

# Cracking a Few Eggs

by Dean N. Essig

Wargamers are a traditional lot. North Africa games have, since the beginning of time it seems, revolved around Tobruk. Beyond that, if the 1940 Italian offensive is included, gamers have traditionally ran from the British as fast as possible to duck into the Tobruk fortress, circle the wagons, and wait for the cavalry (in this case, Rommel and the Germans) to show. Confronted with **DAK** and carrying all this "baggage of expectation", some have asked me about the "impossibility" of taking Tobruk with the British during their post-Compass advance.

The simple answer is "hogwash", but since this flies in the face of what they have learned to expect, I tend to get blank stares and assurances that there was just *no* way they could see to do it.

That being so, I decided to examine the basic "worst" case situation from the Allied point of view (The Italian Player has met only the absolute minimums, abandoned everything in order to maximize the defense of Tobruk) followed by my plan to attack. We will follow this attack and its progress. I expect to own Tobruk in very little game time; my accusers expect me to fail miserably and to not take the fortress at all. Since their assumption is that "it can't be done," then if I do it at all, I win. Not a bad bet.

The point of all this is to show how the Allies can take Tobruk, under conditions of Italian advantage well beyond that which any **normal** gamer would ever have to face. If, under these conditions this can be done, then it shows how deeply gamers must question the baggage they carry from game to game before jumping to conclusions.

Predicting how situations will develop based on skills brought from other games is more difficult (and less accurate) than many gamers tend to believe.

Now, let us take a look at what we have here...

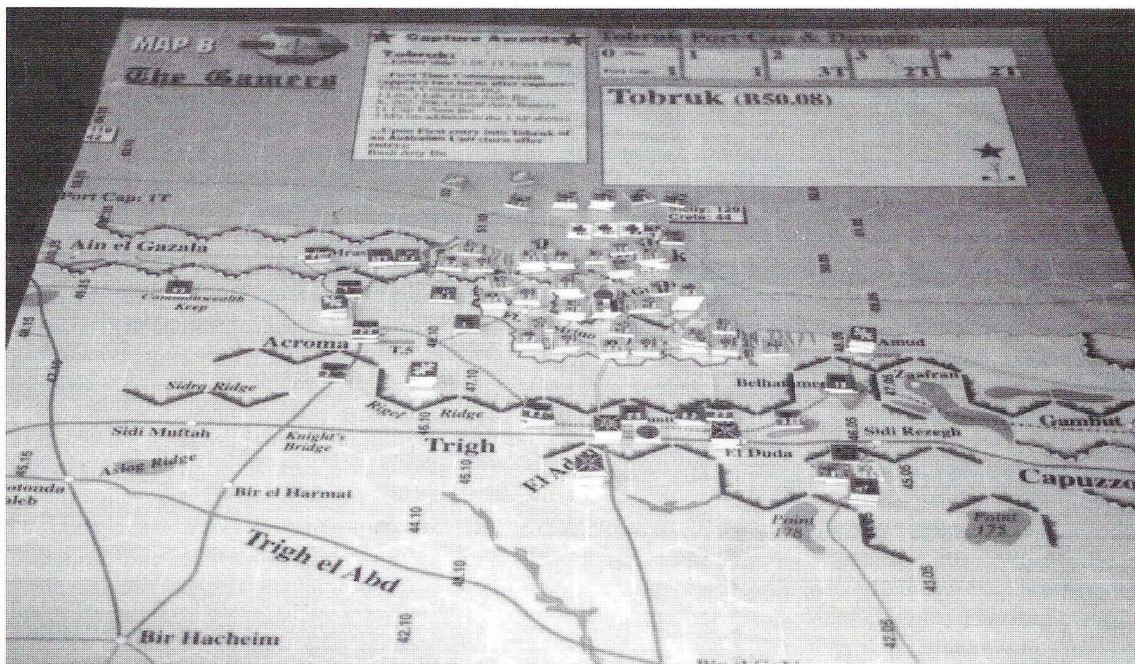
## Setting the Stage

I won't go through all the details of the Compass offensive itself. (See the article in *Ops 29* for pointers.) Most players have been able to pull that off without detailed instructions. Some have had to attack too much because they failed to destroy the forward Italian army by cutting off its supplies. Missing this means of destroying the enemy is too basic to the OCS way of doing things and I will not expend your time here re-hammering on those concepts. They have been dealt with enough over the years and if that effort has not changed a particular gamer's attritional frame of mind, then I am not sure spilling more ink here will generate new results.

