

Sidi Barrani: Planning, Playing, and Fun!

by Dean N. Essig and David A. Powell

This article arises from some discussion on our e-mail list about the Sidi Barrani scenario from DAK. Some asked for suggested moves, others complained of having a hard time taking on the Italian Army (or at least felt it was too difficult to replicate the British victory). Someone, I'm not sure who, suggested I do a write-up regarding the scenario for the magazine. Dave and I sat down to play the game, record our thoughts and try to follow what we were thinking and how we reacted as the game unfolded. As a secondary purpose, we wanted to see just how difficult it was to replicate the historical victory.

The Stage

Dave and I arranged a weekend to work on the article. Unfortunately (fortunately?) our Christmas sale had so depleted the warehouse of finished games, we had to schedule an "emergency" collate for the same weekend. With the collate slated for Sunday (a long day involving collates of 150 or so copies each of 11 titles that we had ran out of), our gaming time was limited to Saturday. Further reducing the amount of time available was my Tae Kwon Do class Saturday morning. Suffice it to say, we were limited to about a four-hour time block Saturday afternoon.

Dave arrived Friday evening, which gave us time to get the game set up (30 minutes, tops, including socializing) and to try to re-acquaint ourselves with the rules. We both went into this game deep in cobwebs and rust.

Our original plan was to play the game twice, switching sides. The limited time slot demanded we rethink that plan, and we ended up with time for only one shot at it. Since we would not have a chance to run both sides, my initial selection of who played which side had more impact than was originally intended. I chose to play the British, which left Dave with the Italians and all sorts of illusions about how *his* British offensive would have been better. I would have enjoyed handing him his head, as would certainly have happened, as well.

As part of the article preparation, we both had computers nearby with which to record our thoughts at the moment (uninhibited by later "spin doctoring"). I will use that raw text here to show what was going through our minds at the time. Also, we paused at the end of each phase to photograph the map.

The Scenario

We played Scenario 7.3 "The Battle of Sidi Barrani—Training Scenario #2." This is a very small tactical puzzle centering on the opening battles of Operation Compass, the "5-day raid" to evict the Italian Army from Egypt. The scenario is only two turns long, which leads to some (expected) "end of the world" player behavior. It begins with the mobile British Western Desert Force deployed just opposite a major gap in the Italian camp line. This gap, while ungarrisoned, is more difficult to take advantage of than it looks due to the terrain—wadis and slopes connect the dots making for an area that can be moved

through, but at a high cost. Historically, the British blasted the Nibeiwa Camp in order to open the road to the coast to support their drive further west.

The key to this scenario is efficiency. Both sides operate on a shoestring, and the British must run an offensive with very limited numbers of troops. There is little room for error or waste.

Initial Planning

British—Looking at the victory conditions, I want to seize both Sidi Barrani and Sollum as rapidly as possible. If I do this in my first movement phase, his forces will be unable to trace supply in the very first Italian Supply Phase. This will help my effort quite a bit.

I'll also aim at taking out Buq Buq right away, but this will be a secondary effort. Most important for right now is to seize Sollum (or at least cut the road going out of it, required for Italian Supply) and to take out the Sidi Barrani hex (to smash its dump).

I will ignore the camps for now, as they are wastes of my effort. I want his army cut off, out of supply, and using internals for any attacks they might make. Then, during Turn 2, I'll aim at mopping up as many of these guys as I can, after they are out of supply and low on internal stocks.

In the air, I will launch strikes against his fighter with my Gladiator and try to engage one of his bombers with my Hurricane. I don't expect much, one way or the other, as neither of us has an air force capable of doing much at all.

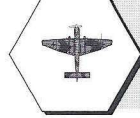
For my logistical issues, the Sollum force will have to acquire that port. I will launch that operation first. If it fails, I'll expend some effort clearing the road vic. C36.24 so that the Sollum force can trace. The close-in logistics (Sidi Barrani) should not be an issue because of its location.

Basically, with these two general objectives in mind, I will decide on the specifics of the action as events unfold.

