12th Armored Division, Germany 1944-45

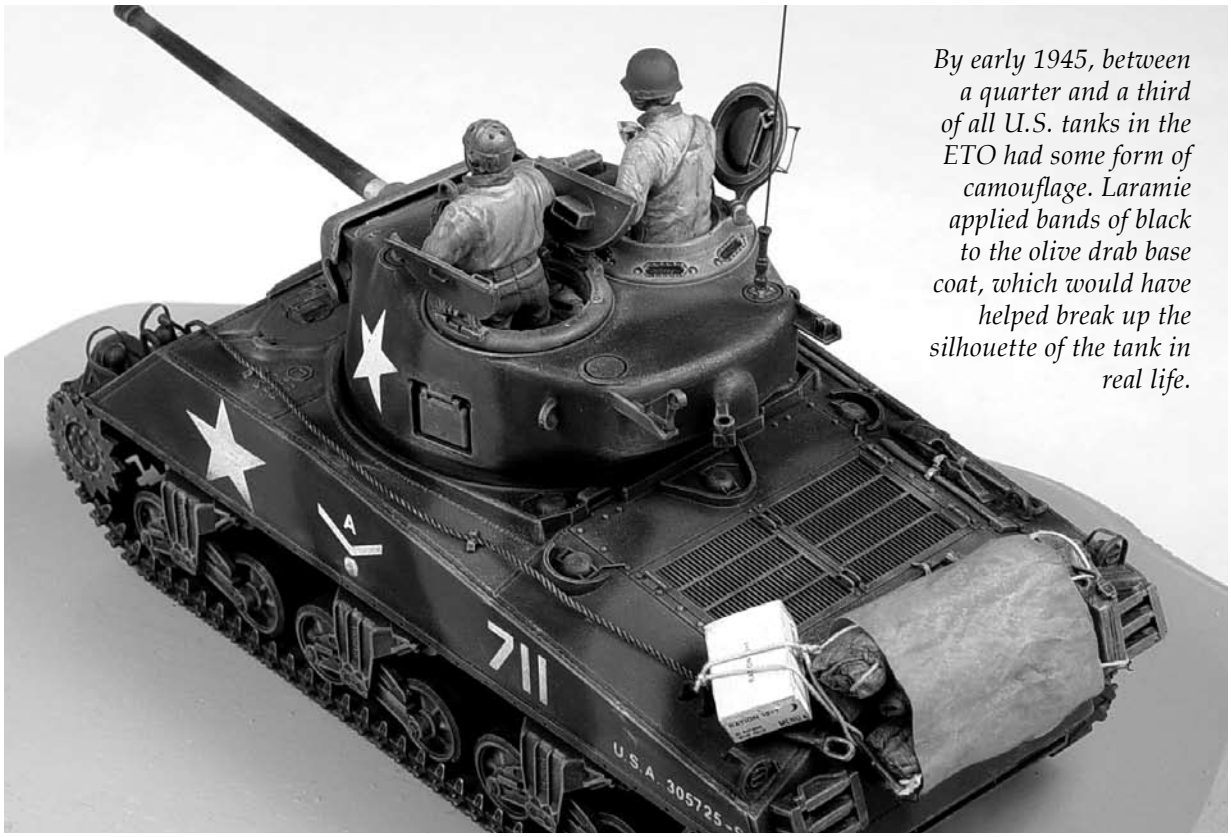
M4A3 SHERMAN

by Laramie Wright • photography by John Heck

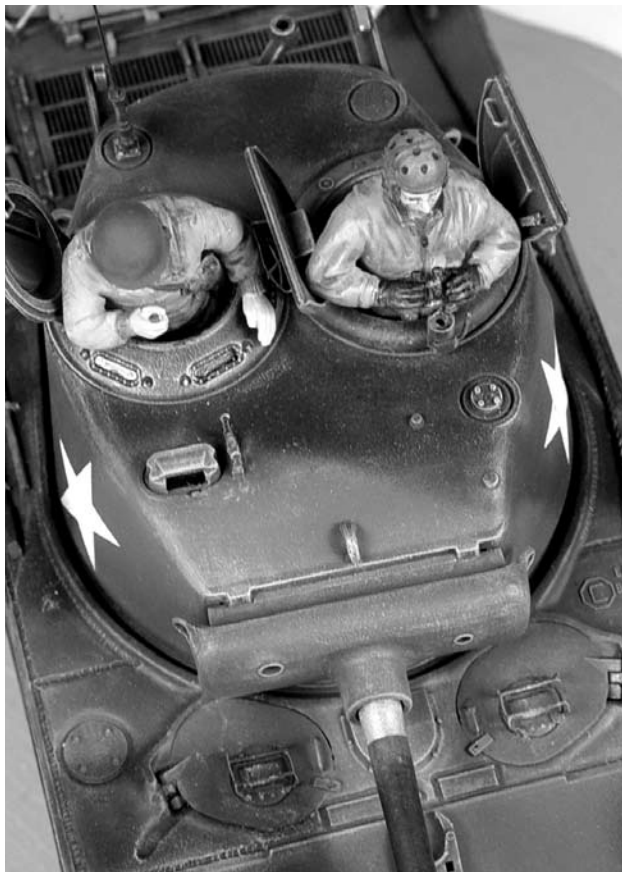
The M4 Sherman series was the most-produced tank family of World War II. While the German Panzer IV, Panther and Tiger surpassed it in many areas, it nevertheless served successfully on all fronts in all climates. The most serious shortcoming of the Sherman was its low-velocity 75mm gun. Against the German Panzer III and Panzer IV, the 75mm armor piercing round was adequate and its high–explosive round was highly effective in direct-support and indirect-artillery missions. Through 1942, 1943 and early 1944, the Army was satisfied and saw no need for a heavier gun. In fact, in late '43 the Army proclaimed the M4 to be the best tank in the world. Then came the very rude shock of fighting the Germans in Normandy.

The American tanks were knocked out in distressingly large numbers fighting in the bocage country, where ambush was the norm and every field and hedgerow was carefully sighted by the Germans. Worse, the Panther and Tiger tanks made their appearances in large numbers for the first time against U.S. forces. The previously renowned M4 was seriously overmatched and incapable of killing the German cats from the front angle. They could knock out the enemy at close range from the sides, but that wasn't the usual luck of American tankers. The courage and devotion to duty those young men

Continued on page 48



