Sexton II 25-pdr SP Tracked - Smart Kit

by Eric Christianson, IPMS # 42218

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Provided by: Dragon Models USA
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www.dragonmodelsusa.com/dmlusa/welcome.asp

Dragon Models has released the Sexton II Self-Propelled Gun 1/35 scale. Out of the box, the detailing looks absolutely stunning, even for Dragon. The engineering and detail of the on-board stowage, radio equipment, driver's compartment, surface texture is as good or better than any release I've seen. Their excellent 25-pdr Mark II main weapon has been pulled from a previous release, and the chassis contains all the good stuff from their equally superb Dragon Models M4. The Commonwealth makeover of the U.S M7 Priest sports over 150 new parts, including a completely reworked driver's compartment and transmission, radio sets, ammunition lockers, etc., etc. An engine is not provided, but everything that is exposed is brilliantly represented.

The Kit

I've always thought the British Sexton was the 'cooler' version of the venerable M7 Priest Self Propelled Howitzer. Lower, streamlined silhouette, flat muzzle brake, gun shields...this is one nice-looking AFV. As with most Dragon kits, once you pull the sprues out of the box they aren't going back in. The single-piece DS 'rubber-band' track is highly detailed on both sides and a good choice for this vehicle.

The contents of the box include:

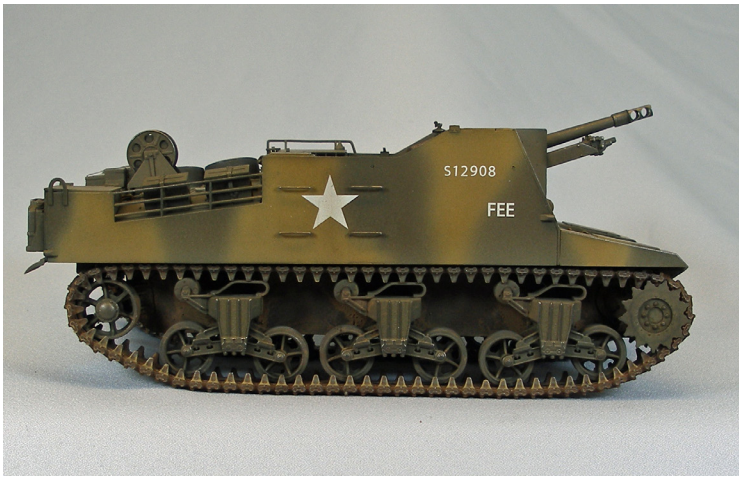
- *Main lower hull, packaged separately.*
- *11 main sprues in soft, light grey plastic, packaged separately.*
- *2 lengths of yellow DS track*
- *1 small photo-etch sheet, including a box straps, an engine exhaust grille and a radio compartment screen.*
- *1 8-page blue and white instruction sheet with 18 steps.*
- *The kit comes with five schemes represented using the ubiquitous Dragon blue-and-white three-view drawings, and a small but perfectly registered sheet of decals from Cartograph of Italy.*
- *147th (Essex Yeomanry) Field Regiment, RHA, Normandy 1944 4th Field Regiment, RHA, 4th Armoured Brigade, Weert, 1944 Unidentified Unit, Northwest Europe 1944 13th Regiment, RHA (HAC), Northwest Europe 1944 Unidentified Unit, Northwest Europe 1945*
- *Paint callouts are provided for Model Master, Mr. Color and Hobby Color.*

