The Making of "Reflected Glory" by Steve Kerry

First you need to understand that I have Parkinson's Disease. That means I've lost the ability to sketch with a pencil, or hold a steady paintbrush. Everything I create now is done with the aid of my computer, which has been a tremendous help in retaining my sanity.

I build models in 3D, just as many traditional aviation artists will build Airfix kits or make cardboard models of their subject. These can be arranged to work out the composition and lighting before actually starting to paint. Sometimes my virtual models are fairly basic, other times they go on to be proper models in their own right.

I've had the concept for this painting floating around in the back of my mind for a while, this picture was cobbled together from flight-sim screenshots way back in 2006.

In 2008 I made a basic Lightning model for another project, and for a while I considered putting a boy on the nose of XN728, throwing a model airplane into the air. I was going to call it "The Last Flight" or something like that.

When the Manchester Aviation Art Society (MAvAS) announced the theme for this year's Avro Trophy Competition would be "British Aviation 1945-1965", I decided the time had come to actually do the painting.

I tried many compositions but kept coming back to this one, or something like it.


I created a temporary setting so I could play around with the lighting, this was going to be replaced later but I ended up using it as the final piece. This is not uncommon.

The Lightning model was given a thick coat of rust and dropped into the picture, the viewpoint was moved around and the sunlight adjusted until I was happy with it. Previously I would have transferred this onto a canvas and painted over it, these days I just save the final image to my hard drive.


I started a new file in Photoshop, dropped in the background image, and enlarged the canvas to 12,000 pixels wide. That's about as much as my computer can handle .

There is no such thing as "too much reference material" and this was no exception. Fortunately if you Google for "XN728" you can find plenty of images, I found 62.
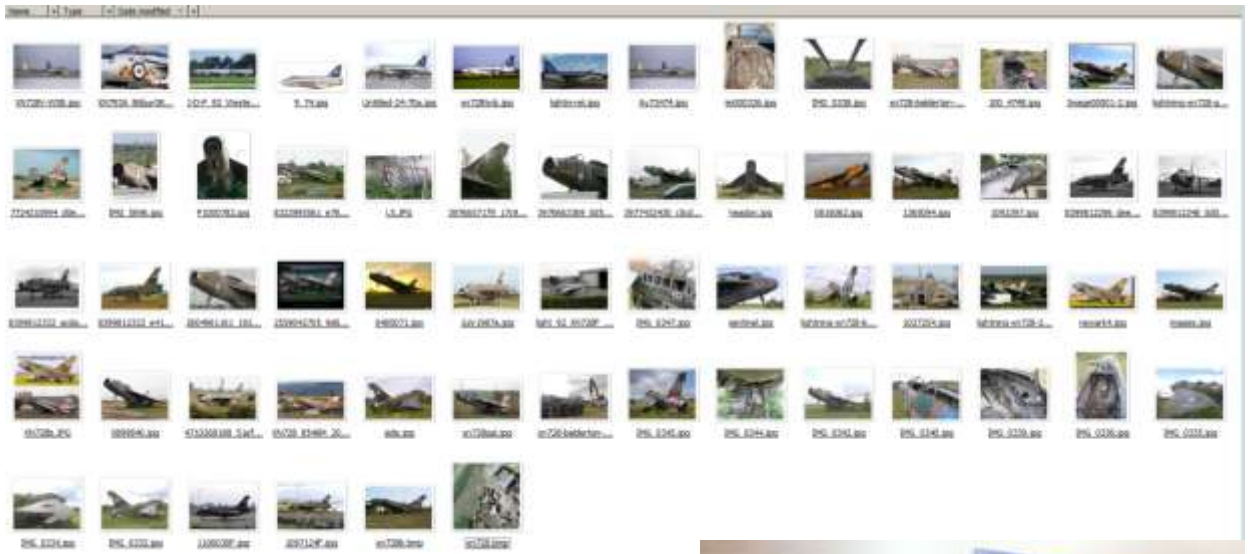
It also helps to have a good collection of books and magazines! I rarely came home from an airshow without a load of used books, I have no idea how many are on my shelves now. I'm too scared to count them any more.
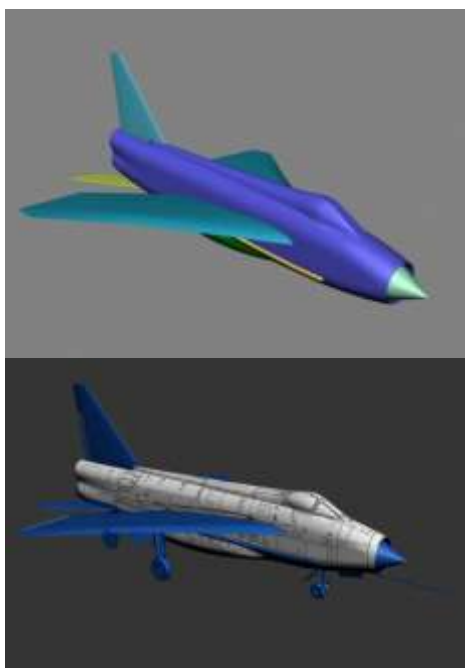