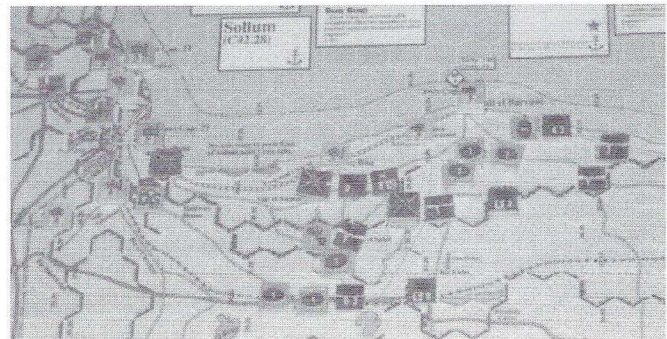
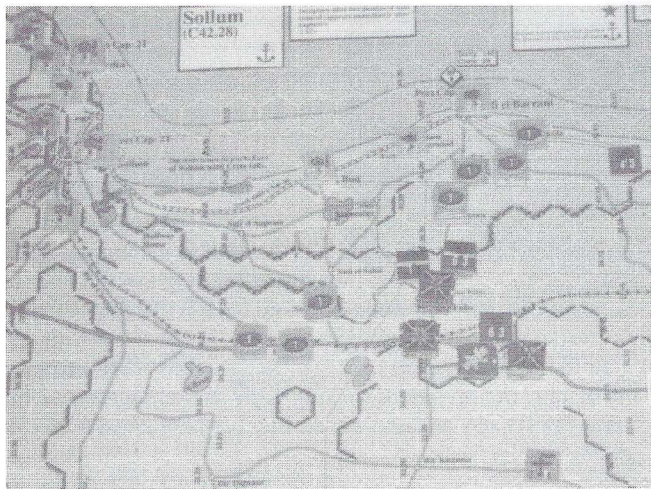
Italian—I start out in a very exposed position, with a large British hammer poised on my desert flank, and a very porous line. The good news is that the British player needs to kill three of my divisions, and take Sollum, Buq Buq, and Sidi Barrani, all in two turns, so he can't afford to waste either time or resources. I intend to hunker down in the critical towns with as much force as I can muster and pursue a fairly non-aggressive posture, since I feel that the overall action-rating deficit is going to make any attacks a chancy affair.

However, I do possess one force with some teeth in it: the Maletti stack. If he fails to neutralize them I hope to use them to mess with his local rear forces, and draw his power away from the critical coastal objectives that I cannot hope to defend straight-up against his strength. His assets are strong but very limited, and he cannot afford diversions. I can only pray for luck here, though, since this group is in the front line, beyond most supply reach, and vulnerable to both being hammered with British cannon and placed out of supply by flanking Limey forces.

Both sides operate on a shoestring. . . . There is little room for error or waste.



The raw set up...ready to roll!



End of Allied Movement Phase, Turn 1.

The First Moves

British—The Sollum operation dropped the ball badly—twice. This lost me two good units and left Gott hung out to dry. Not good. The air operation did what it was supposed to do (grounded his fighter and then took a step out of one bomber).

Once the Sollum operation failed, I turned my attention to Buq Buq in an attempt to secure the supply there. The overrun on this hex did poorly as well, leaving the hex in Italian hands with one lousy step between me and the desperately needed supplies. Lastly, I set up Shelby to knock on the camp along the coastal road, a massive barrage to DG the Nibeirwa camp, and a minor effort to clear the camp at Sofafi. I was not at all happy with the results...while I got surprise in all but one overrun, the greatest shift was 2. Not good.

The results of the combat phase will determine how this will go, but if I do not get some luck there, I fear I have shot my bolt with little to show for it.

Italian—Well, the Weenie [*Dean's Note—Such unprofessionalism would not be tolerated in my British Army, please note that I never referred to Dave as the "little snot" he is in any of my sections*] will edit this to make himself look like a Limey Napoleon, but I will try to present the facts of the matter anyway.

The British player tried multiple overruns at both Sollum and Buq Buq, but was stymied by the problems endemic to an overrun-based offensive—not enough good die rolls. He got surprise 3 out of 4 times, but never got a big column shift to negate the low odds problem. Sollum was never really threatened, but Buq Buq almost fell—lost 3 out of 4 steps, and has only a 1-step Inf Div (AR1) left to hold on. Buq Buq is almost certainly doomed. However, my reaction may give me some chances. If Maletti goes active, I can send some good AR units to Sidi Barrani and maybe Sollum, and perhaps mess with his supply trace, which is very tenuous right now due to terrain. At the moment, things are good, and I am confident of managing to hang on to at least one of the critical three towns.

