

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

DOCTRINE FOR DESERT FOX

Maxims and Measures for Successful Operations

by J Matisse Enzer

Desert Fox covers one of those perennial game subjects that are virtually clichés in the minds of most gamers. The romantic image of tanks and armored cars making cavalry-like charges through the desert dust; everyone in jaunty hats and desert tans; the chivalric behavior of the British and the Germans. Of course, it was only a very little bit like that at all. Mostly it was a terrible time in a hostile environment. Perhaps the most appealing thing about the subject from a game designer's point of view is that the whole thing is so self-contained and manageable even at a campaign level. Hence, *Desert Fox*. —Redmond

2. Do not attack unless confident of a smashing victory.
3. The best defense is... a good defense.
4. Massage your supply grid.
5. Territory is more important than casualties.

Planning

Planning is of the utmost importance in *The Desert Fox* from the Commonwealth player's placement of his units before the first turn, right up to the last moves of the game. The player who calculates movement points, traces supply lines, considers probabilities, and so on, will defeat a more tactically skillful but less methodical opponent every time.

The key to the game is learning to plan "operations" — discreet detailed plans of action for 2 to 4 Game-Turns with definite goals, territorial and otherwise.

The following sequence should be considered in planning an operation: (1) Determine long range goals; (2) Evaluate the resources available, and decide what percentage of these can be expended on the operation without detrimental effects; (3) Determine the opposition's goals and resources; (4) Use this information to set up a self-contained project that brings you closer to your long-range goals.

For example, a reasonable operation for the Axis player to plan for Game-Turns 1 through 3 is the capture and control of the coastal road from El Agheila through Tobruk, allowing that city's capture, bypass, or encirclement. Planning this operation involves breaking it down into moves for each of the three Game-Turns. Counting movement points will show that the lead units must travel at full speed across the desert or along the coastal road. Faster units using the coastal road will be able to deal with Commonwealth units between Benghazi and Gazala. Since units tied up with the Commonwealth forces in L0705 and L0704 past Game-Turn 1 will not be available for an assault on Tobruk by Game-Turn 3, the first step of the operation is the elimination of these units by the end of the first Combat Phase of Game-Turn 2.

The next point at which resistance can be predicted to be encountered is along the road near Benghazi. Contingency plans must be developed, if the coastal road is blocked. The only way to cut off the Jebel Achdar may be to send units across the desert towards Mechili.

Making sure that all units are in supply on their way to an assault will take up a good part of the planning of the operation. Supply units move more slowly than most combat units, but, at least in the particular operation in question, one can plan on capturing Commonwealth dumps with fast reconnaissance units. Care must be taken, however; Commonwealth troops have been known to sally forth from the Tobruk area and cut Axis supply lines as early as Game-Turn 2.

It is very important to plan the allocation of supply assets (dumps and MSU's) as far in advance as possible, especially during offensive operations where poor planning can cost the chance of advancing. Before moving units, know where they will draw supply from at the beginning of the next friendly Movement Phase.

Little elements have to be taken into account, too. Make sure pure armor units will be matched with infantry or mech units so that combined arms effects won't sap your strength. Also, always check for annoying possibilities that an opponent can take advantage of. (For example, can any of the other guy's recon units make a suicide dash on your primary supply line? Very embarrassing.) Above all, make sure you have sufficient supply for an attack before announcing it.

A Smashing Victory

An attack should only be conducted as part of a well coordinated operation, with some ultimate territorial or positional goal in mind. Given these criteria, no more than a few attacks per turn will usually be necessary. Once you have decided that an attack is necessary, pile everything you can into it. The CRT is structured in such a way that to do more than disrupt the enemy you have to attack with a lot of artillery, or with heavy odds in your favor.

For example, an assault on Tobruk in the first few turns is generally a worthwhile objective. Most playings of *The Desert Fox* will find Tobruk garrisoned with 6 to 8 Combat Strength Points and 1 or 2 artillery units by the time the Axis has a supplied unit at the gates, however. This means that even with 30 to 40 Combat Strength Points and 2 or 3 artillery units, the Axis will have only a 50% chance of taking the bloody place. If the attack fails and the Commonwealth player is competent, the Axis player might well lose his offensive capacity for the early part of the game. An assault should not be staged unless one is confident of success, and the consequences of failure would be acceptable.

