

## DAK Campaign Game

Played by Doug Fitch, Michael Barnard and David Burson.

The following is the first installment of a DAK campaign currently underway. Other installments will follow at irregular intervals. Two of the three players are veteran gamers and Gamers, but relatively new to the OCS (scenarios only). The third player (David) is new not only to wargames, but military history in general (you never realize how much background knowledge is required for a wargame until you have to explain that the x means infantry and two little lines equals a battalion).

The optional rules we are playing with include the combined arms rules, the barrage rules, and the new air rules. We are playing with variable British withdrawals and historical Fliegerkorps.

Comments are welcome (and desired).

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

The Italians launched their much anticipated invasion. Except for four divisions in Tripoli and a handful of Arty units, the Italians poured everything they had into the attack. The invaders organized themselves into two armies. The 10th Army, the larger of the two, had the bulk of the Arty and the task of marching down the Via Balbia and capturing Mersa Matruh. The 5th Army, with the mobile forces, was ordered to protect the 10th Army's flank and prevent the British from cutting off the invaders.

To oppose this massive Italian force the British deployed four incomplete divisions and some independent units. Only the 7th Armoured Division had complete freedom of movement. The other British formations were all under some kind of restriction.

The Italians crossed the border in a disorganized rabble that lurched forward without opposition, the British choosing not to contest the advance. The RAF flew several missions against the vulnerable Italian columns, but for the most part confined themselves to dropping leaflets. By the time the lead elements of the invaders staggered into Sidi Barrani the invasion was beginning to assume some organization.

First blood in the invasion went to the British. As the ponderous Italian armies marched eastwards the LRDG struck out of the desert and overran an airstrip near Sollum. The British shot up some of the aircraft stationed there, but the bulk escaped. The Italian reaction was swift and, surprisingly, effective. The Regia Aeronautica bombed and strafed the LRDG and the garrison at Sollum sallied and eliminated the British commandos. The successful operation filled the Italians with confidence for the upcoming campaign.

October 1940

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

Things heated up in October. Several bloody air battles saw the RAF gain the upper hand and establish air superiority over Mersa. On the ground, the 10th Army launched its first attack. The Cyrene Division (+), massively supported by artillery, assaulted the Indian defenders of the pass northwest of Bir el Hukuma (about 15 miles southwest of Mersa). The attack was successful and the Indians were forced to withdraw.

The British reacted violently. The 7th Armoured Division moved out of its reserve position south of Mersa and tore into the unsuspecting Cyrene. The Italian defenders melted before the British onslaught and the survivors ran away as fast as they could. The rout uncovered the Italian artillery and the 7th AD destroyed several units. The British were unable to rein in their rampaging armor, however, and the 7th AD found itself amidst a sea of Italians.

The Italians hammered the British with artillery and then launched a massive counter-attack. The attack was poorly executed and most of the Desert Rats got away. General O'Connor was wounded slightly during the operation.

After the 7th AD had returned to its own lines the Italian commanders took stock of the situation. They were pleased to discover that the British raid seemed to have little impact. There were LOTS of Italians.

The rest of the month saw the 10th Army hammering away at the passes and exchanging barrages with the British. By the end of October the Italians had established a tenuous link between the 10th and 5th Armies along the Mersa - Bir el Kenayis road.

November 1940

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

The brief (and theoretical) link up between 10th and 5th Armies was lost to a British counterattack. Throughout November the Italians launched a series of heavy and largely unsuccessful attacks on the determined Indian defenders. The 10th Army also made liberal use of its powerful artillery, and came to rely more and more on this arm as the offensive progressed. The British countered with their own artillery and occasional counterattacks.

After the near disaster of the 7th Armoured Division's first attack, the British turned their armor on the 5th Army. A week of attacks destroyed two Blackshirt divisions and some MG battalions, but the overconfident British tankers were surprised and roughly handled during an attack on the Marmarica Division. Rather than withdraw after the reverse the 7th AD launched another attack that smashed the 2nd Libyan Division. On 14 November, while leading a follow up attack that finished off the Italian division, General Richard O'Connor was killed by troopers of the 8th Hussars while returning from a reconnaissance.

With the 5th Army wilting under the 7th AD's hammer blows the Italians began a disorderly withdrawal towards the Piccadilly Circus area. The Italians feared that the British would cut off the bloodied and demoralized 5th Army before it could retreat to defensible positions. There was also the fear that if the 5th Army fell back too far the British would capture Sidi Barrani and cut off the 10th Army.

