than *Military Model Preview!!* But there are good reasons -- none of which are related to work for once.

As some of you know, I've been off of work for a month dealing with some back problems that eventually culminated in back surgery a couple of weeks ago. It was a pretty agonizing experience, and even if I had had access to the PC that I had stored the newsletter file on, I wouldn't have been able to do much work on it. And the PC is at work, so I didn't have access to it while recuperating. The lead article was half finished,

but I had to wait to get back to work in order to finish it up.

Andrew and I made the decision, once I was able to go back, to not try and pad the issue out to 8 pages, but just to run it off with however many pages it had. As you can see, it had six, which is why this issue is a little thinner than most.

This isn't to say that my work has gotten any less hectic (the big processing center consolidation project I was working on may be mostly over, but I'm now moving on to the merger between US Bank and West One, which could be even worse). And there is a business opportunity on the horizon that, if all works out, will eat up whatever free time I still have left.

All of this means that time to produce this newsletter is drying up. We do have options, including changing the frequency back to quarterly. But to even manage that, I'm going to need material. And the material comes from you. Ideally, I need maybe 5 people who would commit to producing two pages of material per quarter. Kit

reviews, techniques, historical stuff, it doesn't matter. But I would need to be able to count on those pages. Then my job basically becomes a newsletter editor and assembler, rather than writer. I could probably pull that off quarterly (he said with incredibly naive optimism). So give that some consideration; we'll be discussing the matter at upcoming meetings.

So what's on tap in this (abbreviated) issue? Another view of this summer's IPMS-USA Nationals from Gerry Nilles. Also, a kit review of the Monogram Pro-Modeller version of the 1:48 Convair F-102.

One last item. Next month's meeting -- December 9 -- will be the annual foodfest. Everyone is invited to bring along something tasty (cookies, brownies, drinks, chips, whatever). This has become an annual tradition for IPMS-Seattle. I'd also like to see everyone bring at least one model for a change. Let's see if we can send '95 out right by burying the tables with food and models.

More on the 1995 IPMS-USA Nationals

BY GERRY NILLES

(Ed note: Gerry sent this article in after the lead article in the August newsletter. It gives more information on kits in "those other scales" plus additional impressions of the convention as a whole. Other IPMS-Seattle members that were onsite but not mentioned

in that issue were Gerry, Norm Filer, and Bob LaBouy. I have updated Gerry's list where particular kits have been released since the article was submitted).

The vendors' room was where most of the action was, kit and rumor-wise, of course. The following is a list of what I saw

along with a few personal observations.

Aviation Usk:

(1:72) - Curtiss SC-1 Seahawk WW II observation / fighter. The last of the US Navy's catapult-launched floatplanes. A test shot was available and looked very

acceptable. It should be available now.

Minicraft:

(1:144) - Consolidated PB5-5A (I agree it is a little gem).

(1:72) - Spitfire Mk 14c (already covered and released).

(1:72) - Apache helicopter (released).

(1:72) - Boeing B-17F/G (released now; another page in the B-17 chapter).

(1:72) - Consolidated B-24M (the light weight version and final variant).

(1:72) - Boeing B-29 "Enola Gay" (released now; has correct, cuffed props, and a scale A-bomb).

(1:72) - Boeing RB-50G (late October or November release. "Caribbean Queen" markings).

Note: Rumors of a 1:72 KC-97 in the works were confirmed by Minicraft. Release is dependent on financial conditions (ie, sales).

(1:48) - Republic P-47N (the buildup looked great).

(1:48) - Sukhoi Su-27 (released).

(1:48) - Lockheed P-38 Lightning. (three more versions. The F-5 recon, plus the radar nose and glass nose "pathfinder" and "droop snoot" versions).

(1:35) - M-163 (released. They only had the box art on the armor. Not much new; previously announced kits are still in work. I noted that they will go with the one-piece vinyl

tracks in the future. There has been much negative feedback from more mature -- older -- armor modellers expressing frustration with the intricacies of DML's multi-piece individual track links. I should also note here that Tamiya heard the same thing and has also gone with wrap-around tracks on their new mid-production M-4 Sherman).

Note: Minicraft expressed interest in doing one of the Korean War B-29s that was modified to carry the Tarzon bombs. Other rumors that were *not* confirmed: 1:72 Bell P-59 Airacomet, 1:35 M-18 Hellcat. No info on the previously announced 1:72 Curtiss SB2C Helldiver or Hurricane Mk 2.

