

How I Created The Legend Begins

by **Mark Simonitch**

Rich Erwin's Note: I consider this article a veritable game creation Odyssey...

The story of how *The Legend* began is inextricably tied together with the publication of other North African games. Twenty years ago, at the age of twelve, my favorite game was Avalon Hill's *Afrika Korps*. I constantly coerced my brothers (younger and older) into playing the game. At that time, all that I knew of the campaign was what Avalon Hill thoughtfully provided in the Battle Manual. Sometime during high school I read Ballantine's *Illustrated History of the North African Campaign* and learned that my favorite game was far from being a historical simulation.

Knowledge of these shortcomings soured my interest in the game. I attempted to correct some of the inaccuracies by writing a few extra rules, but my brothers would never accept anything not officiated by Avalon Hill. Although occasionally played again, *Afrika Korps* slipped from popularity at our house, although the legend of Rommel did not.

My gaming interest is diverse, but I had always hoped that a newer and better game on the topic would be published. Avalon Hill occasionally rejuvenated their games (*D-Day* / *Fortress Europa* and *Stalingrad* / *Russian Campaign*), and I felt confident that some day, *Afrika Korps* would be done

again. I anxiously looked forward to it.

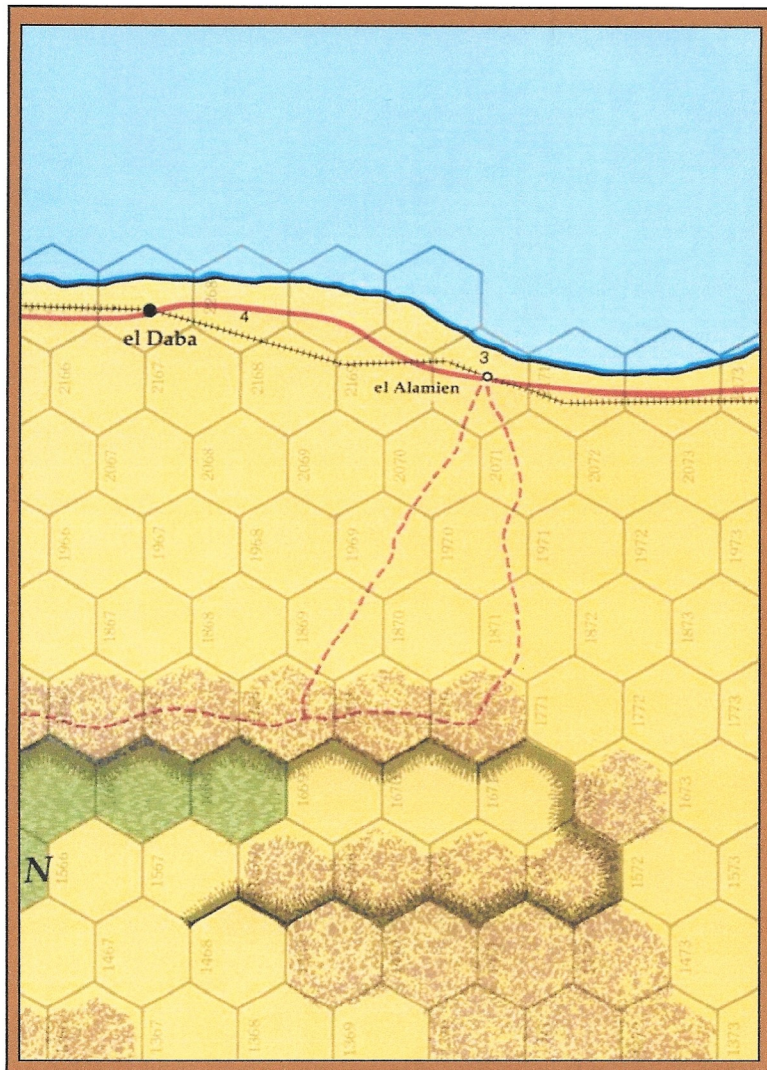
A couple of years later, SPI put out *Panzerarmee Afrika*. Money at that age was scarce, and buying a game without waiting for Christmas or my birthday was bold. Nonetheless, one of my brothers and I wasted little time in securing a copy, and playing it. To us, it was a disappointment. Especially frustrat-

