

Confessions of a Scale Modeler.

**By
Jon Bius**

In 1978, my family and I had moved to Tallahassee, FL. Our new house had a carport instead of a garage. On one side of the carport, there was a storage area about 4 feet wide, and as long as the carport was deep. On either end of the storage area were standard size doors. The door on the right was where my dad kept all of his tools and other assorted things that are generally stored in a garage or shed.

The door on the left, however, was mine. My dad built shelves on that end, and a fold down desktop. It was my model room. And for an 11 year old kid, it was just about pure heaven.

I can't begin to imagine how many hours I spent out there. I froze in the winter, and melted in the summer. I had a lamp hanging on the wall, so I often worked long into the night. Well, as long as my parents let me stay up, anyway.

During the summer, I'd leave the door open to try and let some air in. Of course, being Florida, this meant the bugs came in to. Swarms of them, attracted to the light, of course. So when they became too much to put up with, I'd turn off the light, turn on the light in the carport, and out they would fly. I'd close my door, turn on my light, and back to work I'd go. Sweat pouring off the end of my nose.

In the winter, there were no bugs thankfully. However, it wouldn't be long before my fingers would be numb, and paint would be too thick to even work with.

But I can't recall ever caring a bit about that. Because I had my place to build, to create, to live and learn history.

And what I'd give to have some of those kits back. My world was all about brands like Monogram and Revell, Lindberg and Aurora. Sometimes mysterious kits from far away would arrive with names like Airfix and Hasegawa. And I'd build anything. While I mostly built aircraft, I can recall cars and tanks and ships and even Darth Vader moving across my model desk. By my recollection, I know I built at least one hundred models, certainly more if you count duplicates and the ones long forgotten.

(Before we moved to Tallahassee, we lived in Valdosta, GA, near Moody AFB. F-4 Phantoms were stationed there, and a pilot lived next door to me. Who knows how many Phantoms I built!?)

Of course, it was much easier for a kid to buy models then. Mowing a neighbors yard would earn \$5. Christmas and birthdays meant a \$10 bill from each set of grandparents, and maybe even \$20 if they were feeling generous. And I cornered the market in my area on babysitting, knowing that it would mean an eventual pay-off in plastic.

With my hard-earned money in my pocket, I'd take a bike ride over to the K-Mart or Woolworths. Each trip would net two or three kits, several bottles of paint, and usually an Icee to cool off with before the ride home.

On occasion my mom or dad would even drive me to the model shop tucked away in the back of the toy store called Little Folks in the Northwood Mall in Tallahassee. That was really special. Models hung from the ceiling. More paints than the K-Mart ever had. Kits I'd only heard about from friends, or seen in catalogs. And Tom was there, the guy who ran the shop. He knew everything, it seemed, about modeling. (If any of you remember that shop, I'd love to hear from you!)

Looking back on it, I realize I learned quite a bit from those hours spent building models, and the hours I spent working to earn money for them. Though I didn't realize it at the time, they were life lessons I still apply today.

First, modeling taught me the value of working for something. My dad didn't have enough money to get me a kit every time I wanted one. Yet I liked building models- lots of them. So I had to find ways to purchase kits and paints and glue and everything else. Of course, mom and dad did help me out from time to time. But they were wise about it. Christmas always meant a really great kit from Santa- like Monogram's B-17 or B-29. One birthday, they gave me both of the Baa Baa Black Sheep kits from Revell- the Corsair and Zero. For the most part though, I had to earn it.

Modeling also taught me a lot about following directions. While modelers often joke about "who needs instructions", the truth was, I had to learn how to use them. Not doing so meant finding parts laying about outside of the kit that should have been inside! While no amount of modeling will make up for lack of instruction from parents in following directions, the hobby does serve as very practical reinforcement of the lessons a parent teaches. (Or should be!)

Another area that I learned from the hobby was problem solving. Whether it be trying to fit all of those interior modules from the B-26 inside the fuselage while I was gluing it together, or trying to deal with aligning warped parts, I had to learn ways to look at a problem and come up with a practical approach to solving it.

Painting really worked on hand-eye coordination. For example, I never understood masking a canopy. For some reason the concept eluded me. So I learned to hand paint canopies, keeping the lines nice and neat simply through good brush control. (At least they seemed nice and neat to me. But I do remember being complemented on them!)

Modeling was not always a solitary hobby for me either. Friends would often come over with their newest kits, paints and brushes. We'd sit on the floor of the carport, modeling and talking and laughing. I learned a lot from that too- especially helping friends who were new to modeling. Or learning to listen to other friends who were more experienced.

I think more than anything, modeling really helped me have an understanding of the lessons I learned in history class. It was one thing to read a few paragraphs about D-Day. But having modeled a Sherman tank with hedgerow cutter really brought the subject to life. And the sciences were reinforced to, whether it was relating physics concepts to an airplane's flight, or getting a 100 on a report on the Space Shuttle because I was able to hold a small one in my hands to really understand the subject, modeling helped me out at school too. (As long as I didn't skip homework to build!)

Today's young people could learn these lessons too, if they'd put down their iPhones long enough to try something new. Today's world is a world of instant gratification. Rarely is time spent on any one task for long. And tasks requiring critical thought and patience are almost unheard of for many young people. (And I do not count staring at the TV with game controller in hand as critical thought!)

Even many of the "kits" today aimed at the younger crowd reflect this. Many are pre-painted, with only a few minutes for assembly required. While it certainly gets you a shelf full of builds, little is learned, and the kind of satisfaction you can get from completing a task you've really poured yourself into is sadly lacking.

Introduce modeling to your kids, or nephews, or the neighbors kids. Show them the joy that can be had from it. See the hobby as not just a way to pass time, but as a way to help others grow. I've been able to share that joy with my son. Though he's a junior in college now, he still models with me when he's home. And I see him using many of the practical lessons from modeling in his life.

Most of all, modeling should be fun. If nothing else, pass that on to your kids. While many pastimes grab kid's attention today, few can boast a tangible result based on hard work like modeling can.

Now, you must excuse me. The 12 year-old in me is calling me to the model desk. I have a Spitfire to build!

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