

## Special Section

# The magic of painting your own figures

**Keith Nairn-Munro** shares some of his expertise on how to successfully (and neatly) paint your own toy soldiers

**M**ore years ago than I care to remember whenever you picked up a modeling magazine it was full of page after page of adverts for castings. Names like Rose, Hinchliffe, Tradition and Phoenix fought for the attentions of the reader. To what the appetite some were in the painted form using matt colours but ultimately the point of the hobby was you were going to paint the figures yourself.

Running parallel to this and spawned from allegiance to the Britain's toy soldier style of figures were a number of small manufacturers producing castings like Giles Brown of Dorset Soldiers and Andrew Humphries of Great Britain and Empire Toy Soldiers to name but two.

The fusion of these two styles was largely pioneered by Len Taylor of Trophy who gave a level of sophistication to the toy soldier not seen before. Little did we know at the time this evolution would be the forerunner to the matt painted figures emanating from China which have come to dominate the hobby today.

As welcome as these figures have been they have tended to overshadow the individual's own creative involvement in bringing a figure to life. This 'hands on element' is a dimension of the hobby that now bypasses so many yet has a unique magic.

Surprisingly in the face of this tsunami of figures from the East we are still fortunate to have a good number of producers who make and market castings and this treasure trove is just waiting to be discovered. After a moment's hesitation I hear the immortal words ringing in the air, "But I can't paint so what's the point!"

Well how about I get you started! If you have never tried but could not get the hang of it, come and join me on a journey into the addictive and hypnotic world of figure painting. Successful painting is really all about good preparation (take your time), patience (don't give up if it does not work perfectly first time) and practice. Achieve these three aspects and your confidence will grow and there will be no looking back.

For people just starting out I always recommend commencing with a bandsman figure. The reason being once you have mastered the first one you have a painting guide for the other members of the band and the repetitious nature of the painting will give you good practice.

Of equal importance is that when you have



**These are the tools and glue you will need to prepare your figure**

thus chose a member of Prince Albert's Somerset Light Infantry Band from one of the many figures that comprise the range of Asset Toy Soldiers.

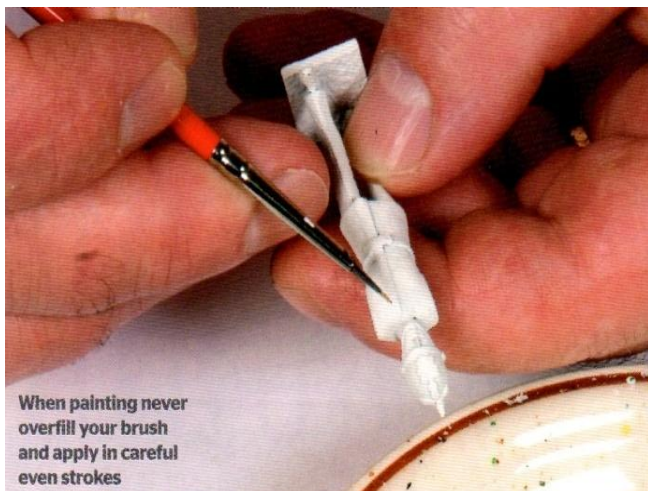
Whenever you receive your figure/figures from any producer the first and most important thing you must do before any other task is to check all the parts are there. In the case of Asset the attention to detail is superb with parts being individually bagged.

This is vitally important when painting the whole band as certain supporting arms are only designed to go with certain instruments. I ensure these are kept together until priming and then to prevent them from getting mixed up I colour code the pins at the top of the inside of the arms i.e. red for the saxophone, blue for the flute etc.

Once checked preparation can begin prior to priming. If this is not done carefully any casting line (formed where the molds meet) or blemish you

finished you will have created a colourful and engaging set of figures all from your own efforts!

To get us going I wanted to choose and bandsman that was simple and vibrant in colour. I



When painting never overfill your brush and apply in careful even strokes

→ leave will show through the paint and spoil all your efforts.

Therefore the first job using a needle file is to gently file away the casting lines on the bandsman. Remember do not use too much pressure when filing or you may accidentally remove important details. On this figure be particularly careful when you file the casting line on the left hand side of the jacket as it is very near the buttons, on the face and also on the badge on the helmet.

