PART IV
Finishing Her Up

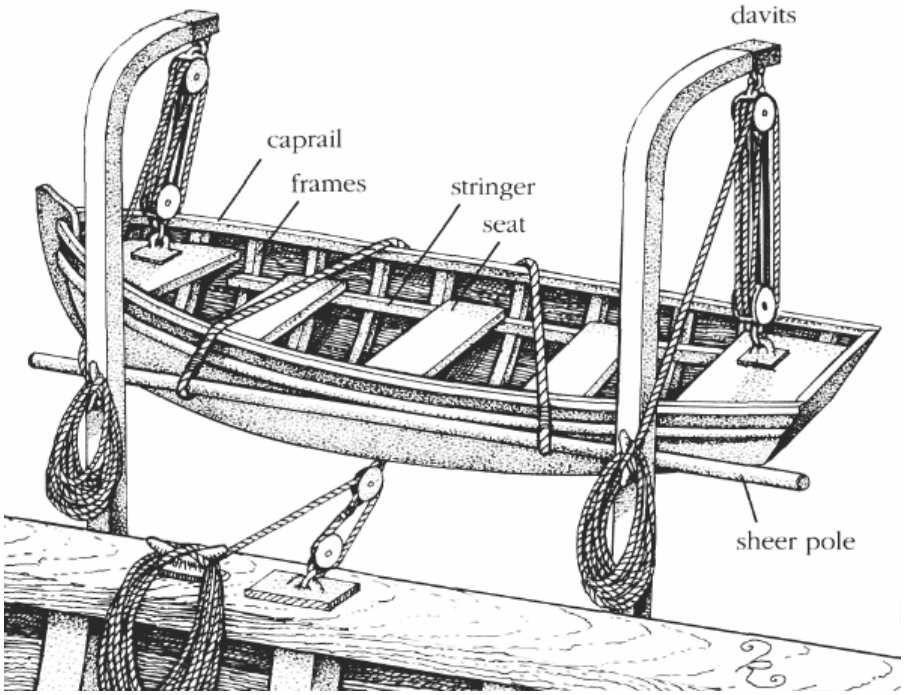
"Young Officers sometimes feel a diffidence in soliciting information; either from a fear of exposing their ignorance, or from an idea that such a request may be treated with ridicule. A reference, like a work of this nature, which can be consulted with privacy, will obviate the difficulty: it was not a secondary consideration in the prosecution of it."

— A Young Sea Officer's Sheet Anchor, *1819*

That intricately rigged, finely crafted model now sitting in front of you knows you by now. It's watched your moods swing as you waded through the process. A while back you were a nervous novice, tentative, unsure about what to do next. Now you've got a nearly finished ship model at your fingertips; and you're feeling good, maybe even cocky. That's fine, but don't get carried away; though you might feel like it, you're not finished yet. Stay with the cautious, careful streak we've been on since we first laid the keel. A silly mistake now will throw some unwanted gloom into a festive moment.

Putting the finishing touches on your model is a lot like the proverbial icing on the cake. The cake might be delicious, but if the frosting is slopped on no one's going to notice.

The final touches will focus attention on your fine work, not detract from it. A smartly fitted anchor, an impeccable paint job, and nicely appointed boats and davits set off by a flying flag — these



things can really add to your ship's looks. Take a deep breath and let's get going. We're almost there now.

BOATS, ANCHORS, PAINT, AND FLAGS

BOATS

Depending on its duties, a ship might have cause to use a number of boats — service boats, fishing boats, and lifeboats. Some of the simpler boats were flat bottomed, some were planked smooth, and others were clinker-built or lapstraked (like a clapboard house).

Most kits provide small boats; some are precarved, some are stamped plywood plank-on-frame. Some kits just supply plans and instructions. Let's take a look at some of them.

Most of the precarved boats are pretty good — just the right size and shape — but they require additional

work to make them look more authentic.

The first thing to do is to carve out the inside of the boat a little more. Use a small sanding drum on an electric drill at a reduced speed and then some gentle filing. Hand sand any rough spots, then stain or paint the inside.

Next install the frames. Make them from a thin wood strip; bend to match the curve of the hull and glue in place.