Italian Reaction Phase

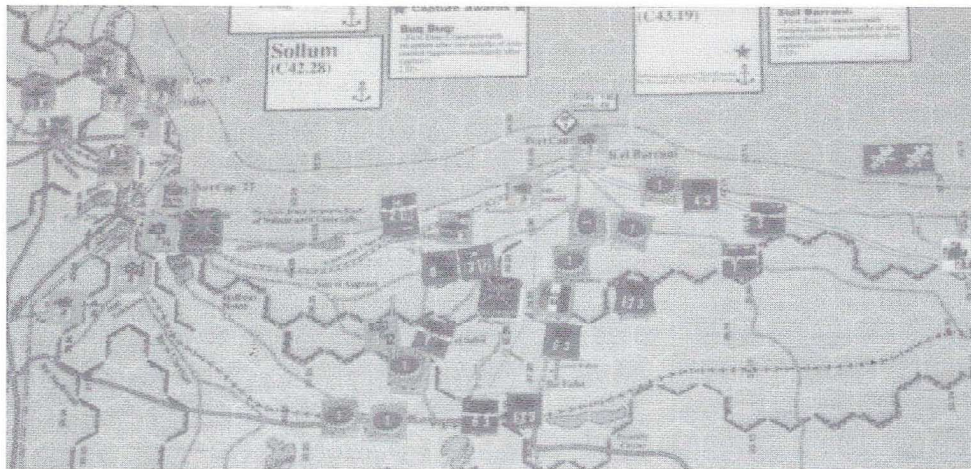
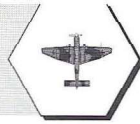
Italian—I moved up the Babini Armor Ragg so as to reinforce Sollum (and hopefully to set up a counterattack against the Gott stack if possible—I have a good AR3 tank Bn to give the attack weight). Better yet, I got Maletti to move. I sent the artillery back a hex to the salt marsh hedgehog hex behind it, and then decided to overrun the adjacent Brit stack with the tanks and Camels. With Maletti and the Camel AR, I had a +1 mod. for the overrun, and got a good roll—4 shifts up. Better yet, I rolled well, so that the Brits lost 2 steps and retreated with no loss to me. This is good, because now Maletti with 2 units is astride one of the roads he needs to supply his situation, and represents a significant diversion away from my vulnerable hexes and into his rear.

British—As expected, Babini was released and ran toward Sollum; he'll probably be able to clear Gott's remaining battalion during his turn (the other died due to attrition). Maletti ran forward to try to mess with my already messed up supply lines. This won't affect anything as I will ignore them.

British Combat Phase

British—Sloppy supply work meant no barrages... D'OH! Combats got me into Buq Buq (at the cost of Jock Campbell, who was wounded). All other attacks went very poorly. The loss of Jock removed my Exploit chances as he was the main effort (Gott is still stranded with his one battalion, O'Connor is helping the corps HQ's defense).

Italian—He used up too much ammo to fire his cannon, so I got lucky there. [*Dean's Note—Actually, the intended supply was there, the problem was that some dummy (me) didn't count the distance and it was too far away to be used.*] However, the attack on Buq Buq went in well, and I lost the last step, destroying the division. His taking of Buq Buq netted him 2SP + 1T captured, but cost him Campbell, which negated his exploit possibilities. He made two other attacks. Selby Force vs. the 1 Lib Infantry Division cost both sides a step, but I still hold the hog hex. He also sent one Indian brigade against my 21 Corps stack—a division, a Lt Tank Bn, and the HQ—but that was a forlorn hope, and netted him nothing but a retreat. [*Dean's Note—This was a desperate effort to reopen a supply linkage: it failed.*] As the



End of Allied Player-Turn, Turn 1.

phase ends, I still block his best supply routes, leaving him with a strong need to police up his own areas rather than concentrate on taking Sollum and Sidi Barrani. Choices, choices.

British End of Player-turn Comments

1) My effort at Sollum was too much and too early; in another game, I'd want to do that stuff on turn 2 (or at least the first Exploit Phase).

