

Demonstration: Making Your Own Tow Cables

Frank Blanton

Frank became frustrated with kit tow cables and their seam lines and how they would break at inopportune moments. Even recently offered kit cables made of twine are often fuzzy in appearance even after applying Tamiya Super Thin liquid cement.

Finding the right replacement was tough because it had to be small in diameter, relatively soft and without surface fuzzies. Model ship rigging is close but often looks more like real rope than steel cable. Picture-hanging wire looks right, but is made from stiff steel or stainless steel and is too stiff to bend over contours on a fragile styrene model.

Frank finally found a material that was malleable and had no seams. Ultrawire can be found in angler's tackle shops and is made from fine-diameter copper wire, approximately .007"-.008" diameter. Locally, Green Top Sporting Goods stocks this product.

Another product that anglers use is lead fly tying wire. It comes in various sizes but you'll need the smallest size available for tow cables. The other sizes are good for other uses though.

Alternatively, you can scrounge off broken electronic devices and find small transformers in side that are wrapped with tiny wire.

Real tow cables start as single strands that are combined with others and twisted together. In turn, these are again bundled with other twists and twisted again. The final product is very strong and able to take much abuse.

Making scale tow cables is as simple as cutting a few strands and twisting them together. You can do as the real ones and twist the twisted wires together for a final cable, but getting the twists evenly applied is a little difficult. Frank likes to anchor one end of the wire in a vise while he spins the other end.

The cable ends have an eyelet for attaching to the vehicle towing hooks. These patterns differ across armies and eras, so check your references. You can use pieces of tape or lead foil to help you form the cable ends to match what you need. It's interesting to note that the real tow cables are often coated in a grease preservative to repel moisture and prevent rust, but this means it attracts dust. Be aware of this when painting your home-grown cables. At all times avoid bright silver! A chemical called "Blacken-It" is useful to stain the wire cables before painting. This helps to prevent the paint from chipping off, but it's not foolproof. Art and craft stores also carry a liquid stain intended for stained glass work that works similarly to Blacken-It.



Below: Frank's materials for making his tow cables. From the left, ship rigging, lead wire, two varieties of Ultrawire, Mission Models Multi-tool.