The Desert Fox is an operational-level simulation of the campaign in Libya and Egypt from March 1941 through the end of 1942. The term "operational" is very accurate in this case as a well-played game usually takes the form of a series of distinct "operations," with the more thorough and precise player being the winner. Just as thoroughness and precision are requisites for success in *The Desert Fox*, lack of these same qualities is an assurance of defeat.

A Game-Turn in *The Desert Fox* represents one month of real time. Counters range in size from battalions to divisions, the most common units being brigades and regiments. Zones of Control are active and semi-rigid for most units, though battalion-size, artillery, and non-combat units lack ZOC's. Unit characteristics include combat strength, movement allowance, morale rating, armor rating, and stacking point value.

A Player-Turn consists of Reinforcement, Air Allocation, Initial Movement, First Enemy Reaction, First Combat, Motorized Movement, Second Enemy Reaction, Second Combat, and Refit Phases. Each player has two opportunities to move (once with mechanized units only) and to react to enemy movement. Supply logistics are treated semi-abstractly; supply may be drawn through either supply dumps or through mobile supply units (MSU's), which represent convoys of trucks.

The players have two main resources which they must learn to manipulate with care: combat units and supply lines. Victory or defeat will often be determined by the degree to which a player succeeds in integrating his supply units into supply grids. Techniques of integration can be broken down into the following five maxims:

1. Plan everything to the last detail, then plan again.

The Best Defense

Continuous defensive lines don't work in the desert; if a line has one weak point, it might as well not be there at all. Instead, large quantities of troops should be concentrated in a series of positions occupying alternate hexes along a limited front. Each such position should contain a dump, if possible, in case worse comes to worst and it is surrounded. While keeping these defensive positions between your supply lines and the bad guys, keep some fast recon units close by (but not in the thick of things) to exploit openings resulting from a poorly executed enemy attack. Enhancing a defensive position with fortifications is nice, but expensive in terms of supply expended. Desert combat is so fluid that by the time a fortification is built, chances are it won't be needed anymore anyway. This is not to say that fortifications should never be used; their use and positioning does have to be planned out well in advance of the moment they will be needed, however.

Even better than defensive positions are retrograde operations (i.e., retreating). Retreats should be used when the friendly units in question occupy poor defensive terrain; it is not worth fighting over territory you can capture later. Of course, if your opponent's attack seems weak or poorly coordinated, it may very well be worthwhile to let him bash his head on your brick wall. Retreating can also be used as a ploy to get

your opponent to overextend himself. Most players just can't resist filling up empty spaces with their units, even if it means leaving a tenuous supply line or a vulnerable vanguard.

For the Commonwealth player, the problem of defense lessens as the game progresses. The constant replacement of units and supplies available to the Commonwealth player makes losses less painful. Indeed, at times the Commonwealth player will enjoy such a numerical superiority over the Axis that he will be able to set up a string of positions stretching 200 kilometers or more. This is not to say that such lines are in any way more efficient than a small series of defensive hard points, but they are conceivable if the Commonwealth player is setting up for a flanking operation, or if he enjoys a favorable territorial situation.

Assuming that Tobruk does not fall early in the game, the Axis will probably have to garrison the road bypassing the fortress for much of the game to keep lines of supply open. The Italian infantry divisions are ideal for this task; they are too ponderous to be used effectively in offensive operations (and are gluttonous consumers of combat supply), but are sufficiently large to cover any but the most determined sortie. Italian infantry can also be used to cover other rear areas, or to cover the notorious southern flank in situations where combat ability is not vital, but a rigid zone of control is.

Supply Grids

A good supply grid cannot be created unless the player setting it up has a pretty good idea of where his units will be a turn or so ahead of their being there. If this information is uncertain or unascertainable, it will be necessary to keep some supply units in MSU form, but in general MSU's should be used as little as possible. Since an MSU is not an end supply source, keeping supply units in MSU form in effect is a waste of supply capacity. Usually about a third of a player's supply units will be MSU's, but this should be increased to about a half or more in highly fluid situations.

