AH-6J, MH-6J, and A/MH-6M Little Bird Gouge.

With release of the newer ICM 1/48th Little Bird kits, I thought it useful to provide some hints about the full-scale aircraft that might help the modeler. This gouge would also apply to the older 1/35th Dragon and Kitty Hawk models done years ago.

There is no way to go into every detail regarding all the available kits. There are numerous inaccuracies with both the 1/35th offerings and the newer ICM models, but they will still build into nice renderings of the type.

Note that all US Army Little Birds were assigned to the 160th. We'll address only the J-Model and M-model versions of the type. The R-model is the latest version but not available in model form. G, and H-model versions are also not available, and could be made from J-model kits. Previous C models are also not available.

J-Model (AH-6J and MH-6J)

Configuration:

The unit never had any pointy-nosed versions. Sometimes Boeing, MDHI, and private users paint pointy noses black, put bench pods, and guns on but they are not the real thing. Check your references carefully. Both AH and MH versions of the J-Model had round noses and essentially the same airframes. Some of the internal wiring and avionics were in different places depending on the mission and aircraft assignment. For example, the instrument panel layout differed with the Armament Management System panel (AMS) in the AH. It occupied the space the MH used for navigation avionics.

Among other things, there were weapons wiring and other components in the AH that were not in the MH. It was much more complicated to convert the AH to an MH or vice-versa, but it was possible if really needed. We fixed that problem with the M-model.

Paint:

J-models were all painted flat Black for both AH and MH. None were ever the dark green of normal Army aircraft. NATO black can have a green tint to it in certain light, so it's not recommended. We all know how quickly black fades to various shades of grey. In smaller scales we should still do some fading, but we should avoid the quilt patch-work effect unless subtle. Highlight a few access panels here and there. Like any tactical aircraft, crews were prone to rattle can paint to clean up the look prior to a static display or to repair patches. Don't overdo it on such a small model even in 1/35.

Cockpits were also all flat black on all interior surfaces. Early on, some aircraft had OD colored mesh seats. Most mesh seats were black though. Unlike Vietnam era OH-6s the seat frames and floors were not grey but painted black also.

The engine compartment interior structural surfaces were always gloss white. They would slightly yellow around some edges, but you'd have to look closely. The upper inside surfaces of the engine compartment had heat blankets with aluminum tape covering. It was not placed on the firewall or engine doors though. Engine compartment detail is not important with the ICM models.

Rotor blades (5 Main blades and 2 Tail blades) were also flat black. They had no tip colors. They were never polished even though a smooth blade is more efficient. A polished blade would add to the flash signature in daylight or at night with ambient light.

Decals:

The J-model markings were black on black. Sounds dumb but it worked. Even with new paint, when you mask and paint black on black there is always contrast. Do not use the decals in the Dragon/Kitty Hawk J-models. The markings were never white or light grey. The J-model only used the full UNITED STATES ARMY in black. The M-models did not. Sometimes there is no clue as to where kit makers get their information. Why did ICM think the decals should be yellow? Dragon/Kitty Hawk made them white.

Thankfully no Little Birds had instructional stencils. No F-4 Phantom here. The only stenciling would have been on the rocket pods. The rocket pods came from Army standard stock. Some were painted flat black, but we left some in standard Army green. They were consumable items. Yes, you can wear out the pods with the amount of shooting done in the unit. Don't put rocket exhaust weathering on pods. They really don't WX that way. Certainly not with black paint.

Antennas:

They evolved over time. It's gotten worse for modelers with the later Little Birds. The line-of-sight antennas around the inlet fairing and doghouse were constantly changing. But do not make the common mistake by placing 2 of the larger antennas on the tail boom. Choose either the earlier Blade antenna like we had in Somalia, or the later X-blade antenna. Later M-models and R-models have yet another type antenna (and a lot more). All antennas were provided in black but not rough flat black. They were not allowed to be painted. They look more like anodized black.

Canopies:

Inside and outside canopy frames were flat black. The clear parts overtop of the pilots known as the “green houses” are not green! They are smoke colored. They almost look black from a distance, but you can see through them even at night with goggles.

Other Items:

The J-model had a single pitot tube mounted above the FLIR sensor on the nose.

The ICM kits have the exhaust suppressors modeled. Do not use them. The few times we tried them, all they did was start grass fires under the aircraft. They tend to rob some of the power too. Although we had Rolls-Royce 250-C30 engines like the MDHI 530FF we needed as much power margin as we could get. Thus, the development of the M-Model.

M-Model (A/MH-6M)

The Little Bird needed additional power margin and some updates to the avionics. The M-model was built and fielded to provide needed changes to extend the service life of the type. We took the current J-models and made extensive structural and drive-train modifications but retained the BuNos.

