

PZ. Bef.Wg.III Ausf J w/Schürzen - Smart Kit

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Dragon Models offers a complete lineup of the Pz.Kpfw. III family tree in 1/35 scale, including several kits in this last year alone. The subject of this review is the Pz.Bef.Wg. III Ausf J from their 'Smart Kit' series. The 'Pz.Bef.' in the name, short for 'Panzerbefehlswagen', identifies the vehicle as a specialized command tank, containing long range radios.

The Panzer III was a medium-class tank that, at the outbreak of WWII, was designed to be the primary platform of the all-conquering panzer divisions. With the advent of more heavily armored and up-gunned enemy tanks, the role of the Panzer III became secondary to that of the Panzer IV and production finally ceased in 1943. A number of specialized command tanks containing long-range radios were created based on standard gun tanks, and one of these was the Panzerbefehlswagen III Ausf. J. As its name denotes, it was



The contents of this box include:

Lower hull, packaged separately.

15 sprues in soft, light grey plastic, packaged separately.

2 clear plastic sprues

1 photo-etch sheets, including the star antenna, idler wheel rims and engine exhaust mesh

2 pre-cut sheets of sturdy metal schürzen, separated into sections.

2 runs of yellow-tan DS track

1 8-page blue and white instruction sheet with 24 steps

based on the Ausf. J chassis, of which 2,616 were built by German factories from March 1941 to July 1942.

Whereas earlier Panzer III command tanks were fitted with dummy cannons made of wood, the Ausf. J retained its main cannon, and as such fills a gap in the Panzer III family tree from Dragon. With the addition of DS track, a photo-etch star antenna, and the

latest engineering innovations from Dragon's Smart Kit line, the Panzerbefehlswagen provides an interesting and different Panzer III kit for modelers' collections.

Opening the box

All of Dragon's Mk III's come with enough parts to completely fill a sturdy box and then some. There are extra parts on nearly every sprue for

