



# The Limits of Glory

**Bob Letterman's shadow  
box diorama of Napoleon's  
'decision at Fontainebleau'  
described by Ken Jones**



The front of the diorama – from this distance only a few distinct items are visible. You have to get in really close for a good look inside – all part of the adventure!

When I visited my old friend Bob Letterman towards the end of 2009 he was working on his last ‘super’ diorama ‘Logistics’ that I took some photographs of, plus a few others in his back yard museum, one of which, a boxed diorama, or shadowbox, sparked some interest amongst the *Military Modelling* readership. This was ‘The Limits of Glory’ – it’s my favourite amongst Bob’s many models and we published a single photo of it in this year’s January issue.

Readers have asked for more, when we stayed with the Lettermans in Missouri last October I took the opportunity to photograph ‘The Limits of Glory’ when the front panel was removed. Bob originally built this shadowbox 14 years ago for the Miniature World Museum in St Charles, near St Louis and it’s his only model based on the Napoleonic Wars period, and fortunately he wrote short article about it that was published by VP that we could refer to, so that and Bob relying on his memory, he’s still sharp as a tack, filled in the gaps.

He’d laid aside his ‘Logistics’ diorama for the time being and was concentrating on building a large-scale model of a house for his daughter Gail based on a mansion in Springfield, Missouri. Like all Letterman miniature buildings it was fully fitted out inside and lit ... this produced a ‘brief’ diversion (in Bob’s time scale) and he will return to ‘Logistics’ this year.

### Choosing a period

Bob’s ‘super’ and smaller dioramas to date have been based on the Second World War and he needed to do quite a bit of research to make this one historically accurate. He says he was very fortunate to have a lot of help from those versed more than he on that particular period, and acknowledges the help given by some of the best authorities amongst whom he consulted were Philip Haythornthwaite for the history, Shep Paine, Bob Knee and his then business partner François Verlinden on modelling matters.



ABOVE: With the front cover and frame removed from his diorama Bob peers inside at Napoleon and his marshals during a maintenance period, which also gave an ideal opportunity for the accompanying photographs to be taken. Variations in lighting will be evident, and some of these photos appear dark, but this is how they are seen in the shadow box and how they and the fixtures would appear in reality in a room lit principally by candles. BELOW: The shadow box within its wooden case – ‘electrics’ are controlled by the switchbox on the right via the MG Pro Series ‘regulated power supply’ below it – the transformers and other electrics take up the lower space provided under the floor of the room.