The 7th AD never got a chance to follow the retreating Italians, however. Although the attacks by the 10th Army were almost uniformly unsuccessful the Italian artillery was exacting a fearful toll of the scant defenders. The Italians soon gave up attacking and pinned their hopes on blasting the British out of the passes. It worked. As the 5th Army was taking to its heels the 4th Indian Division was forced out of the passes. The Italians pushed their way up to Charing Cross and were only 5 miles from Mersa Matruh.

At this point the 7th AD attacked the Italians head on at Charing Cross. The attack smashed the Italians and cut off a division north of the escarpment. A second attack crushed another division and the 7th AD burst in among the Italian artillery a second time. This time the artillery was better defended, but that meant nothing to the British. Most of the Italian artillery was destroyed, along with yet another Italian division. Finally, the remnants of the 7th AD was surrounded and destroyed.

This time the Italians most definitely could see the wounds the British tankers had inflicted. Taking a chance that the British wouldn't be able to launch any extended flanking moves to cut off the Italian advance, the 5th Army was deactivated and the survivors were transferred to the 10th Army. The Sirte Division, cut off north of the coastal escarpment, managed to cross four wadis and march the 35 miles back to the Via Balbia. For this feat the men of the Sirte Division were rewarded with orders to the front.

With this infusion of troops the 10th Army was able to scrape together a respectable force to continue the attack. The artillery, by far the most effective part of the Italian invasion, was ruined. A few regiments remained, but they were of poor quality. The 10th Army commander requested that the artillery units and four divisions being deployed to Tobruk be released to the invasion force, but was refused. The Italians were also facing a supply shortage. The Italian Supreme Commander, considering the invasion a failure, ordered the 10th Army to withdraw. Instead, the 10th Army moved forward "once more into the breach" on a last ditch effort to seize Mersa.

The British were having troubles of their own. The 7th AD had been annihilated. The 4th Indian Division had lost its recon unit and a brigade, while its two remaining brigades were both at half strength. Adding insult to injury, the 14th Infantry Brigade had been diverted to Greece. Besides the two weak Indian brigades, all the British had to defend Mersa was a pair of green brigades from the 2nd New Zealand Division, the Mersa garrison, and a handful of artillery battalions. The 6th Australian Division was in the Alexandria area, but could not be moved to Mersa because of political reasons.

As November ended the two exhausted combatants prepared for one more big battle.

December 1940

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

Unable to rein in the insubordinate 10th Army, the Italian Supreme Commander was forced to support the attack on Mersa Matruh. The 10th Army took a week to reorganize itself and try to build up some supplies. During this time Churchill began to assist the Italians. The remnants of the 4th Indian Division was sent to the Sudan. With the 10th Army again on the move barely more than three brigades were left to hold Mersa.

As the 10th Army deployed into its attack positions around Mersa the 6th Australian Division was released to the Western Desert Force. The Italians, desperately short of supplies, were in a race to take the town before the Australians could complicate the situation.

The Italian barrage pulverized the Selby Infantry Brigade, but the attack was a disaster. The tough New Zealanders cut down the Italians without loss. A second attack was also a dismal failure. The 6th Australian's first attack was far more successful and the Aussies were soon threatening the Italians with encirclement. 10th Army was forced to withdraw into the hard won passes. An Anzac assault on the rear guards was turned back and the Italians deployed in the passes in good order. This minor victory convinced the 10th Army commander that he could hold the passes and make another stab at Mersa.

The Italian supply situation was worse than critical. The supplies that could be moved forward were totally inadequate to allow even the remnants of the 10th Army to engage in offensive operations. The 10th Army commander was sacked. The Aussies, after a heavy raid from the RAF, broke through the northernmost pass and trapped the luckless defenders of the southern pass. The rest of the Italians ran pell mell for Tobruk. The Great Italian Invasion was officially dead. The trapped Italians held out for two weeks, and in the process allowed their comrades to escape to the safety of the Tobruk fortress.

The British were in no hurry to pursue. With only the green Australians available, the WDF began a slow march towards Sidi Barrani.

January 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

The new year saw badly needed reinforcements arrive for the Western Desert Force. The 2nd Armoured Division (-) and some independent tank battalions were unloaded at Alexandria and rushed to the front. At this time the WDF was redesignated XIII Corps.

The Italians were also receiving reinforcements. The most important of which was the German Flieger Korps. This powerful air unit was soon hammering Malta into impotence. The Italians organized themselves into the Tobruk Army of two corps, the XX and XXII. Every Italian unit was crammed into the Fortress.