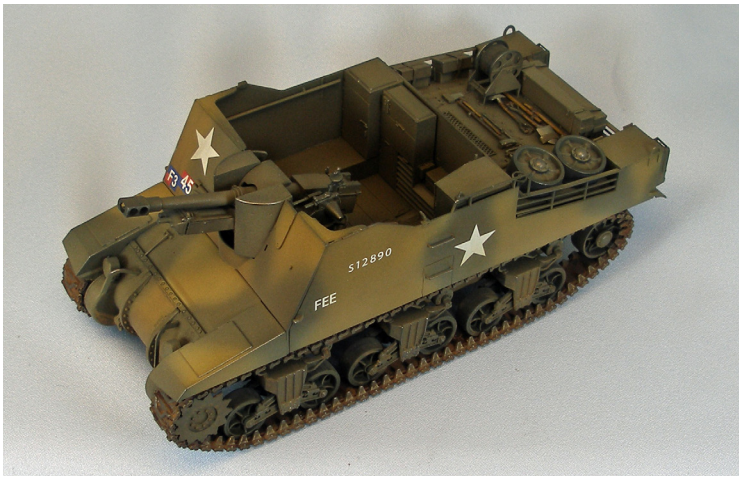
The Instructions

There are sprues from several different Dragon kits included in the box. As a result, there are some minor problems with the relationship between the parts map, the instructions and the parts actually in the box. That said, the slip-ups are minor and the overall effort is a marked improvement – Dragon is stepping up to improve the instructions in their kits, and the results of this effort are evident. It's a good thing too, since their kits are excellent in every other respect.

Things to consider before starting:

Like most self-propelled artillery, the open-hull design of the Sexton leads to a rather complex assembly sequence.





Dragon's instructions are generally on-target with some minor detours recommended. There are nine major parts that make up the upper hull, and these must come together perfectly for everything to fit. A single piece out of whack and you'll have fit problems through the entire build (as I did). The main weapon can be completely assembled and finished apart from the rest of the kit.

There are several places where parts are placed on top of other parts, all of them exposed, so the build-it-all-and-then-paint-it approach won't work with the Sexton. Plan ahead and proceed slowly.

The Build

Lower chassis, bogies, and drivers compartment

Having built the M4 Sherman chassis from several different model manufacturers, my hands-down favorite has always been Dragon. In my opinion, their design decisions have produced the best balance between accuracy and complexity, always with the modeler in mind.

Make sure to take notice of the 'sided aspect' of the six bogies, three left and three right when you assemble them, which is a snap. The instructions will have you glue parts V39/V40 to the hull – I recommend that you instead attach them to the rear plate of each bogie (Part V5).

The transmission housing and firewall come together fine, but I had to perform some minor surgery later when it came time to attach it to the hull (below) and main floor (above). The firewall did not want to fit, or I couldn't figure out how to fit it to the main hull with the instructions provided in Step 4. I ended up cutting off two vertical locater tabs and making the best of it.

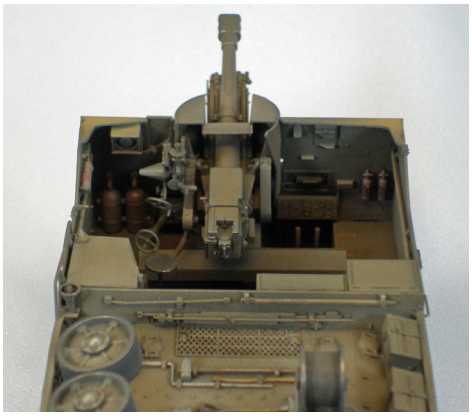
Things got a little frustrating in Step 5 in regard to the headlight guard placement. There is no assistance provided for these oddly shaped parts in the way of locater pins or surface impressions so I just had to try my best at making them look the same on each side. In addition, assembly of the air cleaners would have been helped by better drawings, or at least more drawings using different angles. Fortunately, most of the detail on the rear plate is hidden when completed. In the end, the fit of the rear plate to the hull is perfect so you leave this step in a good spirits after all!