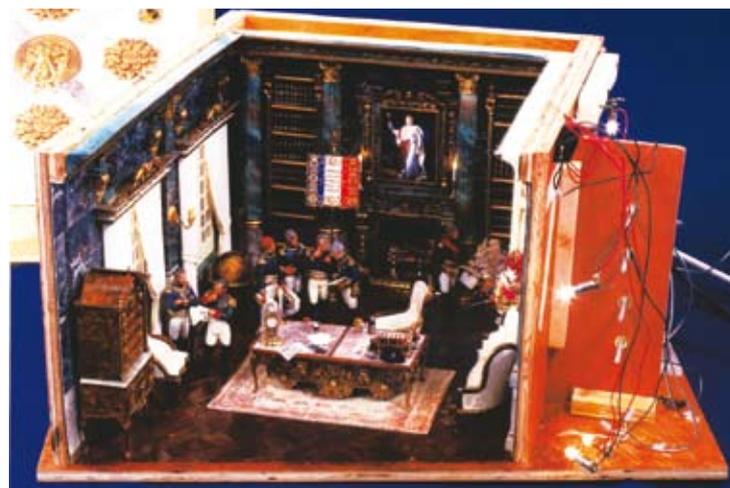
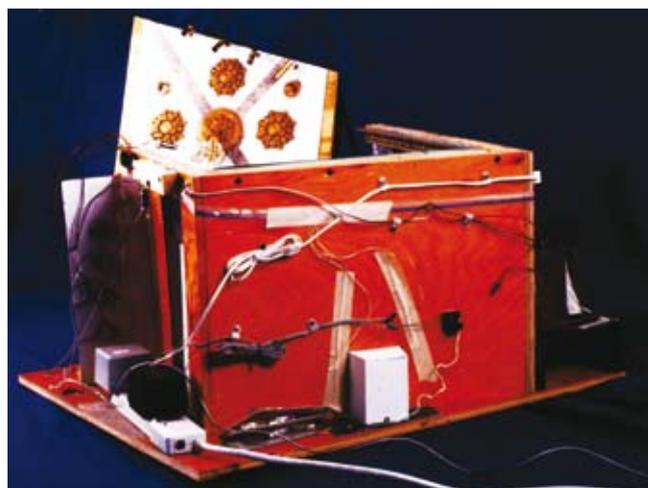
The shadowbox shows a scene in Napoleon’s office at the Palace of Fontainebleau one evening in 1814, when following the defeat of his armies by those of the Sixth Coalition, Russia, Prussia, Austria and Britain the Emperor of the French was considering abdication, and was encouraged to do so by his ‘mutinous’ Marshals who had received assurances on the retention of both rank and status if they could get Napoleon to step down. Napoleon submitted his unconditional abdication in April 1814 and went into exile, courtesy of the British, on the Island of Elba. He of course later escaped from Elba and began his ‘100 days’ campaign that led to a further and final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, and further exile to the more remote island of St Helena where he died on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1821.

In the room in Fontainebleau Palace Bob placed Napoleon conferring with General Bertrand to the left side of his desk, which is centre stage, whilst behind the marshals also confer about the Emperor’s abdication – left to right they are, Ney, MacDonald, Berthier and Oudinot. Another marshal, François Joseph Lefebvre receives an aide at the open doorway, stage right. The whole room exudes opulence, all painstaking recreated in miniature, mainly from scratch, using varied techniques developed by Bob over many years modelling.

The shadowbox had to be built quite large in order to take the 120mm (1:15 scale) Verlinden figures then available that would populate the room within. The outer shell is constructed from ¾ inch plywood and strip wood, glued and pinned, measuring 30



ABOVE: The interior exposed! Except for the miniature spotlights in their brass tubes above the top edge – this is the panoramic view of the room at Fontainebleau, and lit for this photograph rather than as it would be under the diorama's special effects lighting. BELOW LEFT: One of Bob's photos of the shadow box before it was installed – he admits it's not pretty and is not seen when the unit is in place. Efficiency and reliability are the key words for any lit boxed diorama. The small white box is the back of the fireplace that contains the pulsating circuits for the flickering fire effect within. Round the back are two HO railway buildings with internal lighting so their windows appear distant looking out through the windows inside the room. Two of the transformers for the lighting are on the left. BELOW RIGHT: The base and room is constructed from plywood. Note that the room, viewed from above with its ceiling removed, is set at an angle to the viewer through the decorative border viewing frame to produce good perspective of the room. The small spotlights used are controlled by the four rheostats in the wooden panel on the right.



inches x 30 inches by 30 inches high. Inside this fits a smaller base on which the room was constructed, asymmetrically, at a slight angle, and also from 3/4 inch plywood to take the inner walls.

### Fixtures and fittings

When Bob made his diorama he obtained a lot of the interior fixtures and fittings and architecture produced for dolls houses in 1:12 and 1:24 scales and marketed by Trevor and Sue Cook

of Brighton in Sussex. A quick Google on the Internet shows Sue Cook Miniatures still trading and any readers interested in emulating Bob should explore Sue Cook Miniatures Website: [www.suecookminiatures.com/](http://www.suecookminiatures.com/) Bob used the products as supplied, or modified and he cut and adapted a lot of them to fit the scene.