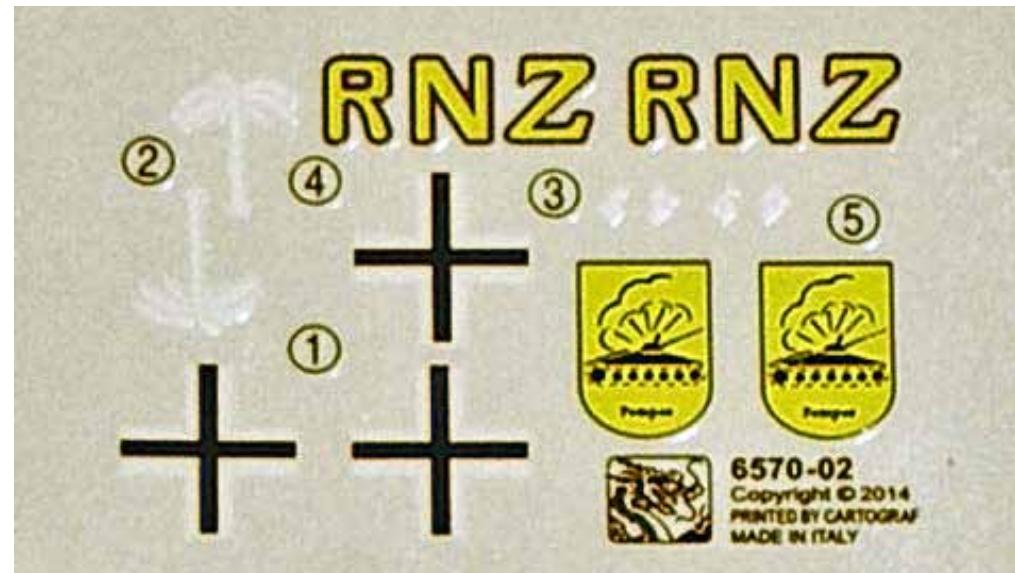
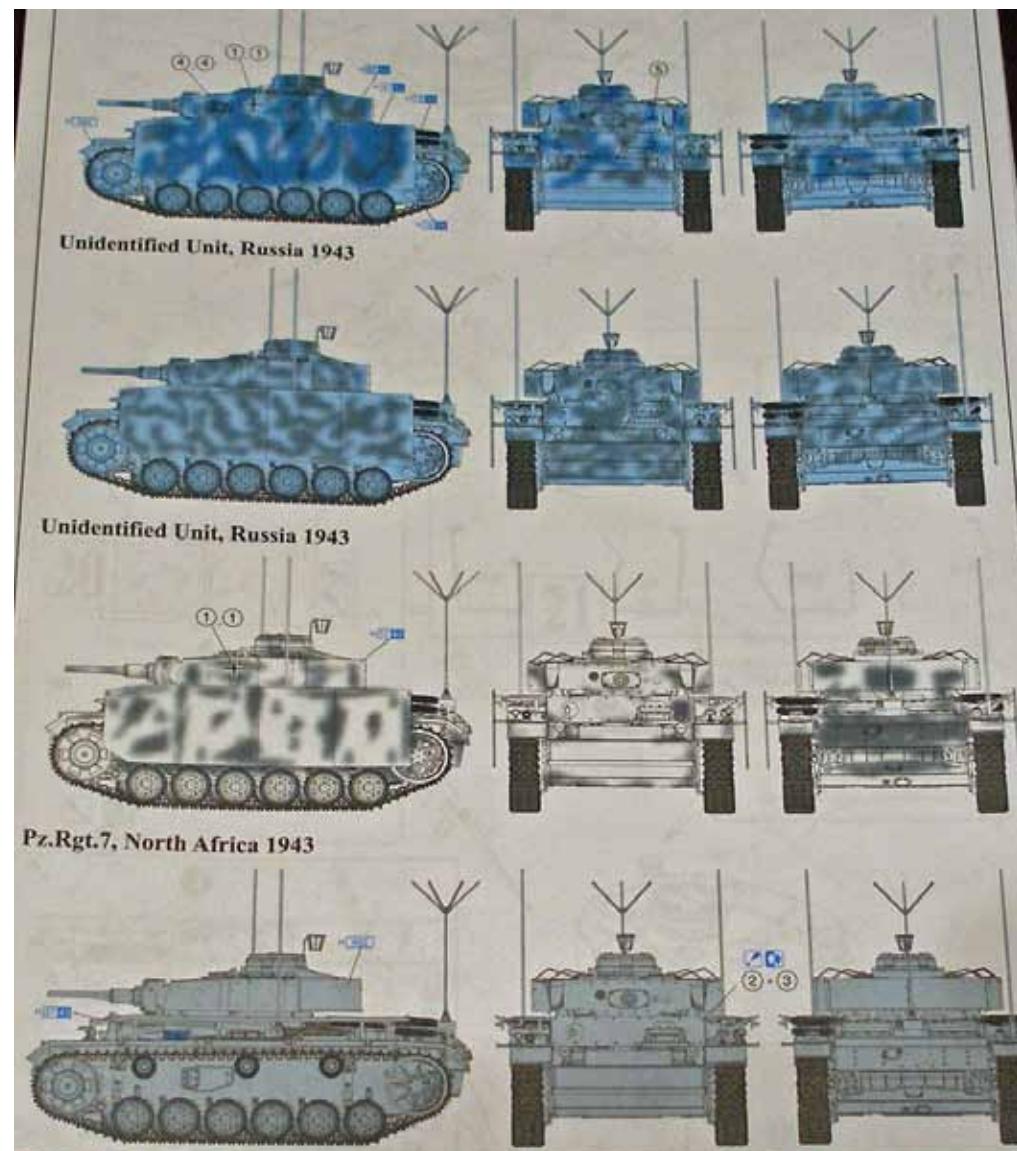
your spares box, including pioneer tools, a submachine gun, tow ropes, smoke dischargers, road lights, etc., etc..

One item of note: Dragon has thoughtfully stamped each section of each sprue with the sprue letter (A, B, C, etc.). For example: Sprue 'A' has six separate sections, which are (now) all stamped with 'A'. At least in my case, with the way I build models, this has been a tremendous help in distinguishing the many sprue sections, especially after I am well into the build and the sprues have become barely recognizable. Bravo Dragon – great idea!