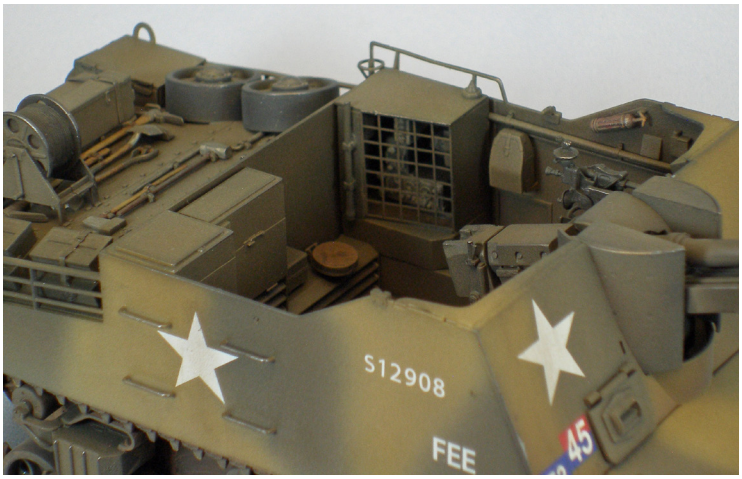
Most of the sub-assemblies in Steps 7 and 8 were left apart and unattached so they could be painted and weathered separately.

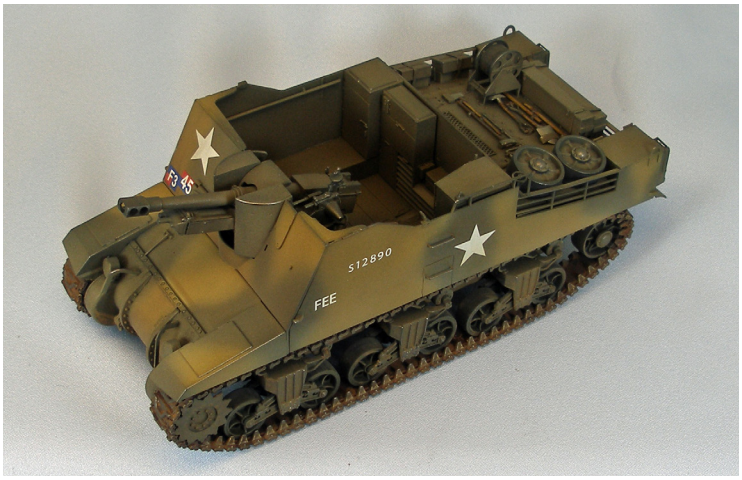
The radio compartment is beautifully executed with highly detailed consoles, covered by a PE screen door. Unfortunately, the detail here is mostly hidden unless you shine a bright light directly into the bin from the side. Adding a small internal source of light to this area would look great, the detail is really that good.

The 25 pounder Main Weapon

Step nine brings together the 25-pounder main weapon, and, while it results in a nice-looking howitzer, the journey getting there is a challenge. There is a small widget that you attach one of the hand-wheels to that is not in the parts map or numbered in the instructions – a mystery! I sort of just stuck in to the side of the main housing so the wheel looked right when finished. Be very careful assembling the horizontal housing that







the main weapon slides forward and back on – these pieces fit together ten different ways but only one is correct in the end.

The right and left shields are engineered and fit very well. I left them off for painting which complicated things slightly, but I saw no other alternative. They attach tightly to the rest of the weapon assembly and give the British gun its distinctive look on this vehicle.

Rear Hull On-Board Detail

The rear hull of the Sexton is covered with beautifully-engineered detail. The crispness of the pioneer tools is exquisite. There are PE straps to hold down some of the crates and bins, but most of the small clamping detail is molded in and looks great. The spool of cable (C28) and the two containers (C15/16) were assembled with their PE straps and left off so I could paint and weather them, and what lies beneath them, separately.

Assembly of the upper main hull parts

Steps 12 through 17 are a challenge – the engineering is good but assembly is not easy or intuitive. There are no less than nine major parts that must be aligned perfectly in order for the main hull sides to fit right. In retrospect, I should have set up the assembly sequence so I could have glued all the big parts at once, moving and sliding them until everything was right before the glue had a chance to dry. Unfortunately, there is so much going on that I let some steps dry before starting others. The result is that I had to do a lot of forcing and clamping in the end to make things line up… sort of.

As a consequence, my Sexton won't win any awards for sure. Hopefully I can break everything down so others might not make the same mistakes. I suggest the following sequence:

Leave off all the detail in steps 12-15 for now.

