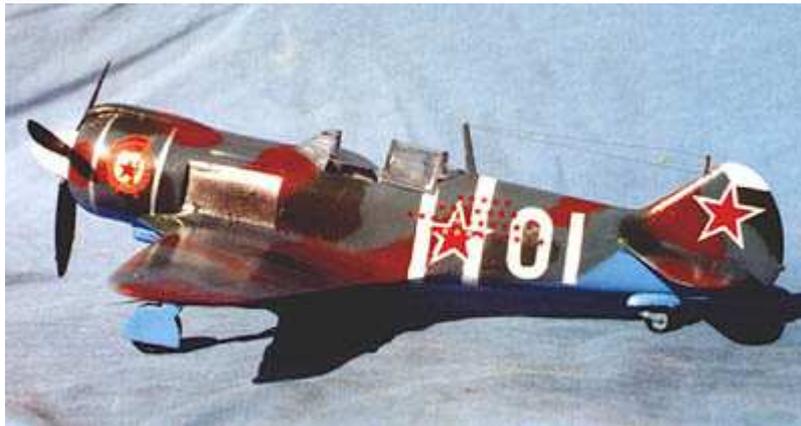


Kitbashing A Lavochkin La-5FN

By Tom Cleaver

THE AIRPLANE



Semyon Lavochkin's La-5FN was arguably one of the two best Soviet fighters of the Second World War, the other being its successor, the La-7. At low to medium altitudes, where almost all air combat took place on the Eastern Front, the La-5FN could out-maneuver the Focke-Wulf Fw-190. The top-scoring Allied ace of the war, Ivan N. Kozhedub, claimed all 62 victories while flying Lavochkin fighters, downing 4 Bf-109s during Operation Citadel north of Kursk in July 1943, and claiming his last victim, a Messerschmitt Me-262A jet fighter, on February 15, 1945. Soviet factories built 9,920 La-5 series fighters between July 1942 and November 1944, with an additional 5,905 La-7s when production ceased in December 1945.

The original design was the LaGG-3, an overweight in-line fighter which gained the nickname "varnished guaranteed coffin" among its pilots; this was mostly due to the haste with which it had been put into production before the bugs had been worked out of the design, but there was nothing that could solve the problem of not enough power, until the team received orders to redesign the fighter to take the M-82 radial engine, which had roughly 40 percent more power than the M-105 engine that powered the LaGG-3. This redesign was accomplished by Semyon Mikhailovich /alezeyev, Lavochkin's deputy. Conversion work began immediately after the design bureau was evacuated from Moscow to Nizhny-Novgorod in the fall of 1941. From the outset, the La-5 had its armament increased to two 20mm ShVAK cannon in the upper fuselage.

The prototype La-5 took to the air in March 1942, and production began that July. By Western standards, the La-5 was an austere and unsophisticated aircraft. However, its wooden structure, lack of complexity and limited demands on field maintenance suited it perfectly for the role and conditions in which it operated with the Red Air Force.

The first La-5s were assigned to fighter regiments during the fall of 1942, when they were delivered directly from the production lines to the Stalingrad front; the aircraft saw combat on every major front until they began to be replaced by the La-5F and La-5FN in the summer of 1943.



The La-5F featured a cut-down rear fuselage and boosted ASh-82F engine, which provided improved performance above 1,500 meters, and the first of the series left the production lines of State

Aircraft Factory 21 at nizhny-Novgorod

in March 1943.

The definitive La-5FN (Forsirovanny Neprosredstvenno - Directly Boosted) first left the factory a week after the La-5F, and is considered a parallel development of the earlier version, rather than a successor. The ASh-82FN engine developed 150 more horsepower than the ASh-82F, and replaced the carburetor with direct fuel injection, and offered improved performance over 2,000 meters. The La-5FN was the first of the Lavochkin fighters to equal the performance of the Bf-109G-6, then the standard Luftwaffe fighter on the Eastern Front. While the La-5FN could maneuver with the Fw-190, the German fighter was still the faster. Only at high speeds did the controls stiffen up; the airplane being well suited to close-in high-g combat maneuvering.

The La-5FN first saw combat during Operation Citadel, and proved itself in the hands of the 32nd Guards Fighter Aviation Regiments, which took part in 25 aerial engagements during July and August 1943 and claimed 33 German aircraft, including 21 Fw-190As.