The kit comes with four color schemes represented, using blue-and-white ink three-view drawings; and a small (but perfectly registered) sheet of decals from Cartograph of Italy. These units include:

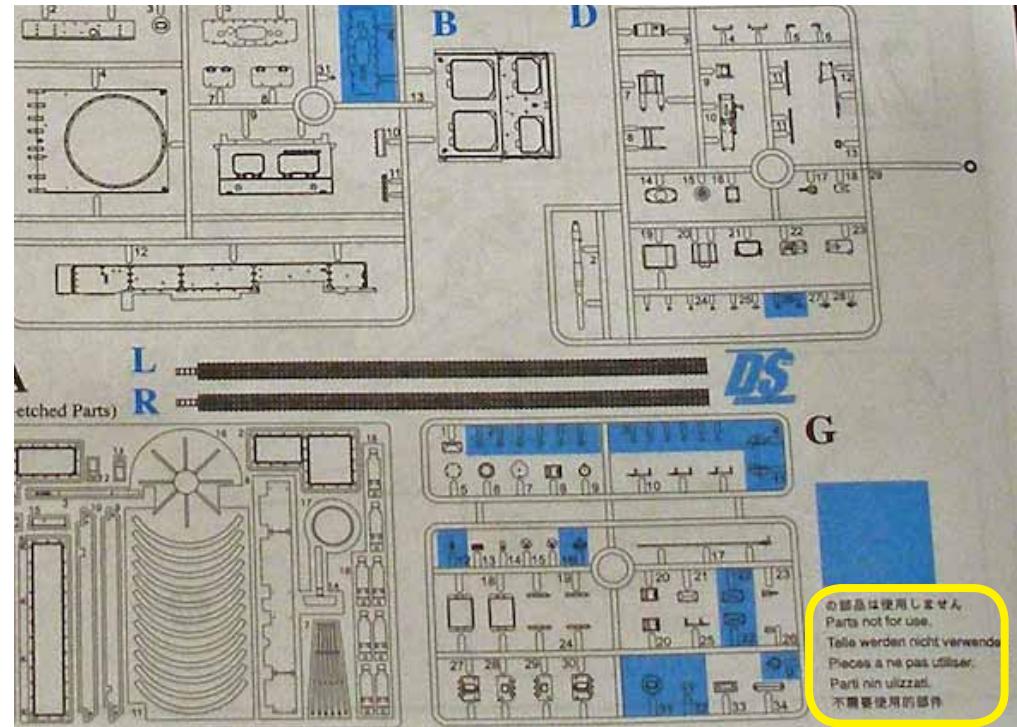
1. s.Pz.Jg.Rgt.656, Rgt.Nachr, Saporoshje Bridgehead 1943
2. Two Unidentified Units, Russia 1943
3. Pz.Rgt.7, North Africa 1943

When compared to one of their recent PzKpfw III kits (6773), there appears to be four new sprues (images below), in addition to the new decal sheet. The star antenna is also made of PE this time around, instead of the plastic representation found in many other Dragon armor kits.



The Instructions

This is a 'fortified re-box', containing sprues from several different Dragon kits, which sometimes leads to inaccuracies in the instructions. The issues are minor, however, and have been noted below. In Step 7, where the busy fenders come together, Dragon has thoughtfully provided a nice overhead schematic of where everything is supposed go. Assembly sequence varies by modeler but the general flow of things go pretty much as Dragon intended. The exceptions I made are identified in the text below.



Things to consider

before building:

The Mark III is a pretty straight-forward tank. Chassis, fenders, main deck, turret, gun, hatches – it's all there. There are relatively few options (for Dragon) so there are few up-front decisions to be made. The area beneath the fenders is un-obstructed so the DS track can be attached at the end of the build without any problems. You can build the entire vehicle before painting, with the only exceptions being the different antenna and the schürtzen sections themselves, which can be painted and weathered separately before hanging them on the brackets.