Supply lines must be protected at all times from enemy action. Only rarely will the loss of a supply chain not seriously affect a player's situation, and both players will always find it well worthwhile to sacrifice a recon unit to cut a supply line. The Axis player will have the quickest advances, and thus the longest supply lines for most of the game, and so his task to defend them will be the hardest. El Agheila should be used as a supply terminus only for units within 20 or 30 movement points. Dumps will have to be used to supply units occupying positions further forward.

The perfect supply grid does not exist, but if the technique of operational planning is mastered, it will be a lot easier to create supply grids tuned to support a variety of operations.

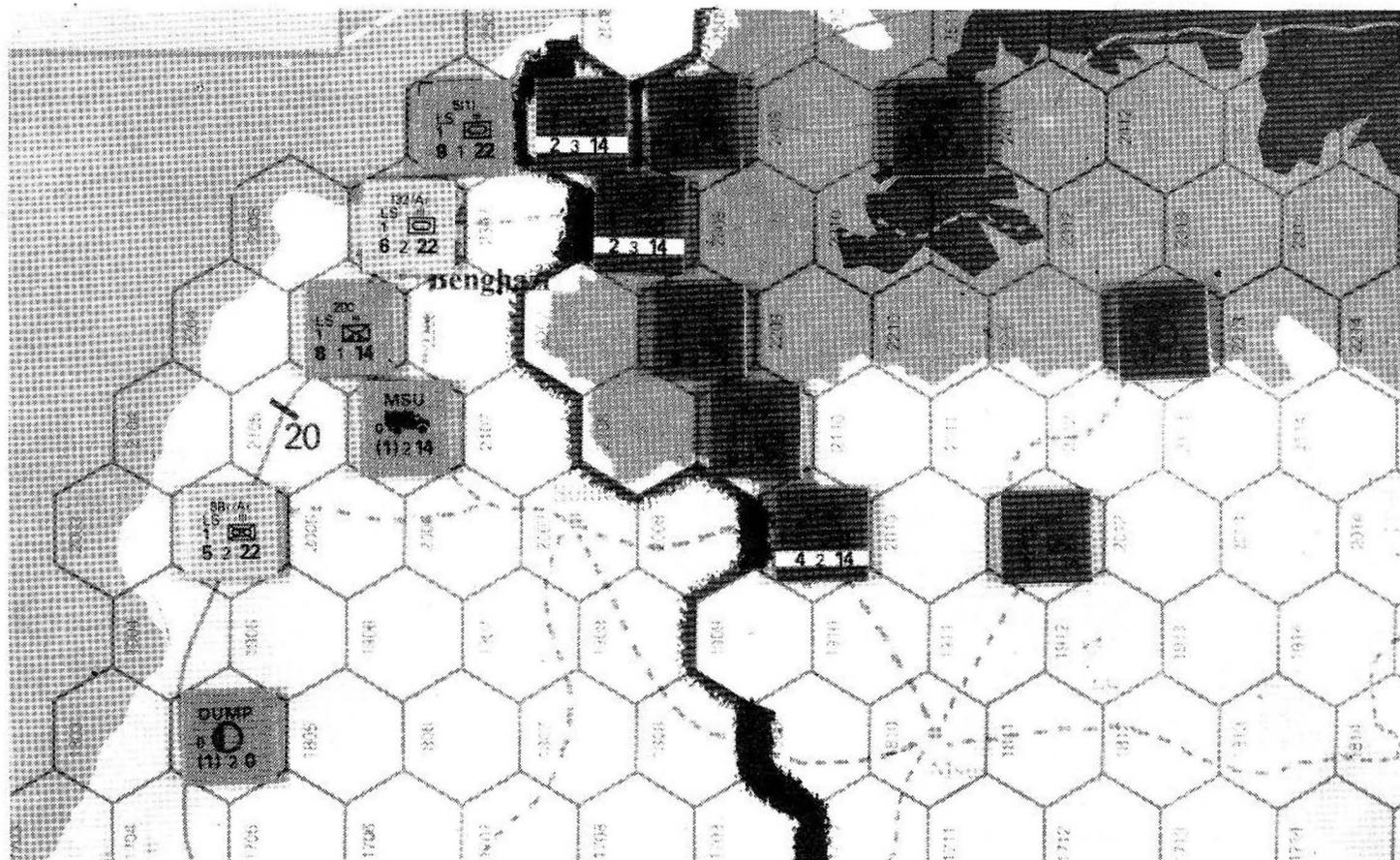
Figure 1: Reaction Movement

A feature of *The Desert Fox* which provides the defending player with unique versatility is **reaction movement**. Using this rule, the defending player can reinforce hexes under attack, and adjust defensive po-