Install the floorboards and then the *stringers.* The stringers support the ends of the seats (or *thwarts)* and run parallel to the *gunwale*— the upper edge of the boat's side. Hold the stringers in place temporarily with small pins until the glue dries. The bow seat and the stern seat are made of thin (1 mm) plywood; cut the bow seat in a triangular shape and the stern seat in a "U" shape. Both can be planked for a better look. Bend the *caprail*— the top of the gunwale — along the boat's lines; drill two closely spaced holes in the caprail on each side of the boat midway between the seats and insert short pins in the holes to simulate *thole pins,* which accommodated oars in the days before oarlocks. Cut small wood triangles and erect them on the ends of the seats and against the hull to form reinforcing knees.

Now you can paint the outside of the boat.

Some kits will provide plank-on-frame boat kits. These can be very challenging — if not downright difficult — to build properly.

Why?

Some kits supply frames stamped on easily breakable 1 mm plywood. You also may find that some of the frames are so out of proportion that the finished hull looks like a cucumber. Another problem: you must remove the frames when the hull is completed, and this is no easy task. Then there are the frames that are too weak to support the planking. . . .

I am not saying that all plank-on-frame boat kits are impossible to build. Some can be constructed if you have a lot of patience and stamina. Following are some of the tricks that will help you accomplish it more readily:

- Make sure that the frames are cen tered on the keel properly before gluing.
- Cover the outside edges of the frames with masking tape so that the planks will not stick to them.
- Install a strip inside the frames as a temporary stringer to help keep the frames in place.
- Taper the planks just as you would on a ship model.
- Use double planking, making sure that the second layer of planks overlaps the seams on the first layer.
- After the planking is done remove the frames, sand the inside of the hull smooth, and install the ribs.
- If the boats look really bad, discard them and buy precarved ones.

Boats were stored on ships in different ways. Some were secured upside down on deckhouse roofs or on deck. The boats were set on two crosstimbers to avoid warping the keel and were lashed down with ropes to rings inserted on the timbers.

Some boats were set on cradles rightside up and lashed to the deck.

Some ships carried their service boats on *davits* — the arms used to hoist and hold the boat — fixed on the side or stern of the ship. A boat on davits will need blocks and tackles to be raised or lowered.

You can see a typical arrangement of a boat stowed on davits in the illustration on page 109. The davits can be installed either inboard or outboard. Some davits will swing inboard to stow the boat inside the ship. Davits were fitted with sheerpoles to prevent the boat from swinging in and out. In many cases, two lines ran from the pole around the boat, back to a block, and then to a purchase with the second block on the ship's caprail. There are variations on this arrangement; check your plans.

Some builders like to embellish the boats with in oars, buckets, and rudders — but it's not really authentic. On real ships this just wasn't done — they would all be washed overboard in the first rough seas.

DAVITS. Davits will vary with the ship and the era — some will be wooden, others metal. Watch out for the wooden ones because they sometimes are cut crossgrain and break at the slightest touch. If that's the case you can make your own, either by using your plank bender on a strip of wood the same size as the fragile kit davit or by cutting two halves on reverse grain and gluing them together.

ANCHORS

Anchors have undergone a lot of modification and improvement over the years — so it's important that you find the right one for your model. Again, a trip to the library will help. Some kits will supply woodstock that must be fitted around the upper portion of the anchor stock. After gluing the two halves together, you need metal loops, or something that looks like metal: Use thread or tape or even strips made from a sheet of shiny copper. Look at Figure 65.

Earlier, ships stowed their anchors outboard, lashing them to chainplates or to *bitts* — wooden posts — on the foredeck. Later the anchors were stowed inboard. The anchor was raised to the water surface by the *hawse cable* or *chain;* then it was raised to the *cathead* — a wood or metal beam at the bow — by, and this makes sense, the *cathead tackle.* Another tackle was then secured to one of the anchor's *flukes* and the anchor was hoisted over the bulwarks to its stowed position and lashed in place.