And this was pretty much the point where I realised I had set everything up with the wrong version Lightning (XN728 was an F2A). Doh! I didn't fancy starting again so I added some detail to an F6 (the nearest thing I had to an F2A) and simply adjusted the painting as I went along.

The photos showed XN728 had a dark green paint job on arrival, so I started there. I soon realised that was going to be pointless since the green wasn't really there any more – why spend time painting something that will just be overpainted later? Start again.

Start #2 – This time I decided to tackle each panel individually, rather than painting the whole fuselage as one piece and then painting the panel lines in. The approach would have probably worked for a smooth skinned airplane but not for the rusted, grungy finish I was after. Start again.
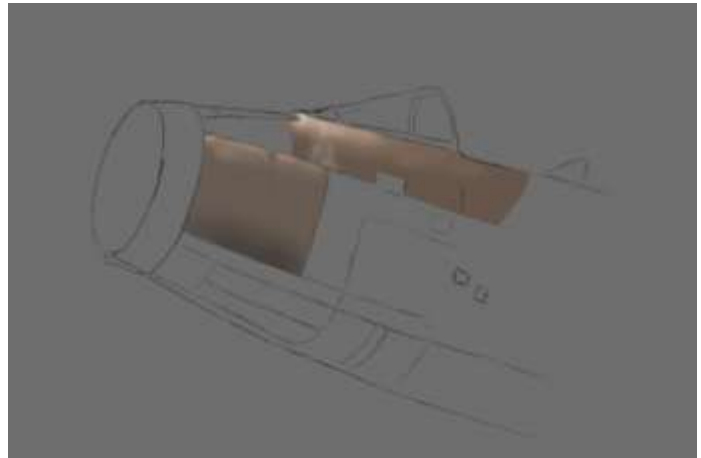

Start #3 – I created a little pile of paint blobs, each one taken from the general area I wanted to work on. I used this as my brush and scribbled it across several fuselage panels, then smeared the colours together with the digital equivalent of finger painting. That finally gave me the look I was after, so I spent the next day or two scribbling, smearing, and scribbling again.

