

Bruce MacRae

By Robert Lomassaro

As a modeler, have you ever wondered what it would be like to work in the motion picture industry building the models we see in films? What would it be like to build models as a hobby as well as for a living? Let me introduce you to someone who has done just that!



You may already know Bruce MacRae from local IPMS Regionals and National Conventions for everywhere he goes, his models draw the attention and wonder of all those who see them. Known for his light-hearted dioramas of all genres, and his amazing attention to detail, his work has earned him numerous Best of Category and Best of Show awards over the years.

What you may not know is that Bruce was a professional model maker and painter for almost 30 years, most of which was spent in the motion picture industry, and on some of the biggest box office films ever made. In the golden age of film, beautiful young starlets would leave the farms and small towns and move to Hollywood and frequent coffee shops and gin joints in hopes of getting discovered by some big-shot movie producer. Ironically enough, Bruce was discovered in a similar way. Let's take a look how all that came about.

Originally from Iowa City Iowa, Bruce and his family moved to El Segundo California at age 2 and grew up in West L.A. One of his earliest memories was that of finding an old box behind his apartment house that contained dozens of discarded model trees. He was just six years old at the time and was fascinated by what these trees might have once held. His first model was that of a Revell Destroyer. After that, he was hooked!



By 15 he was building almost every aircraft kit that Revell and Monogram produced. Most of the kits at the time were not always that accurate and they lacked a lot of details. So he started researching the aircraft he was building and making scratch built corrections and adding fine details. His first serious model was 1/72 scale Revell B-17 Flying Fortress. He was so proud of the details he added, as well as the paint and finish of the model that he decided to take the 20-minute bus ride to the Revell fac-



tory and show them how to fix the mistakes in their model. Proudly standing at the reception desk, with his B-17 model in hand, he asked to see the boss. A short time later he was introduced to Mr. Llyod Jones, the R & D Manager for Revell Corporation. This was the 1960's, and perhaps sensing that Bruce might someday turn out to be a very good customer of Revell products, Jones decided to look over Bruce's model and listen to his explanation. Fifteen minutes later Jones finally broke the bad news to Bruce, that although his model was very impressive, "Revell was not really in the business of making models, they were in the business of making money". He gave him a tour of the factory and then sent him home. But the trip was not a total loss, for on the way out he told Bruce that a model club met at Revell once a month and perhaps he would like to meet other modelers like him. The club was IPMS.

After high school Bruce attended San Monica University and earned a degree in Photography in 1975. He hoped that perhaps learning how things looked through a lens might lead him to a job in movies, after all Hollywood was not that far away.

In 1976, Bruce was back at Revell this time though he was getting paid to build the models used in the box art, in addition other model and



miniature companies in the area were hiring him to do piece work.

Like the many want-to-be actors and actresses who were discovered and became Hollywood stars, Bruce

had his own break come in a similar way. While attending a MACS Model Show in Long Beach in 1978 he was approached by a man who wanted to know more about his scratch-built Storm Trooper figure. As it turned out, that man was a talent scout for BPMM, a major model and prop maker in Hollywood at the time. After learning about his background, Bruce was offered a job on the spot.

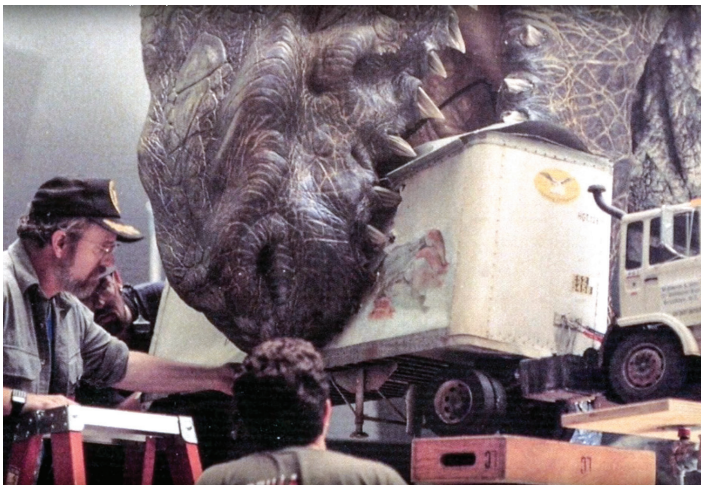
Bruce's first job with BPMM was making and painting props for Star Trek the Motion Picture, in particular the hand phasers and belt mounted communicators. On one occasion he was summoned to the set and told there was a problem with a prop. When he arrived, he was directed over to one of the actors who