The Build

The Lower Chassis and Running Gear

The assembly of the lower chassis went together relatively well. The only hiccup here was with Parts A50 and A51. As installed per the instructions, they will interfere with the fenders later on. I had to snip off a chunk of each to make the fenders seat properly in Step 14.

In Step 2, Part A21 is listed twice, and is not found on the sprues. It is supposed to be A23. The escape hatches (Parts A43/A44) can be posed open or closed, and Dragon has provided a handle on the inside of each if you choose to pose them open.

In Step 3 is it easy to get mixed up inserting the axles – if you make sure to keep the tiny slots at the outer end of each axle lined up with its neighbor, you won't have a problem. The fit of everything here is perfect.

In Step 4 there is a busy section at the top-left of the instructions. Make sure to let all of the pieces dry thoroughly before moving on because this assembly takes some jimmying around when it's inserted into where it goes. Unfortunately, in the end, nearly all of it is hidden from view.

The Fenders

In Step 7, the rear dropdown on the port-side fender is identified as Part A39 in the instructions. This part, however, does not match the illustration and lacks the tab needed to attach it to the fender. I believe this is supposed to be Part A41, which fits.

The attachment parts for the Jack (Parts G54 and G56) are reversed. If you use the pre-drilled holes as guidance, however, these two parts will only fit one way. I usually attach these parts first to the fender, and then the rest of the jack (once assembled) to these parts because (for me) it's a little easier to line things up that way. But following the directions will lead you to mount the jack facing the wrong direction so test fit everything and find a way to fit the jack alongside the fire extinguisher, but with the jack handle facing inwards. If it faces outwards, the handle will interfere with the schürzen.

In Step 8, Part A64 is actually A65 on the sprue. Do not drill out the holes as shown in the instructions here – they will not line up with Assembly 'L' later on, in Step 24 and are not even needed since Assembly L does not sport any 'male' counterparts. Not sure where Dragon was going with that.

In Step 10, there is a small round part (Part N6 on the sprue) that is not called out in the instructions. It is the lowest section of the star antenna.

The Main Deck

In Step 13, the placement of Parts R32 and R16 is vague, and, since the schürzen side brackets hang off of these parts, their location needs to be spot on. Look to Step 24 for guidance. I used some Tamiya tape and attached the side brackets to the hull to see where these two parts should go.

The main deck comes together in Step 14. There was a fit issue where the front of A61 met the rest of the hull, exposing a significant gap along the bottom. I played around with the order of

attaching the sections to no avail. If I were to guess as to the cause, I would say that the original parts were from a kit that did not have the extended front armor (Parts C3/C4/C20) which interfered with the fit. I ended up having to cut into the lower left and right hand corners of the front armor plating, (Parts C20/C8/C9), and the two mounting pegs from the bottom Part C3 in order to seat the center section correctly. I double checked everything – it just didn't fit.

I attached the front deck (B9) and rear bulkhead (B13) first, then the fenders next, and finally the turret ring (A61) portion.

Before dropping the fenders down onto the lower chassis, I removed the six prominent tabs, three on each side (see