sitions after the attacking player has committed his forces. Effectively, this rule accounts for the effects of reserves; a player can hold his mobile (armor) forces back until battle is joined and critical areas are determined.

Figure 1 shows an example of effective utilization of

defensive reaction movement. The Commonwealth player has deployed a defensive line just strong enough to prevent overruns, and has kept 7Spt/7 Mech, 4/7(2) Armd, and 7/7(2) Armd in reserve, in positions from which they can react to aid any part of the line which is threatened.



The exact placement of MSU's and dumps does, of course, depend on the specific situation. However, some concepts are worth keeping in mind: (1) The closer a dump is to the units supplied by it, the better; (2) Supply lines that run north-south are better than ones that run east-west (this is because a north-south line has a smaller southern flank than an east-west line, and is thus easier to protect from a flanking maneuver); (3) Always, always check that your supply grid is out of range of all enemy units, regardless of whether or not such enemy units would die after cutting your supply lines; (4) If you find you must have a vulnerable spot somewhere, keep dumps stacked with your forward positions, so that they will still be in supply if cut off.

Territory

It is an inhumane but correct observation that territory is worth more than casualties in *The Desert Fox*. The victory conditions speak only of territory, not bodies. The only exception to this is a Commonwealth failure to withdraw units on schedule, which is worth a small town for each unit not withdrawn. Units are only valuable in *The Desert Fox* as vehicles for capturing and holding territory. This is not to say that they should be thrown away recklessly, but only that one should not be overly concerned with losing them if a valid objective can be accomplished by their sacrifice.

Optional Rules

The following three Sections are additional rules for *The Desert Fox*. They may be used individually, or together. The first Section was designed by Eric Sven Ristad, the second by J Matisse Enzer, and the third by Richard Berg.

[16.0] Operation *Herkules*

COMMENTARY:

The effects of logistics was of paramount importance in the North African campaign, and the island of Malta was crucial to the war of supply. The island dominated the Axis supply and communications lines, oftentimes to deadly effect.

A plan was proposed for the invasion of Malta as early as April, 1941. Although the plan was accepted as feasible and considered at several points during the war, it was never implemented. The plan for the invasion was code-named Operation *Herkules*, and was scheduled for mid-1942. Airborne and amphibious forces consisting of the Italian "marines," the Folgore Glider Infantry Division, and the German Ramcke Heavy Airborne Infantry Division were to assault the island, supported by elements of the Italian Navy. Amphibious landing craft were prepared in Italy, and in March of 1942 Kesselring's Sicilian Luftwaffe intensified its bombing raids on Malta, destroying planes on the ground, and preventing supply ships from reaching the island. In April alone, nearly 7,000 tons of bombs were dropped.

Churchill realized that Malta was in deep trouble, and ordered a major offensive in North Africa to seize the airfields in western Cyrenaica and enable the Desert Air Force to come within range of Malta and provide the island with air support. Reluctant and ill-prepared, Auchinleck, the British commander in the desert, promised a June offensive. At the same time, Rommel decided to

throw the British out of eastern Cyrenaica. The Gazala campaign ensued.

After Gazala, when the British army seemed to have been completely demolished and the way to the Nile delta open, Rommel decided to use the forces slotted for *Herkules* (the Sicilian Luftwaffe in particular) in his drive on Egypt. The Malta invasion was scrapped, despite the overwhelming opposition of the German General Staff. Malta recovered, and its deleterious effect on Axis supply lines grew. Within a few months, more than a third of the Axis materiel which took ship for Africa was falling prey to Allied interdiction.