At any rate, I will make the following assumptions: 1) That in preparation for the perfect fortress, as many of the best units as possible were **not** used to fulfill Mussolini requirements. Rather, that these units were held back while the army's dirtbags went forward. 2) That the maximum number of units in Tripolitania were shipped forward to build up Tobruk's defense. And lastly, 3) that whatever SPs that could be shipped forward (in addition to those units) were shipped and held in Tobruk rather than being sent forward.

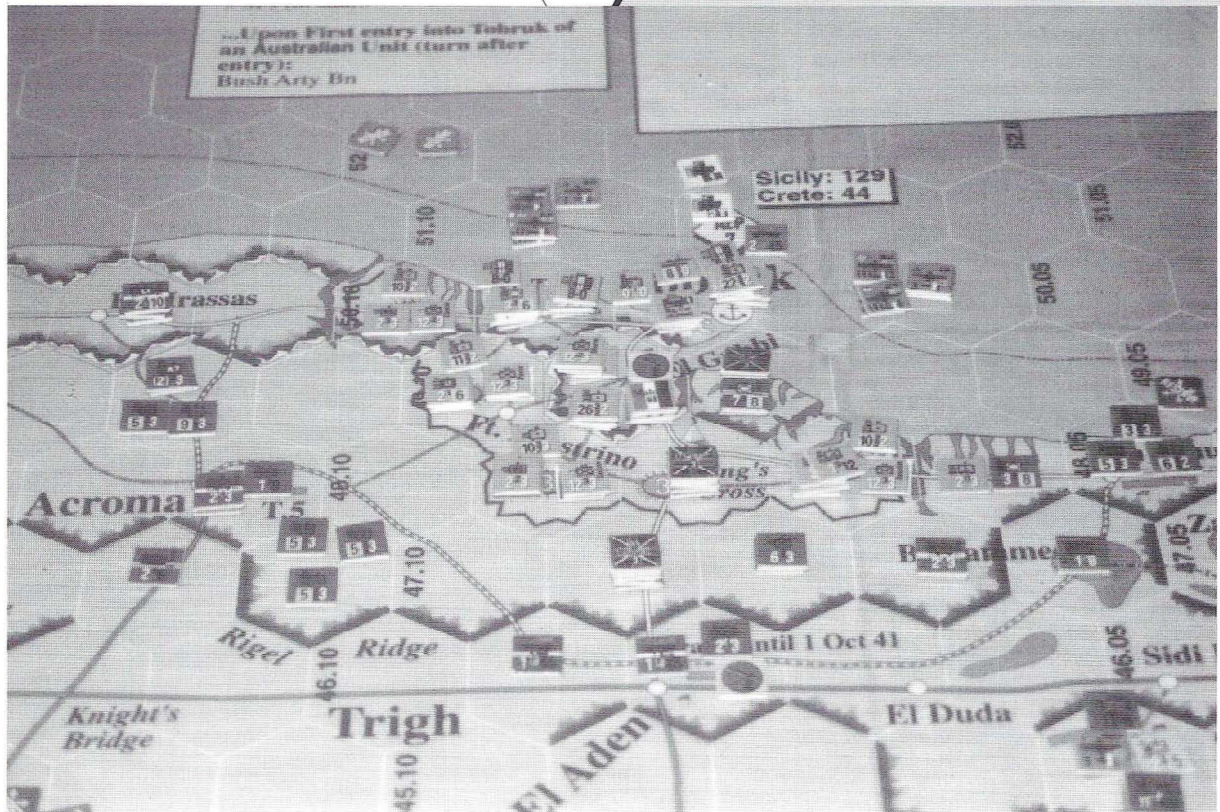
With this series of assumptions, the following will be true: 1) The British Compass Offensive will begin on schedule (end of November, first week of December, 1940 at the latest) and that leads to 2) a relatively quick and bloodless victory for the British in a minimal amount of time over the forward Italian Army.