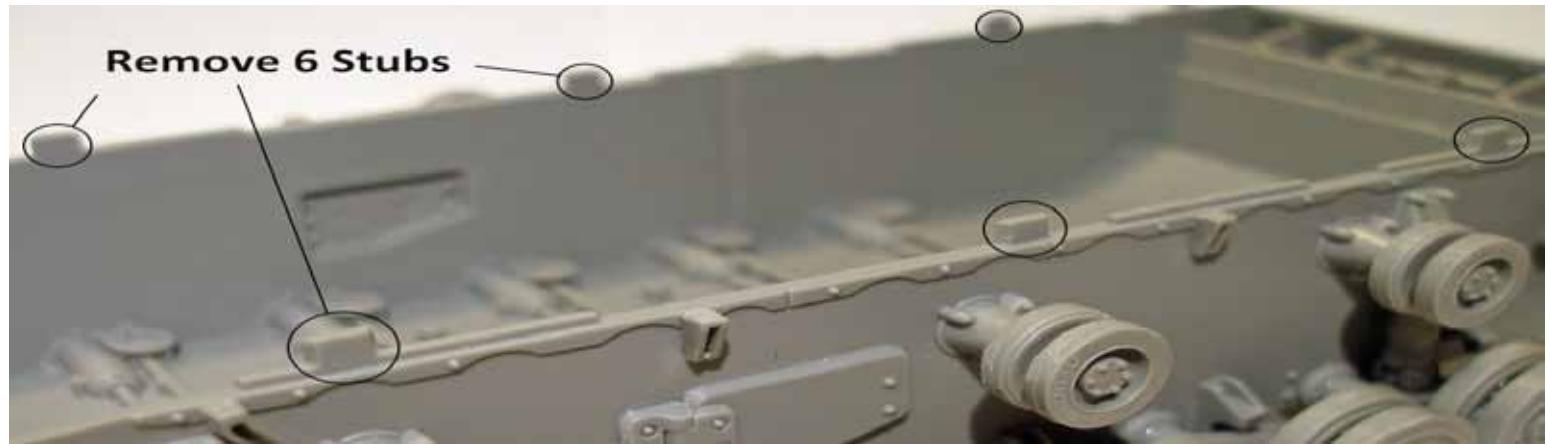


image). Otherwise the fenders won't fit. These tabs exist on nearly every single PzKpfw III and IV Dragon makes, yet are rarely addressed in the instructions (?).

The Main Weapon

In Step 17, do not glue Parts E2 and E3 as shown in the instructions, unless you want the gun to point at a ridiculous, parade-appropriate up-angle. I suggest you attach them without glue and finish the assembly in Step 17. Once that is dry, tape parts E6, E13, and E12 together and rotate the main gun into the position you want. This will align parts E2 and E3 correctly for gluing. You can then continue with Steps 18.

In Steps 18 and 19 you assemble the baffle and armor that surrounds the area just behind the barrel. The way these five parts come together is not very intuitive and they all tend to slide around a lot. You will need to use images from other parts

of the instructions to understand how they come together. Again – using slow-drying cement is key here as they all seem to fit several different ways.

Otherwise everything comes together pretty well. I really like the slide-molded main weapon – plastic is so much easier to work with than turned aluminum.

The Turret

The turret in this Mark II is bristling with hatch and visor port detail that you can post open or closed. The engineering and detail is excellent and the design is pretty straight forward.

Each side sports a two-door hatch that, if left open, sits across from optional sections of the turret schürzen that are made to be dropped down allowing entry and exit for the crew.

The single viewport on each side consists of several parts that are a little fiddly but it's a good design considering the

task at hand. After having done a fair share of these, I have found the following assembly approach to work the best (for me):

1. Using a slow-drying glue (like Model master 'black bottle' liquid cement), attach Part G8 to the interior of the turret. Before the glue has a chance to set up...
2. Orient the visor lever (G10) the right way, carefully pry loose the edge of G8, and slip G10 into where it goes. Press G8 back into position.
3. Carefully pull the two visor lever 'arms' through the opening in the turret and once you get them where you want them, apply glue to the lever so it will stay put.
4. Once the glue dries, attach the visor to the two protruding arms.

The lid of the bustle behind the turret can be attached in the open position, but little to no interior detail is provided.



The commander's cupola has a nicely detailed (and visible) interior so closing the optional two-part hatch would be a shame.

The Schürzen ("skirts")

Having built several Dragon 'Smart' kits that sport side skirts, I have to say that the design of the schürzen and the hardware to support its various pieces is simply brilliant, and in my opinion, the very best available. Dragon sets the bar here.

The side skirts are provided in the form of two pre-cut, sturdy yet thin metal sheets. I have found that they are best painted and weathered on their metal sprues, and separated only when they are

ready to attach to the vehicle so you can easily figure out which section goes where. The separate pieces have pre-cut holes in them that receive male stubs running along two horizontal bars on each side of the vehicle.

Likewise, the parts that surround the turret fit onto beautifully molded brackets that are shaped just right to receive the thin plastic schürzen. My experience with this design makes me come back for more.