The floor was made from basswood strips like typical patterns or parquet found in French palaces, glued down and finished with a mini electric sander, then stained and varnished

with two coats of clear polyurethane gloss. Bob visited some French palaces and the odd chateau or two when visiting Europe and he found that the colour illustrations in the tour guides he'd kept from the trip made excellent references for interiors.

Napoleon's desk was the most ambitious miniature piece of furniture Bob had made back then, and probably hasn't since! It was made from sheet styrene and decoration in the form of carvings, etc., came from Bob's spares

box and items from the Sue Cook Miniatures' architectural pieces. Photo etched brass leaves from the Techstar range gave the carved effect. The top was simulated marble effect with the accessories coming from various sources or scratch built where they weren't available.

A lucky find in a shop was a pencil sharpener configured like a globe on a stand – Bob found its size perfect for the 120mm figures and bought it – for one dollar! The paintings on the walls were scanned from pictures in books and magazines, reduced to size and placed in miniature frames. The infantry standard was also scanned from a book and given a fringe made from soft metal foil before mounting on a brass tube pole with an eagle, from the spares box, added to the top.

The rest of the pieces of furniture were built from kits and adapted to suit with extra soft furnishings added. The wooden parts on chairs and the cabinets were given a burr walnut effect by first undercoating with flesh acrylic. This was followed with an overall coat of Burnt Umber oil paint and allowed to dry for an hour or so, before a second coat was added. Humbrol Clear was then applied with a clean broad bristle brush in a swirling motion which 'ate' through the Burnt Umber oil colour to reveal a burr-like pattern with the flesh acrylic showing through. Some experimentation soon produced the result seen in the photos. Once lots of gilding was added the 'period look' of such items was created.

The firewood in the fireplace was made from twigs drilled out to simulate burning before stacking them onto a metal fire grate soldered up from brass wire. The flickering lighting effects add to the illusion.

Bookcases were made in basswood and trimmed with cuttings from ornaments in the Sue Cook range. Masters for sections of books were made up from basswood and solder wire for binding detail on their spines, before casting off plenty in resin to fill the available spaces of Napoleon's library.



ABOVE: Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and General Bertrand discuss the former's pending abdication. The Emperor is a Verlinden 120mm character figure converted to capture his concern over abdicating.

LEFT: Napoleon's bicorne is a point of interest on the corner of the desk, and sets the seal that this is the Emperor's desk!

### All lit up

The 15 candles in the room are dolls house products and the five miniature spotlights were made up from brass tubes with bayonet fittings inside for miniature bulbs. The spotlights and the grain of wheat bulbs that illuminate the HO scale buildings are on a different (and third) circuit.

Experience with pulsating fireplace units in dioramas, which never looked right to Bob, led him to use two circuits for the fire in the room. A single transformer creates a single uniform pulse and because this didn't look realistic to him, Bob experimented with two circuits, each with its own transformer, which gave random pulsing lights and the effect he was looking for. Having seen the units in action I can vouch for the very realistic effect of a flickering fire in the grate.

### Populating the diorama

All the personalities in the diorama, in Bob's words, "Have been immortalized on canvas" and a little research soon provided him with their features and information on their uniforms. When Bob made the diorama Verlinden Productions had only two 120mm French marshal figures of Soult and Davout, but unfortunately neither was there at Fontainebleau with the Emperor, so some converting had to be done to produce the marshals that were. Bob also changed the Verlinden figure of Napoleon when he was in the process of mass 120mm figure converting. Extra heads were sought and adapted and an *aide de camp* was added to the complement. Using only one basic standing marshal Bob had to create the illusion of many and painting the slight differences in uniform removed any thoughts of doing a repeat performance.

Bob soon became more appreciative of the work that painters of Napoleonic period figures put into getting their models



Marshals' Ney, MacDonald, Berthier and Oudinot discuss the points of the latest ultimatum from the Sixth Coalition. These 120mm figures are conversions of Verlinden products. Bob had only Verlinden Productions' models of Marshals' Soult and Davout when he did the diorama, and neither were present at Fontainebleau, so he had to obtain some replacement heads and do some scratch building and sculpting to produce likenesses of the Marshals who were.