You can't be strong in both places and sending the quality units back to Tobruk dooms the frontal units to a quick kill.



Before the fray: Both sides at start locations.

*The Initial Penetration is completed. This is the situation the Italians are presented with the very first time they can react to what has happened to them!*



Leaving good units with the front means that the Tobruk force will not be as strong, and my purpose here is to take the fortress while its strength is at a theoretical maximum. Obviously, in real life, the fortress will be weaker and the frontline troops marginally stronger. It is my contention that the results will differ only in location—the early Italian Army is doomed no matter how you cut it.

The next step in any British advance is the capture of Bardia. For our purposes, the second the British offensive begins, I will pull out all the mobile troops from Bardia and send them to Tobruk. The immobile units will stand fast (and die quickly). All supplies not expended in the original offensive will be trucked to Tobruk. I expect Bardia to fall with token resistance. The focus will now shift to the main event: Tobruk itself.

## The Two Armies

The British will have arrived at Tobruk with the 7th Armored intact. Other than the usual withdrawals, the British army arrives in front of Tobruk by the end of December at full strength. At that point, I will wait until the beginning of January in order to build up the supplies needed to take Tobruk. Before you conclude that this is too late to be historically correct, remember that the British took Tobruk on 22 Jan 41 during the real campaign. My attack begins on 8 Jan 41.

The Italians arrayed inside Tobruk need a careful look, as these guys are the basis of the “can’t be done” stance. Here we have the best of the forward army plus every guy in uniform that could be shipped forward in the time available. Also, with the exception of some of the poor, minor garrisons, all available troops have been stripped from the map area. To further maximize the Italian position, I have assumed the British player completely “forgot” to attempt any effort to suppress the port of Tobruk—“Blimey!” he exclaims as he slaps his forehead!

These are the units that died in the forward army, the poor sods:

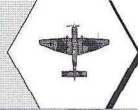
- LibOp, 23 It Corps HQs
- 3 Jan, 23 Mar, 28 Oct Blackshirt Divisions
- 1 Lib, 2 Lib, Ctnzro, Sirte Inf Divisions
- 9 Lt, 21 Lt, 62 Lt Tank Bns
- 201, 202, 204 Blackshirt MG Bns
- 27, 61, 62 MG Bns
- 225 Territorial Bn
- Maletti, 31 GAF, 32 GAF Artillery Rgts

As you can see, these guys were hand-picked to be thrown to the lions. No weaker selection could be made. A decent Brit player will have no problem annihilating these guys in short order—none will escape.

