

FOX KILLED

A Prequel to
The Desert Fox™
Game

by Steven Copley

O'Connor vs. Graziani for North Africa

On 10 June 1940, Italy declared war on the United Kingdom, thereby opening up North Africa and the Mediterranean as a theater of operations. Neither side was prepared for serious warfare. Under Air-Marshal Balbo, the Italians had about a quarter of a million men in Libya, far outnumbering the 36,000 Commonwealth troops in Egypt. However, many Italian units in Libya were under-strength, short of equipment (especially transport) and poorly trained. The artillery, tank units and the air force had good morale but much obsolete equipment. Balbo planned to attack the British in mid-July, but on June 28th he was killed — shot down by Italian AA gunners as his plane came in to land at Tobruk during a British air raid. To replace Balbo, Mussolini appointed Rodolfo Graziani, a soldier with a reputation for offensive spirit. Despite this reputation, won in Italy's colonial wars, Graziani became very conservative when faced by the British. He not only postponed the advance into Egypt until September, but much worse, he failed to use the three month delay to any advantage.

The Commonwealth forces also had their problems. Archibald Wavell, heading the Middle East Command, had appointed Richard O'Connor as commander of the Western Desert Force on 8 June, only two days before the Italian declaration of war. Besides being outnumbered by more than six to one, Western Desert Force was neither organized nor equipped properly, since most first-line material either had been lost in France or was being held in Britain pending the expected

German invasion. The 7th Armored Division had only four battalions instead of its normal complement of six; the 4th Indian Division was short an infantry brigade and an artillery regiment; the New Zealand Division actually amounted to only a brigade group. If Graziani was not a man of action, however, O'Connor was. On the very first night of the war, the 11th Hussars crossed the frontier in a raiding operation.

From June until August, the conflict consisted primarily of skirmishes, raids, ambushes and air attacks by British forces. Although O'Connor's troops suffered some minor reverses, they generally were successful and achieved an advantage of initiative over the Italians, who more and more felt constrained to defend themselves in tight knots of strength, leaving control of the open desert to the British patrols. Both generals' efforts were meager — Graziani's because of his nature, O'Connor's because his resources were so limited.

Finally in mid-September, under threat of sacking unless he took action, Graziani ordered an advance. After a loud bombardment of the empty frontier, the Italian Tenth Army began a ponderous march into Egypt. O'Connor did not resist Graziani. Instead, the Commonwealth units drew back on Mersa Matruh. A strong infantry force held the town while the 7th Armored Division prepared to counterattack from the escarpment inland. O'Connor was forced to wait for his victory, however, for to his disappointment the Italians stopped their advance at Sidi Barrani, 60 miles into Egypt and still 80 miles from the Commonwealth defenses at Matruh. Here Graziani spread his army into a semi-circle of defensive camps reaching inland

to Sofafi and then began work on a metalled road up from the frontier. Graziani had no intentions of moving towards Matruh until he had a firm base established at Sidi Barrani. The initiative had in effect been given back to O'Connor.

O'Connor considered the Italian dispositions, consisting of a fixed forward line containing a large part of the army at no great distance from the enemy, to be very unsound. Looking at the Italian camps, each out of supporting distance of the others, O'Connor conceived a bold plan: He would penetrate the gap between the Sofafi and Nibeiva camps, cutting the Italian defenses in two.

Leaving only Selby Force (a brigade-sized formation formed from the Matruh garrison) standing between the Italian camps and Matruh, 4th Indian would attack the northeastern most camps from behind, while 7th Armored masked Sofafi and then drove for Buq Buq cutting Italian communications. On 2 November, Wavell accepted O'Connor's plan but only in the form of authorizing a five-day raid, which would be followed by withdrawal to Matruh.

