# DAK

By Dave Jeffery

**DAK** may be the most playable, enjoyable game in the whole series. Why? It has a low counter count, interesting history, diverse units, a great ebb-and-flow to it. And it has more chrome than a '55 Buick Roadmaster—and all of it matters to the play of the game.

**DAK** comes with 19 separate scenarios, plus a training game. It has something for everyone who has an interest in the African campaign from September of 1940 through November of 1942. The full-blown campaign is 239 turns. But that isn't quite as daunting as it sounds because the unit count is manageable. You don't get those large East Front stacks crammed together until Alamein, and there is a lot of space out there in the desert. Plus, the victory conditions make it fun to play. "If it isn't obvious, it is a draw." That's an exact quote. Sort of "You'll know it when you see it." So there is no scrambling for Hexes X, Y and Z. It really frees up the players to try different things to defeat the other side.

## Chrome

A concept unique to **DAK** is that of Leaders and Kampfgruppe markers. The Commonwealth has three Leader counters (O'Connor, Gott and Campbell) and the Axis has two (Rommel and Maletti). Proper use of Leaders goes a long way to success in the game. Leaders move at will over the map. Just pick them up and place them, in any phase, with units of their side. They can be used in one of two ways. They create a +1 to any surprise or combat die roll. However, this isn't always prudent because each time used this way, a Leader must roll on a loss table where it is possible they can be killed, wounded or captured. So unless it means taking Alexandria or Cairo, the temptation to use Rommel's bonus in an attack should be avoided. After all, there is only one Rommel.

The second use of a Leader is as a sort of super reserve marker. Units under a leader get to make a Reactive Roll in any phase in which reserves could be released. If the roll isn't lower than the rating of the Leader (Rommel is a '1' so he succeeds 5 out of 6 times), that stack can then move as if it were in Reserve Mode. But unlike normal reserve restrictions, the Leader **can** be adjacent to the enemy when the roll is made. This has important implications for both sides. The Commonwealth can use Leaders, for example, to fire their artillery thrice: once in the regular barrage segment, then a second time in the Exploitation Phase, then again in the Reaction Phase, assuming it is stacked with one of their Leaders and he reacts successfully.

Another concept introduced in **DAK** is that of "green" units. The best Germans (AR of 4 or 5) need time to acclimate to the desert and their AR is reduced by 1 from their arrival in Africa until October of 1941. The rule is different for Commonwealth divisions, which can arrive "green" and then take three months to shed the label. During this training period their AR is reduced by 1, their brigades do not have the usual intrinsic artillery (another bit of chrome), and they can't move during a sandstorm. ("Sandstorm?" Yes indeed, there are myriad weather effects here.) Suffice to say that during the Winter and Spring of 1941, the Commonwealth player, desperate for quality units to hold Tobruk and other key spots, is frantically waiting for the solid AR 4's and 5's of the 9th Australian and 2nd New Zealand divisions to get trained. It presents a tight, testing management problem for the Commonwealth player and it can't be sped up.

The last special rule we'll look at is the Random Events table. This is a wonderful device, rolled for every turn, that adds uncertainty and some historical flavor into the play of the campaign game. There are four levels of events, ranging from the Common to Ultra Rare. It takes three successive high rolls to reach the Ultra Rare Table. In most games, even a 200+ turn campaign game, you will never get to roll on this. But a Common Event can be something as simple as "Axis finds abandoned dump; place 2T with any friendly unit." Or, more significantly, something like "Rommel Goes to Berlin" which means the Axis player is without this key asset for a number of die-determined turns. Almost none of the random events are game-changing. But they provide just that little element of uncertainty that can upset the best-made plans of any player. Chrome? Yes. But in a good way.

## Axis Strategy

The Axis player commands two vastly different armies, the Germans and the Italians. We'll look at the Italians first, as they are alone in Africa from the campaign's start in September of 1940 until Rommel and the first Germans arrive in February. It is a lonely five months.

The Italian situation during the first part of the game is completely controlled by supply. Until March, Italians can only trace supply off Primary Roads—for the Commonwealth and the Germans, it is Primary **and** regular Roads. This pins Italian forces, not very mobile to begin with, within an HQ's throw range of the generally coastal Primary Roads to maintain trace supply. They cannot venture into the interior, while Germans and Commonwealth forces can, using the regular roads.