**ABOVE LEFT:** Tiny spotlights controlled by rheostats enhance the ceiling and coving details down to the sumptuously adorned pelmets over the window draw curtains. Most of the relief detail throughout the diorama was mastered by Bob and cast in resin. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The chandelier with candles hangs from the centre of the ornate ceiling. Again, the candles are controlled by rheostat.



In this view, the lit windows in those small HO buildings positioned outside of the rear window to create the illusion of buildings opposite Napoleon's office can just be seen. It is difficult to get a camera in for such a picture with the lighting working and the ceiling in place, but the effect can be seen by the viewer with the shadow box closed down – as Bob intended.



Over the fireplace is a painting of Napoleon in his coronation robes taken from a picture in a book and copied down to size. An eagle and infantry banner stand to the left side of the huge ornate fireplace.



Napoleon's massive ornate desk was based on designs of the early 19th century and constructed entirely from scratch. Bob admits to resorting to some artistic licence when he made this item, but it certainly looks the part, and what's on top, from Napoleon's famous bicorn hat to papers, wine bottles and glasses, books and lit candles in candlesticks does lend an appropriate 'period' appearance. The clock came from a store specializing in dolls house furniture and fittings and a lucky find, as were the candles and candlesticks from similar sources. The tiny quill pen was made from a goose feather.



**ABOVE:** The small settee in front of the mirror, like most of the other matching pieces, was assembled from kits of furniture items on sale in stores specializing in dolls houses. In the background Marshal Lefebvre receives an aide bearing possibly another abdication ultimatum for the Emperor.



**LEFT:** Looking over the desk past the grouped marshals and Marshal Lefebvre and the aide de camp the warm glow from the fire (which gently flickers) is very atmospheric in these overhead photographs, a viewing angle not normally possible through the front panel.



HO scale buildings attached to the left side of the outer wall are lit and their windows show through the windows when viewed from inside. The miniature 'tree', a natural twig, fixed just outside the window gives the impression that it is some distance away.



Bob couldn't believe his luck when he found this globe, actually a novelty pencil sharpener, in a store that cost him the princely sum of \$1.



ABOVE: The lighting via miniature spotlights and the grain of wheat bulbs in the candles is controlled to produce the correct lighting that could be expected from the glow of the fire and the candles positioned around the room – warm looking around the Marshals in the candlelight with the fire adding warmth to the scene from behind them.

BELOW: The furniture was adapted and modified from kits in dolls house suppliers' ranges. Each was given a burr walnut finish by base coating with flesh acrylic followed by a coat of Burnt Umber oil paint then, after an hour, three coats of Humbrol Clear applied with a broad clean brush in swirls. The Humbrol Clear 'eats' through the Burnt Umber to the flesh acrylic undercoat to produce the scale effect here. This view is lit to show the effect which otherwise would not be clear through the front panel when fitted.



The miniature arrangement of dried flowers in their stand near the mirror adds a splash of colour to the area near the door.



The wall mounted candleholders, like the candlesticks and chandelier are dolls house fittings with miniature grain of wheat bulbs adapted to this diorama and controlled by rheostats.

correct, making the switch from Second World War Allied and Axis figures that he knew so well was really a challenge to him. For a 'first attempt' I think he made a good job of them and they fit so naturally into the scene he created for them.

### Always check the facts

In his original article Bob advised against using the movies as reference for a diorama without first checking available factual information. If he had followed the epic film *Waterloo* as originally intended without referring to Philip Haythornthwaite and Shep Paine for advice, he would have used marshals Davout and Soult in his diorama. Both were depicted in the movie for this scene at Fontainebleau, but neither marshal was actually there on the day! ■

