

# Dassault Mirage IIIO

**History:** By the mid 1950s the RAAF was starting to think about a replacement for its Avon Sabres. The Air Staff began collecting detailed information about the new generation of fighters being developed around the world and had decided, in mid-1957, that the air force would order 30 Lockheed F-104s. However, before the decision could be formalised it was cancelled and more Avon Sabres ordered. The F-104 was rejected because it was too expensive, at about £1 million each and too complicated. The search for a Sabre replacement began again in 1958 with the Lockheed F-104, the Northrop F-5 and the McDonnell F4H (later F-4) the prime contenders, alongside the BAC Lightning. By 1959 the F-104G had emerged as the front runner and its order seemed merely a formality.

Suddenly the Dassault Mirage III entered the competition and quickly emerged as a prime candidate. It was a pleasure to fly, relatively simple to manufacture and operate and fitted the RAAF's requirements. In mid 1960 a technical team went to Europe and the United States to make a detailed evaluation of the Mirage, F-104 and Northrop F-5 and on 15 December 1960 the Australian government announced that the Mirage III would be ordered for RAAF service and that it would be licence manufactured in Australia.

The Australian version of the Mirage was designated the IIIO and differed from the French Mirage IIIE in 178 relatively minor engineering differences. They included such things as relocation of the radar screen in the cockpit, deletion of the doppler navigation/attack radar and replacement of the small rocket motor in the rear fuselage by more fuel capacity. The government made two major decisions about Mirage manufacture in Australia; preferring the Government Aircraft Factory over CAC as the prime contractor and deciding to retain the Atar engine over the possible installation of the Rolls Royce Avon, due mainly to the fact that the conversion to operate with the Avon did not offer any worthwhile increase in performance.

The first two Mirage IIIOs were manufactured in France and the first (A3-1) made its maiden flight on 14 March 1963. The following eight or so Mirages were assembled in Australia from components sent from France and the



first locally assembled Mirage IIIO (A3-3) flew from Avalon for the first time on 16 November 1963. Most later Mirages were made locally although a later handful used airframes imported from France when inability to employ skilled staff and strikes at GAF interrupted production. The final single seat Mirage IIIO was A3-100 delivered in December 1968. An additional number of dual-seat Mirage IIIs were also delivered to the RAAF. The total cost of the Mirage III project was about \$260 million; the cost of early aeroplanes was \$1.665 million each and later ones \$1.731 million.

## **The models - A3-72, 77 Squadron 1981.**

The first Mirages in RAAF service were flown with polished bare metal, but that didn't last long because of the corrosion problems that followed. Only the earliest photos show this

bare metal finish that could be replicated, but not with great ease. To overcome the corrosion problem the aircraft were given an overall coating of aluminium laquer and most images from this period of the Mirage's operation show this finish. The Hawkeye decal set AAF-34 is for a 76 Squadron Mirage from this period so that is where I started. However, the instruction sheet recommends the application of FS17178 that Model Master calls 'chrome silver'. I wasn't convinced about this and should have stuck with my earlier experience that Humbrol 11 silver is a good representation of the aluminium laquer finish. On went a coat of FS17178 and as soon as it was on I knew it was wrong, the model was so bright it almost glowed in the dark. I tried overspraying it with a coat of Humbrol 11 but it was still far too shiny.

White sprayed over silver comes up nicely so that was the only viable option. Fortunately I'd bought a Microscale sheet of Mirage IIIOs years earlier that included colours for an all-white special colour scheme and so the problem was relatively easily solved. There was the problem of the missile rails I had fitted, the under-wing rails came off easily enough but I'd secured the central pylon with a couple of wire pins and it refused to budge so it remains, accurate or not.

After a couple of coats of semi-gloss white the model was ready for its decals. If you can find the decal sheet (72-515) you would find it useful to also find photos of the aircraft it replicates because there are a few differences between that the instruction sheet shows and what was on the aircraft that were painted in this scheme. Most importantly, the decal sheet provides red, white and blue stripes to go under the wing where, I'm sure, there weren't any.

There was most likely a blue diamond shape under the wings that I fabricated out of chunks of the cut up blue under-wing stripes. The only addition needed are small A3-72 number to go on the rear fuselage that aren't supplied on the decal sheet but I made on the laser printer. The end result is an elegant little model.

### A3-3, 76 Squadron 1968.

Having decided that good ol' Humbrol 11 is the better choice for the aluminium finish I got it right the second time. Then I discovered a couple of problems with the Hawkeye decals. The most important is that the instructions are not very helpful and neglect to mention anything more than that the airframe is silver and the nose is black. Again a shuffle through as many photos as you can find is useful, and the first thing you find is that the details of the aluminium finish changed quite a lot over time. Most notably, in the early days the Mirages had roundels on the wing tops but later they didn't. There are also variations in the size of the black nose cone, the red markings around the intakes and the tail flashes. The decals themselves are fairly transparent so the set comes with white decals to put on the model to help them stand out. Most dismaying is that the red around the intakes and upper fuselage is quite imaginative but don't fit.

Fortunately, the Microscale sheet has decals for A3-3 that flew with 76 Squadron and although their red flashes are just as imaginative, they fit a bit better. More importantly, the decals settle down very well with Micro Set and so, with a lot of fiddling, I was able to get the red flashes looking very nice. The rest of the model used a combination of Hawkeye and Microscale decals. The only addition not provided in either decal set was some wing top roundels that I scrounged from the spares box. The end result is another very attractive model that may be more to do with the elegance of the real thing as much as my modelling skills.