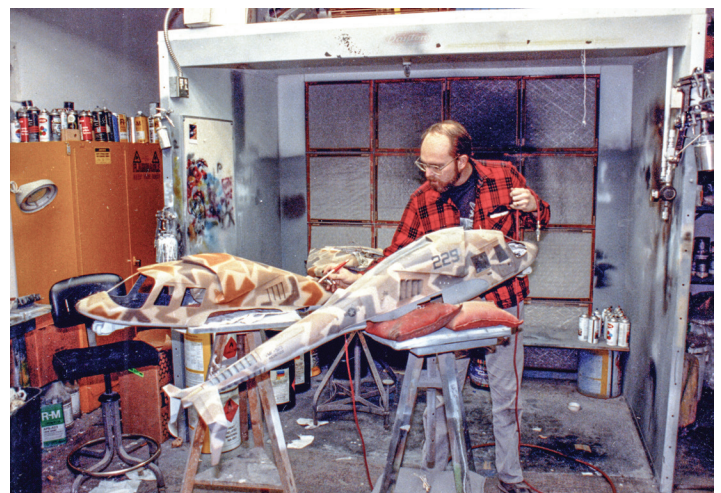
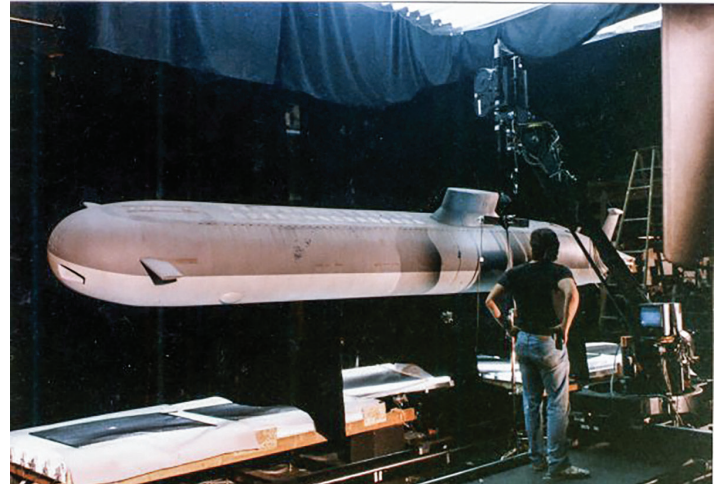
cut himself on a communicator. The actor was George Takei otherwise known as Mr. Sulu, who Bruce remembers as a friendly man and who understood that sometimes things go wrong. Another 'close encounter' came a few days later, when Bruce was instructed to take a box of props to the set and deliver them to the set manager. Once there, he found the set empty



and no one around. Like any die-hard Star Trek fan, he decided it was the perfect opportunity to take the USS Enterprise for a ride. For the next 30 minutes he commanded the Bridge, beamed himself to nowhere in the Transporter Room, and got a quick check-up in Sick Bay. He was just about to leave when he noticed some-



one sitting on the steps of a dressing room trailer watching him play on the set. In an attempt to look more official, he walked up to the man to ask directions and found himself speaking to none other than Leonard Nimoy in full Spock make-up.



Bruce explained that the model making and painting business was not a permanent job, that artists and technicians would be hired for a particular film where they might work seven days a week, 14 hours a day. When the film was over, they were left looking for another gig. Fortunately, Bruce developed a respectable reputation as an artist as well as becoming an excellent networker. Before long he was getting calls from other studios. In 1986 he was recruited by Boss Films which not only offered a steadier flow of work, but it was also a union job with benefits. It was here that he started working with first-rate modelmakers and some of the best in the industry. Overnight he went from a 'big fish' to a 'guppy in a big pond'.