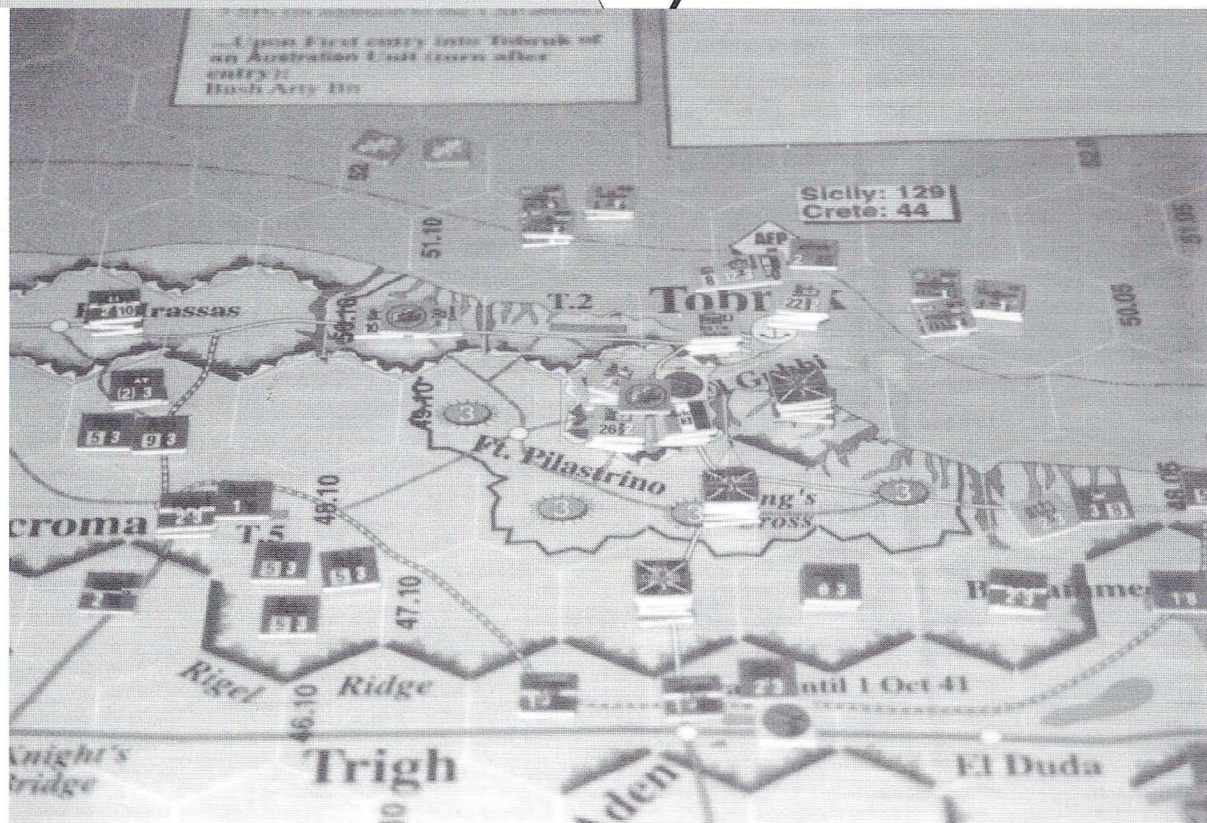
The accumulation of troops in Tobruk is now quite impressive—perhaps too much to reflect what would happen in a real game—but that is fine for a test. The limited area of the fortress means the troops are packed wall-to-wall with absolutely no maneuver room. The fortress is also pretty skimpy on reserve potential—yes, it has Maletti, the Babini marker, and the two Reserve markers—but the problem is space. There are only three non-Hedgehog hexes in the fortress and only they can contain reserves. Although the number of reserve hexes is really limited, the number of units that might be in reserve is a force to be reckoned with—there is enough artillery in these hexes to choke a horse.

At the same time as another playtest was going on, I drafted Jim Ferguson and G. Carl Evans to set up the Italian defense for me. They set them up in a manner that would be mildly different from the way I might have set them up, but added the “other guy has his own plans” effect.

One point needs to be made right now (before I actually begin the play of this scenario), I will use and live with whatever die rolls that might happen (good or bad) and not try to “normalize” any dice rolls. My reasoning here is simple, I have already stacked the deck in the favor of the Italians beyond that reasonable in normal game play. I see no point in



*Attrition takes its toll. Quickly.*



adding to that advantage by destroying any good or bad luck that might occur in play (let alone by insisting on nothing but bad die rolls for the Commonwealth). If somebody insists that I need to prove that the British can win this situation while rolling nothing but 2's, I'll tell him to stop wasting my time.

## The British Forces

I am assuming that British operations between Late Nov 40 and 8 Jan 41 generated no losses (only an incredible lack of luck would generate loss in taking out the poor units sent forward into Egypt). During the period since the campaign began, two Infantry Brigades and one Organic Truck have been sent to the Sudan.

Everyone else, including all three leaders and quite a bit of supply has moved forward to and beyond Bardia. Building the forward logistics network was the number one priority between the fall of Bardia in early December and the launch of the Tobruk offensive in January. The idea here (simple enough) was to get enough materials forward to allow the Commonwealth to splurge when the time came. Doing this isn't all that difficult.