Monogram/Revell:

(1:48) - Consolidated PB5-5A Catalina (BIG!, and looked very good).

(1:25) - Mid-1950s pickup truck (sorry, that's all I know).

Tamiya:

(1:35) - M-4 Sherman (mid-production type. A beautiful kit with a very hefty price to go along with it. Includes some interior detailing, like the gun breech. Obvious provisions built in to do an M4-A3, and possibly an -A2. It also looks like they will probably do a fully detailed engine compartment when they do the -A3 version. Both styles of transmission covers are supplied. Release is in progress and should be in stores any time).

Marco Polo:

(1:72) - Hasegawa SBD Dauntless (looks as good as reported by the other guys. Just released).

(1:35) - AFV Armor M-88 combat recovery vehicle, Vietnam version.

DML..... nothing new.

AMT:

Disappointingly, they were not represented.

A Convention overview:

I can only speak for myself, of course, but I felt that the general quality of the models entered was good, but not as high a calibre as I saw in Seattle in 1992. As always, there was the occasional exception to this observation, but overall it was more on a par with our spring show or one of the previous Recons. In my opinion, the local membership (including the area's greater modelling community) has set and maintained a very high standard for itself. This standard has been in place since I started serious modelling, which now goes back almost three decades. This is just a personal thought, but explains why so many of the local troops do so well in the awards category.

The convention facilities, I think, were excellent, and Albuquerque was a great place to visit, in spite of the hot weather. Accommodations at the Doubletree Hotel were very acceptable as hotels go, and reasonably priced. The complementary cookies were a nice touch. As for the convention's organization, I would say it was a little on the loose side. Schedules were not always maintained, and normal convention activities (special tours, demos, guest speakers, etc) were a little on

the scarce side. The majority of the action, as I noted earlier, was really in the

vendors' room. All things considered, I believe our hosts worked very hard to do a good

job and made the best of what they had to work with.

Monogram 1:48 F-102

BY WILL PERRY

"Pro-Modeler" is Monogram's attempt to make its reissues more attractive to serious modeler types. The retail price gets bumped up (\$20 for the F-102) and you get extra parts, nice Scalemaster decals, and a much improved instruction sheet. This kit got some mold mods as well, to represent an early production version of this Cold Warrior.

An impressively large box is graced by an impressive painting -- a Dagger letting fly a Falcon missile over a South Vietnamese landscape (at a North Vietnamese An-2, perhaps? A red-winged bird downing a Bear over the North Pole would have been more fun). The plastic inside is a typical Monogram product: crisp and delicately raised surface detail, a detailed cockpit and wheel wells, well-molded clear parts, and a generous amount of explosive stuff -- six Falcon air-to-air missiles. There are areas where the molding could have been better; the reworked wingtips spring to mind.

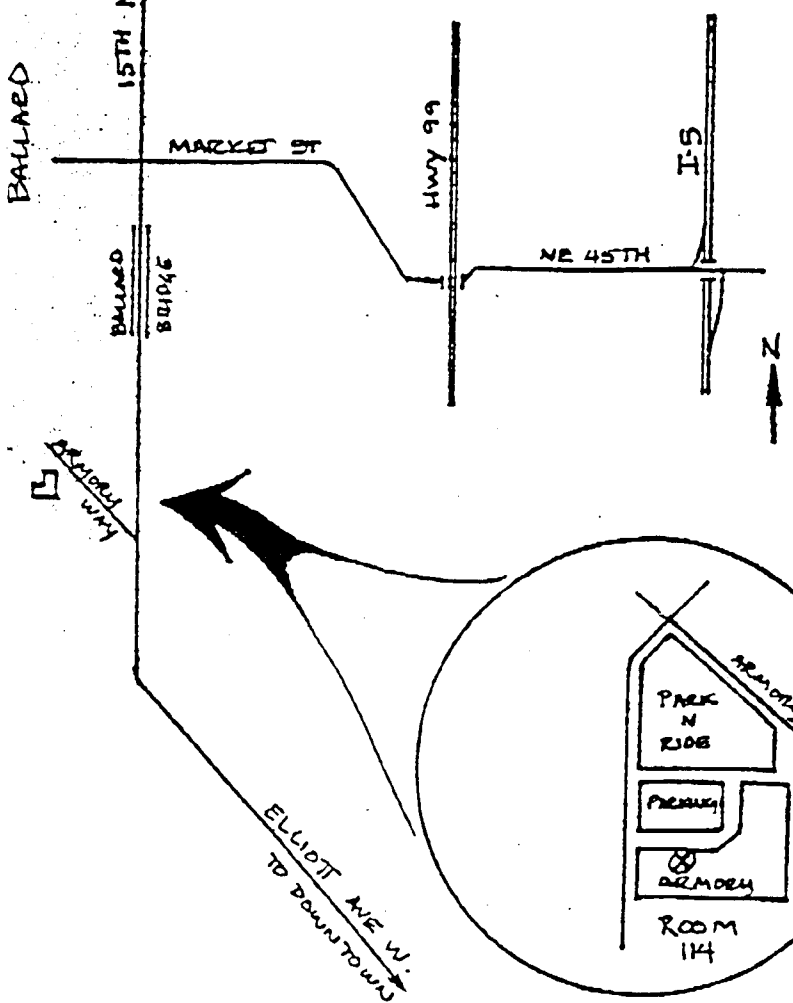
The instruction sheet is a vast improvement over the "sketches and pictograms" style that Revellogram has featured over the last decade.