The only downside has to do with the instructions. The individual side skirt sections are hung on long, horizontal cross bars (Parts R10/R11) that run the length of each side of the vehicle. Each of these cross

bars is held in place by three brackets, and placement of the brackets is vague, at best. The instructions provided by Dragon contain arrows that tell you to place them 'here somewhere'. In order to make sure everything lined up and fit, I guesstimated the placement of the front brackets (Parts R32/R16), and drilled holes to receive the tiny male nubs on the brackets. Then I held the cross bars up to the holes I drilled and created companion holes farther aft for the second and third sets of brackets (Parts (R16/R15 and R5/R5 respectively). Once everything was checked, I attached the six brackets in place and the cross bars to the brackets. The schürzen would be hung on the cross bars later, after painting and weathering.

The attachment points for the side turret brackets are (also) not addressed in the instructions apart from arrows. I decided to attach the hardware brackets instead to the schürzen itself and when the time came to attach the two pieces to the turret surface, I glued them wherever they fell once I lined them up with the rear schürzen piece. (Easier to see than to describe.)

The Track

The two runs of DS track in this kit are very, very thin and though beautifully detailed, almost too thin to work with. Tamiya 'green top' thin cement was almost too much for them and I decided to staple them together since the attachment points could be hidden by schürzen. I love Dragon's DS track but these were a little too delicate – the first time I've seen this on a PzKpfw III. On the positive side, however, they look great and accept any and all type of paint, although it might be prudent to first put on a coat of primer. Unfortunately, Dragon did not leave enough slack in the DS track to adequately reproduce the sag common to the Mk. III, so it looks pretty tight once installed. (With a little slack, I have found on other builds using DS track that I could use glue to attach it to certain



parts of the wheels and return rollers, thereby forcing a very realistic track-sag.)

The Star and Basket Antennas

The photo-etch star part of the antenna drops onto a mast that consists of no less than five parts – quite a production. As far as detail, this antenna far outclasses what has come before – as long as you can get things to fit and line up right. Unfortunately, I was not quite up to the task for either of these two little projects. The star antenna cannot unfold and be spread out as

designed as far as I can tell, even using the handy plastic cone-shaped tool Dragon provides for the task. The base of the star is not a single point, but rather a short length PE that simply cannot be magically collapsed to a point. On the other hand, the basket that attaches to the commander's cupola came together relatively well; I just made a mess of things trying to glue the small parts that make it up. I had to leave both of these impressive assemblies off the vehicle.

Painting and Finish

The PzKpfw III Ausf J offers some tricky steps in painting and finishing, especially if you want to leave hatches open and mount the skirting armor. I painted the schürzen (with mounting hardware attached), antennas, commander's hatch, starboard hatch doors, spare wheels and the track separately, and attached them after painting the rest of the vehicle but before weathering, save the antennas. Otherwise, the kit can be completely assembled before painting.

Using Vallejo Paints with a (siphon-feed) Pasche H Airbrush

Normally I use Tamiya Acrylic/Lacquers or Model Master Enamels for armor builds, but I thought I'd try something different this time around and picked up some Vallejo Model Air colors, which, unlike Tamiya paints, are 'true' acrylics. I went through a bit of experimentation up front, but eventually found them to spray beautifully once I dialed in the right setup and thinning ratio. To do

that I had to throw out most of everything I had been told since very little of it worked for me.

First, I dialed the pressure back up to 18-20lbs (Vallejo recommends 12-15lbs). I think the higher pressure is needed because I use a siphon-style airbrush (Pasche H) as opposed to a gravity-feed airbrush. Once I did that, the spray pattern evened out and I lost the scatter-shot look of the paint on the surface.





Next, I found that using very thin paint worked well and (almost) never clogged. A Q-tip wetted with Vallejo thinner was kept nearby during my painting sessions for touching against the nozzle tip when minor clogging did occur. I found that I needed to thin their Model Air paint (which supposedly comes already thinned) roughly 2:1, thinner to paint, and used small batches to achieve a near-perfect session. So, 5 drops of paint to 10 drops of thinner for small jobs, 15 drops of paint to 25 drops of thinner for larger jobs. Anything more than that and the brush seemed to 'fatigue' and clog more often with dried paint.