2) Numerous attacks went south. I probably went in expecting too much value for luck, but the return was far worse than expected. Average results would have been far better than what I got.

3) I was dreadfully sloppy in a number of instances. My big barrage on Nibeewa didn't happen due to a screw up in supply placement, and the entire logistical operation west of Sidi Barrani just failed. Not very good play.

4) On Sollum again, I really needed to concentrate on the near-in objectives first. Going after this one too early used valuable units I needed elsewhere (the losses didn't help, either!).

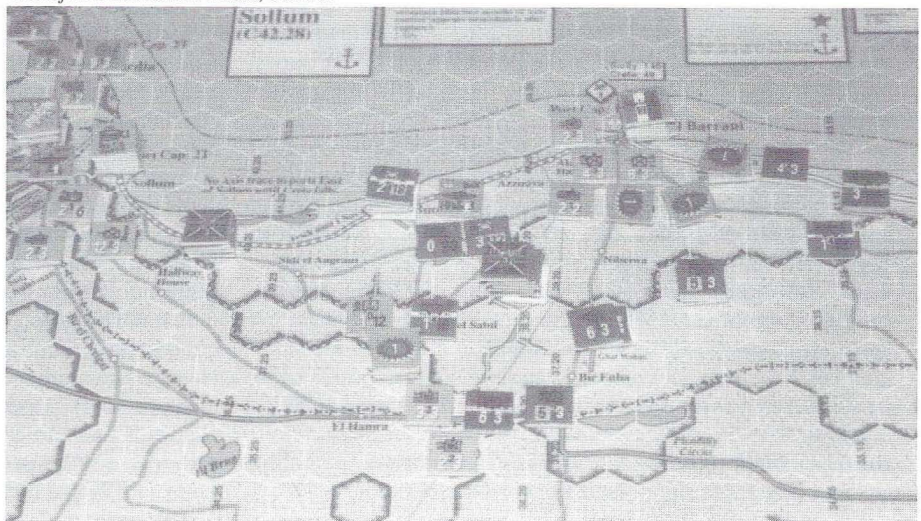
Italian Turn 1

British Expectations—I see Dave going after Gott's hex (and getting it). The other Italians will have to deal with my units on the their supply line.

[Dean's Note—Take careful note that both of us are now expecting the other player to drop everything and deal with the threat to his supply lines. This is sort of a Mexican stand-off, but the important feature is that neither of us is overly concerned with his own supply lines. We both expect the "other guy" to blink first.]

Italian—I made one effort to get a fighter aloft, promptly shot down by the Limey devils. Next, I concentrated for two attacks, shifting a 26-point artillery brigade to Sollum, supported by the armor and infantry there to try and capture the hex in front of Sollum and create a buffer. Supply precludes

End of Axis Movement Phase, Turn 1.



any other attacks, and sustenance cost me all the supply in the Barrani dump—thankfully I could ship in the 1T needed to get the last two REs.

British Reaction

British—During Reaction, I managed to get Gott to withdraw a few hexes in order to

keep him out of the hammer fall aimed at him. Because of this, his attacks were canceled and so on.

Italian—Strafer Gott managed to get active, and retreated out of my attack. Insert various rude comments about his sexual habits and ancestry, including his well known love of animals.

Remainder of Italian Turn

Italian—No Italian combat. Rolled for Babini Ragg for Exploitation—no exploit. Shot Babini.

Italian Turn Two

British—I won initiative and made him go first because that way he will be unable to undo what (little?) I can do during my turn. Also, giving him another turn of eating off his dump at Sidi Barrani will make sure that at least some units get out of supply.

Dave tried to overrun part of the Indian Division in an attempt to break supply into Sidi Barrani. It failed. This was the extent of his turn.



Italian—The Brit gave me initiative. I cannot get supply into the Barrani area without trucks, so I sent two tanks to overrun the 11 Indian Brigade, but they died in a -1 overrun attack that resulted in AL2. I see no hope of re-opening the supply line, or trucking stuff in, so I guess I will stand pat and try and hang onto Sollum.