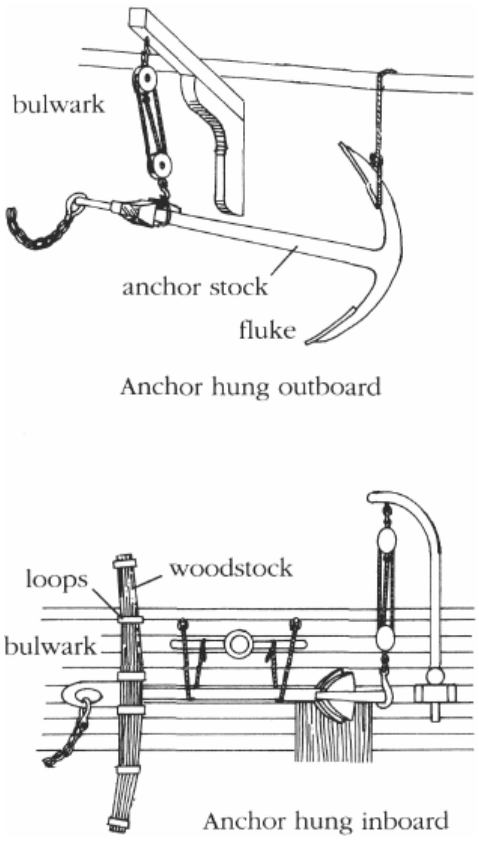


FIGURE 65. *Anchors— a finishing touch that deserves special care.*

FINISHING AND PAINTING

Depending on the period and style, you can leave your model in natural wood or you can paint it. Or you can do something in between — leaving it natural above the waterline and painted below. I prefer as much as possible not to paint a model. The beauty of natural walnut contrasted with other woods such as limewood, boxwood, cherry, mahogany, or ebony is really something to rest your eyes on.

Avoid shiny finishes for period ship models: Don't use varnishes or oils, for they attract dust like a magnet.

To give your model the natural, raw look of old, use acrylic matte varnishes (decoupage), which you can find in art stores. Apply a first coat, let it dry, and then rub it with a very fine (0000) steel wool. Apply a second coat and again rub it with a very fine steel wool. If your model is a more modern craft you can use acrylic gloss medium and varnish.

These varnishes can also be used over acrylic base paint for a deeper tone and protection.

Preparing the surface of the wood will lead to better results. If you decide to paint, apply a coat of acrylic modeling paste with a stiff nylon brush until it is smooth. Be careful here — the paste dries hard, like fiberglass, and sanding off rough spots is a tough job. But painting over a surface treated with this paste is a blessing; it can be sanded eggshell smooth, and it prevents the paint from showing the wood grain.

Use water-soluble acrylic-base paints. There are no vapors, no streaks, and no messy brush cleaning. If you have to use petroleum-base paints, confine them to metal or very small areas. This kind of paint dries too quickly and is

therefore almost impossible to brush smooth, and the vapors will not do much for your health. Here are some secrets for success in painting, especially with acrylic-base paints:

- Stir your paint well before using it. Pull out your stirring stick and watch how the paint drips off: You want a steady drip. Add a few drops of water if there's a slow drip, or no drip.
- Use only a sable-line brush; it won't leave any streaks on the paint.
- Apply the paint in one direction.
- Sand with fine wet-or-dry sandpaper between every coat.
- Apply a coat of matte varnish after the paint dries.
- Do not use steel wool on white painted surfaces.

Ships of the past were painted below the waterline with a mixture of tar, lead, or sulphur, which had an off-white color called tallow. You can reproduce this color by adding two or three drops of black and three to four drops of yellow to a container of two fluid ounces of white paint. Never use pure white paint.

It's a good practice to paint parts that will be installed on a nonpainted surface or on a surface of different color *beforehand*. If you can't, or if you forget, masking tape can help with straight lines and contrasting colors. (For example, painting the bulwarks.) But heed this:

Don't apply masking tape to any painted surface unless it's had at least two days to dry. For masking before painting, use Scotch fine-line tape, which you can buy in an autobody supply store; regular masking tape will leave a ragged edge. Do not remove the tape until the paint is dry. If you are going to paint around the inside frame of the gunports on the bulwarks, tape on the other side will prevent unwanted smudges around the edges.

STICKY BOTTLE AND CAN CAPS

Try to unscrew a stubborn cap on a bottle of glue, varnish, or paint, and most likely you'll end up with a broken bottle, a bent cap, or a bleeding hand. Why not take a minute and a jar of petroleum jelly and avoid all the pain? Just apply some on the jar threads and screw the cap on again. Next time it will unscrew with a touch of your fingers. You'll also seal out the air and prevent the bottle's contents from hardening.

FLAGS

Flags generally are supplied in your kit, often printed on silk and quite nicely made. But are they in scale?

Since flags are printed on silk or something similar, they fray when you cut around their edges. Apply a bit of

diluted carpenter's glue where you wish to trim and let it dry before cutting.

Never install a flag by wrapping its edge around the tip of a mast or flagstaff. Wrap and glue the flag around a halyard fed through a block on top of the mast and tie the ends on the deck. Flags should be folded softly to look natural. You can wet the flag and wrap it around the shank of a hair-curling iron for a few seconds, and it will keep the natural look permanently.