If Operation *Herkules* had taken place as scheduled, Malta would almost surely have fallen, Axis supply lines would have remained open, and the course of the war in the desert might have been drastically altered. The following rule gives the Axis player the option to go through with the assault on Malta.

GENERAL RULE:

During the Air Allocation Phase of his Player-Turn on Game-Turns 15, 16, or 17, the Axis player may announce that he is launching an invasion of Malta. Depending on the forces allocated to the invasion, Malta will either stand or fall. If the island stands, Axis supply will continue to be interdicted. If the island falls, the Axis player will almost immediately begin to profit in the way of increased materiel and reinforcements.

PROCEDURE:

After the Axis player has declared that he will launch the invasion, he states what units will be committed to the assault. The **Assault Index** is determined by Case 16.3. The die is rolled, and the effects of the invasion are assessed.

CASES:

[16.1] AXIS RESTRICTIONS

[16.11] The Axis player must commit one or both of the following units to the Malta invasion: Folgore Glider Infantry (Italian) and Ramcke Heavy Infantry (German). A unit committed to the assault *never* arrives as a reinforcement, regardless of the success of the invasion. Which units he assigns to the invasion is up to Axis player, but his decision will affect the chances of the assault (16.3).

[16.12] The invasion may not be launched before the Axis Air Allocation Phase of Game-Turn 15, nor after that Phase of Game-Turn 17.

[16.13] The Axis player may not initiate a raid on Malta (6.3) during the turn of an invasion. He may commit Air Points in exactly the same manner as is described in 6.3 (expending supply units as normal), but their effects are determined differently (see 16.3).

[16.14] If an invasion is attempted, the Axis player must permanently expend one Air Point, in addition to Air Points assigned per 16.13. No assault may be attempted unless this one Air Point is available to be expended.

[16.15] No more than one invasion may be launched during the course of a game.

[16.2] COMMONWEALTH RESTRICTIONS

No more than one Air Point may be transferred to Malta during a given Air Allocation Phase if no Commonwealth unit is in General Supply in a hex west of Lxx23. This rule supercedes 6.31, and is applicable throughout the entire course of the game, regardless of whether or not an invasion is ever attempted.

[16.3] ASSAULT INDEX

The Assault Index for an invasion is calculated as follows:

Add...

...2 if Ramcke Heavy Airborne Infantry is committed

...1 if Folgore Glider Infantry is committed

...1 for each Axis Air Point committed (16.13)

Subtract...

...1 for each Commonwealth Air Point at Malta

...2 if any Commonwealth unit is in General Supply and west of Lxx23

The Assault Index is totalled, and the die is rolled. If the roll is less than or equal to the Assault Index, the invasion succeeds and the provisions of 16.4 apply. If the roll is greater than the Assault Index, the assault fails. There are no specific penalties to a failed invasion.

[16.4] SUCCESS

If the invasion succeeds (per 16.3), the following provisions apply:

1. Subtract 3 from all future rolls on the Axis Convoy Arrival Table (supercedes 7.55).

2. The Axis player receives one additional Refit Point of each nationality each Reinforcement Phase following the invasion.

3. Any Commonwealth Air Points assigned to Malta are eliminated. No Air Points may ever be assigned to Malta in the future.

[17.0] DETACHMENTS

GENERAL RULE:

In some circumstances, a player will want to delay a hostile advance without sacrificing an entire regiment to do so. In such a situation, the player may detach small formations from his units. These **detachments** function as any other units friendly to the owning player, within the provisions of the following Cases.

PROCEDURE:

A player may announce his intention to form a detachment during any friendly Movement Phase by declaring from which unit the detachment will come. A detachment counter is placed with the friendly unit, and a die is rolled to determine if the friendly unit is depleted as a result of the formation. The detachment may then move (but not attack) until the beginning of the next friendly Reinforcement Phase, at which point it is removed.

CASES:

[17.1] RESTRICTIONS ON THE FORMATION OF DETACHMENTS

[17.11] Detachments may only be formed during a friendly Movement Phase.

[17.12] Detachments may only be formed from a friendly unit of one of the following types: infantry, mechanized infantry, armor, motorized infantry, heavy weapons, heavy infantry, heavy airborne infantry.