On completing this task I test fit the parts of the figure in case there is any need for adjustment prior to painting. Handle the instrument arm (if doing the whole band saxophone and French horn particularly) with care as it is easily broken. Check with the main picture for the correct angle of the arm/arms before making any adjustment.

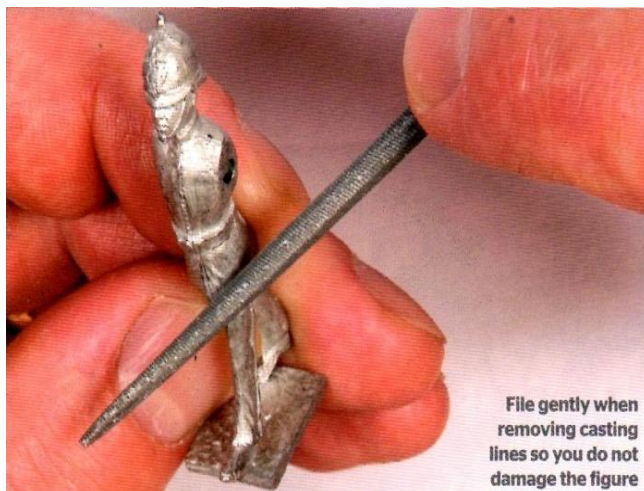
Sometimes you can stick arms or other parts to the figure prior to painting which is beneficial as it lessens the risk of later paint damage. In this instance I will paint the arms separately, as if attached now they would make painting some areas of the figure very difficult.

After all this handling I always wash the figure in soapy water to remove grease, filings and any other detritus that may have attached itself to the metal. Upon thoroughly drying it I spray it with a matt white car primer ready for painting.

Here are a few tips on this aspect of the preparation. Make sure you spray in a well-ventilated area such as a garage and that any overspray will not cause damage to other items. Cover your spraying surface with newspaper and then place on that a sheet of white copy paper (newsprint adheres to the figure when sprayed with primer).

After laying the figure on the paper start spraying clear of it about twelve inches above and draw the spray backwards and forwards. I tend to leave the figure overnight or at least three hours on a warm day until it is completely dry and then repeat the process on the other side.

To paint my Somerset Light Infantry bandsman I am going to use easily available Humbrol



File gently when removing casting lines so you do not damage the figure



A selection of makes of acrylic paints and brushes you can use to paint your figure

acrylics so I shall just refer to them by colour and number. One of the reasons I chose this figure is that the greater majority of the colours you need are standard colours which you will be able to use repeatedly thus keeping the cost to a minimum.

As we go through painting the figure I will give you additional options with regards to paint you may care to try but the Humbrol regime is ultimately all you need to complete the bandsman.

The main reasons I use mostly acrylics these days are they dry quickly, give a good range of colours and because they are water based are kinder to brushes. You can use gloss enamels but they do take a long time to dry, generally are more difficult to use and apply and are very hard on brushes. Even when you use low odour spirit the fumes and smell are invasive but ultimately the choice is yours.

Choice of brushes is always a bit of a minefield. The credo I always follow is not to buy cheap ones as you are likely to get more bristles sticking to the figure than are left in your brush. My personal favourite are Windsor and Newton University Series 233 which are nylon rather than sable and I will be using sizes 000.00 and 0 to paint his figure.

### Right so let's get started!

I use an old saucer for mixing as it is easily cleaned while my source of water is in a miniature jam jar. Make sure you change the water in the jar frequently as it will get dirty and may contaminate the purity of your lighter colours of paint. I also paint over a white sheet of paper with newspaper underneath as this negates any visual distraction when painting and means I can keep a very clean working area as when the paper gets paint on it I just replace it with a fresh sheet.

One of the down sides of using acrylics is as you mix it (the slower the better) the paint can form tiny bubbles. If you paint these bubbles onto the figure be care-ful to remove them as when they dry they will leave a small crater in the surface of the paint. If this happens use very fine wet and dry sandpaper to smooth the depression and over paint.

