

This is the season to finish up our winter rebuilds. For me, the last step is usually putting on new decals over that (hopefully) gorgeous new paint. I don't even try to do the old-style varnished transfers since they can mess up a paint job in my hands. But the cut-vinyl decals as used on Commandos are pretty safe. I have messed up a few times by getting the decal crooked or wrinkled. It's possible to get a fresh vinyl one off with careful use of a hair dryer, but that is risky if the new paint isn't fully cured. So I've worked out a system that seems safe, at least so far. It's important to let new paint fully cure before putting the decals on. I like to wait a month before even handling the parts if I can.

The following technique applies only to cut vinyl decals. The cut letters are stuck to a translucent front tissue. The back of the decal is coated with sticky stuff, protected by a thicker backing sheet with a wax-like surface. For installation, you'll need a roll of masking tape, a medium Sharpie marker, a ruler and a hair dryer.

Start by carefully laying out the position using masking tape. You're using the edges of the backing paper as a guide, so check that the cut vinyl lettering is actually straight on the backing. I've never seen a bad one, but it seems possible. Set the new decal roughly in place and pick the horizontal placement by eye, comparing to photos if you want to match the stock style. Put a piece of masking tape just outside each vertical edge of the decal. Now you can slide it up and down to set the vertical placement by eye. When it looks right, mark each piece of tape at the bottom of the decal.

Set the decal aside for a moment. If it is supposed to be parallel to some reference line (the bottom edge of the tank for example) use a ruler to measure from each corner mark you made to the reference line. If the two measurements are off, make an adjustment to one of the marks. Then put a piece of tape across, below the two marks, to make a bottom guide.

Now you can place the decal on the edge of the bottom guide tape and check your position. Use some small sticky tabs to hold it in place, so you can step back and look at it from a few angles. Making any changes needed now is much easier than after it's stuck on!

When you're happy with the position, put the decal face up on a clean surface and use the smooth back end of the sharpie to rub the front tissue with gentle pressure. This makes sure it's stuck to the vinyl. Now turn the decal over and if it's a cold day, warm up the back just a bit with the hair dryer. Starting at a corner, slowly and carefully remove the backing paper, pulling it back against itself. Work slowly and make sure the all vinyl lettering sticks to the front tissue. If you get to a letter that wants to come loose, try changing the direction you're pulling on the backing to work around it. It's important to keep the front tissue flat and the sticky back of the vinyl clean.

With the backing paper removed, align the bottom edge of the decal with the bottom guide tape, with the corners inside of the vertical guide tapes. Carefully roll the decal into place, working up from the center, then out to the ends. Using the smooth end of the Sharpie, gently rub over the front tissue to set the vinyl adhesive. Next, start from a corner and remove the front tissue, again pulling it back against itself and working slowly. If a part of the vinyl starts to lift with the tissue, try sticking it back down with the tissue and the pen. Sometimes a bit of heat from the hair dryer helps at this point. Don't worry if some of the extra adhesive also sticks to the paint.

Once the front tissue is off, check for air bubbles. Anything larger than a pinhead should be carefully punctured with the corner of a fresh razor blade. Don't use a needle, as it's more likely to leave a visible mark. Now lay the slippery side of the backing paper over the fresh vinyl and use the rounded back end of the sharpie with moderate pressure to really set the new lettering in place.

Finally, remove the guide tapes. Use Turtle Wax or similar product to remove any excess adhesive and marks from the tape and around the decal. Now stand back and admire your work. Have a drink or go for a ride (never both of course). Spring is just around the corner.