I managed to truck in 2T to Sidi, which prevented the inner ring from starving, but it cost me my best AR unit (the Camels), and the entire outer ring starved. Sidi should fall this turn. Ergo, he has killed the required divisions, but I still hold both Sidi and Sollum. I hope that his losses will be enough to prevent him taking both cities.

Note: sending the 2T of trucks into Sidi with supplies is a desperation move—something I'd never do in a campaign game, but it was the only chance I had of making Sidi tough enough to hang onto through his turn is to send them in.

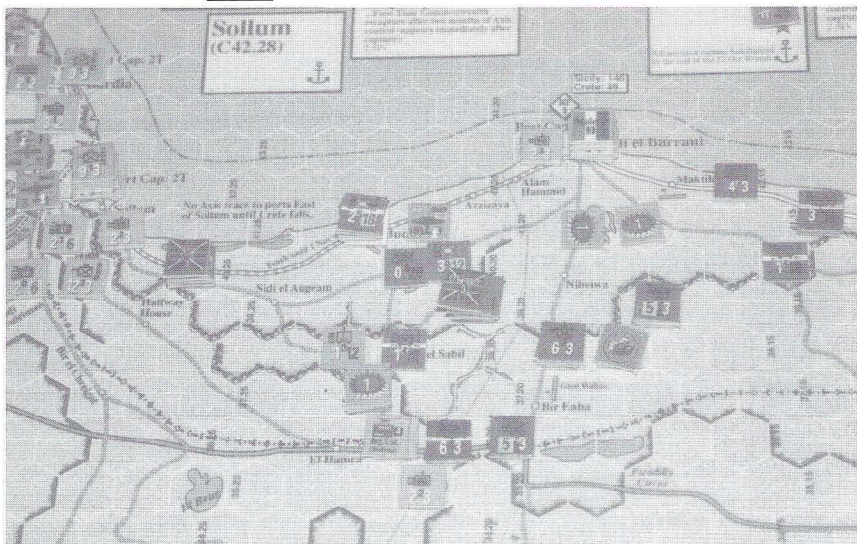
British Turn Two

British—I sent in all I could to make a hard attack on Sidi Barrani. Then I took the mobile elements left of 7 Arm (now in combat mode), overran the buffer hex Dave set up outside Sollum—and then slammed the actual Sollum hex with the rest of the division. I think Sollum is mine. The determination will now be based on the attack on Sidi Barrani.

The attrition effect on the Italians turned everything around: prior to the mass surrenders due to attrition, I was really concerned that I had no hope of winning.

The attack on Sollum captured the place, at the cost of wounding Gott.

The attack on Sidi Barrani went poorly, inflicting a little



End of Axis Player-Turn, Turn 2

damage but costing the Allies the Matilda Tank Bn. Because of the way it went, O'Connor was able to displace to another hex to (hopefully) try again in exploit. To make these die rolls will determine the game.

O'Connor got his move and even got surprise (three columns), but the combat roll was just shy of taking out the last units in the hex. It came right down to the bitter end—the last die roll could have gone either way—and tension was very high. Unfortunately for Allied arms, it didn't go my way.

Great little game!

Italian—

Brit Move: Brits close in on Sidi, and I doubt it can stand the barrage and attack. Strafer Gott, however, in a very lucky overrun (no skill, naturally) gets a +6 surprise on the MG Bn holding the buffer hex in front of Sollum, opening the door to the next overrun. The second overrun worked well also, +5 shifts left only an artillery unit and one step of a IAR infantry division there, ripe to fall. He is very close to winning this one, it will come down to razor-thin margins on the combat die rolls.

Brit combat: Sollum attack took Sollum easily, but cost Strafer Gott wounded. No impact on scenario, but it might