An example of the loose detail, in this case
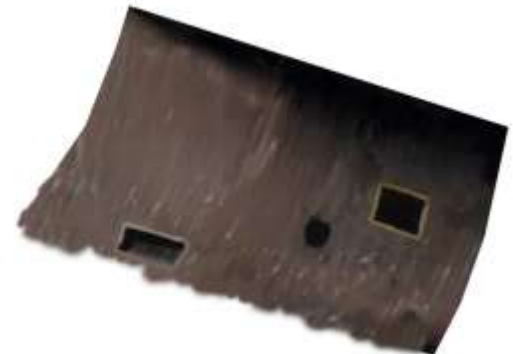adding a few holes under the wing root
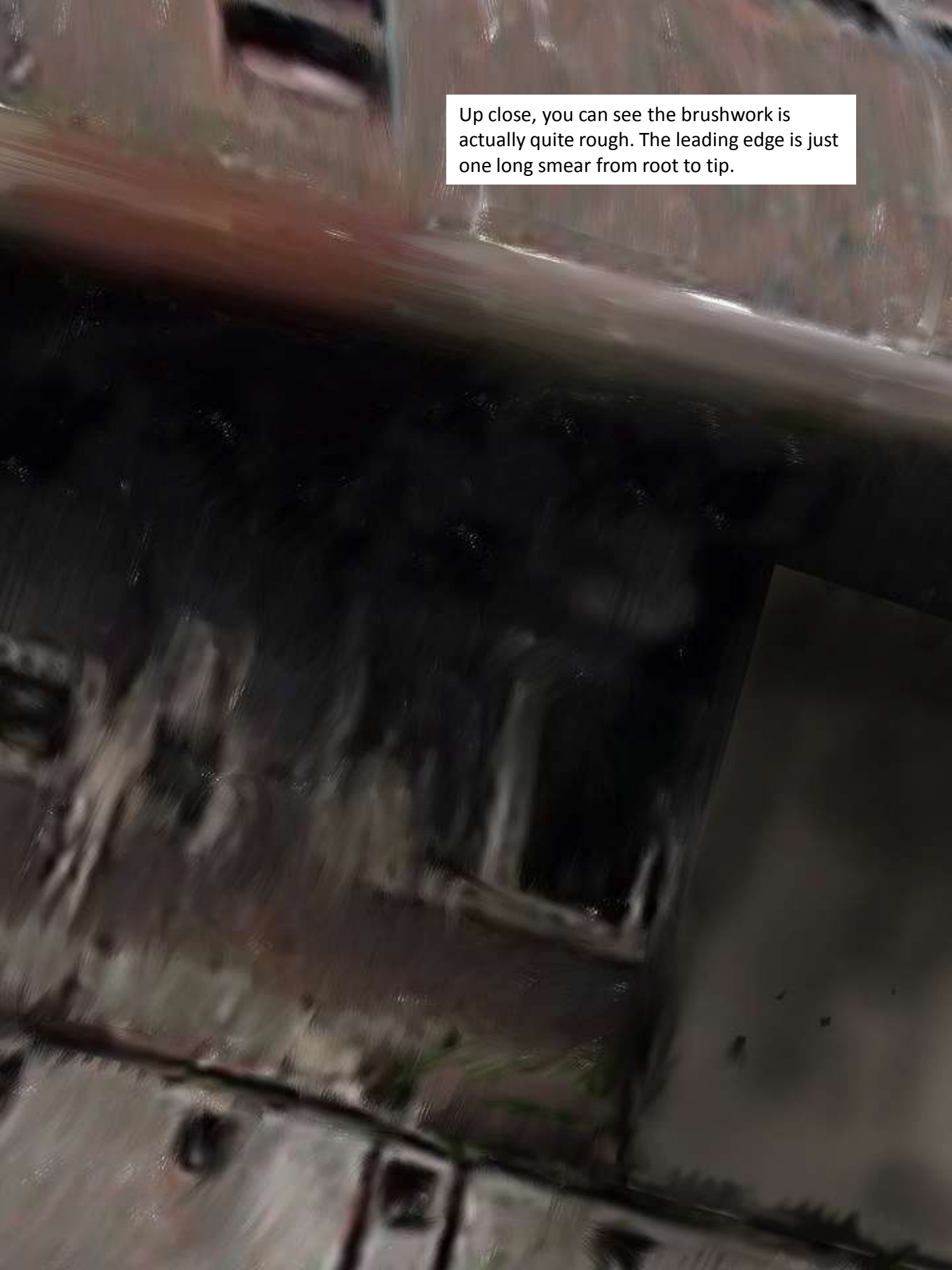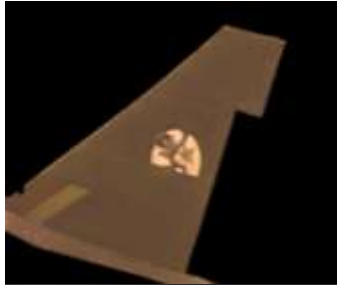

1
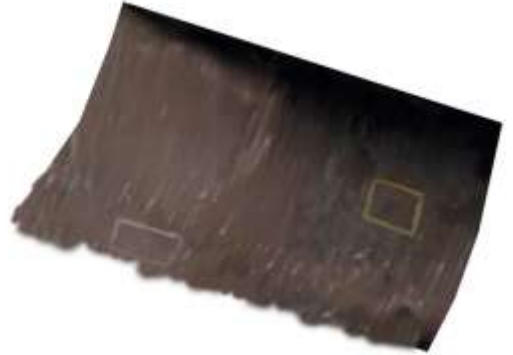
2

3

4

5

Finished

Up close, you can see the brushwork is actually quite rough. The leading edge is just one long smear from root to tip.

I made a decision very early to reproduce the weathering and deterioration, but not the graffiti.

However I went back later and added the red and white paint on the fin, as it helped balance the composition.

I already had a grey sky with godrays that I'd painted for another project, but which was ultimately replaced with something brighter. I flipped this one left to right, and tweaked it a bit to match the light I had chosen for the painting.

With the picture turned upside down, I added another Lightning as the reflection. The markings for 92 Sqn were added, along with a sparkle on the canopy, nose and leading edge.

The reflection was knocked back with a semi-transparent layer of brown, and a few ripples were added to enhance the water effect.

Finally, all the pieces were combined to make a single image...

Steve Kerry

The artist with a full size print, 40" x 28" (100cm x 70cm)

Links

PixelPusher digital aviation art
www.metaphor.karoo.net

The Manchester Aviation Art Society (MAvAS)
www.mavas.co.uk