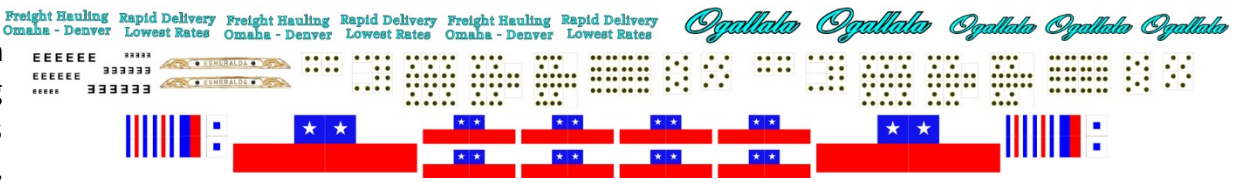
Making Decals for Lettering and Small Details

By David Fellingham

Lettering and very small details are next to impossible to paint at most ship-in-bottle scales but are easy to prepare as wet transfer decals using your computer and printer on decal stock.

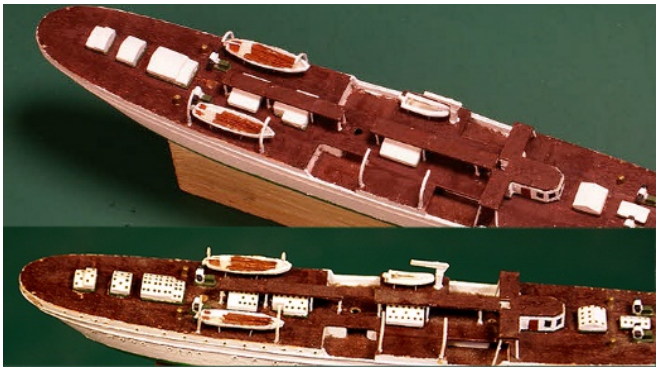
Decal stock is available at most hobby shops and internet model suppliers for inkjet and laser printers in clear and white. The white stock is used if you have white in the design such as white lettering. Be careful selecting the correct stock for your printer and use.



Prepare your art work with a good drawing program such as Serif DrawPlus SE, a freeware version of their product with some limited capabilities, which I used to make these three strips of decals. The program uses vectored graphics which means that the DrawPlus drawing is infinitely scalable up or down without pixelating. Keep in mind that the printing on clear decal stock will be somewhat transparent and the color will change if placed over other colors. For example, the cyan in the Ogallala strip shifted to green when placed over yellowish tan and red on the model. The strip with the dots are in groups to be applied to the tops of eight hatch covers. The flags were printed on white decal stock. Use the white decal stock for white or gold lettering on a dark background; your art work should have a matching background to the paint on the model. These decals are shown actual size; top row is from a completed project, the other two rows are for my current project. After the graphics are drawn, scale them down to the actual size needed, duplicate extras and arrange them across the bottom margin. All the strips have at least one extra of each decal.

When ready to print your decal, set your printer for glossy photo with the dpi set at your printer's highest setting and print them on paper to check the images for size and quality. If satisfied, print them out on your decal stock. Do not touch the printed area, it will smudge even after the ink has dried. When dry, carefully cut that strip from the edge of decal stock; a square, straight cut will allow the sheet to feed properly the next time you use it. Tape the strip to a sheet of paper and spray it with a couple of light coats of clear lacquer to fix the printing. Remove when well dried and cut out the individual decals very close to the printed edges.

To apply the decals after trimming, dip them one at a time in water for a second or two then place on a tissue for eight to ten seconds. While counting, wet the area where the decal will be applied with general use Decal Setting Solution then place the decal. After it's located use a tiny piece of tissue to wick up the fluid. When all the decals are applied, brush them with the Decal Solvent to make them lie flat making sure all the edges are down.



The next day give the decals and area around them two light coats of artist's matte or gloss varnish to match the finish on the model. Trimming close to the edges of the decals and varnishing over them will conceal the edges.

At left are before and after photos of *Esmeralda* with all the groups of dots in place on the white hatch covers. Below is a photo of the real stern from which the yellow metal stern detail was extracted, enhanced and turned into a decal along with the finished stern.

Homemade decals can be used for many details that are too small to paint on our models – lettering, hatch gratings, doors and windows on deck houses, port holes and anything else that might work as a decal. Your imagination is the limit.