

# A New Scenario for DAK

## “The Gambler’s Last Throw”

by Mike Stohlmeyer

### The Battle of Mersa Matruh — Retreat and Pursuit to Alamein

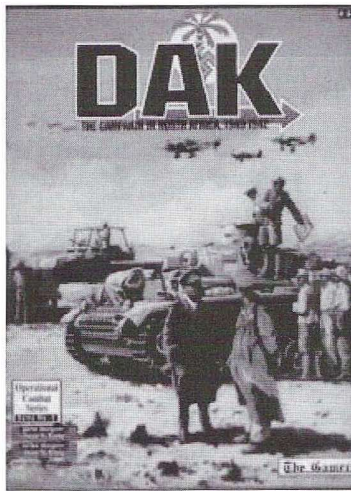
The South African official history of the North African campaign, *Crisis In The Desert*, describes 1 July 1942 as “the crucial day in the whole desert campaign.” Field Marshall (then Major) Lord Carver called Rommel’s efforts to break through the Alamein Line “the gambler’s last throw”. After the weakened remnants of the Afrika Korps were turned back at Alamein on that day, the odds that Rommel would capture Egypt quickly eroded. In a few days any chance of victory was gone. The battle that had occurred at Mersa Matruh only days before was the last success Rommel enjoyed in the advance, and was the last opportunity to tip the scales far enough in his favor that ultimate success would be within his grasp.

The Battle of Matruh is surely one of the most incredible in military history. The outcome, given the relative strength of the opposing forces and the desperate situation the weaker army found itself in, due to its commander’s reckless audacity, is mind-boggling! The Commonwealth had 8 brigades of infantry in position, with their supporting artillery. The 1st Armoured Division could field 160 tanks, of which 60 were the powerful Grants. German strength, on the other hand, had become dangerously depleted.

The Afrika Korps, which would inevitably be used as the main striking force, had barely 60 tanks in the two panzer divisions, only 15 of which were anything like the equal of a Grant. The Korps possessed a meager 15 armored cars for reconnaissance and no more than 1,500 infantry. The strength of 90th Light Division was about 1,000 infantry. The Germans had 330 guns of all types, which was sufficient, but not plentiful. The 3 Italian Corps added about 6,000 more infantry, for what they were worth.

Rommel’s off-the-cuff planning, suffering from inaccurate intelligence and insufficient reconnaissance, put his army in such a desperate tactical situation that it was a miracle it was not completely destroyed. If the Commonwealth commander on the spot, General Strafer Gott, had had any grasp of the true situation, that is what would have occurred. He didn’t, and the result was that Rommel was able to rout two corps with less than half the number of tanks available to him at Tobruk!

Nothing short of the complete destruction of the Panzerarmee was there for the taking at Matruh. *Crisis In The Desert* describes the result of the Axis movements: “By the end of 27 June, Rommel had placed his command in as critical a situation as any opponent could desire.” But not only did the Afrika Korps escape, but by the end of 30 June they had dealt the Commonwealth a stunning defeat, captured thousands of men and an abundance of vehicles and supplies. The humiliating defeat at Matruh triggered a



panic in Egypt and precipitated the retreat of the 8th Army to Alamein.

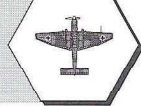
When we look more closely into what produced this stunning reversal of fortunes, we see that at Mersa Matruh Rommel was presented with an unexpected (and undeserved) opportunity to greatly even the odds against him. In the light of what transpired, the 8th Army was fortunate that so many of its men got back to El Alamein safely. If the Germans had been able to effectively eliminate a greater part of the commonwealth (CW) forces at Matruh, they very well could have won it all at Alamein. This incredible moment in history when Egypt was in the balance is the background to this scenario for *DAK*.

After his magnificent triumph at Tobruk on June 20-21, Rommel immediately pushed his weary men onward and beyond the Egyptian frontier. The newly-minted German field marshal was intent on destroying the 8th Army while they were backpedaling and in confusion. He caught up with them at Matruh on June 26. The Commonwealth dispositions suffered from one crucial weakness which would have serious consequences the following day. The two corps of 8th Army were separated by a gap of six miles, and were working independently of one another.