Prepare, but don't glue, parts A2/B51/B52/B78/B79/B53/B54 that make up the rear plate, Parts A3 and A4 (top and forward plates), and the side panels A5 and A6.

Assemble all the detail parts that go onto to Part A8 (Front shield) since you won't be able to get to them later. Take note that parts B76 and the small hatch appear like magic in the construction images, but are marked as unused in the parts map.

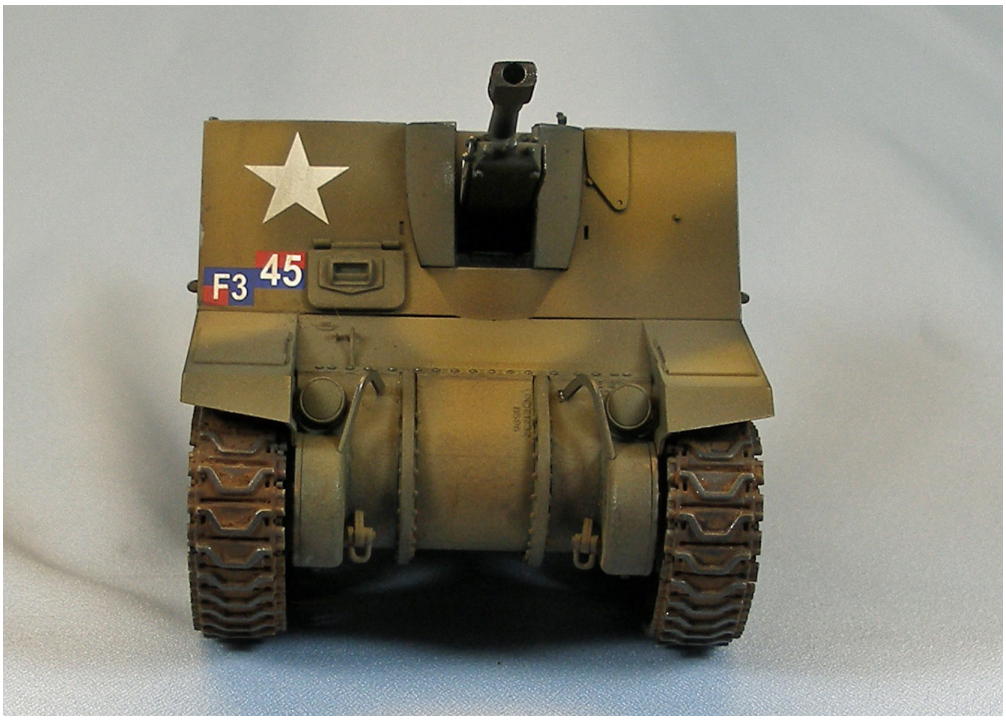
Likewise, attach the two parts (A20) to the bottom of the front Part A23, since access later will be a problem.

Once the sections in step 3 and 4 above are dry, put some slow-drying Testors black bottle cement on all the major parts called out above in steps 1-4 and put together your three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. The two large side panels will fit – but getting there will require everything else to be managed into their proper place and angle.

Go back and attach all the detail left off in Step 1, above.

The Track

The two runs of DS track are beautifully detailed. They are a chore to paint (why can't these come in any other color besides bright yellow-tan??) but slide on without any trouble. I used Tamiya Thin (Green Top) cement to attach them and this worked well. There is scuttlebutt on



the internet about the Sexton DS tracks being too long and needing to be trimmed by a link or two, but I did not find that to be the case. If the bogies are sitting flat on the 'ground' then the track tension looks right to me as is. I feel that if I cut a link or two off, the track, once installed, would cause either of the end bogies to tilt up from the added tension.

Painting and Finish

The Sexton is a challenge to paint, as are all open-topped vehicles. Having experience finishing aircraft helps a great deal here, as the armor modeler's mantra of build-first-then-paint approach won't exactly work.