Almost every Italian unit. As cautious as the British pursuit was they still managed to destroy some stragglers at Sollum. The 6th Australian Division then occupied Bardia, which the Italians chose not to defend, and settled in to build up supplies and await reinforcements.

With the British barely 80 miles from Tobruk, and its airfields, the RAF found itself at a disadvantage. Removals and casualties had been steadily reducing the British squadrons at the same time that the Regia Aeronautica was growing in strength. The British airmen were forced to go on the defensive, but they were always alert for an opportunity.

The rest of January was quiet except for the occasional air raid. The British built up supplies and waited for more troops. XIII Corps had the equivalent of two divisions forward, both green, and some artillery. The remnants of the 4th Indian Division and 2nd New Zealand Division were in the Sudan.

The Italians had the Brescia, Pavia, Sabratha, and Savona Divisions from Tripoli, all understrength, three surviving 10th Army divisions ( Marmarica ( - ), 23 Mar ( - ), and 1st Libyan), and numerous independent units. Parts of the Ariete Armored Division were also moving up. Very short of supplies and unwilling to risk their depleted army to the hazards of open fighting against British armor, the Italians waited for help to arrive.

February 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

February was even quieter than January and came to be known the First Pause.

For the British it was a month of frustration. Reinforcements continued to flow to XIII Corps, which was redesignated I Australian Corps, including vitally needed aircraft. The British commander was just about ready to launch some limited offensive operations when Churchill struck again. Two brigades were ordered to Greece, one of them armored. At a stroke, Churchill had ended any British hopes of a successful offensive before the Germans arrived in strength. When the I Australian Corps HQ was removed, leaving the British without any HQ units at all, the British Commander began to move the supply dumps at Bardia and Sollum to Mersa in preparation for a general withdrawal.

For the Axis, February was a month of optimism and anticipation. The Italians received substantial reinforcements, but most importantly, the Deutsches Afrika Korps began arriving. Although supplies were still short, the 5th Leicht Division was moved forward as fast as possible. Between the steady arrival of German reinforcements and the draining withdrawals Greece was imposing on the British, the Axis knew that time was on their side.

March 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

Despite repeated attempts to dissuade Churchill from embarking on a Greek adventure, the British Commander had to watch his small army be decimated by withdrawals. Every day saw the Axis gain in strength while the British got weaker.

Elements of the 7th Australian Division and 9th Australian Division arrived throughout March, but these divisions were untrained. Furthermore, several of the Australian brigades had to be dispatched to Greece.

With the addition of strong German reinforcements the Axis situation was much improved. Knowing that the Greek campaign was draining British strength the Axis decided to launch an attack. Since there was not enough supply to move and fight the entire army, and none of the German panzers had yet arrived near Tobruk anyway, the offensive was to be a strictly Italian endeavor.

To prepare for the attack the Italians underwent yet another reorganization. With both the 5th Leicht Division and Ariete Armored Division trickling into the Tobruk area it was considered safe to release much of the Tobruk garrison. 5th Army was formed from XXI and XXII Corps. Each Corps had three "division- sized" Raggrupamentos. XXI Corps was built around the surviving three divisions from 10th Army and was strictly infantry. XXII Corps had the armor and motorized infantry. Due to his excellent political connections, the disgraced 10th Army Commander secured the appointment to lead 5th Army.

The offensive was designed to be a two-pronged attack. XXI Corps would march down the Via Balbia, grab one of the hedgehogs defending Bardia, and then starve the defenders into surrender. The XXII Celere Corps would advance down the Trigh el Abd, occupy Sollum, and proceed towards Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matruh. One Raggrupamento would assist XXI Corps at Bardia.

To oppose 5th Army the British had parts of three Australian divisions. Two brigades of the 6th Aus Div, supported by armour and artillery, were at Bardia. The 9th Aus Div was forming up at Mersa along with a brigade of the 7th Aus Div. The 6th Aus Div's third brigade was in Greece and the 7th Aus Div's only brigade in Egypt would soon follow.

On 15 March the offensive jumped off. The British, who had been anticipating the move, were nonetheless faced with a dilemma. The dump at Sollum had been moved back to Mersa, but a large dump still existed at Bardia. Should they surrender the dump and retreat to Mersa, or defend the dump and the port? Furthermore, could the British fight a mobile campaign with scant forces and only two armoured battalions, one of which was made up from captured Italian tanks? In the event, the British decided to stand. The Australians hunkered down in their trenches and waited for the Italians. It was a fateful decision.