[17.13] A unit may not be used to form a detachment if it is depleted, disrupted, has a Morale Rating of 3 or 4, or is out of General Supply.

[17.14] No more than two detachments may be formed by a player in a Player-Turn, and no more than one detachment may be formed from a given unit in a Player-Turn.

[17.15] The unit from which a detachment is formed loses 2 Movement Points during the Phase in which the detachment is placed on the map (i.e., if a detachment is formed from a unit with a Movement Allowance of 22, the unit would have a Movement Allowance of 20 for that Phase).

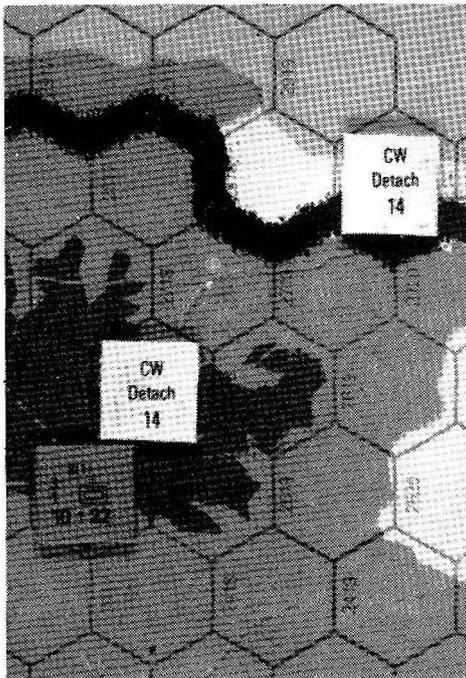


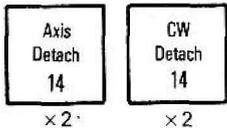
Figure 2: Detachments

Commonwealth detachments left in the positions indicated greatly hinder Axis advance. The Movement Point cost for 8(1) Armd to move from its present position to 2819 would be 2 if the detachments were not there; with the detachments, the Movement Point cost is 16 (7 for 2617, 1/2 each for 2718 and 2719 and 8 for 2819).

[17.16] Whenever a detachment is formed from a unit, the owning player immediately rolls a die: on a 1 or 2, the unit is immediately depleted; on a 3, 4, 5, or 6, the unit suffers no disability.

[17.2] PROPERTIES OF DETACHMENTS

In order to use detachments, it will be necessary to make the following counters:



[17.21] Detachments may move as any other unit friendly to their owning player. They may never force march, however.

[17.22] Detachments have no supply requirements. They are always considered to be in both General and Combat Supply.

[17.23] Detachments exert no ZOC's into adjacent hexes. Instead, they exert a ZOC into the hex they occupy. This ZOC is subject to infiltration (10.3). Except for this ZOC and 17.27, enemy detachments may be completely ignored.

[17.24] Detachments may never attack, be attacked, or be overrun. Their only effect is to impede the passage of enemy units.

[17.25] Detachments are removed at the end of any Phase in which they are stacked with any enemy combat unit (including enemy detachments), or at the beginning of the first friendly Reinforcement Phase following their placement (whichever comes first).

[17.26] There is no additional effect to having two detachments in the same hex. Similarly, a detachment stacked with any other friendly unit is treated as if it were not there. It is not affected by any attacks against the friendly unit, nor is it affected if the friendly unit is overrun (although the overrunning unit would have to pay an extra Movement Point to conduct the overrun because of the detachment's ZOC in the hex, as per the normal rules for overrun).

[17.27] No roads or railroads (not trails) leading into or out of a hex occupied by an enemy detachment may be used. For example, if a road led across a ridge hexside into a rough hex occupied by

a detachment, it would cost an enemy motorized unit 8 Movement Points (3 for the ridge, 4 for the rough hex, and 1 for the detachment's ZOC) to enter the hex. If the unit moved on to another rough hex, it would only cost 4 Movement Points to do so, as the detachment exerts no ZOC into the surrounding hexes.

[17.28] Each detachment has a Movement Allowance of 14, regardless of the unit from which it was formed.