Early on 9 December, the Western Desert Force fired the opening rounds of the most spectacular offensive the desert was ever to witness. O'Connor ranged the battlefield in his staff car, encouraging and directing his subordinate commanders. The success of the British attack was obvious by the end of the first day. By the end of 11 December, Italian resistance had melted; the men of Graziani's army were either retreating towards Sollum or were marching towards Matruh as prisoners. It was on that day that O'Connor learned that the 4th Indian Division was to be taken from his command and sent to Eritrea. This raised a problem. The attack had not been a successful raid, but a major victory. O'Connor had ended the Italian threat to Egypt, smashed two Italian corps, taken 38,000 prisoners, and captured 73 tanks and 237 guns. Commonwealth casualties (killed, wounded and missing) totalled 624. Still, with 4th Indian Division being withdrawn, should Western Desert Force, about to be halved in size, fall back on Matruh per the original plan? Although this may have been the safe thing to do, O'Connor was determined to pursue the enemy with his remaining forces — 7th Armored Division and Selby Force.

Using these troops, O'Connor pushed the Italians across the frontier and on 16



December invested the town of Bardia. Bardia was garrisoned by elements of four Italian divisions commanded by General "Electric Whiskers" Bergonzoli, whose message to Mussolini had been "In Bardia we are and here we stay." Wavell, fond of using hunting metaphors in telegrams to England, had signalled "Hunt is still going but first racing burst over, hounds brought to their noses, huntsmen must cast and second horses badly wanted. It may be necessary to dig this fox."

For the assault on Bardia, Wavell had given O'Connor the understrength 6th Australian Division, a fruit perhaps of O'Connor's daring in continuing the pursuit. Although supply was a primary concern, O'Connor was confident of success. By utilizing captured supplies and transport, O'Connor's troops, renamed 13th Corps, were ready to attack Bardia by January. Early on 3 January, a coordinated attack was launched, using artillery, naval guns, air power, Matilda tanks and infantry. Within 2½ days the position had fallen and the 7th Armored Division was sent to El Adem to cut off Tobruk. The Italians had lost 40,000 men and 450 guns. Of more value to O'Connor was the capture of 700 trucks.

First Tobruk

Again, victory led to a dilemma. Although the offensive had been most successful, 13th Corps was experiencing supply difficulties as well as wear and tear on their tanks and transport. In addition, Churchill was deeply moved by Greek resistance to Italy and wanted to reinforce Greece (at O'Connor's expense). Lastly, Germany had decided to send German ground forces to Libya. Unless O'Connor could occupy the whole of Libya by the end of January, the British would be faced with a German invasion of North Africa.

By 7 January, Tobruk faced its first siege. Inside, under General Petassi Manella, were the 61st Italian Division plus fortress troops (approximately 25,000 men). The assault was scheduled for 21 January. The plan

and tactics used were similar to those at Bardia. With less men to cover more perimeter, Manella was faced with an impossible task. Within 36 hours of launching the assault, the Allies had captured Manella, 25,000 prisoners, and more than 200 guns. Once again, the 7th Armored Division was sent west. For O'Connor, use of Tobruk as a supply base and source of fresh water (10,000 tons were stored) was vital to further offensive action.

Italian defenses now consisted of the 60th Division at Derna and General Babini's tank group at Mechili. O'Connor planned to envelop Babini's tanks with armor and then destroy him with infantry. But on the night of 26 January, Babini withdrew northwest into the Jebel Achdar. O'Connor was very disappointed and annoyed at the setback. Yet it created an opportunity — the way was now open for a drive south of the Jebel Achdar to the Gulf of Sirte. Time was running out, however. On 2 February, aerial reconnaissance confirmed that the Italians were evacuating the remainder of Cyrenaica. On 4 February, the 7th Armored Division was ordered west of Mechili. In crossing the desert, the 7th Armored faced no significant opposition from the Italians — their forces were situated along the coast road. The strongest resistance to the British advance was provided by the elements and the fiendish country they were attempting to cross. At midday on 5 February, lead units of the 11th Hussars were at Beda Fomm and the coast was within sight. The retreating Italians had yet to arrive. O'Connor's men had won the race for Beda Fomm; the next contest would be the Battle of Beda Fomm.