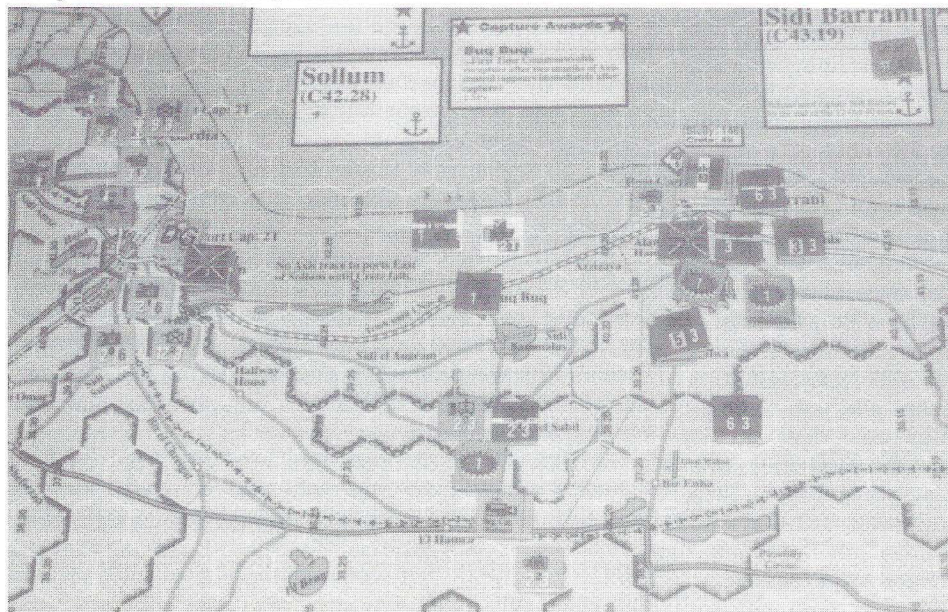
have hurt the campaign. Next, the attack on Sidi. He missed the surprise by 1 (rolled a 9 when he needed a 10, and the 5 shifts were wasted) so that the attack went in at 2:1 instead of 10:1, and produced an AL1/DO1. Naturally, I took the loss. However, he killed the single unit under O'Connor, meaning that O'Connor was alone in the hex and could displace! Vile Englander!

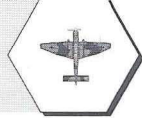
O'Connor displaces to next largest stack, and everything hinges on his surprise roll.

Exploit Phase: O'Connor gets exploit—again, vile Englander! The last attack is now critical.

I have: 2 Med Tank Bn 3-3-6, 3 Jan Blackshirt Inf Div 9-1-3 (2 steps) LibOp HQ and Maletti—total 4 steps, all DG. Strength was

End of Allied Movement Phase, Turn 2.





17 halved due to DG to 8.5 AR3 (2+1 for Maletti)

He attacks with a 10, AR5. The surprise Die roll comes in at 2 shifts up! Crisis in Barrani! Panic in Rome! Many responsible parties shot!

The result is only a DL101—we win! Two steps hang onto the hex. Medals for everyone, apologies to the families of the executed.