[17.29] A detachment may never enter an enemy ZOC, nor may it ever enter a hex occupied by an enemy unit.

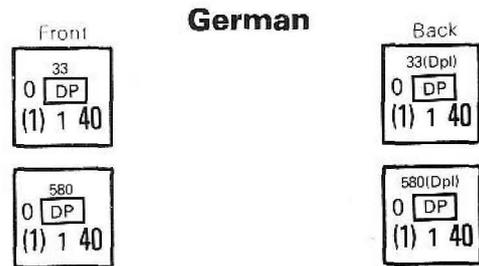
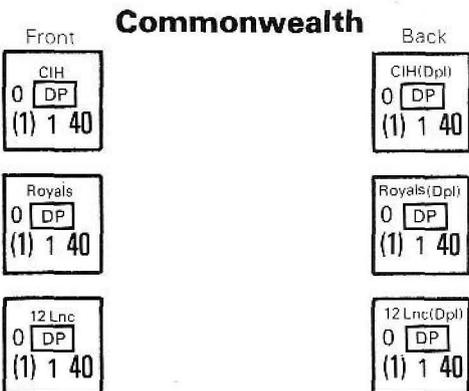
[18.0] DESERT PATROLS

GENERAL RULE:

Certain reconnaissance units may be converted into **desert patrol** units. Desert patrols have increased movement and supply capabilities, but no combat ability. Historically, they were used to conduct raids against rear area supply lines. In essence, these units represent the Commonwealth Long Range Desert Group and Special Air Service Brigade, as well as the German Sonderkommando Almsy, admittedly on a somewhat abstract level.

PROCEDURE:

The following counters must be produced before desert patrols may be used:



During any friendly Reinforcement Phase, a player may announce that he is converting a friendly reconnaissance unit meeting certain requirements (see 18.1) into a desert patrol. During the Refit Phase of that Player-Turn, the reconnaissance unit's counter is replaced by the appropriate desert patrol counter.

CASES:

[18.1] CREATING DESERT PATROLS

[18.11] The following reconnaissance units may be converted to desert patrols: German 33 and 580; Commonwealth CIH, Royals, and 12 Lnc.

[18.12] A unit may only be converted to a desert patrol if it occupies L0701 (Axis) or Alexandria (Commonwealth), is undisrupted, and is not in a depleted state.

[18.13] A unit may not move or attack during the Player-Turn in which it is converted into a desert patrol.

[18.14] If a desert patrol is eliminated, and is eligible to be rebuilt (13.1), the appropriate reconnaissance unit is put in the Refit Box in its place.

[18.15] A desert patrol may be returned to reconnaissance status by following the exact same procedure for conversion to desert patrol status; i.e., it must spend an entire Player-Turn in L0701 or Alexandria without moving or attacking.

[18.16] No more than one Axis desert patrol may ever be on the map or in the process of being formed at a given moment. No more than two Commonwealth desert patrols may ever be on the map or in the process of being formed at a given moment during the game.

[18.2] ABILITIES AND RESTRICTIONS ON DESERT PATROLS

Desert patrols function exactly as any other combat units with parenthesized Combat Strengths, with a few exceptions, as listed in the following Cases.

[18.21] Desert patrols never need supply of any kind. They always are considered to be in both General and Combat Supply.

[18.22] Desert patrols may never force march.

[18.23] Desert patrols may conduct supply overruns. They are considered to have a Combat Strength of 4 for purposes of supply overrun (only). If a desert patrol succeeds in a supply overrun against an enemy supply unit, the results of the overrun are treated differently. If the overrun would normally have resulted in the supply unit's capture, the supply unit is destroyed instead. Any other result has no effect.

[18.24] Disrupted or depleted desert patrols may not attempt supply overrun. Disrupted desert patrols may recover normally from their disruption. Alternatively, the owning player may roll the die during any friendly Refit Phase. On a 1, 2, or 3, the desert patrol is undisrupted where it stands; on a 4, 5, or 6, the desert patrol may not be undisrupted that Phase. Depleted desert patrols must return to L0701 (Axis) or Alexandria (Commonwealth) to be refit. One Refit Point is all that is required to undeplete a desert patrol. ■■