

Best Method for Using Decals

By Glen Martin

So what to do with those pesky decals that come in the box? You know you need them but are frustrated with the results. Here are a few tricks that might help.

Start out with a smooth, almost shiny surface. It should almost look wet and reflective. Why? A paint's surface, if looked at under extreme magnification, is like a sea of rocks. Laying down a decal is like laying down a tarp on the rocks. It rests on the high points, but beneath and between the rocks are crags and crevices. Light shines through and reflects on the underside of the decal, causing what is commonly called "silvering." If you were to pour concrete over the rocks, it would fill in the voids and make a smooth surface for the tarp to lay down in contact with. Applying a clear gloss to a painted surface smoothes it so the light has no where to reflect from.

When building aircraft and automobiles the paint used often has a smooth or semi gloss sheen already. Military vehicle paints are usually flat and require more gloss to prep the surface for decals. Glen swears by Future floor finish, found in home improvement stores and widely used in the modeling hobby. It's really just a liquid plastic that tends to level itself out naturally. Glen sprays Future through his airbrush at around 20psi. Use multiple, thin passes. You may opt to apply Future only to areas that will receive decals. Some modelers apply Future using a soft, wide paintbrush with good results. Allow plenty of time to dry, as much as 1-2 days in a dry atmosphere or longer if humid.

Now that the surface is prepped, turn attention to the decals. Decals have been around for decades, and some companies have figured out how to make really thin decals that snuggle down to contours easily. But there are wide varieties out there, so always take stock of what you have. If there is a large amount of excess clear decal around the design, it might benefit you to cut as much out as possible, thereby minimizing the decal to surface ratio.

Next you'll need tap water, and warm to hot if possible.

This helps dissolve the decal fixative efficiently. One suggestion was to use a coffee mug warmer, as long as the heat can be regulated down. We don't want simmering decals! You also need two products from your favorite hobby products vendor. Micro scale Set and Sol. These fluids have been around for years and modelers swear by them. Set is used between the model and decal surface and allows fluid placement of the decal. Sol is a mild solvent that "melts" the decal slightly so it conforms to curves and grooves. But we're getting ahead of the game.

Once you've got the Sol and Set, the decal is cut from the backing sheet and the water is warm, use tweezers to dip the decal in the water. While it's under water, use a clean brush to apply Set to the model surface, only where the decal goes. Return to the water and test the decal to see if it is starting to slide off the backing. This can happen in seconds or many minutes, depending on the decal. Check often! When it's moving around freely, use tweezers to bring it to the model and slide it off on top of the Set fluid. Use a toothpick or tool of choice to do this, just don't use a sharp or pointed tool or it may damage the decal. Work quickly to move the decal into place. The Set will help this process. If it weren't for Set, it



would want to suck down where you first applied it. Once the decal is in place, immediately use a clean brush and apply Sol to the decal. The effects take time, but again it depends on many factors. The decal will start to soften and wrinkle. At this point it looks ruined, but it

must be left to do it's thing and dry completely. Sometimes a milky effect may appear, but wait for it to completely dry and it will be clear.

Using this procedure is not absolutely fool-proof, but in most cases excellent results can be had.