The only things I did as far as the interior parts go is to paint the drivers compartment using various Model Master Buffing Metalizers on the transmission housing and other exposed parts, Leather on the two seats, and Tamiya Hull red on the fire extinguishers. The rest of the detail would wait for washes and dry-brushing later.

I decided to finish my vehicle using the 147 (Essex Yeomanry) Field Regiment RHA, Normandy 1944 scheme if for no other reason than I liked the placement of the markings.

After completing the main assemblies (see 'Things to consider before starting', above), painting and finishing followed these steps:

I started by airbrushing a primer coat of Gunze Mr. Surfacer 1200 since there were several gaps and other flaws that needed to be exposed and fixed.

I followed this with a pre-shade coat Tamiya NATO Black (XF-69), including all of the subassemblies.

I painted the DS tracks with Krylon Brown which is just about the only paint that will cover these kinds of tracks initially. I could have used Tamiya paint and my airbrush but that just takes too much paint and too much time. I wish these DS tracks came in …. Track color.. what what?

Next came the first camouflage coat of Tamiya Olive Drab followed by a second, post-shading coat of Tamiya Olive Drab + Deck Tan, starting from the center of all the panels working outwards to lighten things up a little.

I then sprayed a second camouflage coat of Tamiya Buff for the lighter wave pattern. I sprayed a thin coat of Buff over the Olive Drab sections and a thin coat of Olive Drab over the Buff sections to blend everything a little more.

Once the camouflage coats were dry, I shot the whole vehicle with a liberal coat of Future Acrylic to prepare the surface for washes and decals.

While the Future dried, I used a Q-tip to apply Model Master Dark Anodonic Gray Buffing Metalizer to the cleats and centerline posts of the tracks.

I followed this by adding several applications of a filter made of Paynes Gray to the rubber portions of the wheels and the track. I heavily thin all of my washes and filters with Mona Lisa White Spirit.

I painted the wooden portions of the on-board tools Vallejo Acrylics Old Wood and all the steel parts Vallejo Oily Steel. For the hand painting I mix a tiny bit of Vallejo Slow Dry and water with each color until it flows smoothly off a 00 Liner Red Sable brush.

To give the wooden parts of the tools more depth, I brushed on a little Mig Wash Brown Oil and let that set overnight. I then carefully removed most of the brown oil paint using a brush dampened with Mona Lisa, leaving the areas near the buckles and metal parts darker than the wooden shafts.

I applied the decals for my scheme using the Red and Blue Micro Sol/Set system without any problems.

Once dry, I hand-brushed another coat of Future over the decals to seal them.

I then gave the vehicle a pin wash using Mig Dark Wash (aka Raw Umber).

I worked a slurry of Mig Russian Earth and Mig Thinner into the areas behind the bogies, and then took a little off in the open areas using plain Mig Thinner.

I then added some oil stains here and there using Tensocrom Oil.

While the oil paints were drying, I brought out the detail by carefully dry-brushing all the protruding bits with Amblin Sliver Artists Oil.

I followed this with a 'road-dusting' coat of Vallejo Model Air Light Brown and then shot the whole vehicle with Vallejo Flat Varnish to kill any remaining shine. I cut each of these 50/50 with Vallejo Airbrush Thinner to improve flow.

Finally, I applied a light dusting of various Mig pigments, light earth tones for the body and wheels, dark rust and black for the track.

Conclusion

Dragon makes great kits, and the company has made real progress with their instructions. The Sexton was a challenge to build and it took longer than usual to finish. In my opinion, however, most of this difficulty is inherent in the original design of the subject. The Sexton is an open-topped vehicle marrying several parts of different machines into one. Unless Dragon can slide-mold an entire open-topped upper hull, this kit is just about as good as you're going to find for this subject.

I wish I could recommend this kit to everyone but I can't; reserving that for average-to-experienced modelers only. Go slow, pay attention to the instructions, and consider the suggestions included above.

I would like to thank Dragon Models and Dragon USA for providing this kit for review, and to IPMS USA for giving me the opportunity to build it.