XXI Infantry Corps quickly surrounded Bardia and brought up the artillery. The XXII Celere Corps occupied Sollum and lent a Raggrupamento to XXI Corps for the assault on Bardia. As soon as the southern hedgehog was taken, and Bardia eliminated as a supply source, XXII Corps would move into Egypt as far and as fast as possible.

The attack south of Bardia was conducted under conditions more favorable to the Italians than ever before. As usual the Italians possessed a large numerical superiority and substantial artillery support. This Italian attack, however, also had armor support, uncontested air superiority, and quality parity.

While the Italians were laboriously preparing for their set-piece attack the British tried to disrupt the Italians with an artillery barrage. One of the four attacking Raggs was hit hard and numerous casualties inflicted. The Italians countered with their own artillery and the Australians were hammered. Confident of victory, the Italians launched their assault.

The Australians were not impressed. As they had every time they faced the Italians, the 6th Australian Division beat them savagely. The attackers were surprised by the strength and ferocity of the defense. Soon the battlefield was littered with dead Italians and burning tankettes.

Regrouping, the Italians attacked again. This time the preemptive British artillery barrage was ineffective, and the Italian artillery's reply was even more effective than last time. Again, however, the Italians were surprised that the Australians not only survived the barrage, but were able to put up a firm defense. The attack succeeded only in killing more Italians.

5th Army Commander was now obliged to bring XXII Celere Corps to Bardia to fill the gaps in his depleted ranks. A third attack was launched, but this time the target was the north hedgehog. The terrain was more favorable to the defenders, but the Italians had finally learned some lessons about attacking fortifications. The attack was preceded, as always, by a thunderous artillery barrage. The attackers suffered heavy casualties, but managed to inflict some as well. A fourth attack finally broke the Australian defense.

After two weeks of intense fighting, the Australians were forced to withdraw into Bardia. The Italian 5th Army had been gutted. Half of XXI Corps and a third of XXII Corps had been destroyed. More importantly, the Axis supply dumps were empty. Supplies that should have seen the Axis at least to Mersa Matruh had been consumed by four enormous and bloody assaults on the Australians at Bardia. Curtly rejecting 5th Army Commander's request to attack Bardia, the Axis Commander sent XXII Celere Corps on its much delayed mission.

April 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

XXII Celere Corps' drive on Mersa Matruh had originally been intended as a powerful reconnaissance in force that, if the situation allowed, would become a full-fledged offensive. After the fiasco at Bardia the Corps' attack degenerated into a slow move forward into areas vacated by the British. Buq Buq and Sidi Barrani were occupied without opposition, but XXII Celere Corps lacked the strength or the supplies to push farther east.

Although by late March the Italians had established a close siege of Bardia and rendered the port unusable, the Australian garrison refused to surrender. Hampered by supply shortages and

unwilling to throw his fragile troops against the fearsome Australians the Axis Commander was forced to wait for the garrison to surrender. He would be waiting a long time.

For the British Commander things were looking up. While the 6th Australian Division( - ) tied down>

### **Transfer interrupted!**

ion, with parts of the 2nd New Zealand Division, defeated the Italian forces in East Africa and were returning to Egypt. Moreover, the bulk of the 7th Australian Division arrived during the first week of the month. Even Churchill seemed to realize the severity of the 8th Army's situation, and by the end of the month was rushing badly needed replacements to the desert.

At Bardia, day after day and week after week, the Australians held out. After inflicting grievous losses on the Italians in March the Australians held them motionless outside Bardia during April.

May 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard, David Burson

With the reinforcements and replacements that flowed into Egypt during April the British Commander was beginning to get a grip on the situation. The 1st South African Division began arriving in early May and a large convoy of tanks and aircraft was headed to Alexandria. The 7th Australian Division, 9th Australian Division, and the rebuilt 4th Indian Division were all at Mersa Matruh.

This rosy situation couldn't last, and it didn't. The first week of May delivered a pair of crises that foreshadowed the bigger disaster yet to come. The first crisis was delivered by the Axis. After a heroic defense the 6th Australian Division ( - ) surrendered to the Italian 5th Army. This released XXI Corps to join XXII Celere Corps' advance on Mersa down the Via Balbia. Also, the Germans began a rapid advance with the 5th Leicht Division and 15th Panzer Division down the Trigh el Abd.