The Axis army simply did not possess the strength to blast the CW out of their defenses. They could only defeat their enemy by maneuver. Rommel’s hastily-devised plan of attack resulted in the dangerous isolation of his three German divisions. If General Gott had at this point unleashed all of the firepower at his disposal, the Afrika Korps and 90th Light Division would have been overwhelmed. The commander of the British 1st Armoured Division, General Lumsden, later realized that an opportunity to annihilate the German forces had been lost. “We should have obliterated the lot” was his considered opinion. But incredibly, Gott ordered a retreat instead! Why?

British intelligence estimated that the DAK had between 100-120 tanks. General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who had just taken over command of 8th Army on June 25, thus began with a serious misapprehension as to his opponent’s strength. Auchinleck wanted to instill proper caution into his subordinate’s planning, and as a precaution mentioned the option of withdrawal. Unintentionally he planted the seed of retreat into the mind of General Gott before the battle even began.

Gott, commander of 13th Corps, was caught in a violent bombardment while visiting the headquarters of the New Zealand Division on June 27. He saw the rout of their transport elements and probably believed that the entire division was involved. Here is a classic example of a commander confusing local conditions with the general



## A New Scenario for DAK: The Gambler's Last Throw (Cont.)

picture. At this point in the desert campaign Gott was exhausted and discouraged by repeated defeats. At Matruh he was completely out of touch with reality.

Believing that the battle was lost, General Gott sent a message to Lumsden, "It's all over. The N. Z. Division doesn't exist." But the two New Zealand brigades had suffered nothing of the kind. What an illustration of Napoleon's maxim that the morale is to the physical as three is to one! In this deluded state of mind, Gott ordered the armored division to break off contact and retreat to Alamein, effectively leaving the infantry to fend for themselves!

The independent withdrawal of the armor of 13th Corps could have (and almost did) lead to catastrophe for 8th Army. The New Zealanders broke through 21st Panzer that night in a wild mêlée to escape capture. No one thought to inform 10th Corps that their brothers-in-arms of 13th corps were on the way back to Alamein. As a result, 10th corps was left stranded in and around Matruh. They broke out in their turn through the encircling formations of 90th Light Division and scrambled across the desert. In confused, desperate fighting that even involved Rommel's battle headquarters, the brigade groups headed for Fuka. They expected to find 13th Corps holding the escarpment there to enable them to pass through.

When they reached the rendezvous, however, they were surprised to find units of the Afrika Korps awaiting them. Under Rommel's insistent prodding, the fast-moving spearheads of 21st Panzer had out-paced their opponents. Arriving at Fuka on the evening of June 28, the Germans drove off the rear guard from the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade that had been left there. Antony Brett-James vividly described these events in *Ball of Fire*, his illuminating, though not completely objective, history of the 5th Indian Division.

Many soldiers of 10th Corps ultimately reached Alamein safely. General Holmes, the corps commander, estimated that 60% of his men got through. But thousands more fell into German hands. The South African historians state that the capture of so many of its men "set the seal upon the demoralization of the 8th Army." The real gravity of the Fuka disaster lies in the distinct possibility that even more of the Commonwealth infantry could have been lost. If that had happened, all bets would have been off for the gambler's last throw.

### The New Scenario:

What happens between Matruh and Fuka can have a decisive effect on the fate of the two armies at El Alamein.

This scenario for DAK begins two turns before the start of the two First Battle of El Alamein scenarios (7.15 and 7.16). It can be tacked on to either the Campaign or the One-Map versions. It essentially adds two turns to either scenario – but what momentous turns! What happens between Matruh and Fuka can greatly influence the comparative strengths of the two armies when the battle of El Alamein commences. The challenge for the German player is to prevent a significant proportion of the CW infantry brigades from reaching the Alamein Line. Obviously, the CW player wants to bring in every unit possible. At the start of the scenario the

armor of 13th Corps has already withdrawn from the Matruh position. With little or no coordination between the various commands, the infantry are on their own against the panzers of the Afrika Korps.

