

It's plain to see hobbyist sticks to little details

By MARIE MCGEE



Eldred Mason uses a dental drill to design air scoops in a basic model in his workshop at his home in Livonia. In the background is a national insignia panel from a plane that a PanAm pilot gave him when he learned of Mason's hobby. (Staff photos by Bill Bresler)

Eldred "El" Mason has had a yen for the wild blue yonder ever since he was a 10-year-old kid making airplane models out of balsa wood in the upper peninsula mining town of Hancock.

That was 40 years and several wars ago, and things haven't changed that much except that balsa has given way to plastic, and he's a whole lot fussier with the finished product.

So fussy, in fact, that it's unlikely that he will tackle a model until he's seen the actual plane first-hand and then, whenever possible, photograph it inside and out.

THAT FACET of his hobby has led to some exciting experiences involving the crews and pilots of the 191st Fighter Interceptor Air National Guard unit stationed at Selfridge AFB Base in Mt. Clemens.

It's also turned him into a pretty good photographer and has led to his invention of an ultra-thin adhesive-backed foil which he markets internationally under the trade name of "Bare Metal." Not only has it been a boon to him in achieving a specialized finished product, it's been a big help to car modelers as well because it allows them to create fancy exterior trim.

But his fetish for authenticity occasionally backfires. Take his prized F-4 Phantom jet model that took about eight months to complete. It is so authentic that it cost him a first place in the International Plastic Modelers Society's national convention in Salt Lake City last summer.

HE GOT A third place in the contest because the exhaust area was so clean that you could see the plane's checkerboard insignia reflected in the metal.

"One of the judges told me later that I didn't get a first place because that area is never that clean. It's supposed to be dirty. But then I showed him the photos I took of the actual F-4s at Selfridge Field, and you can see the reflection of the insignia in the metal in the pictures."

Apparently other air national guard units are not that fastidious, Mason concluded.

A Livonia resident for the past 22 years, Mason, 52, operates a dental lab in Farmington Hills.

"WHEN THEY learn what I do for a living, people say it's the skill of a dental technician that makes me a good modeler. Actually, it's the other way around," he smiles.

He has borrowed a tool of his trade, however, in obtaining accuracy in his modeling. A dental drill rigged up in

his home workshop on Ingram Street makes it easier for him to modify the basic kit into a sleeker finished product.

It's a far cry, he recalls, from his early days of modeling from balsa wood.

His ability as a modeler was evident from the beginning back in his boyhood. "In those days, I'd get two kits from the dime store every week. They gave me both of them. I'd do one for myself and the other for the store for display purposes."

An AF veteran, Mason "flew a desk" during the Korean War and was stationed at Egland AF base in Florida, assigned to a busy supply depot.

"BACK THEN, I'd drive to Pensacola on the weekend and buy two or three dozen models and assemble them. I would always keep one or two on my desk. Before you knew it, pilots and other base personnel would come by my desk and wind up buying them."

Lately, Mason has been haunting the Selfridge Base more than usual. He's putting together a magazine article with pictures on how the squadron's unique black and yellow checkerboard tail area is done. When it's completed, he will submit it for publication in various aviation magazines. Several years ago a Japanese magazine published several pages of pic-

tures he took of the Selfridge unit.

The close rapport that has developed between the unit's pilots and crews has helped him in yet another hobby — that of developing scale decals of the various plane markings — which he expects to launch soon.

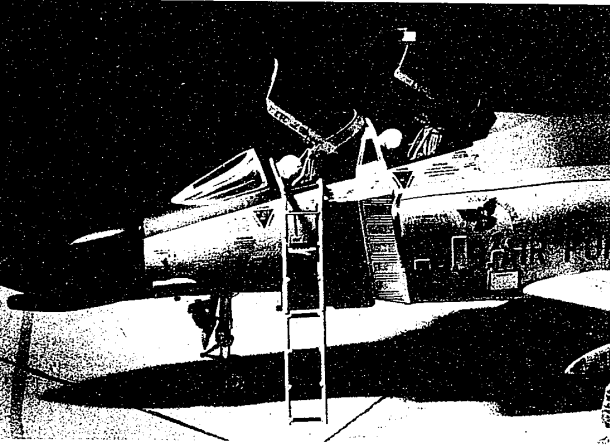
A spinoff of his modeling hobby came recently when Mason spent four days with the officers and men of the 191st unit at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida for the 1980 William Tell Weapons Meet.

One of the missions involved the hunt and chase of a Firebee drone, a small red needle-nosed aircraft which simulates an enemy aircraft at supersonic speed. Mason obtained permission to photograph the launch of a Firebee. Shortly after take-off from the launch pad, the expensive drone rolled over on its back and tumbled into the Gulf of Mexico.

Mason apparently was the only one who caught the incident on film, and the Air Force will use his film to determine what caused the mishap.

At the weapons meet, two officers of the 191st scored a direct hit on a Firebee at 10 miles high and eight miles away with a Sparrow missile.

Not only does the 191st maintain the cleanest planes he's ever seen, Mason said, but it's nice to know that Michigan's skies are guarded by guys who can shoot with that much accuracy.



Incredibly detailed is a good description of this F-4 Phantom jet that Al Mason created.

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