The second crisis was delivered by Churchill. While the British Commander prepared to face the Axis onslaught he was ordered to attack. Two brigades of the 7th Australian Division and some armored cars were the units selected to fulfill the order. With the Italians marching down the Via Balbia, the Germans threatening to pocket Mersa, and the attack order, the British Commander decided to abandon Mersa. The 7th Australian Division went on its raid and the 9th Australian Division acted as rear guard, but all other Allied formations went to Alamein to set up a last ditch defense.



The attack by the Australians was neatly done. Side stepping the Italian lead units, the 7th Australian Division destroyed three artillery regiments around Sidi Barrani and almost made it back to Mersa. Almost.

The Axis attack looked more fearsome than it was. Although all of 5th Leicht had arrived, 15th Panzer was a shell. Most of its units had yet to arrive at the front. It was a panzer division without any panzers, but the British didn't know that. Although supplies were still tight, the logistical situation was easing. The problem became getting the supplies forward. The DAK arrived south of Mersa in plenty of time to attempt an encirclement of the port, but they were out of gas. The panzers sat idle while the bulk of the British slipped away east.

The Italian 5th Army, meanwhile, cut off the 7th Australian Division and advanced to Mersa. Again, the Italians were attempting to take a fortified port from an Australian division. This time the Australians had no intention of holding the port. After blowing the large dump at Mersa the 9th Australian Division cut through the thin Italian lines and opened a hole for the 7th Australian to retreat through.

The 7th Australian Division was doomed, however, when the 5th Leicht Division moved north to plug the hole. The Australians surrendered two weeks later. They did get some revenge when they called in a RAF air strike that caused the first German casualties of the campaign. The 15th KRD motorcycle battalion was destroyed.

9th Australian Division was now engaged in a running fight with XXII Celere Corps. For most of the distance from Mersa to Alamein the Australians slipped or cut their way out of Italian encirclements. The Italian armor, however, made the retreat a costly one. Finally, it took a sally from the newly rebuilt 7th Armoured Division to bring in the Australian survivors. Less than a quarter of the division survived the hellish retreat.

An even greater disaster than the loss of Mersa and two Australian divisions was the news from Greece. Eight brigades, three battalions, and two organic trucks had been sent to fight the Germans. Only a single unit, the 22nd Guards Brigade, came back. To add insult to injury, the British Commander had to send the brigade to the Near East.

May had been a disastrous month for the British and June looked like it might be worse.

June 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

At the beginning of June the Axis Commander faced a quandary. Should he launch a shoestring attack on the British line at Alamein? Although more and more supplies were flowing into the desert, only a trickle was reaching Mersa Matruh. The Axis had the 5th Leicht Division, elements of the 15th Panzer Division, most of the Ariete Armored Division, a Raggrupamento of infantry, and a Raggrupamento of tanks and tankettes. The Axis Commander was sure this force had the

combat power to break through the Alamein Line, he just wasn't sure he had the supplies to bring that combat power to bear.

Axis intelligence believed that they faced the 4th Indian Division, 1st South African Division, and most of the 2nd New Zealand Division in the Alamein Line with the 7th Armoured Division in reserve. Plus a handful of independent units and artillery. With Alexandria so close the British would have no supply problems, and the RAF could dominate the skies. Reluctantly, the Axis Commander chose the better part of valor and began to withdraw his forward elements. The Italians tore up the railway as they retreated.

In fact, the British situation was worse than the Axis believed. Many of the brigades holding the Alamein Line were understrength, and the 1st South African Division only had two brigades in theater. Churchill was also making things difficult for the 8th Army by withdrawing brigades to the Near East. The British Commander, not convinced the Axis were really withdrawing, continued to strengthen his defenses.

But the Axis were withdrawing. By mid-June the DAK was west of Bir el Gubi, the Ariete was at Sidi Barrani, the 5th Army infantry was marching to Bardia, and the XXII Celere Corps was at Mersa. Meanwhile, the British were receiving a flood of replacements. The 2nd New Zealand was brought up to strength and the 9th Australian Division was being rebuilt. The 50th Infantry Division began to arrive as reinforcements as did several armour battalions. When Churchill again demanded action from the 8th Army, the British Commander was ready and willing to comply.

Operation Lancer began poorly when the RAF was completely unable to locate any of their targets. The bad omen was proved false, however, when the 7th AD, 2nd NZ, and 9th Aus attacked the Bergonzoli Corazzato Raggrupamento defending Mersa. Without the benefit of effective air support or a preliminary bombardment the British forces slaughtered the defenders without loss. The surprisingly rapid collapse of the Italian armor forced the Axis Commander to move the Ariete into a rear guard position to allow the 5th Army infantry to clear Sollum and take up positions in Bardia. The British were in no hurry to pursue. With over seventy miles of torn up track to repair the 8th Army required some time to settle its logistical situation.

