

Pre-release Review of the Rapido HO Scale ACF Helium Car

Since I have become a leading expert on helium railroad cars and have been producing kits for about 2 years, I have been asked by customers what I think about the upcoming release of the Rapido HO Scale Helium Car. I have been reviewing the limited photos and documentation coming out of Rapido and have come up with a pre-release review. I will try to be as unbiased as possible and look at the model as a railroader interested in building a prototypical helium car.

To begin, I wanted 4 helium cars for my transition era layout and started buying AHM kits with the plan to fix and repaint as Navy cars. I found an excellent article, by Pat Bray, on what it takes to make an AHM car look better. My biggest issue was that there were no clasp brake trucks available at the time, and I did not like the toyish look of the tanks that were just a facade on a flat background. This is what started me with designing and building my own kit and trucks. At first it was just going to be for me, but after talking with Jay Miller and Pat Bray, I decided to see if others wanted it and it took off from there.

Now back to the review. My kit is the GATC 3rd generation helium car produced during WWII, 1943 to 1945. Rapido's is of the next generation produced by ACF from 1955 to 1961. There are some minor differences such as the GATC car had a fish belly frame and multiple vents on each end. The ACF cars had a straight frame, less vents, and changes to the gussets on the side frames along with other minor changes.

During June and July of 1955, the Navy transferred all their cars to the Bureau of Mines (MHAX) and a few to the Atomic Energy Commission (ATMX) and never received any of the ACF cars. So Rapido is correct to not offer the car with Navy markings.

Now to the model. Rapido did good in the fact that they have dual brake systems and clasp brake trucks. However, according to Jay Miller's Quick Roster of Helium Tank Cars (see below), it was not until 1959 starting with car number 1119 and after that they started having metal roof walks and roller bearing trucks. So, from what I can see, their highest car number is 1118. That means all the available numbers should have wood roof walks and solid/friction bearing trucks. The prototype photos show solid/friction bearing trucks, but metal roof walk, not wood.

They chose to do what predecessors did in the past, like AHM, and that is to have a fake facade of tanks over a flat surface, and you cannot see between or under the tanks. Talking to many railroaders who handled these cars, they distinctly remember seeing through the car between and under the tanks. Having a flat surface behind the tanks can cause issues if you want to repaint. I believe Rapido's car has this flat surface painted black and it would

be almost impossible to mask off this fake background. This is one of the primary reasons I designed and built the kit with 30 individual tanks that you can see between.

Another issue I see is that, as the versions offered, they only existed from 1959 (if you stick to having a metal roof walk and ignoring the lack of space between the tanks) to 1970 (when roof walks were removed and switched to roller bearing trucks). Besides the fact they do not appear to have roller bearing trucks, I see an issue of filling holes and shortening the ladders that occurred in 1970 if you model post 1970, I suspect matching paint to cover the filled holes could become “interesting”. If you want to try to make a non-prototypical Navy version prior to 1955, you will have issues with painting and that the ACF car never had Navy markings and will need a wood roof walk, not metal.

Concerning the roof walk, using a laser cut metal to represent the roof walk can cause issues as they tend to warp over time. A friend has had to deal with this issue by removing and then reattaching the roof walk on another car. To tell you the truth, I do not like the look from the side as it appears the roof walk was a sheet of steel instead of a frame with grates. Looking at the side photo, the way they attach the roof walk with small metal hooks look toyish to me.

I all fairness, I have ordered one so that I can see up close if my review is fair. Also, if any of you happen to have one of my kits and get the Rapido model, I would like an independent review of pros and cons.

Possible car configurations as I see them:

1942-1955 USNX: *Not prototypical for the Rapido's post 1955 ACF car.* Battleship Gray all over with black trucks, ladders, steps, and grab irons. Wood roof walk appears the color of treated wood. Solid bearing trucks with clasp brakes. Note: All cars converted from USNX to MHAX or 7 for ATMX in June-July 1955.

1955-1964 MHAX or ATMX: Battleship Gray all over except with Aluminum painted tanks. Black trucks, ladders, steps, and grab irons. Solid or Roller bearing trucks with clasp brakes. Wood roof walk appears the color of treated wood or use the metal roof walk. Roller bearing trucks did not start showing up until after 1955 on cars 1119 and later. Note: all cars were MHAX by 1964.

1964-1972 MHAX: Aluminum painted all over. Metal roof walk. Black trucks, ladders, steps, and grab irons. Solid or Roller bearing trucks with clasp brakes. - 3 - 1972-1998 MHAX: Aluminum painted all over. Black trucks, ladders, steps, and grab irons. Solid or Roller bearing trucks (required by 1991) with clasp brakes. No roof walk, shortened side and non-

brake end ladders (match side length) (fill in holes). The brake end ladder and brake wheel location did not change.

Quick Roster of Helium Tank Cars				
Reporting Marks	Car Numbers	Builder	Date	Comments
Early 3-Tube Cars				
USQX	101-102	Bethlehem	1926-1927	Built for US Army Air Service
USNX	1001	Bethlehem	1926	Built for US Navy
First Generation: 28-Tube Cars				
USNX	1002-1006	GATC	1930	Rebuilt with 'X' brace, ca. 1940
Second Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
USNX	1007-1012	GATC	1933	Rebuilt with 'X' brace, ca. 1940
Third Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
USNX	1013-1078	GATC	1942-1943	Painted all Battleship Gray w/black U/F and hardware. Seven cars relettered for ATMX in 1955.
Fourth Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
MHAX	1079-1138	ACF	1955-1959	First use of MHAX reporting marks in July 1955. Cars 1119 and later (1959 built) in this generation built with roller bearing trucks and metal roof walks. Painted gray with aluminum tanks.
Fourth Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
ATMX	1001-1005	ACF	1955	First cars lettered ATMX. Ditto above.
ATMX	1013-1019	ACF	1955	
ATMX	1020-1025	Darby Corp.	1958	
Fifth Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
MHAX	1139-1163	ACF	1960	Roller bearing trucks, metal roof walks.
Sixth Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
MHAX	1164-1173	Magor	1961	Roller bearing trucks, metal roof walks.
Seventh Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
MHAX	1174-1196	ACF	1961	Roller bearing trucks, metal roof walks.
Eighth Generation: 30-Tube Cars				
MHAX	1197-1221	Magor	1962	Metal roof walks, roller bearing trucks without clasp brakes. All cars painted aluminum except trucks and H/W.
Total Cars Built: 241				
When built, all cars equipped with solid bearing, clasp brake trucks except as noted.				
Changeover from USNX to MHAX/ATMX reporting marks occurred in June-July 1955.				
Changeover from gray superstructure and aluminum painted tanks to all aluminum paint begun after 1962.				
All cars in active fleet were relettered to MHAX after ca. 1964.				
Extensive rebuilding began ca. 1970 with removal of roof walks, new trucks, etc.				
All cars retired or disposed of by 1998.				