Hugging the coast wouldn't be all bad, but the Italians are also forced (by special rules) to be on the offensive in the opening months of the campaign. They do have an advantage in numbers and a fair amount of supply, but the advance eastward to establish the "Mussolini Line" inside Egypt is a march toward perdition. Here they will normally just sit and await their doom, but note if they manage to capture Mersa Matruh by January, they win gloriously.

It never happens. The Commonwealth player knows full well the Italian trace limitations. He can jam-up the escarpment passes at Matruh, knowing the enemy can't venture south into the desert to flank him. It becomes more-or-less a sitzkreig. After a few plays with the 12 September '40 campaign start, I recommend just beginning the campaign with the Compass Start (in December). This avoids the Italian player butting his head against the Matruh wall and allows a reinforced Commonwealth player a chance to immediately launch

the historical attacks that swept the Italians off the map.

However, the game's Italians do have one advantage over history: they know what's coming and how inept they really are. So the player needs to concentrate on holding Tobruk—a tough chore—and especially Benghazi. These ports, plus Derna, are likely his only sources of trace supply until the Germans arrive and the primary road to Tripoli opens back up. His losses will be very large. Some prefer to keep the substantial Italian forces that begin in Tripoli there until the Germans arrive. My preference is to bring them out and use them to defend Benghazi. Hold on for dear life.

After the Germans arrive, the Italians slide into a subordinate role in the Axis alliance. They play the part pretty well; when combined with good German AR units, Italians are very helpful. One of their 12-factor infantry divisions, even if reduced, is potent when stacked with, say, a (3)-4-3 German anti-tank battalion. The Ariete Division is large and quite good, and the late-arriving Littorio Division provides good armored punch when stacked with German armor under a Kampfgruppe marker.

The Italians also have a large number of artillery units. If they survive the Commonwealth Compass onslaught—a big "if"—they can contribute much to the Axis cause over the campaign's course. Supply is tight, but at the right moments their barrages can be a key. What the Axis player must bear in mind with the Italians is that they have severe limitations but are far from worthless when used properly.

The Germans have two problems at the start: they are late to the party and their units arrive piecemeal. The first units hit the sand in February, but the 15th Panzer doesn't arrive fully until May and the Light Division doesn't morph into 21st Panzer until October. Nonetheless, they arrive at just the right time to turn the tide, because in the Spring of 1941 the Commonwealth is reeling from non-theater events beyond their control. So the Germans can join what is left of the Italians and do some serious harm to the Commonwealth forces.

What are the German strengths? First of all, of course, is Rommel. Let's look at an example of what he can do. Say his counter is at Agedabia (A26.18), stacked with the Bach Kampfgruppe which contains the panzer battalions from 21st Panzer, a unit from the Afrika Division, and some independent Italian armor. It is the Axis Reaction Phase. Rommel "reacts" successfully (5 out of 6 chances). The stack is fueled (1 token per unit, not 1 SP for the whole KG) and moves one-half its MA (6 in this case because of some slow units) along the Trigh el Abd (Road of Slaves). Then, in its next Movement Phase, the entire stack moves its full movement allowance. (Note the big difference: normally Reserve Mode units can move only one-quarter MA in a Movement Phase.) Finally, in the Exploit Phase Rommel again reacts successfully and the stack can again move its entire movement allowance. In one fueling, using Rommel, the KG could move across the desert all the way from Agedabia to Bir el Gubi, a trek costing 30 MP.

Rommel is a powerful weapon. The Axis player should use him to keep the Commonwealth off-balance. The threat of an Axis double turn, at almost any point in the game, can open up many opportunities. A flank that the Commonwealth felt was secure can be suddenly turned. It makes for a very challenging, very mobile game.

As you might imagine, Rommel loses some of his punch when the campaign becomes more of a set-piece battle, as happened historically. While still valuable, a "Rommel move" when Tobruk is under siege or the Commonwealth is reeling back toward Alexandria (and all those minefields) is less potent.

Supply will be the Axis player's greatest lodestone. There just isn't much of it at any point in the game. Learn the vagaries of the Malta Table (those Special Rules again!) and how it will impact Axis capabilities, planning, and actions. Maximize supply conservation by minimizing expenditures on combat and fuel. Not a single token can be wasted! There will be many turns where you want to do something but a lack of supply will prevent it. Use it wisely.