By early 1945, between a quarter and a third of all U.S. tanks in the ETO had some form of camouflage. Laramie applied bands of black to the olive drab base coat, which would have helped break up the silhouette of the tank in real life.



Laramie built up the cast texture of the turret with multiple applications of Mr. Surfacer 500.

1:35 M4A3 Sherman

Continued from page 31

showed, continuing to go into battle again and again against a technically-superior enemy while taking heavy casualties, cannot be overstated.

In early 1944, the Army in England had begun to receive small numbers of updated M4A1 Shermans intended to handle the new German tanks, armed with a new 76mm high-velocity gun in a new larger turret. In the run up to D-Day, the American Army commanders refused to integrate them into their formations, believing that the older models were good enough and afraid the 76mm tanks would complicate their supply situation. So they sat in England when the invasion began.

After a few weeks, it became painfully apparent that a bigger gun was needed. The first 102 76mm-armed M4A1 Shermans were sent to Normandy in July in time for the Operation Cobra breakout. The 76mm gun's AP shot was more effective, but fell short of expectations, as it could not penetrate the Panther's front glacis. General Dwight Eisenhower was quite distressed to learn of the less-than-stellar performance of the gun that had been touted as a world-beater by Army officials. At close range, though, it could penetrate the turret mantlet as well as the sides and rear of the Panther. The situation did not improve until early 1945 when the new HVAP (High Velocity Armor Piercing) rounds were available on a more regular basis.