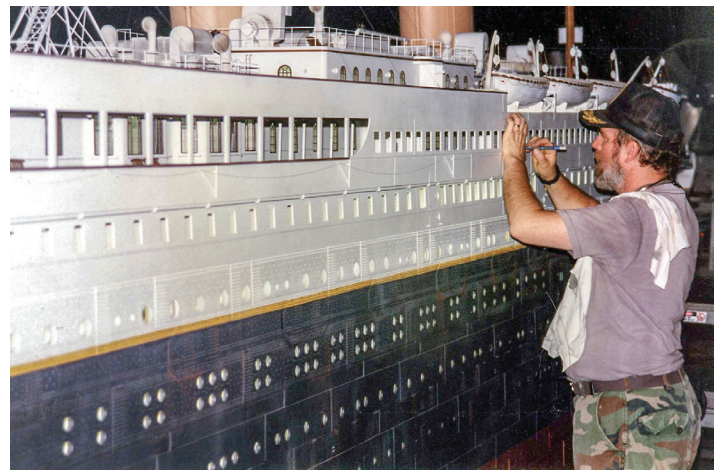
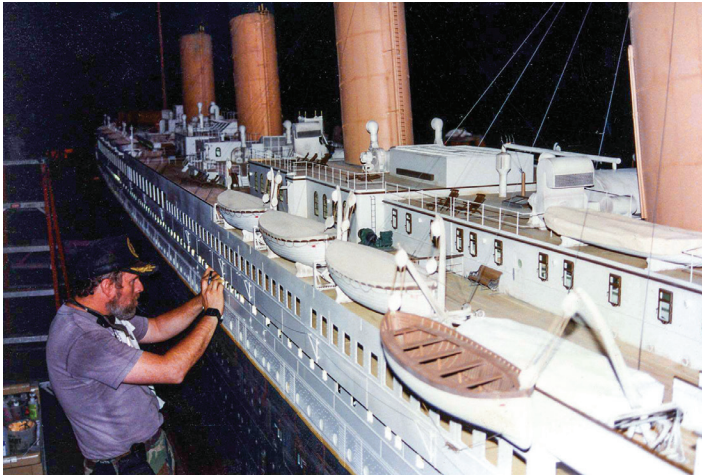
At Boss Films, Bruce found himself working in one block-buster film after another, like Airforce One, Turbulence, Star Ship Troopers, Batman Returns, Hunt for Red October, Die Hard 1, 2 & 4 and perhaps the biggest one of all Titanic. As you may imagine, Bruce's specialty was on the painting, weathering, and detailing of these huge and amazing models. This was before CGI, and movie models were king. He admits that Airforce One was fun because he got a chance to work on military models like the seven 6-foot-long F-15's, 14-foot KC-10's and the 20-foot long, 1/10th scale Airforce One. His weathering skills were really put to good use on Titanic where he not only painted the 'new'

Titanic, but the sunken ship that rested on the ocean floor for 60 years.

Unlike building models for fun, this was hard work, long days and sometimes tedious when you painted or built dozens of the same thing day after day. But Bruce found an interesting and fun way to break the tedium.

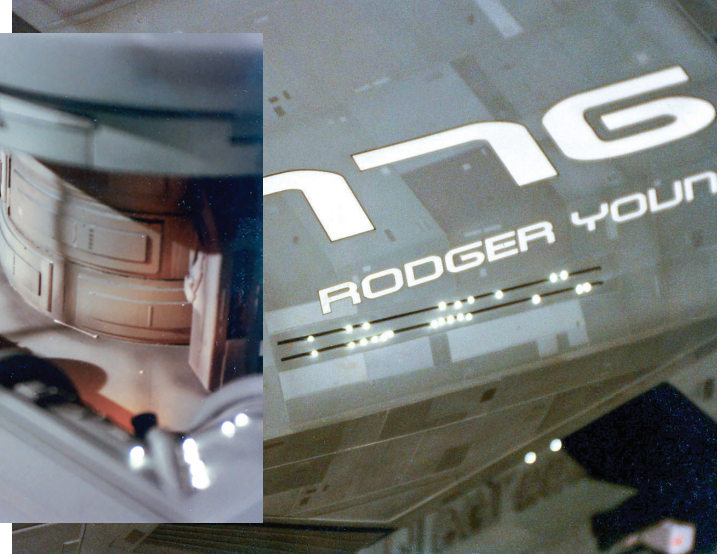
One long-time tradition among movie model makers was to include a 'personal signature' into the models they built or worked on, something only the model maker knew was there and that the cameraman and set designer would not notice. For Bruce this form of signature was





R2D2, the loveable little android in Star Wars. To accomplish this, Bruce molded dozens of little ½ inch tall R2D2's, and cleverly placed one on every model he ever made in almost every

film he ever worked on. These include an R2D2 on the top of the Airforce One tail and five sitting on the hull of the Roger Young destroyer from Star Ship Troopers.