General Information:

**First Player:** Axis  
**First Turn:** 26 June 42  
**Last Turn:** 26 July 42 (Two-Map Version)  
**Game Length:** 11 (Two-Map Version)  
**Maps in Play:** Maps C & D,

or

**Last Turn:** 29 Nov 42 (Campaign)  
**Game Length:** 48 (Campaign)  
**Maps in Play:** All (Campaign)

The general rules in effect are as stated in the rules for scenarios 7.15 and 7.16.

The set up is the same as in the standard scenarios, except as noted below.

### Commonwealth Set Up for Mersa Matruh:

C38.01: 12-0 Corps HQ (10), 50 Inf Div (69 Inf Bde (-1 step), Organic Truck (Full)), 5 SPs

C37.02: 50 Inf Div (151 Inf Bde (-1 step))

C39.03: 10 Ind Div (21 Ind Inf Bde, Organic Truck (Full)), Level 2 Airbase

C38.04: Level 1 Hedgehog, 10 Ind Div (25 Ind Inf Bde)

C37.04: 4 Ind Div (5 Ind Inf Bde)

D35.33: 2-4-8 SA Arm Car Bn (6 SA)

C34.03: 2 NZ Div (4 NZ, 5 NZ Inf Bde), 1 SP

D33.34: 5 Ind Div (9 Ind Inf Bde (-1 step), Organic Truck (Full))

D35.29: 5 Ind Div (29 Ind Inf Bde (-1 step))

### Axis Set Up:

C36.03: 90 Le Div (4-5-8 Arm Recon Bn (580)), 3-3-3 AA Bn (606)

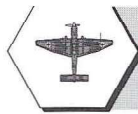
D37.34: 90 Le Div (6-4-3 Inf Rgt (155), 6-5-3 Inf Rgt (361), 5-5-3 Pioneer Bn (900), 361 Arty Bn, 190 Arty Rgt), 4-3-3 AA Bn (612)

C35.06: 14-0 Corps HQ (DAK), 4-5-8 PJ Bn (605), 6 SPs, 2T Truck Points

C30.05: 21 Pz Div (3 Arm Recon Bn, (4)-4-3 PJ Bn (39 PJ))

C34.05: 15 Pz Div (33 Arm Recon Bn, 6-5-8 Pz Bn (1-8), 4-5-8 PJ Bn (33 PJ), 4-5-3 Pioneer Bn (33), 33 Arty Rgt, Organic Truck (Full)), (7)-5-3 Luftwaffe Flak Bn (1-33)

C34.02: 21 Pz Div (6-5-8 Pz Bn (1-5), 10-5-8 PG Rgt (104), 4-5-3 Pioneer Bn (200), 155 Arty Rgt, Organic Truck (Full)), (7)-5-3 Luftwaffe Flak Bn (1-18)



## A New Scenario for DAK: The Gambler's Last Throw (Cont.)

C35.02: Rommel Leader, 3-5-8 Pz Co (KStA), Littorio Arm Div (12 Bns Inf Rgt)

C33.06: 8-0 Corps HQ (20 It), Ariete Arm Div (4-3-6 Arm Bn (10 Med), 8 Bns Inf Rgt, 552 AG Bn, (6)-4-3 AT Bn (AT))

C32.05: Trieste Div (65 Inf Rgt, 11 Med Arm Bn, 21 Arty Rgt)

C36.05: 5-4-3 Inf Rgt (9 Bns), 12-3-3 Inf Div (Pavia, -1 step)

C37.07: 8-0 Corps HQ (10 It), 12-3-3 Inf Div (Brescia, -1 step), 3-4-3 Assault Engineer Bn (31), 7-3-3 Arty Rgt (1 Cel)

C39.07: 8-0 Corps HQ (21 It), Trento Div (62 Inf Rgt, 46 Arty Rgt), 5-4-3 Inf Rgt (7 Bns), 8-3-3 Arty Rgt (3 Cel)

The Axis units at Mersa Matruh (C39.03) in the Campaign Scenario 7.15 begin at Sidi Barrani (C43.19).