Used with combined arms tactics, highly-

proficient American crews would use their Shermans the best they could against ambushing German tanks and anti-tank guns that generally got off the first shots. Painful lessons learned allowed the Allies to overcome the Nazis, though at greater cost than had been foreseen.

I built this model several years ago as one of a continuing series in 1:35 scale depicting Shermans of all U.S. Army armored divisions in WWII. The tank modeled represents a 12th Armored Division vehicle in Germany during February 1945. I was inspired by a profile in Steve Zaloga's book The Sherman at War. I started with an Italeri M4A1 turret that was mated to a Tamiya M4A3 hull to depict the late production VVS tank.

The Italeri turret is still pretty good, and with some detailing and a bit of work it makes a nice representation of the 76mm early turret. I added some casting texture to the sides and mantlet using Mr. Surfacer 500 in multiple applications to better represent the cast steel effect. I added several photoetch details including periscope guards, the commander's roof–mounted sight, stowage brackets and the .50-caliber machine gun stowage clamp.

I used scratchbuilt details for the hatches, including grab handles, head cushions and locking handles. The kit gun barrel can be reworked to eliminate a bogus step that was not present on the original article. When Italeri conducted the

A Hudson and Allen tow cable and MV lenses added detail to the hull and headlights. The figures are from Dragon's tanker set.

The kit's markings were cut from a white decal sheet or were taken from a railroad decal sheet.

research for this kit a restored M4A1 was used and it included a less-than-accurate restored demil'ed barrel that had a bogus step just forward of the mantlet. I considered using an aftermarket barrel but decided to use sufficient elbow grease and putty. The correction was pretty easy, but I would probably replace the barrel on a repeat project. There are some very nice barrels available from different sources that would enhance the general appearance of the kit.

The Tamiya M4A3 hull is a very nicely-done affair and, with a little work, looks super.

The upper hull was detailed using Eduard photoetch along with various scratchbuilt bits. For some things, photoetch is great, but it tends to be rather two-dimensional for bulkier, more complex items. I replaced all the light guards with photoetched parts. I added tie-down straps and brackets for the pioneer tools after removing the molded-on retainers for the kit tools. Hatch handles were made from brass wire, bent to shape and cut to size. Photoetched periscope guards were added to the driver and co-driver's hatches. I added a second tow cable cleat near the driver's hatch and a Hudson and Allen tow cable was run through the cleats and secured in a bracket on the transmission housing.

On the engine deck, solid handle blobs were replaced with brass wire grab handles. The dust skirts' mounting strips came from the Eduard set and were mounted along the bottom edge of the hull sides and rear fender stubs.