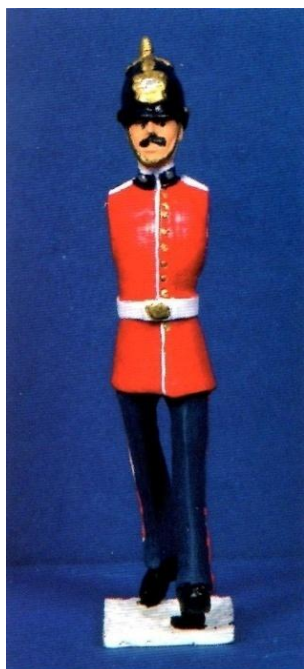
I always start to paint a figure from the top down which means you can hold the figure by the base with-out damaging any of your painting. It is just personal preference but I like to paint the face first



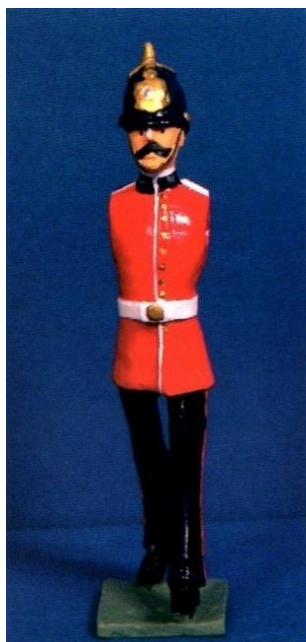
Face, eyes, blue helmet and black details undercoated



The helmet and cuff decoration and the brass areas are top coated while the jacket has received its first undercoat



Jacket top coated with white stripe and undercoated trousers



With the trousers top coated and the figure varnished it is ready for the arms to be attached



Back detail on the figure prior to the arms being attached



The finished figure with the arms attached and varnished

using Acrylic Flesh number 61 as it gives like to the figure.

However because the helmet on this figure can be a little tricky I am going to break my own rule for once and make that my first priority. As the colour of the cloth on the helmet is dark blue I use French Blue 25 with a touch of Black RC 401 or matt black as the under-coat. I use the same undercoat for the collar and cuffs.

As you paint under the brim it is very easy to get paint on the face. If this happens apply matt white over the blue first before you apply the flesh colour as this stops the darker colour showing through.

When you start put a little paint on the brush (00) and holding it like a pen apply in a gentle flowing motion. Less is more, like salt in cooking you can always add more but you cannot take it away. Therefore do not overfill your brush or you may cover important detail. If this does happen by accident just quickly wash the affected area under a tap, dry and start again.

The main thing is to try and get the painted area as smooth as possible so there are no lumps or bumps or brush marks. At this time also put the black on the belt buckle, buttons, chin strap and instrument as it will act as an undercoat for the gold/brass which will be applied later.

For top coating the blue areas you can use acrylic Midnight Blue 15 but you may like to try the way I

am going to go and use paint from a company called Golden Paints. The quality of their paint is superior to Humbrol as it has a more intense pigment and a finer dilution nevertheless it will require further dilution to reduce its viscosity. Although more expensive it does last a lot longer and will not dry out in the container. However of greater importance is that it gives a richness and enhanced finish to the figure.

Now we can paint in the flesh colour 61 on the face prior to what is probably the most important stage in the painting process, the placing of the eyes in the face. If this is poorly done the figure will always tend to look odd no matter how expertly you paint the rest of it. I start by putting a thin line of matt white in the eye socket and then carefully place a dot of matt black for the eye ball. If you align the dot with the corners of the figure's mouth you will place them correctly.

I have also found that if you are right handed it helps to do the right eye first as when you do the left you can see both at once and ensure they are in alignment. Now you paint in his mustache and hair (top coating in Golden Carbon Black).

Once all this is completed apply the white collar detail and the belt, gloves, epaulettes and V on the cuff using 34 matt white. I tend to top coat in Golden White but it can also be done in White but it can also be done in White 22. Once completed the

inside of the epaulettes are painted in blue matching the cuffs.

YOU CAN RELAX NOW! This is the most difficult painting area completed the rest is downhill.