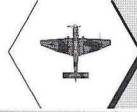
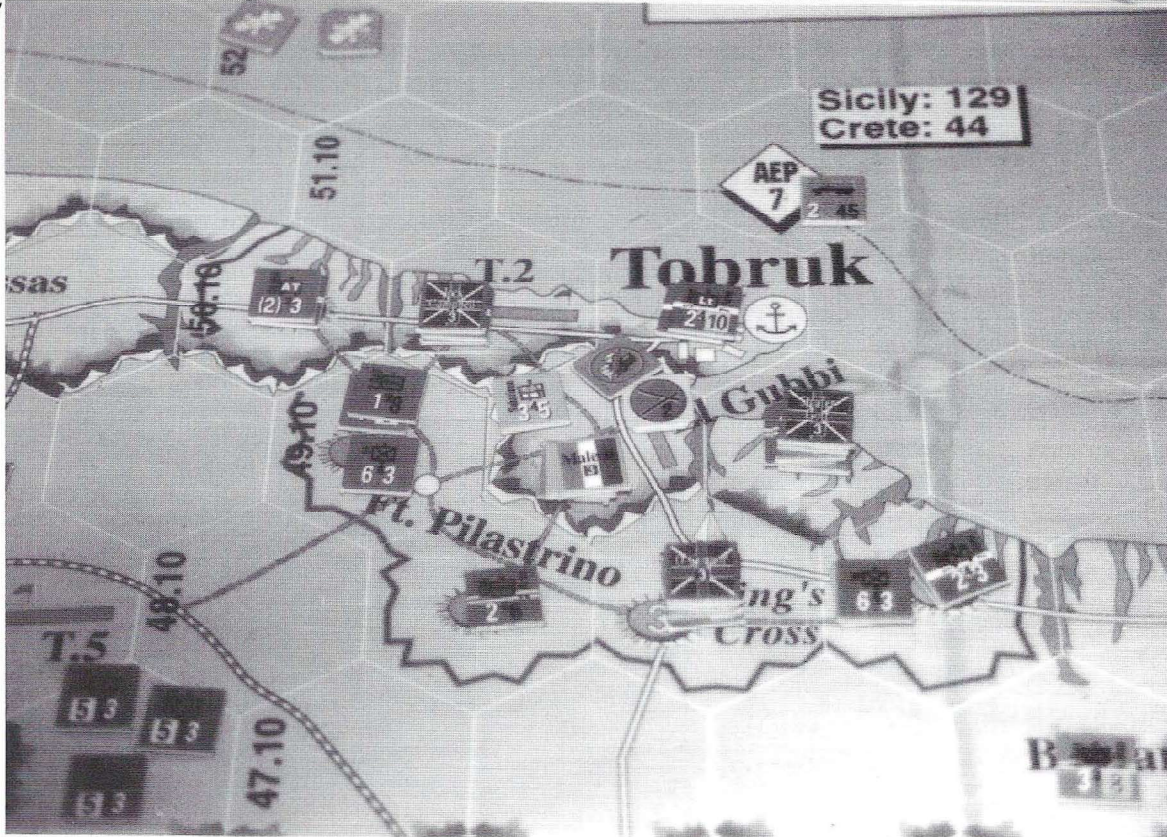
No air campaign of note has occurred. The few British air units (both of them at this point) are intact but unable to challenge the hideous concentration of Italian aircraft inside the fortress. A reasonable air campaign to establish air superiority over Tobruk would be nice to have, but would be beyond the limited means of the Brits at this point. Simple numbers alone make the point here: facing the Brit Hurricane (yes, all one of them), is no fewer than four Italian fighters. While three of them are CR.42's and mildly inferior to the Hurricane, numbers are telling here. I'll give the "airwar" one shot to see what damage I can inflict; if noting else, the Italians will be forced to use supplies to refit the used aircraft. Before beginning my ground campaign, let me quickly run a turn or so of air

action and report the results here.