### Special Rules

General Gott has ordered most of 13th Corps to retreat directly to the Alamein Line. To make things simple, set up the Commonwealth units as directed in scenarios 7.15 or 7.16, except those listed above. It is assumed that the various units that have already withdrawn from Matruh are scattered across the desert to the east on their way to Alamein. The NZ Division and 10th Corps were not informed of the retreat, and are still at Mersa Matruh when the scenario begins.

In order to represent General Strafer Gott's state of mind, he does not possess the usual +1 Leader Action Rating modifier. While he does retain the ability to make "Reactive DRs", his AR modifier is 0 (-1 might be closer to the truth).

The 24 Aus Inf Bde (9 Aus Div) may move up to Alamein on the July 5 turn.

The 26 Aus Inf Bde (9 Aus Div) may move up to Alamein on the July 8 turn.

During the June 26 and June 29 turns, all of the units in the El Alamein area must remain east of the Rahman Track (they are organizing the defenses).

### Victory Conditions

The victory conditions remain the same as the standard scenarios, unless you decide to give the Optional Victory Conditions below a try.

### Optional Victory Conditions

A combination of maneuver, bluff and psychological factors brought Rommel victory at Mersa Matruh. He was depending on the same formula for success at El Alamein. Historically, by this time the Panzerarmee had been bled white. The only way Rommel could have moved the British out of the Alamein position was by a repeat of the Matruh debacle. The weakness of 8th Army was not in the arms of its soldiers but in the heads of its leaders. Time after time during this period they missed opportunities to end the Western Desert campaign. Rommel never would have let such opportunities go begging.

I realize that attempting to simulate the personal psychology of individual commanders in a game is difficult and highly subjective. These optional victory conditions attempt to reflect the morale and perspective of the CW leaders at the time. If the German player is able to get the Afrika Korps and 90th Light Division through and behind the Alamein position so that they are able to cut off the CW units, this triggers an immediate withdrawal of 8th Army to the Delta. In the Campaign scenario the game goes on from there; if playing the Two-Map version it means an automatic Axis victory, and Mussolini can saddle his white horse.

### Notes on Play

The German player must decide how many units to send immediately to Fuka in order to cut off the CW retreat, and how many will remain at Matruh to attack the infantry brigades there and hopefully capture SPs. The critical Axis supply situation will of course influence his decisions.

The Commonwealth player must choose between breaking out directly to the east or moving well south before turning east (as many units did historically). Thanks to General Gott, he will get no help from the forces at Alamein. But there is the Desert Air Force!

## In Brief... (Continued from Page 2)

As for me personally, I started gaming in 1980 with the 1965 version of Avalon Hill's Battle of the Bulge. Other than PBM games through AHIKS, I pretty much dropped out of the hobby after my marriage and new job in 1989, only to get drawn back in at the first Avaloncon convention in 1991. I have been re-addicted ever since. I now play most of my games through PBeM, only playing against face to face opponents once or twice a year at various conventions like the World Boardgaming Championships (Homercon seems to fall the same weekend as our local town Oktoberfest, not to mention during high school football season, so I never get there).

About 20 months ago I was asked to end my 13 year engineering career, and decided to move on to other things.

I currently work part time as a high school sports writer (specializing in football, basketball and track and field) and as a substitute teacher. I am currently back in graduate school, and by next June, I should have my Masters degree in Education and a license to teach high school math.

For now, my top priority is to deliver a new magazine every four months (every three months was considered and is still possible in the future). In nine years of *The Boardgamer*, I never had an issue come out late, and I intend to try and keep the same regular schedule here.

Hopefully you will like what comes out in this and future issues of *Operations*. If not, or you just have suggestions, please feel free to email me. As an Internet addict, I usually check my email at least twice a day.