The M-model was powered by the Rolls-Royce 250 C30R3M full FADEC equipped engine, a 6 main blade rotor system, 4 blade tail rotor and a modified cambered vertical under the regular T-Tail. The cockpit was re-done with a digital Collins Cockpit Management System utilizing a 1553 data and weapons bus.

One of the key program objectives was to provide both personnel lift and attack missions with an identical aircraft. Unlike the J-model, all M-Model Little Birds have the same configuration, hard points, and wiring regardless of unit mission the aircraft was assigned to. If the units needed to trade aircraft around, they now could by simply adding or removing a few boxes and external stores.

We purposely chose to rename the official type as the A/MH-6M not AH-6 or MH-6 (think F/A-18).

Paint:

The standard Flat Black overall was retained. We did test 2 grey schemes on the M-model. One used a 2-tone grey like some previous Marine Cobras, and the other an all dark grey. Note that the Kitty-Hawk boxing of the M-model has a 2-tone grey scheme with decals for tail number 377. That is correct. 377 was our first M-model and was used for the grey testing. It was the only one ever done in that scheme. The aircraft was quickly returned to

its original black after the test. There was no doubt nothing is better than black for a night fighting aircraft.

All coloring was the same as the J-model with all black interiors, rotor blades, and the gloss white engine compartment. Little Bird blades from the OEM are provided all black.

The seats had new black cushions and became stroking seats with block 2.0 M-models. It would be hard to see a difference on the model, but the seats were no longer mesh. Eventually armor panels were added but it is not obvious where. We won't go into that detail.

Decals:

The markings were changed from the full UNITED STATES ARMY to only U.S. ARMY. The long text took up the whole length of the tail boom and was harder on crews to keep looking good. It was changed to a shorter US ARMY and done in contrasting dark grey. The BuNo on the doghouse, nose, and tail were also dark grey. Not white, green, baby poop yellow, or any other color. Always use the Mil Spec Army font or it looks bad and is way wrong like nails on a chalk board.

Antennas/Lights:

The unit fielded the M-Model in 2002. They are still in active service. That means there is no way to detail the many changes to the antenna array on the Little Bird. Use the internet but be sure you are not looking at an AI Image. AI has renderings that are completely fabricated. There are enough legit pictures. The key obvious antenna is the one on the tail boom. Use only the X-Blade or most recently the eggbeater. No antennas on the T-tail sections at all. The anti-collision light was one element instead of two elements and mounted below the tail rotor on the lower vertical. Don't use the colored plastic position lights in the ICM kits. Only use the belly and tail anti-collision ones.

Canopies:

Same as the J-model. No green "Greenhouses" please. Smoke colored on M's also.

Other Items:

The FLIR sensors have changed at least three times. Choose based on photos. Also note later M-models had dual pitot tubes mounted next to the FLIR mounts They were bare aluminum colored, and probably big enough to be on a B-52. That's another story.

Look closely under the belly and note later block 2.2 M-models had a new belly fairing. Don't add it if you're doing an Iraq war version of the 2000's.

The external carry-through stores mounts (we call Planks) evolved as well. The Gunship plank was above the floor on struts and one piece with folding sections outboard of the gun mounts. The MH plank was mounted to the floor flush and had folding benches (also called planks).

Final Notes:

Do not bend or over droop the main rotor blades. Unfortunately, many helicopter modelers tend to add way too much bend in the rotors. Most helicopter rotor blades can not bend or curve very much toward the ground. Both metal and composite blades have full length spars that would break or crack with that much curve. Some Russian helicopters might have considerable droop but avoid the bent blade look. Blade tips aren't that heavy.

The Little Bird blades have a very shallow droop. Most of the slight curvature happens within the first 3 feet from the rotor hub. If you place a blade over the tail boom it should be parallel to the top tail boom surface for its length. No more.

The aircraft sits 4 degrees nose high on the ground. That puts the rotor mast roughly perpendicular to the ground. The tail boom is angled slightly down toward the tail. It does not sit parallel to the ground. Decals on the aircraft should be parallel to the reference line of the aircraft centerline along the boom. Adjust the model's skids to get the proper look sitting on the ramp.

Conclusion

That's probably way more detail than a modeler might want or need. Get the coloring correct, replace decals with proper masks, Smoke the greenhouse, and put only the proper slight droop in the blades and you'll have a decent Little Bird with these kits. All the other inaccuracies in the kits can be overlooked if the basics are good. Throw the decals away.

By-the-way, while we were on the original USS America in the 90's, only ship's company or Pri-fly called them "Killer Eggs". No one else does, including no one in the community.

Cheers!