Also – cleaning the airbrush became a must-do chore afterwards, which is a break from using other paints when I just blew some thinner through the brush and put it away.

On the flip side, Vallejo paints are odor-free and allow me swap my heavy, uncomfortable vapor mask I use with distillate-based paints for a simple painters (particulate) mask.

Painting and Finishing the Track

I painted the bright yellow/tan DS tracks with rattle-can Rustoleum Flat Black Primer, followed by a dusting of rattle-can Krylon Flat Brown. Krylon/Rustoleum is just about the only paint

that will cover DS track initially, in my opinion. I could have used model paint and my airbrush but that just takes too much paint and too much time. I really wish these DS tracks came in a different, darker color.

Once the Krylon paint was dry and did not exhibit any more 'tack', I applied Model Master Dark Anodonic Gray Buffing Metalizer to the inside of each track where the wheels roll and to the sides of the teeth using a Q-tip. I then flipped the track over and applied Gamblin Silver Artist Oil Color to the tread plates and outer edges using my finger.

Painting and Finishing the Rest of the Vehicle - Primer and Pre-Shade

Before purchasing the Vallejo acrylics, I had already laid down solid primer and pre-shade coats, using my old standby products. I'll try Vallejo's Primer products next time.

I started by airbrushing a primer coat of Gunze Mr. Surfacer 1200 to give the plastic and PE some grip for the following coats

Next, I spray-painted a pre-shade coat using rattle-can Rustoleum Flat Black Primer – this is a cheaper alternative to hobby paint and doesn't seem to have any adverse effect on the plastic or detail. Plus, you can do the whole tank and track runs very

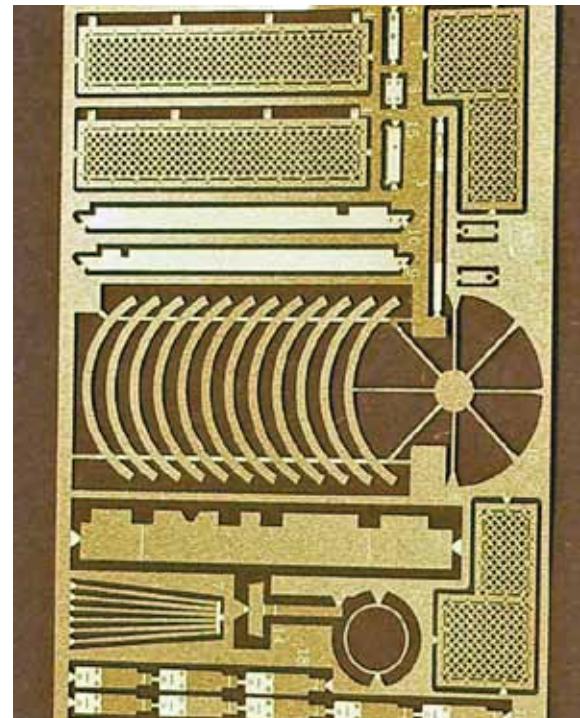
quickly. Keep the can moving and spray in short bursts to keep from flooding the paint on. The dark paint fills in the recesses and creates a shadow effect near the flat surface edges, adding depth for the subsequent coats to come. Once the paint was dry and had a chance to de-tack and de-gass, I touched up areas missed by the rattle-cans by airbrushing Tamiya (XF-89) NATO Black.

Camouflage

I followed this with Vallejo's three-color German Yellow recipe of Dark Yellow (71.025), Sand Yellow (71.028) and Sand (Ivory) (71.075), applied in that order. What starts out very yellow-green ends up being a nice, light, German yellow. I worked each color from the center of the panels

outward to preserve some of each color showing through from underneath. Some parts I left the original dark yellow and some parts were nearly ivory-white, depending on where I thought the sun would hit, achieving sort of a forced-color perspective (called 'color modulation' now in the industry).

