

PANZERARMEE AFRIKA...

A SYNOPSIS

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I know that you S&T subscribers are aware of what's happening at SPI. S&T games have been diminishing in physical quality while prices have risen. I can accept this fact since it is difficult today to produce the physical quality of the past at two dollars an issue and game, but I'll leave that to the economists. At this time I would like to return to the past. The time is September of 1973, the issue is number 40, and the game is *PANZER-ARMEE AFRIKA*.

The first look at *PANZERARMEE AFRIKA* might shock your average wargamer. The mapboard is all right; as a matter of fact it is a typical SPI mapboard. By this I mean a tri-color map with a hex-style grid containing the time record chart and other charts around the edges. The big shock is the units. The physical quality is up to the standard one has grown accustomed to receiving from SPI, but take a closer look at the movement factor. No, that's not a typographical error; that 50 is real. But that is part of one of the most interesting game systems developed in recent years.

The main innovation of this new game system is the movement. The only way to use a unit's full movement factor is to move along the road (though seeing a German infantry regiment marching from El Aghliela to Matsa Matruh in one month is a little beyond me). Movement through all other terrain costs extra movement factors. There is also command control for the Allied player (yes, I hear some of you booing).

Combat is fairly standard. Attacking is voluntary with zones of control restricting movement and supply. The main innovation here is the counterattack provision. The Attacker's losses are determined by a counter-attack which happens even if the defender is eliminated. The surviving units immediately counterattack at doubled or, in the German's

case, quadrupled combat value against any one hex of the attackers. This makes the counterattack one of the key elements to this game. A careless attack followed by a devastating counterattack can turn the game for either side.

The supply situation deserves mention here. Supply units are only operative in part of a chain that leads to either a home base or Tobruk. Supply is never a great problem to either side. The Axis has a good chance to capture up to five Allied supply units on the first turn. Besides that, both sides receive a supply unit a turn (Malta, where are you?). This is the on big fault I have found in this game. The only effect that Malta has in the game a possible Axis invasion on turn 15 (June of 1942 for you history buffs) which, if attempted and successful, frees more optional Axis reinforcements. Axis supply was critical and erratic so Malta should have more effect on the game.

The biggest complaint about this game is play balance. Many people have complained that the Axis cannot win or that the Allies don't stand a snowball's chance in El Paso (or some comparable place) [Hell...EDIT.] I feel the game is fairly well-balanced with Axis holding a slight edge. This, however, is only true if you take the time to learn the tactics and strategy of the game. For an excellent discussion of tactics I refer you to "PanzerArmee Afrika Brainstorming" in *Moves*, nr. 17. For those of you who do not have access to that article, I will briefly discuss the tactics.

As the Axis player role is the aggressor. You must take Tobruk by turn five to avoid heavy Allied reinforcements, and Bardia will fall soon after. Then you must push for Alexandria. The faster you advance the better. The most important thing to know is when your offensive has failed. To keep

attacking when you know your drive has been (or soon will be) stopped can lead to an Allied victory. This is the most difficult and important part of the game so be careful when you shift from the offensive to the defensive. Just remember, possession of Alexandria is only necessary for a decisive victory so don't give up hope. A good defensive can save the game for you.

You, the Allied player, have an infinitely more difficult strategy to follow. The first part of your plan is to hold Tobruk until turn eight (ideally) without losing too many units (prayer might not help, but it surely won't hurt). Just remember that Tobruk is not a part of the victory conditions so your job is to pull a holding action. Don't lose your armour in Tobruk; you will need it later. Your job after Tobruk falls is to fight a delaying action. Because of that accursed command control, you cannot fight a mobile defense so plan your defense on not moving. Naturally your lines will be broken and you will be forced to fall back, but don't defend on moving units to plug holes as this is fatal. Finally at the Qattara depression, make your counteroffensive. It is here you must (and finally have a chance to) stop the Axis war machine. Your southern flank is secure so you can consolidate your line. Here is where you finally become the aggressor and try to pull out a victory. Remember that German infantry is hard to replace so if you get the chance at any time, kill! Italian armour is the same way, but less dangerous by far. Also, be careful when attacking Germans; their counterattack can be devastating.

To quote the designer's notes, "*Panzer-Armee Afrika* is a dangerous game. Dangerous because it is a new game system." If this is the case, then I hope SPI produces more of these "dangerous" games. ■