At the airbase at El Gubbi is one CR42 and the G.50 (the rest are at the airstrip in the next hex north as the force must be split due to stacking). In the first combats, the G.50 aborts, followed by a both abort for the CR42 and the Hurricane. Net result, Italian supplies down by 1T. The next time, the Hurricane aborts on the first mission (no results). Later, I try to go after the "easy" hex (the one with two CR42's in it): the results here are first a both abort (another 1T), then a Italian step loss and abort followed by a simple Italian abort (1T more). So far, I've managed to take down 1/2 of a CR42 and cost the Italians 3T. Another turn I go after the CR42s again. This time I abort the good Italian, and (only) abort the weak one (another 1T). One more turn of this... same thing again and this time the Hurricane aborts with no result. My little air campaign cost the Italians 1 SP and half a CR42. Not much to write home about, but what did you expect for one Hurricane to accomplish? I was happy to inflict a little damage and escape with my fighter intact. This whole action took a number of turns to accomplish, all prior to the 8 Jan target date.

## The Plan

The basic British plan is simple: Damage the Italians as much as possible with a three or four turn artillery offensive aimed at killing unit steps and damaging the port and follow that with a knife-like penetration designed to secure one of the hexes adjacent to the port. The result would be shutting the port down and forcing the entire Italian army to live off real SPs. There are 22 Italian SPs available when this operation begins, some of these will be used by the Italians in counter-battery and counter-attack options, some more will ship in, but the upshot of shutting down the port will be that the 54 or so REs in Tobruk will burn down 6.75 SPs per turn just living; after that, the entire mass will "attrit to death." With no changes, it

*Game Over, man!*

will take 2-3 turns for all these units to be out of supply and (given the Action Ratings involved) a turn or two after that for all the units to be destroyed.

In preparation for this article, I evaluated the different courses of action available to the Brits. In the artillery preparation, there are two distinct possibilities: Shell the Port and Shell the Troops. In the first case, the goal would be to keep the port damaged by 2 or more hits at all times. This would inflict the "Advanced Trace" rule on the fortress and only 6 REs or less would be able to trace. The rest of the 54 REs would have to eat off the dump. That would be 48 REs or 24T (6 SPs) per turn... an only slightly slower death knell than the assault plan I looked at above. Plus, the amount of supply on hand would be reduced by the Italians frantically trying to repair their port. The downside of this plan is that the Brits only have one 4-range artillery unit and that the 3-range ones need to be adjacent to the fortress to hit the port (opening them up to counter battery exchanges). Such a plan would also be of limited interest as an article to read. That said, it might just work and be worth a try if you feel Tobruk is tough when built up like this and the assault option looks too difficult.

The second plan would be to use the Brit artillery to take out a step here and there to reduce the sheer flab of the position. Say what you want, but the Italian army here has an incredible ability to absorb hits.

For the artillery plan, I decided to compromise between the two concepts above. Most of the shell weight would go to unit reduction, but I would also slam the port a bit (especially with the 4 range unit) to keep the Italians guessing and to capitalize on any success the port bombardment might manage to create. In other words, I chose option two, but will add enough of option one to see what happens.

Once the artillery offensive has accomplished a reasonable amount of damage, I'll go about overrunning and killing B48.08 in order to gain access to B49.08. I like this entry hex as it affords some minor protection from attack (the escarpment

hexside north-west of the hex) and I like attacking across slopes rather than wadis. B50.10 to B50.09 is the alternate which is even more protected by escarpments, but is a difficult path to assault and is more exposed to being cut off by an Italian sortie.

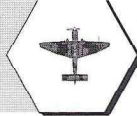
Tactically, I have endeavored to do as much of my shelling as possible in the Reaction and Exploitation Phases in order to minimize the ability of Italian counter battery fires. A handful of tiny units are forward risking life and limb as spotters (if the Italians decide to waste the shells on them). The bulk of the ground forces (those not in positions to contain any Italian break-out attempts) are in reactive positions prepared to either launch the offensive at the drop of a hat, or to react to any Italian sorties.

## Doing the Deed...

8 Jan 41: One mission dedicated to port reduction which gained one hit on the port (this is rebuilt by the Italians in the next Movement Phase at the cost of 1 SP). Two further barrages killed a total of two steps (1 RE), one Light Tank Bn and one crummy GAF Regiment.