### Commonwealth Strategy

The Commonwealth player's strategy can be summed up in a word: patience. As it almost always does in WWII, time works against the Axis. Unprepared at first, the Allies will eventually get it together and can carry the day with more units and more supply. **DAK** is no exception. But getting to that turning point without collapse is a challenge.

At the start of the desert campaign the Commonwealth player is hemmed-in due to too few units. The troops are of high quality, but limitations are placed on some key units that must stay in "restricted areas." That all changes in December, when the restricted Commonwealth divisions are allowed to move forward. They are joined by the excellent 7th Armoured Division, and now is the time for the Commonwealth to rip the Italians apart. As mentioned, the Italians are tethered to the three ports and primary roads, so they can't venture far into the desert and thus are vulnerable to a flanking movement.

The Commonwealth is led by three Leader counters: Gott, O'Connor, and Campbell. Adoit use of them (see the Rommel example, above) will enable their mobile divisions to race around the map, mostly out of range of the Italians. Use the Trigh el Abd to quickly reach the gates of Benghazi. It is going to be panic time for the Italians.

Supply is going to be limited, however, and their best units (those of 7th Arm) are not rebuildable. So even though the Commonwealth player could attack Italian AR 1's and 2's with his 4's and 5's, mostly he does not want to do this. Instead, he needs to win a war of maneuver against the Italians. Perhaps one key attack, then zoom—shoot through a hole and cut the Italian lines of supply.

In **DAK** an EZOC on a port will shut it down as a trace supply source. So you don't necessarily have to take Derna, Tobruk, and Benghazi to cripple the Italians; just get adjacent to them.

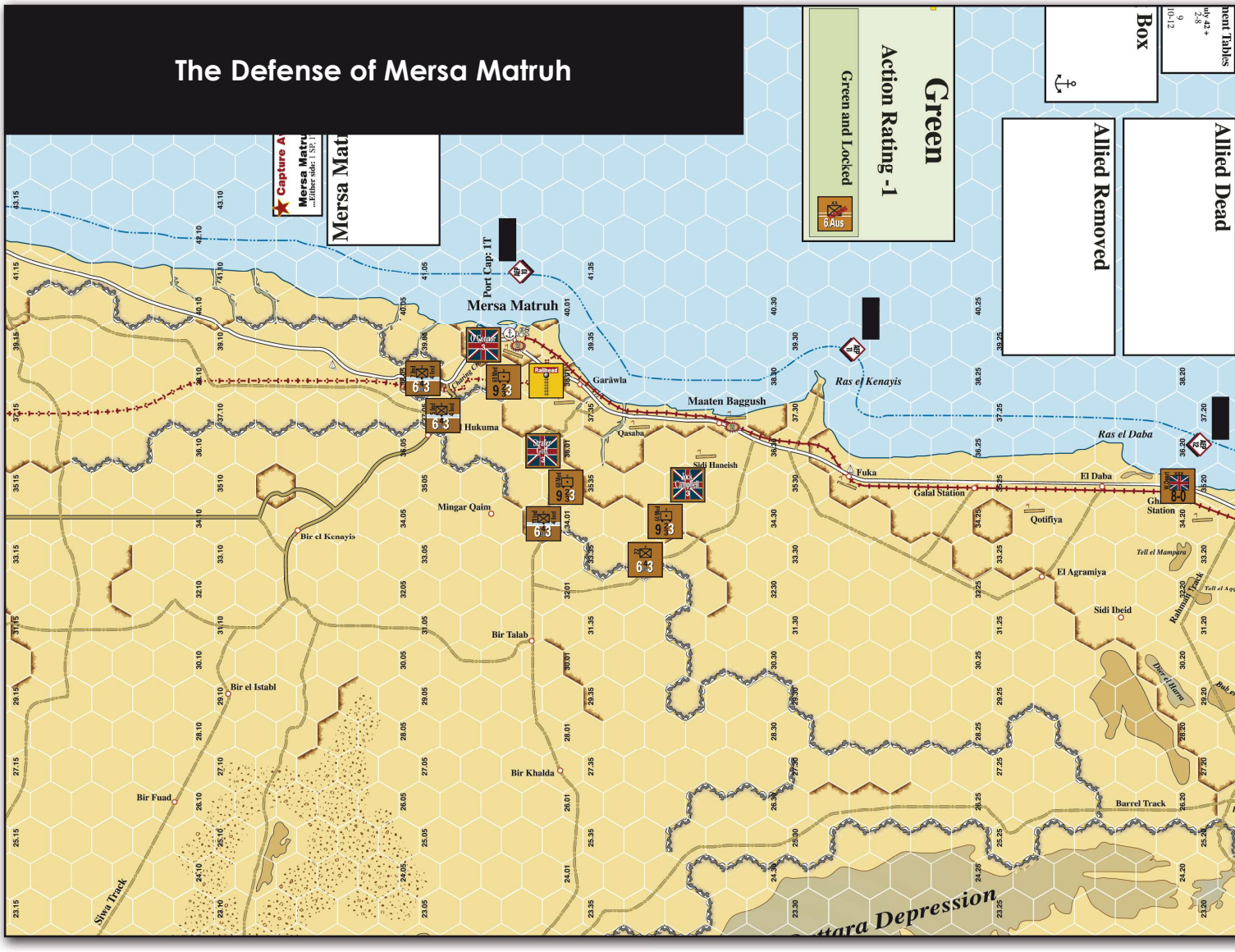
The Commonwealth player needs to have clear objectives in mind and relentlessly go after them from early December into January because the good times won't last. Beginning in mid-January, those outside events