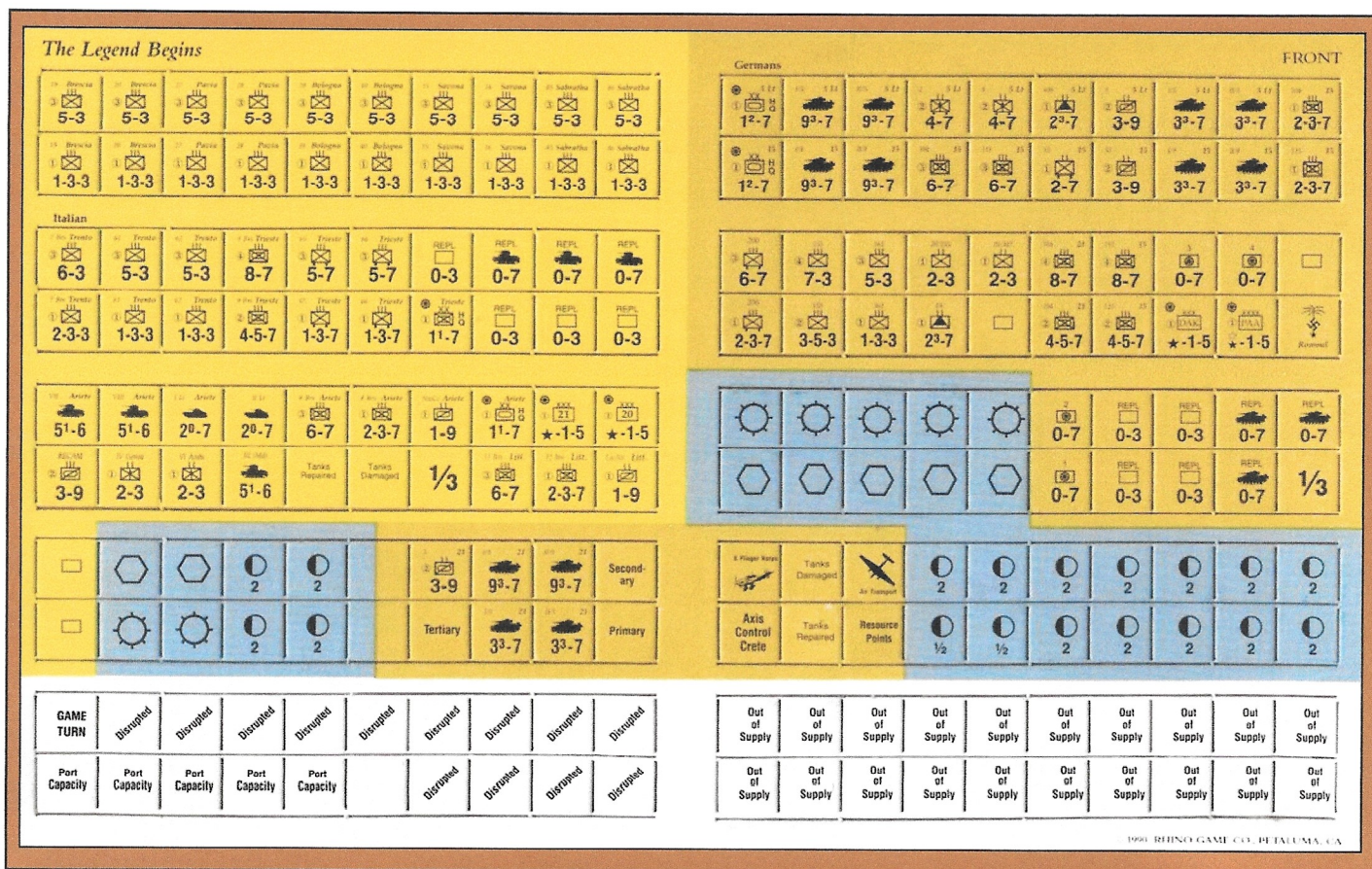
ing in the game was a rule that prevented the Axis player from entering Egypt until certain conditions were met. I'll never forget the time when as the Axis player I swept the western desert of Allied troops; completely victorious, except at Tobruk, my panzers were at the frontier of Egypt. There was nothing in the way of my quickly capturing Alexandria but that rule. I found this too restricting and abstract. I don't think I played that game more than twice, which was a rarity for me back then.