July 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

July started the period known as the Second Pause.

The British spent the month redeploying their forces, repairing the railroad, and raging at Churchill whenever brigades were dispatched to the Near East, Mid East, or Far East. In spite of the withdrawals, the 8th Army was growing fast. All or part of seven divisions were in Egypt, with elements of three more dispatched on various missions. Most of the losses at Bardia, Mersa Matruh, and Greece had been made good.

The Axis spent the month coping with the absence of the Flieger Korps. Previously, the problem had been transporting supplies from Tripoli to where they were needed. Now the problem was almost no supplies at all. All available supplies were shipped, trucked, and flown to Tobruk. All non-mobile troops, except the Bardia garrison, were crammed into the fortress. Tobruk was going to be the hub of the Axis war effort in Africa. If the port was ever taken, the Axis were doomed.

The mobile troops, 5th Leicht Division, 15th Panzer Division, Ariete Armored Division, and Trento Motorized Division were deployed around Bir el Gubi and the airfields at El Aden and Aslog Ridge.

Not a single attack or air raid was launched during the entire month as both sides were occupied with logistical and administrative problems.

August 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

On 1 August the British began their long awaited attack. Almost immediately the 8th Army ran into trouble. Not from the Axis, but from the weather, as severe rainstorms slowed the advance. The RAF was quick to take advantage of the inclement weather by striking Axis air units on the ground. After a week of clear weather sandstorms began to blow across North Africa. For two weeks the sandstorms raged across the area and brought military operations to a standstill.

When the sandstorms finally blew themselves out the rival air forces took to the skies, seemingly intent on making up for lost time. The RAF, as usual, got in the first blow. The RAF anti-aircraft gunners also distinguished themselves. In air to air duels, however, the Luftwaffe ruled. Whenever Hurricane and Messerschmitt met, the British came off second best.

The last week of the month saw numerous raids on airfields and several air to air battles. Meanwhile the 8th Army occupied Sollum

September 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

As the 8th Army moved closer to Tobruk the RAF found itself at a great disadvantage trying to protect the ground forces from the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica. The Tobruk fortress had four enormous airfields operating within the perimeter. The Axis also had huge airfields at El Aden, Aslog Ridge, and Crete. The 8th Army was sticking its head into a hornets nest and was counting on the RAF to protect it. The British airmen concentrated on protecting the troops while they feverishly constructed forward airfields.

By 15 September the Axis air forces were ready to up the stakes. A week of air strikes and air to air battles of unprecedented ferocity was the result. Although the RAF anti-aircraft gunners took a heavy toll and the air raids were less effective than the Axis Commander had hoped, the RAF was swamped by the sheer numbers of Axis fighters and bombers. One bright spot for the RAF was when a Hurricane claimed the first air to air victory for the British since the Luftwaffe arrived in Africa.

On the ground, the 8th Army attacked the Italian defenders in the fortifications outside of Bardia. Any notions the Italians might have had about an Australian-like defense were quickly quashed. The 2nd New Zealand Division, supported by the 7th Armoured Division, hammered the defenders and seized the southern hedgehog after heavy fighting. The Italians did not fold like they had in previous battles, and inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers before being overwhelmed.

With the fall of the southern hedgehog the defenders of the northern hedgehog tried to escape to Tobruk. They were destroyed by the 9th Australian Division after a stiff fight. Five months ago the 6th Australian Division had held out for a month after being cut off. The Italians lasted three days before surrendering en masse. The last veterans of the 1940 Italian offensive had been destroyed.

While the 5th Army was being annihilated more than nine Axis divisions sat idle less than eighty miles away.

October 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

The first week of October saw the two combatants staring at each other across fifty miles of no man's land. Even the raging air battles subsided as both sides gathered themselves for the bloodletting to come.

The first action of the month occurred when the Ariete Armored Division displaced south to the El Cuasc crossroads. Also, the British observed a large stack of infantry moving behind the Ariete. Curious about Axis intentions the British Commander sent the SAS Commando company to conduct a reconnaissance of the Ariete. The SAS obtained valuable intelligence, but were surprised when Italian armor blocked their escape. The elite commandos fought off the Italians and managed to break contact, but the Ariete launched a pursuit. After a two day chase the Italian tankers overran and destroyed the British commandos.