begin to weaken the Commonwealth. In January the best units of 7th Arm, the 4-5-8 tank battalions, go away. Artillery is withdrawn. There will be withdrawals to the Sudan on random rolls. This general dissipation of force is compounded by anxiety over the impending arrival of Rommel.

In February the rolls begin for the start of the Greek Campaign. It is unlikely to begin then, but it could. When it starts the Commonwealth is likely to be forced, over time, to send the entire 2nd New Zealand and 6th Australian divisions to fight in Greece. If Allied luck is poor and the off-map campaign drags on—it's variable—they may even lose some more 7th Arm units. It is a perilous time, particularly if the Commonwealth failed to annihilate the Italians, who will now be looking to make trouble with the newly-arrived Germans.

This is a time when the Commonwealth needs to just hunker down and await the end of the Greek Campaign and the arrival of 1941's summer reinforcements. The South Africans and the Tiger Convoy are coming, as are the 50th and 5th Indian Divisions. There is even a period from late February until early April when the Commonwealth has no headquarters on the map at all! Defence of Tobruk and the passes through the escarpments at Mersa Matruh is critical at this point, as is a buildup of supplies.

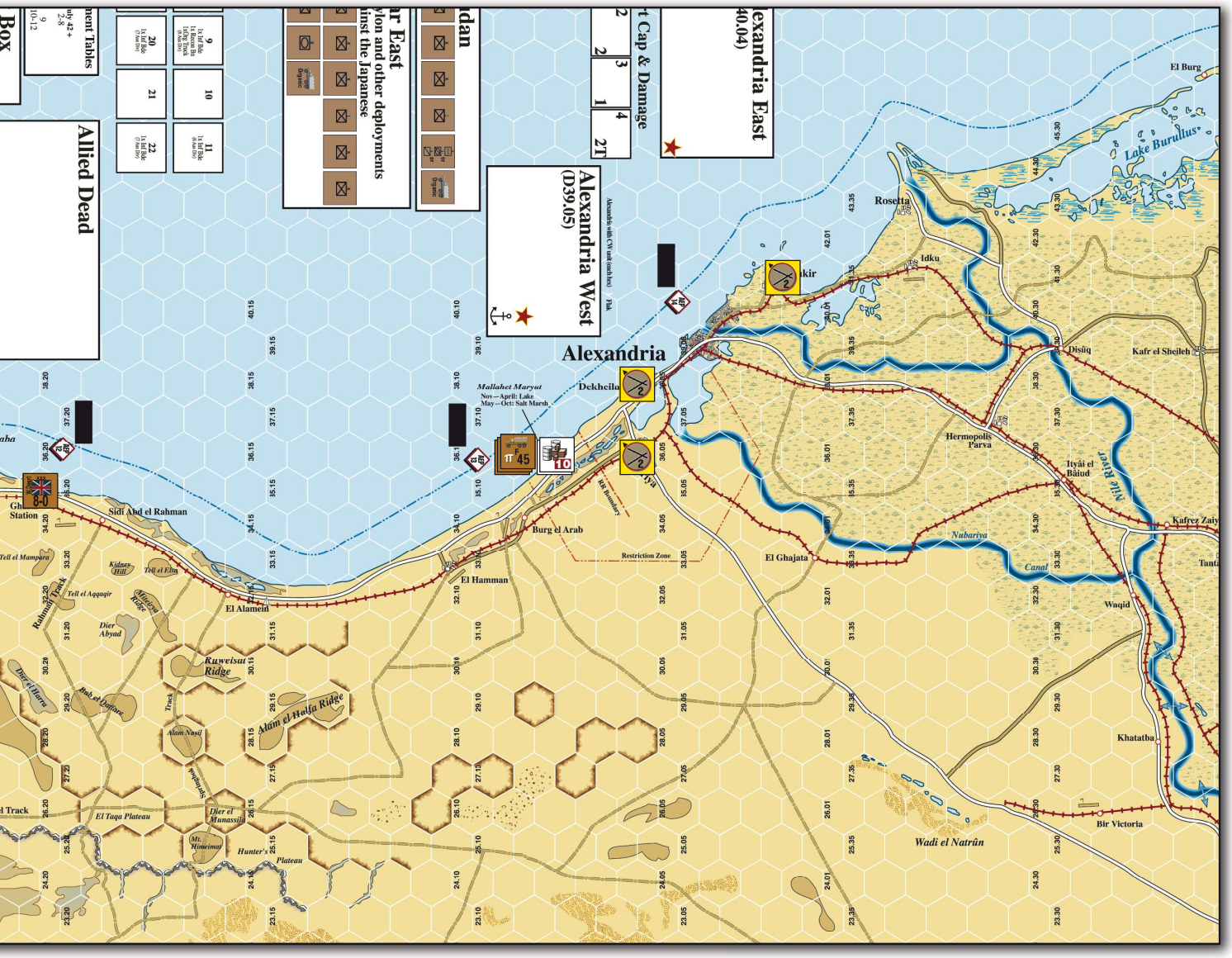
The illustration below shows, in skeleton form, how the defense of Matruh should be conducted. Defend the four escarpment passes with the best units you can spare from Tobruk. Perhaps build hedgehogs in some of the four hexes (only Level-1 is allowed in this game). Put artillery behind the escarpments, stacked with a Leader (try to put two here and the other in Tobruk). With good reactive rolls, this will allow your artillery to fire in all three phases