Once the yellow was down, I applied a two-tone pattern using (first) a mix of Yellow Olive (71.013) and Sand Ivory, and then a mix of Hull Red (71.039) and Sand Ivory. I found the Hull Red to be too red, so I added a little German Grey (71.052) to darken it a little. I'll pick up some of their German-specific colors to replace these mixes the next time I stop at the hobby shop.



I airbrushed the interior of the hatches and the inside of the commander's cupola with Model Master Enamel Panzer Interior Buff.

I stopped here to attach everything except the antennas. The turret schürzen is delicate and requires a deft hand, which I lack. Eventually I was able to get things put where they were supposed to go and moved on.

Decals

Once the paint was dry, I airbrushed just the areas that would receive decals with Future acrylic to give them a smooth surface to set up on.

I applied the decals using the Red and Blue Micro Sol/Set system without any problems, and then airbrushed Future over the decals again to seal them.

After I was sure the Future was dry, I airbrushed the shiny areas that received decals with Vallejo Flat Varnish to prepare the surfaces for filters which need a flat surface to spread properly. I cut the varnish 50/50 with Vallejo Airbrush Thinner to improve flow.

On-Board Tools

While the Future was drying, I painted the wooden portions of the pioneer tools with a mixture of Vallejo Panzer Aces

New Wood (311), Old Wood (310) and (Model Color) German Cam Medium Brown (70822). I painted all the steel parts Tamiya Metallic Grey (XF-56). For hand-brushing Vallejo paints I mix a tiny bit of Vallejo Slow Dry and water with each color until it flows smoothly off a red sable brush.

To give the wooden parts of the tools more depth, I brushed on a little Mig Wash Brown oil paint straight from the tube and let that set overnight. Don't let this paint leach out its oil beforehand, like you would when you are using oils for dry-brushing. The oil helps it stay workable. In the morning I carefully removed most of the oil paint using a brush dampened with Mona Lisa Paint Thinner, leaving the areas near the latches and metal parts darker than the center of the wooden shafts. I then let a little black wash puddle up on the horizontal surfaces of the metal axe and shovel heads. When dry, I think this gives them a convincing look of used steel.

Filters and Pin Wash

With the flat coat on the model, I applied several filters to enhance the monotone areas of the vehicle. I heavily thin all of my washes and filters with Mona Lisa Paint Thinner. This odorless white spirit is very mild and will not react with the paint underneath.

I applied an overall filter of Mig Wash Brown to the entire vehicle and schürzen, a filter of Mig Black over the jack and air intakes, and a filter of Mig Dark Rust over the rear exhaust manifold.

I applied a pin wash to highlight the detail all over the vehicle using Mig Dark Wash (aka Raw Umber) straight from the bottle and a small red sable brush, concentrating on the panel lines, recesses, buckles, pioneer tools, etc.

Road Dust and Final Assembly

Finally, I applied a 'road-dusting' coat of Vallejo Model Air Light Brown (71.027) and then shot the whole vehicle with Vallejo Flat Varnish to kill any shiny spots still remaining. I cut each of these 50/50 with Vallejo Airbrush Thinner to improve flow.

I attached the antennas and this little guy was done!

Conclusion

The PzKpfw III is one of the iconic tanks of World War II, and it is no wonder that Dragon has taken on this family of AFV's to produce some of the very best models on the market. Like most of their other recent kits, the parts fit and are beautifully detailed; together making them a lot of fun to build.

The design of some of the parts such as the schurtzen and opening hatch hardware is simply brilliant, and in my opinion, the very best available; Dragon sets the bar here.

The thin DS track has evolved into an excellent alternative to the Magic Track, which itself was a wonderful product (and still is).

The slide molding, included in all Dragon kits now, has really improved the detail and buildability of their kits. This is nowhere more apparent than with their tank barrels which are, in my opinion, a vast improvement over the ill-fitting and hard-to-paint aluminum versions.

And last but not least, Dragon thoughtfully designs their models so that every hatch, door or access panel can be built in the open position, with more than enough interior detail to get you started.

I can recommend this kit to all modelers who are up to the small challenges that a kit with so many parts and options will offer. If you mark up the instructions beforehand as suggested, and go slow, you shouldn't have any problems.

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