Early in the afternoon the first column of Italian trucks appeared from the north. The trap had closed with little time to spare. The British guns opened fire and the annihilation battle of Beda Fomm began. Groups of trucks appeared throughout the afternoon, and for the most part they were destroyed, captured or turned back. Late in the day a few tanks from the 4th Armored Brigade managed to arrive to reinforce the guns and armored cars of the advance guard. Dawn on

6 February was gray and rainy. By this dismal light, the Italians tried to break through the British roadblock. They were stopped by the guns of the Royal Horse Artillery. The Italian forces included 100 tanks but these were defeated piecemeal by the British forces. Throughout the 6th, only four Italian tanks escaped past the British defenders. Early on

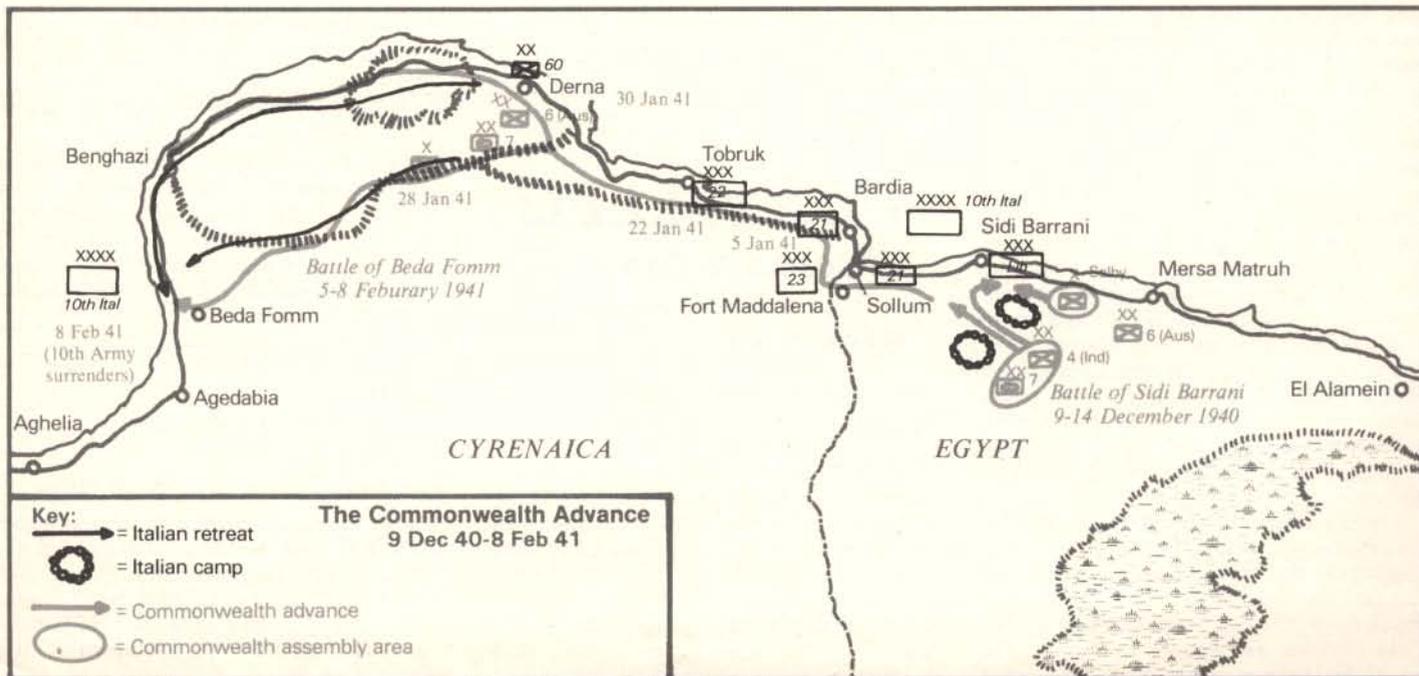


the 7th of February, the Italians made a last effort headed by 30 tanks. Coordinated defensive work by British infantry, guns and tanks destroyed the attacking force. By 9 a.m., Tenth Army was finished. Italian prisoners numbered 25,000 and included General Bergonzoli.