(Combat, Exploitation, and Reaction). And there will be ample supply to do all this. The key is rule 3.7b, which allows infinite supply for Alexandria. But you cannot get infinite supply just drawing out of the city directly. So the Commonwealth player needs to take his three tiny 1T trucks and shuttle the supply out of Alexandria to build a massive dump in D36.08. This can accumulate supply, using all three trucks, at the rate of 9T per turn, or 20 SP over a month. An HQ in Ghazal Station (D35.21) can then throw it to the Matruh area as needed. It makes for a tough nut at Mersa Matruh for the Axis to crack.

If the Commonwealth can withstand this difficult period in the winter/spring of 1941, things begin to turn his way. It is a slow turning, but the ever-expanding force pool, the increase in the Desert Air Force, and the end of external events draining units from the front allow the Commonwealth to gain the upper hand as the campaign draws down.

## Conclusion

At first **DAK** may seem overwhelming. There are many charts and tables and special rules that need to be mastered. But what you find as you delve into the game deeply is that it all flows beautifully and logically. **DAK** recreates the two-year war in the Western Desert in a magnificent way. There is a balance and flow that makes the game enjoyable for both sides. It goes through multiple transitions where one side is on offense, then must switch to defense, then back again. Anticipating and understanding when those shifts will take place is half the fun.

If you have **DAK** on your shelf, unplayed for many years, it is worth dusting off. If you don't own it, it is worth attempting to get. You are unlikely to enjoy any OCS game more than this one.