The la-5 was developed in conditions of total war, and its calculated combat life was shorter than its mechanical life. As a result, the wooden components were no treated with chemicals to inhibit rot, and the aircraft were virtually unusable after 1,000 hours' operational time.

THE MODEL

There is no even halfway good model of any version of the La-5 series in 1/48 scale. Falcon made a vacuform of the airplane ten years ago which was accurate in outline, but as with vacuforms of the time offered little in the way of resin or white metal parts to detail the model with, though it did have a good decal sheet which included an aircraft flown by Kozhedub. I haven't seen one of these in years.



Several years ago, Hobbycraft of Canada released an La-5FN and an La-7 in 1/48. Unfortunately, they got it completely wrong with the La-5, giving it the same wing as the La-7, the one place where the two airplanes differed radically.



A year ago I ran across a Hobbycraft La-5 kit at a local show, and also found the True Details cockpit set. I picked up both - they were bargains - and wondered what to do from there. A few months ago at another show, I saw the LTD LaGG-3 kit at a real bargain price. By that time I had picked up the new Squadron "La 5/7 Fighters In Action," and had realized that the La-5 was a redesigned LaGG-3. I decided a little kitbashing might go a long way toward putting an accurate La-5FN in my collection.

THE KITBASH

The one part of the Hobbycraft kit that is useable is the forward fuselage back to the point



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where the tail joins. Holding the left fuselage half of the Hobbycraft kit against the right fuselage half of the LTD kit, I saw it would be easy to graft the LTD tail to the Hobbycraft fuselage. This was the first step in the process, and easily accomplished with a razor saw; I used some plastic sheet inside the fuselage half to give strength to the joint.

Fitting the LTD wing was next, once I had assembled the fuselage. I used the lower center section from the Hobbycraft kit to fill the cutout from removing the radiator bath. With a bit of cutting and trimming, it was obvious the parts would fit.

I then turned to the True Details cockpit, painting and detailing it, then fitting it in position within the fuselage. I glued on the wing, and puttied everything.

After letting the putty set up for a day, I went at all the joints with file and sandpaper. When you are doing something this radical, never be afraid to re-putty and keep working on the joints. After an afternoon of this, I had what looked like an acceptable



La-5FN. I checked everything against the dimensions in the Squadron book and realized I had gotten it right.

WHAT AIRPLANE TO MAKE?

I had discovered a Propagteam decal sheet from Eduard of Soviet aces that included decals for Popkov's famous Lavochkin, along with a set of three view camouflage and markings plans. This was the one, since Popkov's airplane was painted so differently from the standard Red Air Force camouflage of dark and light grey uppers with blue undersides. His airplane had been painted dark grey primer, and then blotched in a non-standard pattern with brown and green. It was not hard to do.

DECALS

Unfortunately, the Propagteam decals are more translucent than they should be, so the white lets underlying color through, but not so much as to be unacceptable. The decals were thin and otherwise well printed, and went down well.

THE CANOPY

Unfortunately, the Hobbycraft canopy is completely wrong, being several scale inches too low in upper line, and the windscreen is incorrectly done. Fortunately, Squadron/Falcon did a vacuform Lavochkin series canopy a few years ago, which is perfect. I had, however, waited until the last thing to go get this, and it turned out the canopy set I remembered seeing at the hobby shop a year ago was no longer there! The project went into hiatus while one was obtained, but once it was, everything came together finally in an evening.



OVERALL

Coming from that generation of modeler who began by discovering where in the block of wood the airplane was hiding, I am no stranger to carving and cutting a kitbash into something acceptable. Nowadays, doing this can be an expensive proposition with kit prices what they are, but getting the two kits for \$5.00 each made the possibility of messing things up terminally an economically-viable risk. Obviously, the model is not of Tamiya or Hasegawa ancestry, and looks a bit more



limited-run than the usual limited-run model, but it looks right. I do hope that, now that the mainstream kit manufacturers have discovered that Soviet Second World War aircraft are a commercially viable proposition, we won't have to wait too long before someone makes a really nice, definitive

kit of this important and good-looking airplane. Are you listening, Accurate Miniatures, Tamiya, Hasegawa...????????????????



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