Another British commando company, Layforce, conducted a reconnaissance of El Aden airfield and the Trento Division which defended it. Again the Italians were alert and prevented the British commandos from escaping. The Italians should have let them go. Layforce crushed Trento's attack and destroyed the attached 7th Bersaglieri Regiment before escaping.

The British weren't the only ones with active commandos. The German von Koenen commando company overran two airfields near Sidi Barrani. Although the German commandos managed to destroy only a handful of obsolete Gladiator fighters, the raid disrupted RAF activities and cut the

Via Balbia. Garrison forces from Sidi Barrani moved out to destroy the von Koenen company. Two brigades of the 7th Australian Division attacked the commandos in the first clash of ground forces between the Allies and Germans in the Desert Campaign. Von Koenen mauled the attacking Australians, destroying half a brigade. Undaunted, the Australians attacked again and forced the Germans to retreat between the coast and the escarpment.

On 19 October Rommel flew to Germany to see the Fuehrer and visit his wife. It would turn out to be a fateful trip. On 22 October the 8th Army launched their big offensive.

The offensive started with a powerful fighter sweep over the El Aden airfield. After the fighters forced the air units based at El Aden to land the Axis Commander prepared to intercept the follow up bombing raid with his fighters stationed at Tobruk. Instead, the British sent their armour. 7th Armoured Division, with a brigade from 1st Armoured Division attached, attacked Trento. Trento put up stiff resistance before being forced to withdraw. Three and a half air groups were destroyed by the British tankers. In a quirk of fate, General "Strafer" Gott became separated from his command and was captured by Trento's rearguard.

After El Aden airfield was secured the 9th Australian Division passed through the 7AD (+) and attacked the shaken Trento Division. The Australians pushed Trento's remnants into Tobruk and overran some Italian artillery. Now the 50th Infantry Division moved through the 7AD (+) to attack the airfield at Aslog. Aslog airfield was defended by a Kampfgruppe of anti-tank and assault guns. The Germans stopped the British attackers and held the airfield.

The British plan became clear to the Axis Commander. The 8th Army was going to interpose itself between the supply-guzzling divisions around Bir el Gubi and the enormous supply dump at Tobruk. To increase Tobruk's isolation the Royal Marine battalion seized the port of Gazala by seaborne invasion. The British were also going to try and overrun all the airfields outside of Tobruk in order to reduce the RAF's numerical inferiority. The plan was risky, but if successful would separate the powerful German divisions from the supplies they needed to be effective.

The 2nd New Zealand Division, minus a brigade, moved through El Aden and turned south into what it hoped was the Axis rear. One overrun attack destroyed two battalions of German artillery, but a second overrun ran headlong into the 5th and 8th Panzer Regiments. The 2 NZ was repulsed with heavy casualties.

The Germans quickly pressed their advantage. The Luftwaffe inflicted heavy casualties on the 9th Australian Division while the panzers mauled the 2 NZ a second time. A third attack finished the division and opened the supply lines to Tobruk. The previous German attacks had been supplied by organic trucks, internal stocks, and air transports landing at Aslog airfield.

With the supply lines opened the panzers attacked the 4th Indian Division west of El Aden. After a highly successful attack by the Luftwaffe the German tankers sent the Indians running with heavy losses. The 7 AD was the next victim of the rampaging panzers. The British tankers were sent reeling in disorder. In three days of intense combat the 5th and 8th Panzer Regiments destroyed the 2 NZ and 4th Indian divisions while mauling the 7 AD.

The British would never recover. The Ariete swarmed out of the desert and overran XIII Corps headquarters and the airfield where it was stationed. Three and a half air groups were destroyed on the ground as Ariete got revenge for El Aden. XIII Corps' defending tanks and infantry were destroyed by Ariete and its supporting artillery.

A sally from the Tobruk garrison, aimed at destroying the 11th Royal Marine Bn and opening the Via Balbia turned out to be a waste of effort when the Regia Aeronautica destroyed the marines by itself.

The Germans didn't give the British time to catch their breath. The panzers finished off the 7 AD and headed for Sollum. The Ariete overran XXX Corps headquarters and another airfield. Another three and half RAF air groups were destroyed on the ground. Meanwhile, the Afrika division destroyed a British task force built around the 5th New Zealand Regiment.

Isolated British units began to surrender. Other British units cut off by the Axis advance, namely the 50th Infantry Division and the 9th Australian Division tried to make it back to their own lines. 50 ID managed to overrun an Italian artillery regiment, but was caught by the 21st Panzer Division and destroyed. The 9th Aus Div, however, made good its escape.