Among the celebrities Bruce met over the years, his favorite was the late, great Robin Williams who he met while working on the film 'Toys'. He recalled how Robin would sit and eat his lunch with the film and production crew and make everyone laugh until they lost their lunch. Bob Hope was also a real pleasure to work with. His least favorite was Sylvester Stallone who he worked with on 'Demolition Man'. He remembers Stallone as being all ego, rude to the crew, and overall, a big jerk!



Bruce recalled that by 2007 the industry was changing and starting to wind down in California. CGI was becoming more sophisticated and popular among movie makers as a way of saving money and saving time. Ironically, CGI turned out to be much more expensive and more time consuming. A model on the scale of the Titanic may have cost \$600,000 and a 70 people to make, was now costing 8 million dollars and dozens of CGI artists, many whom



were being outsourced to Asia and India. As for studios and production companies they were slowly being taxed-out of California and moving to Canada and states like Georgia that were offering huge tax credits. In essence, Bruce didn't leave the model making industry, it left him. His last films were that of 'Fly Boys' (which was still using models) and 'Die Hard 4'.

Bruce's model making career was not over. In 2007 he met his friend Jim while at an airshow in Las Vegas, who had also been a model maker in films, and like Bruce was forced to move on. Within a few weeks, Bruce and Jim were working together again making models, but this time for Bigalow Aerospace in Las Vegas. Bigalow was trying to win contracts with the U.S. Government to produce livable habitats for the International Space Station, and Bruce



and Jim were responsible for making the large presentation models. Bruce worked with Bigalow until 2015 when the facility closed. Now semi-retired and living in Las Vegas, Bruce kept busy by building architectural models for hotels and resorts including the Wynn Resort.

Although he enjoyed his time making and painting models for the film industry, it did have one negative side-effect as you might imagine. He had no interest in making models in his spare time as a hobby! Instead, he got into war gaming miniatures using 1/72 scale WW2 airplanes in a game called 'Mustangs and Messerschmitt's'. But once retired, the need and desire to make models again returned with a vengeance.

His goal is to "build as many models as I can before I go". His favorite is building dioramas and

to that end, he has developed his own personal style and trademark. To bring a little humor to an otherwise deadly serious topic, such as war machines. This might include a very serious U.S. Military Policemen being splashed by a jeep full of drunken G.I.'s or a German officer being berated by a little girl for running over her bike

with a tank. Whether it be comical or sad, Bruce likes to evoke emotion in the viewer, much like a director would do in films. In essence, he continually returns to his roots as a storyteller.

Unlike some modelers, Bruce admits that he loves competing with his models and dioramas in model contests. He competes not so much for the trophy, but rather for the respect and recognition he gains from his peers. He also loves meeting young people and new modelers, and spending time with them telling stories or sharing tips, tricks and techniques he has learned over



the years. His advice to them is "don't bite off more than you can chew, work within the scope of their skills and don't get discouraged. Just keep building".

When asked what his biggest challenge is, he confesses that its getting started on a new model, especially after completing a successful and rewarding build. He'll sometimes find every possible excuse not to open the box, but once he does and enters what he calls a 'flow state', he'll spend eight or ten hours a day on just one subassembly or the face of one figure.

What does the future hold for him now? Bruce is now concentrating on improving his figure painting skills and has been working with Penny Meyer at figures museum in Las Vegas call Verko's Vault in developing new techniques. He also hopes to continue traveling to model shows around the country and volunteering his

time and skills as a contest judge. In regards to contests he hopes more shows will transition to some form of the 'Gold, Silver, Bronze' format (opposed to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd) which he believes better rewards the builder and encourages more participation.

But you may be surprised to know who Bruce credits as his mentor, and for whom he credits for making him the modeler he is today. Without hesitation he says it was Llyod Jones of Revell, who not only inspired him to build more models, but who introduced him to the wonderful world of IPMS, of which Bruce has been a member of since 1968.

So, the next time you see Bruce at a model show, stop by and say hello. For if you're lucky, he may not only tell you a story or two, but you'll see why Bruce is regarded as one of the nicest guys in the hobby.



Bruce MacRae ❖