The jacket is the dominating colour of the uniform and must be vibrant therefore I begin by undercoating it and the arms up to the elbow with red 60 with a touch of matt white 34. I have desisted from undercoating all of the arms because when you come to attach the arms to the figure using Super Glue Gel it is very easy for this to get on your fingers. If you then touch a painted surface the paint will come off on your finger. It is far easier just to retouch with matt white than have to rectify issues with a n undercoat or top coat. This rule of thumb is particularly pertinent when you come to paint much more intricate figures.

For the top coat, to save complex mixing you can go one of three ways. You can use Red 60 mixed with 34 white. If you are painting in enamels gloss bright red number 19 with a touch of white or the colour I will use is from the Golden company called Pyyrole Red. What-ever colour you choose I always apply two coats of undercoat and topcoat to ensure any blemishes are covered.

Painting the brass instruments, belt buckle, jacket buttons, epaulette buttons, chin strap, helmet badge and spike will afford you another opportunity to try a new producer. Windsor and Newton Artists Acrylics Antique Gold is sold in tube form and offers a very good compromise between gold and brass. However Brass 54 mixed with a little Gold 16 would be perfectly adequate.

If you use W&N gold ensure it is diluted properly and apply it in a one directional sweep for the first coat. Once the coat has dried you can apply a second coat. If you over paint the area before the first coat is dry it will lift onto the brush creating gaps. Once completed you can add a silver 11 dot in the centre of the badge to give it greater definition and paint in the collar badges using the same colour.

All that remains to be done is the white stripe on the front of the jacket and the white detail on the bottom rear of the jacket. The trousers (blue with a red stripe) and boots and instrument cover (black) are painted following the colour combinations already covered.

Now we can varnish the figure prior to attaching the arms as this will allow an easier brush action. The choice of varnish and finish is really up to you as gloss and matt varnishes are available both in acrylic and enamel variants. My personal preference is Humbrol gloss 35 enamel as I think it gives the best finish. Be aware however that if you apply it too quickly to a white surface, the white will take on a brownish tinge. It is also crucial you use it sparingly as residue can gather on prominent features again exuding a brownish tint.

If I am painting a band I like to do the brass instruments at this time, prior to attaching them to the torso as you can get into all the nooks and crannies. The varnish will also protect the paint from being chipped. Once the varnish is dry (leave overnight) we can attach the arms. I only use super glue gel as the liquid form is too runny and is difficult to control. I fill the holes on the torso with glue which means as the plugs on the arms locate in the holes an excess of glue will ooze out covering an additional surface area for adhesion. Sometimes you may get a little excess glue come out if this happens use a very small piece of paper towel rolled into a narrow cone to wipe it using an upward motion away from the main body of the figure. If you get any on the figure wait for it to dry, lightly sand with the finest wet and dry sand paper and re-paint the area.

When you have glued the arms if you find to get the correct stance one of the arms is not flush with the torso do not worry and do not force it! Wait until the glue on the joint is dry and then apply a little more glue which will fill the gap. You can either use the nozzle of the super glue applicator or a cocktail stick to undertake this process. We can now paint in the ruffs in white and place the blue stripes on them. Always start at the centre of the ruff and work outwards each way when painting the blue stripes to ensure equidistant spacing. Now we can undercoat and top coat the arms.

Finally we come to the base. The choice of green for the base fortuitously affords me the opportunity to intro-duce you to another make of colour. Vallejo paints have a very broad range and the one I am going to use for the base is Deep Green 970 lightened with white.

These are very good paints if you are creating a colour as they dispensed in droplet form. By counting the drops when mixing a colour you will be able to re-create it in the future. For example I will use ten drops of Dark Green to one of Golden White or two drops of White 22 for the base/bases. For undercoat you can use Dark Green 30 lightened with 34. There are numerous shades of green in the market so if you prefer a different one to the one I have suggested by all means use it. The figure is now finished so all that remains is for the arms and the base to be varnished.

I do hope this article has given you the confidence and knowledge to have a shot at painting figures. It is one of the most relaxing and rewarding pastimes I know where you dictate the pace and time takes on a secondary importance. Also knowing that many of the figures displayed in your collection are as a result of your own endeavours is immensely satisfying and rewarding.

So good luck and I hope this figure will be the first of many figures you will paint. 🍀  
Photographs by Peter Fallon