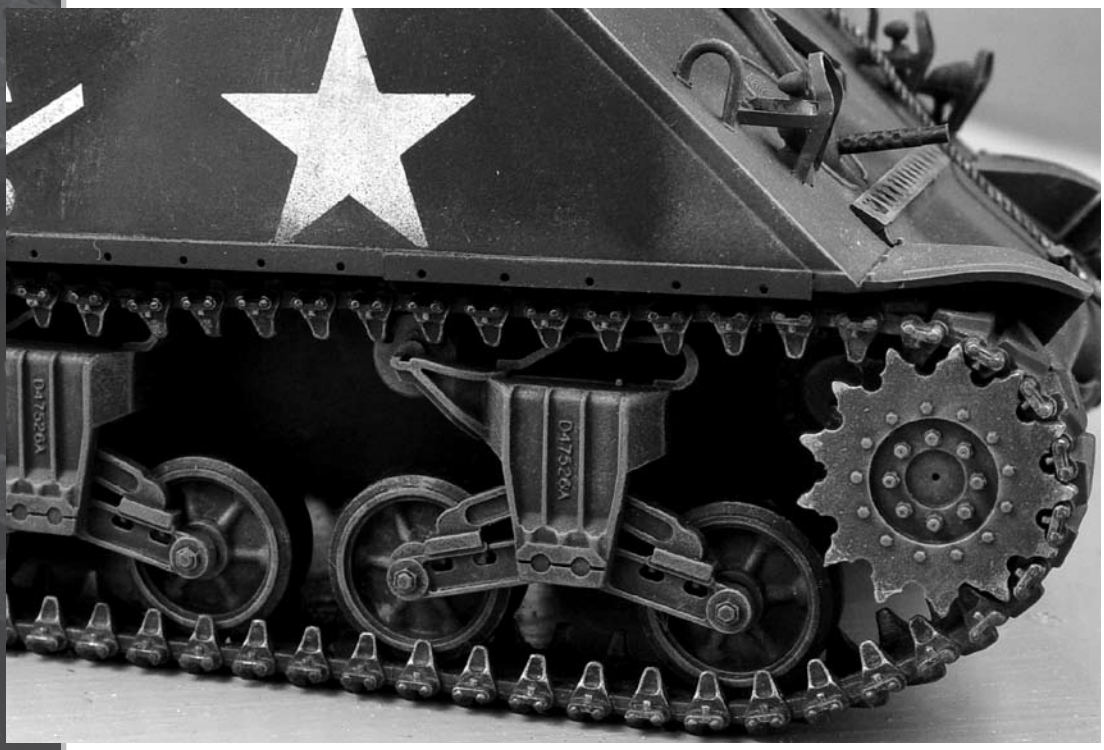
I closed the open lower sponsons over the running gear with plastic card cut to fit the openings. That is a critical tweak the Tamiya hull requires, otherwise an embarrassing see-through is left.

The exhaust trumpets on the rear hull plate were detailed and the tiny slits opened to more closely resemble the real exhausts.

As provided in the kit, the exhaust deflector is a poor representation of the prototype. The grill slats are too thick and the part is molded with a solid rear wall that would prevent the exhaust from passing through. I carved and sanded away the wall, then thinned the slats and the appearance was improved.

By early 1945, somewhere between a quarter and a third of U.S. tanks in the ETO were camouflaged, and that was certainly more interesting than plain old OD! I painted the model overall in Tamiya olive drab, then went over it in rolling bands of black.

I used Pre-Size rub-on white stars for the national markings. The distinctive unit markings indicate this vehicle is from A Company, 1st



Laramie used a silver artist's pencil to bring our wear points on the Sherman's tracks.

Platoon of the 714th Tank Battalion. The chevron and ball were cut from a white decal sheet while the A came from a railroad lettering decal sheet. The vehicle number "711" was obtained from a Superscale U.S. 45-degree numbers sheet.

The model was given a dark brown-black wash and drybrushed to bring out details. The undersides and running gear were sprayed a very dark brown and then progressively lighted with thinned tan. Afterwards, they were dry-brushed and dusted with pastels. Wear points on the sprockets and track were added using a silver artist's pencil. I added sooty exhaust stains to the exhausts and deflector. A final fixing coat of clear flat was applied to tie everything together.

I drilled out the headlights and added MV lenses. The radio antenna was made by inserting a four-inch length of blackened brass rod into the drilled-out kit antenna base.

Several items of stowage and an aerial recognition panel were added to the rear deck. On the offensive, Shermans were festooned with an astonishing array of gear, often looking like a gypsy wagon or rolling spares shop. This time, though, I kept it light.

I added two crewmen from the Dragon U.S. Army tank crew set, which is a really excellent source for mid- to late-war U.S. tankers.

I had fun building this one and it looks good. I will probably do at least a couple more M4A3 76's and when I do, I will add even more detail as my skills and references have increased since building this one.

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Laramie Wright started building models in 1964. He has been a member of IPMS/USA since the early 1990s and joined SVSM in 1995. His interests include 1:48 scale aircraft and 1:35 scale armor, especially Sherman tanks.

An identification panel (displayed away from the engine exhaust decking!) and a box of C-rations completed the cargo stowed aboard Laramie's Sherman.