I felt that the game was no market grabber, and that there was still a need for a good North African campaign game. Certainly Avalon Hill's redo was in the pipeline... When Avalon Hill bought and republished *Panzerarmee Afrika*, my hopes crumbled. I had no other recourse but to

take on the job myself.

During the summers of my college years I began to do some serious research. I read the Playfair volumes, the official Australian and South African histories and, my favorite, *The Rommel Papers*. Initially I did a map from an atlas, but I soon scored a coup with a trip to the map room of the University





of California at Berkeley. Obtaining circa 1942 German and Italian maps the design began to pick up speed. My biggest boost came when I traded two of my Napoleonic games for the colossal *Campaign for North Africa*.

A few words about *Campaign for North Africa*. I've never played it. I did once spend half a day beginning to set it up, assigning trucks and filling out log sheets. I then realized that it would be crazy to attempt it. It was comforting to know that if I ever had to serve fifteen years to life, I would have something to do. I've read the rules cover to cover and thoroughly enjoyed the brilliance and humor of Richard Berg. The game is a prized possession.

It is embarrassing to admit how much time I've spent designing *The Legend Begins*. Many rule drafts, and many laborious hours spent on making play test units and maps. What started as an interesting project turned into a long-term obsession.

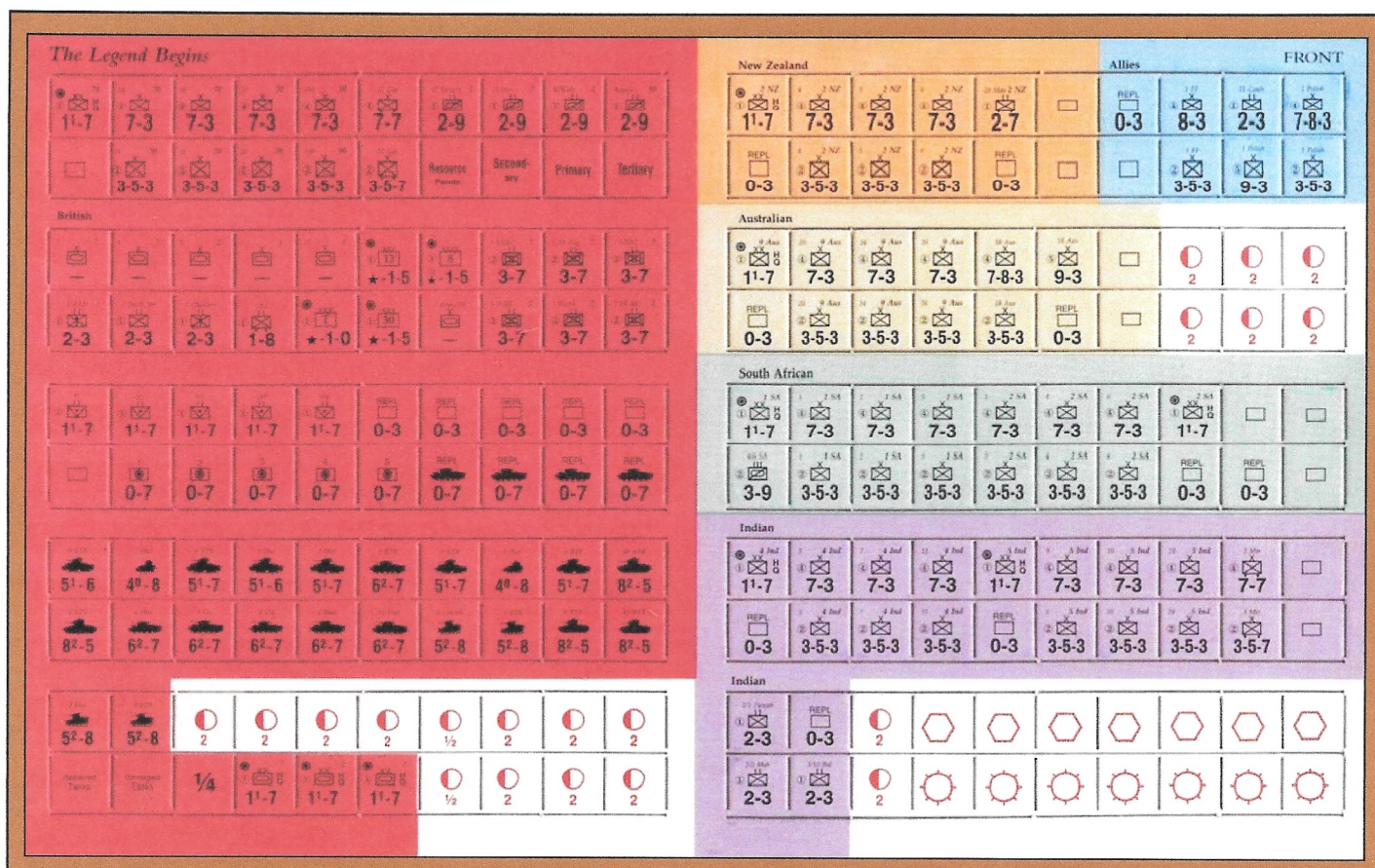
Meanwhile, Game Designers' Workshop put out *Western Desert*. By this time, I had high hopes for the game and consequently didn't want any competition to dry up the market. *Western Desert* is a fine game, especially the air game. I played one game as the Allies and truly enjoyed each and every air raid. But the ground system was not satisfying. The double impulse rules allow an opponent to move his army two hundred miles, attack the enemy

