

## F4F-3 WILDCAT CONVERSION



### Turning the Tamiya Wildcat F4F-4 into an F4F-3 using the Just Plane Stuff conversion kit

By Mike Hanlon

Back in 1994, Tamiya helped kick off the golden age of 1/48 scale modeling by introducing the F4F-4 Wildcat. Modelers all over the world rejoiced! (Or at least I did.) Now all we (I) needed was a -3. While not numerically significant, the -3 was the Navy's main line of defense for the first six months of the war. It also had those snazzy red and white stripes on the tail. Time passed and Tamiya never got around to following up the original release.

Enter Just Plane Stuff (JSP) and their -3 resin conversion released in early 2002. The set includes a one-piece wing to replace the -4 wing in the Tamiya kit as well as a new crankcase cover, four different cowling pieces, two replacement oil coolers, a seat with lap belts molded on and eight resin gun barrels. The wing has an aluminum spar cast into it for stiffness. Even so my wing was warped downward on one side. Dipping the wing in hot water and gently bending it upward restored the proper dihedral. JSP also includes instructions describing how to go about converting the Tamiya kit to a -3.

Before describing the conversion, a word on the Tamiya Wildcat kit. Without a doubt this is one of the nicest kits on the market. Once the major subassemblies have been glued together, it is possible to snap the kit together. The only shortcoming of the kit is the lack of variety in markings. During its career, the -4 was painted in Blue-gray over Aircraft Gray. As boxed by Tamiya, there are no other schemes available. So you can build a fleet of -4s in Blue-gray over Gray with stars in a blue circle with variations in the color of the modex numbers, some in white, some in black. Operation Torch Wildcats off of the USS Ranger had a yellow surround applied around the fuselage insignia. The point of this is that you can build a ton of Wildcats but they will all look essentially the same.

-3s were supplied to the US Navy beginning in 1940. They were the last Navy fighters to be flown in the colorful pre-war scheme of yellow wings and silver fuselages. -3s were supplied to the Royal Navy and flown as Martlet IIIs. Originally shipped in overall Aircraft Gray, these aircraft served in East Africa and were eventually repainted

in Midstone over Azure Blue.

This was my first resin conversion, so I was cautious when starting. The first order of business was to clean the wing of casting marks and flash. JSP obviously used the Tamiya wing to make their master, after lightly sanding the leading edges of the wing I discovered that I needed to fill seam left from the original Tamiya parts. The wheel well areas also had a little flash that needed to be carefully removed. JSP filled the Tamiya wing and rescribed it to represent the -3. Some of the raised detail was a little heavy for my taste and was sanded down. To be fair, the raised detail on the original Tamiya parts is also heavy. The resin surface of the wing is a little rough, so I primed it with Gunze Sangyo Resin Primer, in retrospect I should have used Mr. Surfacer 500 or 1000 as the wing still has some minor pitting in it.



Once the wing was primed, I set it aside and began working on the kit parts. As I stated above, the kit parts have some details molded a little too heavily. Prominently molded on the fuselage are rivets. Real Wildcats were not flush riveted and so they had raised rivets, Tamiya chose to replicate those rivets on the fuselage. I chose to sand them down; they just look too big to me. At this time I also cut a slot into each fuselage wing root to allow clearance for the aluminum wing spar.

The interior parts were painted Bronze Green which is close to FS# 34092. PollyScale has this color included in a set of US Interior colors. They do not sell this color separately, but their RAAF Foliage Green is very close. Although JSP includes a resin seat with lap belts, I thought the detail looked a little soft so I went with a replacement seat from Ultracast. If you chose to use a seat other than Tamiya's you will have to figure out a way to mount it. The seat in the Wildcat was attached to rails along the armor plate, the Tamiya seat has tabs on the back of the seat, and neither JSP nor Ultracast include these attachment points. After I painted the interior, I glued a couple of sheet styrene spacers to the bottom of the seat to raise it the proper height. The interior was painted following the Tamiya instructions. JSP has molded the lower cockpit interior into the center section of the wing. This is an improvement over the Tamiya parts which include a floor, Wildcat cockpits didn't have a floor. The wing's interior section was painted and the remaining cockpit pieces were attached with superglue. I had previously glued the fuselage halves together and now taped the wing and fuselage together to make sure that the interior and wing were properly aligned.

Once the interior had set, I untaped the fuselage halves and glued them together. By waiting to assemble the fuselage, I gave myself the chance to adjust the fit of fuselage to the resin wing. It wasn't

necessary in this case, but I wanted to leave myself the option. I then super glued the fuselage to the wing. Once this had set, there were some minor seams to fill along the forward joint.

The last part of the conversion was the most disappointing, the cowl pieces. JSP includes two cowling fronts, with and without intake, and two rear sections, the early style with two cooling flaps and the later style with six flaps. By mixing and matching you can do any -3 Wildcat, unfortunately the rear section was too small and left the engine firewall showing. The cowl should be wider than the fuselage. I don't know if had a bad piece, but after looking at other online builds, I noticed that the cowl piece seemed to be undersized on the other examples as well. Tamiya's -4 includes a one piece cowl with six flaps and the air intake. This configuration was never used on the -3. I sanded the intake off and polished the cowl, instant -3 cowl. I sincerely hope that this can be corrected in future sets.



Enough whining time for painting, Wildcats were finished in Blue-Gray over Gray. I used PollyScale Light Gull Gray FS# 36440 for the undersides and Aeromaster Blue-Gray for the upper surfaces. There is no Federal Standard corresponding to Blue-Gray. Some photographs show it as being a dark color, while others show it as a lighter color. I have found PollyScale's version to be too light for my taste, but I like Aeromaster's version very much. Tamiya's mixing instructions for Blue-Gray come close to the Aeromaster color. I left the landing gear, rudder and tailplanes off the model while painting; they will all click into place later. After painting, I attached the tailplanes and landing gear. I first assembled the landing gear with superglue and after it had dried, literally snapped it into place. The mounting holes on the resin wing were every bit as good as those on the Tamiya wing.

The aircraft was glossed with Future and applied the decals; I used SuperScale Sheet 48-723. Given the cowling problems, I could not use my first choice, which was Ens. Scott McCusky's aircraft as it had the two-flap cowl. SuperScale's illustration shows it with the six-flap cowl, but this is incorrect. The two remaining choice were Lt. Butch O'Hare's F-15 and Lt. Cdr. John Thach's F-1. I went with Thach's aircraft. The decals performed well and even the tail stripes settled down nicely after an application of Solvaset. I touched up some of the red areas with Gunze-Sangyo Flat Red.

Cutting Edge recently released a replacement propeller for the Wildcat and as I was already \$76 into the model I splurged and spent an additional \$6 on the propeller. Assembling the propeller was relatively painless and it does have a chunkier appearance than the Tamiya prop. The only additional parts to be added were the machine gun barrels. You will need four; JSP gives you eight just in case. I had previously drilled holes in the appropriate locations in the leading edge of the wing. The final addition was the pitot tube, which I fabricated from a trimmed down straight pin.

The -3 Wildcat is a significant aircraft that has been ignored by all of the major model manufacturers. Just Plane Stuff should be commended for releasing their conversion. At \$40, it is not cheap, but short of converting the -4 wing (a lot of filling and rescribing), it is the only game in town. I was annoyed with the cowl problems, but the fact that they actually produced them in addition to the wing speaks well for them. It would not be too difficult to convert the kit cowling to the two-flap version, and I may try this in the future.