O'Connor had achieved a complete victory. The message sent to Wavell was "Fox killed in the open..." The message was radioed to Cairo in clear for Mussolini's benefit. When O'Connor visited the captured Italian senior officers on 8 February, he apologized saying that proper arrangements would be made as soon as possible. The Italian replied politely: "Thank you very much. We do realize you came here in a very great hurry."

O'Connor's Victory

Indeed, it was a complete victory. In ten weeks, O'Connor had advanced almost 500 miles, destroyed an Italian army of ten divisions, taken 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks, approximately 1000 guns and two fortresses, all with a force never exceeding 2½ divisions and with only minimal casualties. How had this been accomplished? The reasons are sev-



eral and include: 1) superior mobility, 2) a secure logistical base, 3) secure lines of communication, 4) material superiority in weaponry, especially tanks, 5) a solid intelligence system, and 6) superior training and discipline. Perhaps most important was leadership. In Wavell and O'Connor, the Allies possessed two outstanding leaders. Wavell's contributions were: 1) the selection of O'Connor, 2) strategic juggling of the various Middle East campaigns (as many as four simultaneously) and 3) protection of O'Connor from the pressures exerted by the higher military and civil echelons, particularly Churchill.

O'Connor's role was, of course, critical and he is deserving of a large share of the credit for the success of the campaign. Apart from the tactical success of his plans for the battles of Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Tobruk, he consistently displayed imagination, boldness and unorthodoxy combined with a driving personal leadership at the front suggestive of the style Erwin Rommel was to use for the next two years. O'Connor, like Rommel, had the knack of being where he was most needed at critical moments. He was tireless in maintaining control of the battle. By engaging in offensive action whenever possible, he kept the initiative out of Graziani's hands. By pushing his tired troops towards the limit, he never allowed any relaxation in pressure on the enemy. Because of this, the Italians largely were either paralyzed with inactivity or anxious only to make good their escape. The Australians called O'Connor "the little terrier — because he never lets go."

Even after destroying Tenth Army, O'Connor still did not want to let go. He proposed to Wavell a plan for an advance to Sirte and then Tripoli. Unfortunately for the Allies, Churchill on 12 February had instructed Wavell to give all possible support to Greece, including those elements of 13th Corps not necessary for defense against the demoralized remnants of the Italian force in North Africa. Some generals would have been tempted to advance without orders and force government support via a *fait accompli* victory. Such covert disobedience was repugnant both to O'Connor's character and his sense of public duty. Suppressing his strong feelings, he obeyed with outward composure.

The aid Britain was capable of giving Greece merely delayed the inevitable conquest of that nation. On the Greek mainland and later on Crete, Commonwealth forces were overwhelmed by the advancing Germans and escaped only after heavy loss of life and equipment. Even Rommel was to agree with O'Connor that an armored striking force, drawing from the 2nd and 7th Armored Divisions and supported by air and naval bombardment (and possibly infantry landings at Tripoli or along the coast), could have pushed the demoralized Italians out of Tripolitania. Therefore the diversion of Commonwealth resources to Greece easily may have lengthened the campaign in North Africa by two years.

While Churchill was stripping O'Connor's forces of troops, Hitler, who doubted Mussolini's ability to survive politically the loss of Tripoli, ordered X Fliegerkorps to attack the British in Cyrenaica while the 5th Light Division was shipped to Tripoli. The 5th Light Division would be followed by a

panzer division in April. Nominated to command this small armored corps would be Erwin Rommel. With 13th Corps disbanded and replaced by a static area command under General Neame (O'Connor was transferred to a command in Egypt), the Commonwealth forces were in no position to resist a determined Italo-German attack.