line, then rush back two hundred miles before it had a chance to react. It didn't work for me, and so I felt the market was still there.

After college, with a degree in graphic arts, I took a year or so off to get my career going and unexpectedly fell in love. During courtship, marriage and the blissful time of being a newlywed, everything was rightly put on hold. But eventually married life settles down to a very comfortable pace perfect for projects and hobbies. However, moderation was a necessity, so work had to proceed slowly.

About this time, Strategy & Tactic's *Desert Fox* came out. The game had all the necessary detail and fairly good graphics. It would certainly satisfy a big chunk of North African lovers, but for me it was crippled by monthly turns. How can you create battles like *Battleaxe* and *Brevity*, which only took a few days? I did like the air, refit and supply rules. It was a decent package, but more could be done.

It was now the mid-eighties. I had put so much time into the project I dared not give it up. One of my brothers, who had always considered my tinkering with rules sacrilegious, would often unintentionally goad me with the remark, "How many years have you been working that game?" I also began to share my project with others, thinking that the more people knew, the less likely I'd be willing to quit. There was still a tremendous amount of work to do,



not to mention typing up rules and play testing. Soon my son was born and time became even more scarce.

About this time, I came to know Jeffry Tibbetts of CounterAttack. As a graphic artist, I was hired to do the counter art for issues #1, #2, and #4, as well as the map art for #4. This was a great learning experience for me. I now knew what went into creating the most important items in a game. Unfortunately, CounterAttack slipped into a coma, and I had to look elsewhere for work. That took me to Strategy & Tactics. It was to my great fortune that the head of the company at the time was Ty Bomba. He was looking for a map artist, and I acquired the project *Harvest of Death*. The map turned out well and soon I was in the map making business. Ty moved to XTR, and in 1990 I was doing many maps for Command magazine and it's zip lock line.

At the same time I was finishing up *The Legend Begins* and had recently gone into business for myself as a graphic artist and typesetter. I realized I had everything I needed to publish the game except the nerve. I had done counter and map work, I had a typesetter, I knew printers, photographers, and I had good experience with sole proprietorships. But self-publishing was too ambitious and too risky.

Instead, I got it all together nicely and submitted my design, through proper procedures, to Don Green-

wood of Avalon Hill. I felt the graphic representation of the finished game was extremely important, so I would trust nobody except Avalon Hill with that responsibility. I really didn't consider submitting it to anybody else. A month later I got a polite rejection notice from Don, saying he was much impressed with the game, but it was not in line with where the company was heading.

It was now self-publish or quit. I took the leap.