Detail photos are numerous and helpful. Bert Kinzey of *Detail and Scale* gets credit for these. Better quality paper could improve photo quality quite a bit. Written assembly instructions are a nice change, and FS numbers and names are called out frequently. No more flipping back to page one to consult the color chart in two dozen languages. Useful modeling tips are scattered about, reminiscent of Testor's nice sheets.

As construction begins, the kit's weak points reveal themselves. Parts clean-up, especially around the wings, took some time. Poorly located seams on the underside of the wings and on the starboard side of the vertical stabilizer gobbled up *lots* of time and surface detail. The instructions suggest that you install the cockpit tub after the fuselage halves are joined; that just didn't work for me, and I had to break apart the fuselage to get the tub in. An unpleasantly long and wide seam along the fuselage/wing joint was no fun. Gluing the top of the wing to the fuselage before adding the bottom of the wing might save lots of sanding.

Painting is the easy part -- all ADC Grey (FS 16473). I found Model Master Light Ghost Grey to be a very nice match. It is just a tad lighter to provide a scale effect. The decals worked very well for me. They are well printed, thin, tough enough, and the Invisa-Clear backing seemed just that. I was surprised how nicely the Connecticut Air National Guard stylized eagle fit that big fin. Decal placement, as depicted in the instruction sheet, wasn't entirely accurate. I used photos in Squadron Signal's *Century Series In Color* to clear up some questions.

There's lots to like about this kit. I found the construction problems a challenge, but they're nothing some patience and good modeling skills can't overcome. Big thumbs up for the decals and instruction sheet. The days when Monogram was the world's best are in the past, but these kits still have plenty of potential to turn into nice models. Thanks to Monogram for this review kit, and here's hoping that they can continue to sell enough of the reissues to finance new molds as exciting as the He-111 and the Catalina.



NEXT MEETING!!

SATURDAY, NOV 11 at 10.00am
 SATURDAY, DEC 9 at 10.00am

NATIONAL GUARD ARMORY
 Room 114
 1601 W. Armory Way
 Seattle, WA

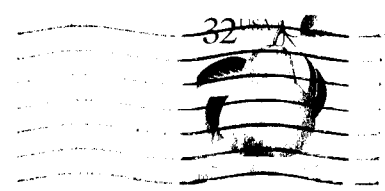
From north- or southbound I-5, take the NE 45th st exit. Drive west on 45th under Highway 99 (Aurora Ave) to Market Street. Continue west on Market St to 15th Ave NW. Turn left and drive south on 15th Ave NW across the Ballard Bridge to Armory Way. Watch for signs!

If you are coming from south Seattle, take Highway 99 onto the Alaska Way viaduct to Western Ave. Follow Western north to Elliott. Continue north on Elliott to Armory Way. Watch for signs! There is plenty of parking in the Metro Park and Ride lot.



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Newsletter comments or submissions:
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 31849 Pacific Highway S
 Box 243
 Federal Way, WA 98003



NEXT MEETING: Saturday, November 11 at 10.00am
 Saturday, December 9 at 10.00am (the annual holiday foodfest)

William Holowchuk
 19627 133rd Dr SE
 Snohomish, WA 98290