Of course, the Allies did not expect any attack before May, or at the very earliest, mid-April. Hitler had in fact ordered Rommel not to move beyond Agadabia before the arrival of the 15th Panzer Division. But Rommel, like O'Connor, was an unconventional commander and one who considered the enemy's estimate of the possible as a major ingredient in his own success. As detailed in *Strategy & Tactics*® Magazine nr. 87, Rommel attacked at the end of March. As the news of Rommel's advance reached Wavell, O'Connor was sent back to Libya to advise Neame. O'Connor arrived on 3 April. On 6 April, O'Connor and Neame were driving in a staff car when they lost their way in the dark and were captured by a German detachment behind British lines. O'Connor spent the rest of the war in an Axis prison camp. The match-up of O'Connor versus Rommel never took place.

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FOX KILLED

O'Connor's Campaign for Libya: Sept. 1940-Feb. 1941

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[1.0] Introduction

FOX KILLED is an extrapolation of *The Desert Fox*™ game appearing in *S&T*™ Magazine nr. 87. Using the following sections with the *DF* game system, FOX KILLED simulates war between Britain and Italy in North Africa from the start of Graziani's offensive into Egypt in September of 1940 up to February 1941, when the arrival of German forces in Tripolitania and the transfer of British forces

to Greece ended O'Connor's conquest of Libya. The rules cases which follow are formatted for use with the existing rules of the *DF* game in that the same numbering system has been used. All rules of *DF* apply unless noted otherwise. There are two scenarios of FOX KILLED: a short, six-turn game, recreating the conflict in Northeast Africa from Graziani's advance to O'Connor's offensive, and until the Allied invasion of Northwest Africa in late 1942. Thanks go to Daniel Yee and Robert Grab who were most helpful in playtesting this variant.

[2.0] Game Equipment

CASES:

[2.1] GAME MAP

The game map from *DF* is used when playing FOX KILLED. Optionally, players may treat the road from Sollum to Sidi Barrani as track in all respects until it is "built." Either side may build the road using the procedure for railroads outlined in Case 8.64 of the *DF* rules. The track from Charing Cross to Siwa (via Bir el Gellaz) also may be converted to road in this way. "Road Ends" counters should be prepared if this rule is used.

[2.2] PLAYING PIECES

In general, the playing pieces from *DF* are employed in FOX KILLED. However, some additional counters are necessary. Players will need to make facsimiles of the counters depicted in Figure 1. Note that the deployment codes for these units use letters to indicate their turn of appearance. Units with a deployment code of "A" begin on the map at the locations listed in 15.32 and 15.33.

[2.3] CHARTS AND TABLES

Modified charts required for this variant are provided in this article. These modified charts and tables include Commonwealth Reinforcement/Withdrawal Schedule (5.17), Axis Reinforcement Schedule (5.18) and an extension to the Turn Record Track (Figure 2).

[2.4] GAME SCALE

No changes.

[2.5] UNIT DESIGNATIONS

The unit type abbreviations used in the initial set-up and in the reinforcement schedules are identical to those detailed in section 2.5 of the *DF* rules.

These abbreviations are used in individual unit designations on the new counters: **Aus** (Australian); **Cat** (Catanzaro); **CCNN** (Camicie Nera — i.e., Blackshirts); **Cir** (Cirene); **Cv** (Cavalry); **Hus** (Hussars); **KDGDs** (Kings Dragoon Guards); **LB** (Libya); **Mltti** (Maletti); **Mrm** (Marmarica); **Srt** (Sirte).

[3.0] Sequence of Play

CASES:

[3.1] SEQUENCE OUTLINE

No changes.

[3.2] AXIS INITIAL SURPRISE TURN

There are no special first turn rules for either FOX KILLED scenario. However, if the extended campaign scenario is played, then effects 2, 4, 5, and 6 outlined in case 3.2 of the *DF* rules apply during March 1941 (Game-Turn G). Case 5 applies during April 1941 (Game-Turn 2).