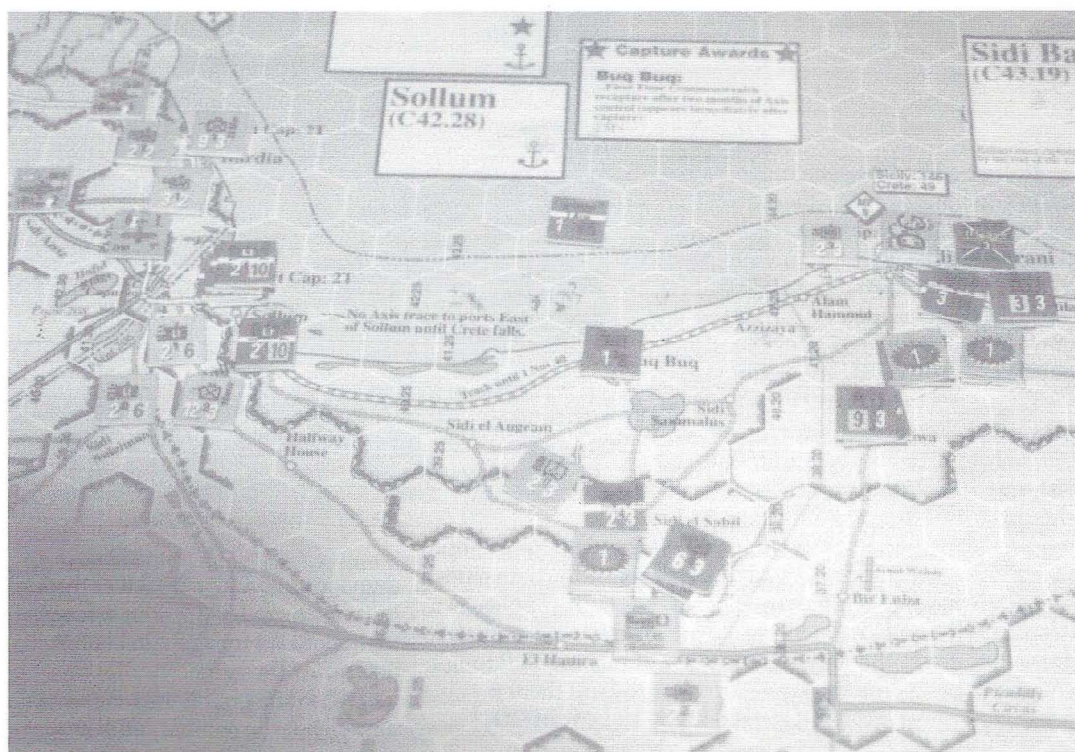
Wrapping Up

In writing the article just now, I noticed that I never used the two free 12 point Naval Barrages the scenario gave me. This is especially unfortunate as I both could have used these to great effect and had actually reminded myself about them before play began!

After some time to think about it, I can make some comments about both of our game plans. I believe I was too hard on the Sollum-early gambit in my remarks above (because at the time, Gott's attacks laid an egg). I think going for, and holding, Sollum early will help the Allies greatly. Not only does this cut the Italian supply line (you can see the effects that has above), but I think digging out a built-up defense of Sollum on the second turn would be tough to do, far tougher than taking it early on. What is needed is a better logistical plan and a Sollum operation that isn't so expensive to run. Better planning can take care of the former, slightly better luck the latter. I got away with what I did in spite of awful die rolls—a little better and things would have gone much better. Even mildly better conditions at Sollum would have given me several good units to use elsewhere—such as destroying the Nibeiiwa Camp.

I chose to ignore Nibeiiwa and in hindsight I see this as a mistake. That camp lies astride the road coming down off the slopes toward Sidi Barrani. Taking that camp out would have allowed me to re-route my trace lines along the roads there so that my Sollum group would not be left to its own devices. At the very least, such a trace set up would have allowed the units around Buq Buq to trace normally, saving the supplies on the 7th Armored Division's organic truck for the units at Sollum.

Buq Buq was more important than I gave it credit for in my initial assessment. It is nicely centrally located between Sidi Barrani and Sollum. Stationing my 7th Arm units there is what allowed me to overrun my way into Sollum in our game. These units could have just as well gone to Sidi Barrani. As always, the plan with the most options is best.



End of the game...a squeaker! (My apologies for the elbow or whatever generated the shadow on the left of the photo).

I worked my way toward this option without properly identifying it in the first place. That is a characteristic of my "shoot from the hip" play style (which gets me into trouble about as often as it brings great results). I let the game paint me a picture as play progresses and adapt my actions to the changing image. This is very flexible, but frequently gets me into trouble if my initial assessment is wrong (as it almost did here). The good part is that, regardless of the outcome, it makes for an enjoyable game for me and (I think) my opponents. That is a matter of style.

From my angle (as the Allied player), I think the Italians could have been handled more aggressively. Many of those units were going to die anyway, so why not make as many attacks as possible on internals? This is a "gamey" play style I don't usually endorse, but like everything above, it must be held in the context of the short scenario it is intended for. The scenario was designed with such abuse as an expectation (game players are, after all, gamers), so such play is not inappropriate here. Yes, this means a number of Italian units would die trying vain attacks, but any damage inflicted by these attacks (at all) would be more than what they could do by sitting and starving.

As it was, Dave's ring of defense around Sidi Barrani succumbed to attrition, leaving only the central hex to be taken. If the ring had somehow remained intact, I doubt my forces could have mustered the attacks needed to chop their way in. Dave's defense squeaked by anyway; having to take down other hexes to get at Sidi Barrani would probably have been beyond my meager resources.

I'm sure both of us feel we could do better in a rematch, and this one run-through showed us all sorts of things that could be done differently (and possibly better) in additional tries. Certainly, we both came away feeling we had played a gem of a little tactical puzzle that kept us on the edge of our seats until the last die roll.