The 5th Indian Division was surrounded in Bardia and the 4th South African Armored Car Battalion was surrounded northwest of Aslog Ridge. Other assorted British units that were cut out of supply surrendered or were mopped up by the Afrika Division.

By Halloween the DAK was at Sidi Barrani.

November 1941

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

The British situation was catastrophic. The RAF, already outnumbered at the beginning of the offensive, was mortally wounded as the British aircraft were cut out of the sky by Axis fighters and overrun on the ground. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica enjoyed almost total air supremacy. The 8th Army, what was left of it, tried desperately to establish blocking positions that would hold up the Germans long enough for a cohesive defense to be established.

The Germans weren't about to let that happen. Due to the superior mobility and fighting power of the German divisions, and a growing supply crisis, the Italian formations were largely halted in favor of the Germans. While the Afrika Division pursued the 9th Australian Division down the Trigh el Abd, the panzer divisions swarmed down the Via Balbia. Sidi Barrani was seized and the 7th Australian Division ( - ) was destroyed. Then the DAK swung south to trap and annihilate the 9th Aus Div.

This left the British with the recently rebuilt 2nd New Zealand Division to defend Mersa Matruh. While the DAK was mopping up the 9th Aus Div near Piccadily Circus, the Ariete Armored

Division tried to overrun 2 NZ at Mersa. The Italians were roughly handled and forced to retreat. The Axis Commander was shocked that the British had managed to rebuild the division so quickly.

2 NZ followed up its successful defense by trying a counter-attack. The Ariete held its own, however, and the battle was inconclusive. Jock Campbell was killed on 14 November while leading the New Zealander attack.

The Axis Commander received another nasty surprise when elements of the recently rebuilt 7 AD attacked Ariete and sent the Italians tumbling back. The RAF also managed to sneak in a destructive raid on the tattered Italian division.

By this time, however, the DAK had arrived. The Germans pushed the two British divisions into Mersa and then left the Afrika Division, the remnants of Ariete, and the newly arrived Trieste Motorized Division to starve the British into surrender. They didn't have to wait long as the demoralized garrison capitulated a week later.

Although supplies were becoming increasingly scarce, and the distances were stretching the Axis to the limit, the addition of many captured British trucks was allowing the Germans to continue operations. In any event, the Axis Commander was determined to continue the offensive until the last drop of gasoline and the last bullet was gone.

At Maaten Baggush another British force was obliterated and the road to Alexandria was open. Already the von Konen Commando company had overrun all the airfields west of Alexandria and was venturing into the great port's suburbs. The British withdrew their surviving brigades into Alexandria and tried to garrison all the easy crossings of the Nile River and Nubariya Canal.

The British were too weak. The Nubariya Canal was forced at El Ghajata in an attack that saw the British defenders almost annihilated by the Luftwaffe and artillery. Despite the excellent defensive terrain, the pulverized defenders were unable to resist the German attackers. With the road open, the panzers moved across the canal and fanned out into the British rear.

The End

Allies: Doug Fitch

Axis: Michael Barnard

German panzers rolled unchecked through the Nile Delta. The surviving British forces were penned into Alexandria, Port Said, Suez, and Cairo. The Axis Commander, seeing no reason to risk his precious troops, was content to starve and blast the British into surrender. Mussolini arrived with his white charger and a new uniform specially designed for his triumphant entry into Cairo.

As more and more Italian troops became available to fill the trench lines the 15th Panzer Division, 21st Panzer Division, and 90th Leicht Division (formerly the Afrika Division), prepared to move across the Sinai and into the Middle East. The Germans found, to their horror, that there was not a single road or rail bridge across the Suez Canal.

One by one the last British outposts surrendered. Cairo surrendered on 15 December along with Bardia. Bardia's garrison from the 5th Indian Division had been cut off since late October. Alexandria capitulated on 19 December and Port Said and Suez followed suit a week later. The 4th South African Armored Car Battalion, stranded southwest of Tobruk since late October, became the last Allied unit in North Africa to surrender when they gave up on 22 January 1942 (!). The determined, if foolish, South Africans had held out for three months.

The Italians were jubilant. Italian warships were soon based in Alexandria and Port Said. Italian submarines, based at Suez, began to attack Britain's vulnerable convoys in the Indian Ocean. And Mussolini began plans to conquer the Middle East, liberate East Africa, perhaps even march on Capetown!

The Germans were much less jubilant when freighters came with new orders and white camouflage...