12 Jan 41: One mission dedicated to the port, 2 hits generated (lucky roll for 21 Barrage points!). Italians rebuild one at a cost of 1 SP, not enough cumulative damage to force them to eat SPs. Two troop barrages, one complete miss, the other killed another 1 step, 1/2 RE unit (a 3-rated MG Bn).

15 Jan 41: One mission dedicated to port reduction, a 5 roll gives it another 2 hits! The Italians rebuild one hit, but the remaining two points cause the Italians to eat off the map (well, most of them anyway). That costs them 1 SP for repair and 5+1T SPs of trace supply. On top of this, the Italians barrage both my artillery and the spotting units (8T total used) and kill one spotter and DG a stack of guns. The Italians expend 8+1T SPs which, combined with the in-flow since the game began leave them with 14+2T in their super-dump from the 22 SPs they started with. My remaining troop barrage (the stack that was



*The dead toll. These are the two dead piles from the Tobruk operation alone, Italian losses from the battle in Egypt are not show.*

supposed to fire plus the DG guns), 19.5 strength, misses entirely.

19 Jan 41: My success with the port barrage last turn makes me reorganize my artillery to do two such strikes this turn, both on the 21-40 table. Doing so means I'll have only one 8 point barrage to fire against troops, but given what I've seen so far, I'm making more hay with the port barrages than the troop barrages, so here goes. The first port barrage misses altogether, the second scores a hit. The Italians fix the new hit (1 SP down), but still must eat off the map. This is another 5+1T SPs. The Italians choose to not fire their guns this turn as the cost is too great, so the net stock loss for the fortress is a 5+2T loss (6+1T out, 3T in). They are down to 9 SPs. The 8 point barrage almost, but not quite, DGs its target hex.

22 Jan 41: One port barrage this time, and it gets the hit I'm after leaving the port with 2 hits and still in the zone for eating off the map. The rest of the artillery goes unit hunting in three barrages. Two of these generate DGs, the last kills the ProvBrs Motorcycle Bn. Stock loss for this turn is the same as last turn, down 5+2T to a total of 3+2T in the fortress.

At this point I'd like to point out that my port reduction theory seems to have been correct. The supplies painstakingly built up over a period of months in the game have now been reduced to less than one turn's trace requirements. Rather than switch to port reduction only (no assault) to end this on the cheap, which I'd do in a real game, I'll play out the assault to see where that leads. The Italians have now been forced into inactivity to avoid accelerating their doom. The one turn above where they tried counterbattery work cost them far more than they gained. Conceding this point, the Italians have been reduced to just "taking the pain."

26 Jan 41: One barrage against the port, which misses. One 16 point barrage against the breach hex (DG, no step loss) and one 18 point barrage shifted for lack of spotter against the final

objective hex (also DG with no step loss). In Exploitation, the first overrun is against the breach hex with Jock Campbell and two armor battalions (total of 7 strength points, 6 AR using the leader). The raw odds are 2:1 in the Open (DG target, no doubling for the armor), +3 AR differential. Surprise roll is 8 modified to 11 giving attacker surprise with five shifts (to the 9:1 table). Combat roll is 3 (damn!) +3 is 6 giving Ao1, DL1o1. Jock withdraws, but the Italians must take their options as losses (due to the hedgehog, half rounded up). Jock survives his leader loss roll.

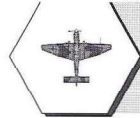
Two additional armor battalions (no leader, AR 4) overrun the same hex. Raw odds are 4:1, +1 AR differential. Surprise roll is 10, attacker surprise and the shift roll is 2 giving a final odds of 7:1. Combat roll is 6 (modified to 7) giving Ao1, DL1o1. I'll take my option loss so one of the two units can occupy the hex, the Italians have been ejected from the breach.

Strafer Gott and a Tank Brigade from the 2nd Arm Div and a 5-rated Tank Battalion roar through the breach to attack the objective hex. This hex is close terrain with everyone x1. The raw odds are 1:1 in close, +3 AR differential. Surprise roll is 8 giving attacker surprise with four shifts to 6:1 in close. Combat roll is 9 modified to 12 giving Ae4DL1o2. This time the Italians can make use of their option, but only at the cost of losing the hex, so they chose to kill off two artillery units instead. Gott survives his roll and the attackers have enough MA remaining to give it another try.

This time the raw odds are 2:1, +4 AR for the attacker. Attacker surprise is achieved with a 7 roll and gives four shifts. Combat is resolved on the 8:1 close table. A roll of 6 is modified to 10 and the result is Ae4DL1o2. The Italian AR unit is destroyed and the remaining unit (an HQ) retreats. The objective hex is secured. Gott survives his second roll and occupies the hex with the two tank units.

Combat cost the Italians another 2 SPs bring the fortress down to 1+2T in stocks.

O'Connor and remaining reserves flood in to bring the



defense of these two hexes up to snuff. In the breach hex are now O'Connor, 11 Hus Arm Car Bn, and two Indian infantry brigades. In the objective hex are Gott, one 5-rated tank Bn, a tank brigade, 2 Support Brigade and one Australian infantry brigade. Both hexes are replete with strength, at least one 5-AR unit and a leader. At the entry point (were Jock took up residence after failing to breach, are a leader, two 5-AR tank units, a 4-rated tank battalion, and an Indian infantry brigade. The ring around the fortress is not leak proof, but rather is designed to keep the majority of the Italians from getting away.

Now, the port is fully shut down and during the Italian turn the player must decide to either expend another supply point trying to fix the port on the hopes of retaking B49.08 or to not do so and supply another 8 REs of troops. Given what is going on, I would rather have the supply to eat than worry about what the port might be worth if I retook this hex. The only way to clear the port in time to make a difference on this turn would be to attempt to overrun the Brits now in it, questionable at best and a sure way to waste the remaining supply. They are now dead meat.

The Italians can afford to supply 12 REs out of the 45 REs of units remaining. The rest roll for attrition. The results of this one roll (on the Italian half of the 26 Jan 41 turn) can be seen in the photograph of the map situation and the one of the dead pile at this point... no need for a detailed narrative. Suffice it to say that at the cost of two dead British units (one from an earlier barrage and another from the assault), the once "impregnable" Tobruk fortress is reduced to three hexes. Tobruk itself, B49.09 and B50.10. The port cannot function and there are no supplies left at all. For the curious, I did let the mobile bordello roll for attrition...it was lost as the only unit in the Tobruk hex itself to attrit!

29 Jan 41: The Brits seal the remaining Italians to let them attrit to death (no need to attack) while a few mobile units are dispatched to take the undefended Benghazi. The three hexes suffer limited losses this turn. There is nothing left to do here but wait. Benghazi is taken.

1 Feb 41: The Tobruk hex collapses while the other two

remain. The British occupy Tobruk.

5 Feb 41: B50.10 falls, B49.09 continues to suffer loss each turn (Maletti, the Camels, an HQ and a Pax Repl remain). The photos show the end situation and end dead pile.

### Conclusion

Here, two turns before the Germans even begin to enter the game, the Brits have marched the entire Italian army (including the forces that would have beefed up the limited Germans) into the dead pile, they have captured Tobruk and Benghazi. Beyond that, I didn't rush. My artillery prep lasted five turns when only 3-4 were planned. I drew that out for my own edification to see if port hits alone would have accomplished the job (and they would have done just that). It took one turn to execute the assault plan (all in the Exploitation Phase) with reasonably average luck...not great but not bad either. Three turns later with no additional combat almost all the Italians have suffered attritional loss.

So, how do the Axis fare with this all eggs in one basket approach? I'd say far worse than the more moderate approach of sending a decent force into Egypt and keeping the troops in Tripoli right where they are. A better Egyptian force would have given the Brits a better run for their money out forward and perhaps caused a few losses. Reasonable forces in Bardia and Tobruk would have slowed the British advance and made it more problematic. A defense of Benghazi would have made that operation more difficult, and having Italians available to bulk out the thin German ranks is a must for later in the game. Putting all the eggs into the Tobruk basket, crossing your arms and sitting back as if there is nothing the Brits can do about it is a sure way to crack a few eggs. Italian eggs, that is.

