

Cauldron: Battle for Gazala
After-Action Report
David A. Vandenbroucke
davanden@cox.net
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This is an after-action report of a solo play-through of Decision Games' *Cauldron: Battle for Gazala*¹, published in 2010. This game is part of DG's "Fire and Movement" series of folio games. The series is an update of the SPI quad games line, for both World War II and later titles. Indeed, the design credits are given to Howard Barasch, who designed the game for the North Africa quad, and Redmond Simonsen is given credit for the cartography. Eric R. Harvey is credited for the redesign.

While I never played the SPI North Africa quad game, I have played others of their World War II modern-era quads. Thus, I know the system well enough to spot the similarities and differences between the SPI and DG rules. The games are intended as small, quick-playing, and simple. There is no stacking, supply, or command control. The games use a differential CRT, with terrain integrated into combat resolution, essentially by providing column shifts. Both sets of rules use a move-fight player turns, in which the player is allowed to move and attack with all of his units as he sees fit. However, the DG rules add a mobile phase. Mobile units (armor and mechanized) that sit out the regular phases may instead move an attack in the mobile phase, which comes after. Thus, the player may commit reserves in response to the results of his regular player turn. Although the rules don't specifically say so, it appears that each game turn represents one day.

Another change in the DG rules is that there are no longer any artillery units. Instead, each side gets a certain number of fire support markers each game turn. Each of these markers may be used once per game turn to support combat (attack or defense) or to bombard independently. Curiously, the defender may counteract bombardments by committing his markers as "counterbattery fire." The markers have fixed values, which are treated just like unit strength points. In this game, all of the British² markers have a value of 3, while the Germans' are split about half and half between 2 and 3. While the rules state that the players may choose among their markers when they use them, I decided to add a bit of chaos and drew the German markers at random.

Zones of control in the quad games had been notable for being sticky: once in a ZoC, the only way out was through retreat or elimination of one side or the other. The Fire and Movement system makes them much more permeable. Units may leave a ZoC if they begin the turn in one. Leg units must stop upon entering a controlled hex, although they may move ZoC-to-ZoC by expending all their movement points. Mobile units may enter and leave ZoCs as much as they like, provided that they exit to a hex not in a ZoC.³ They may move from one controlled hex to

¹ This is how the title is rendered on the folio cover and in the rules. The map says *Cauldron: Battle of Gazala, May 1942*.

² Although both sides fielded multinational forces in the battle, the game refers to the sides as British and German. I follow this practice.

³ An important bit of errata is that the text of the rule is wrong; the example is correct.

another by spending half their movement points. ZoCs do not force combat, although they block retreats, even if friendly-occupied. Units retreating into a controlled hex must take a step loss. Of course, there is no supply for them to block.

The units are battalions, regiments, and brigades. The British have a couple company-size units. The units have the usual attack-defense-movement ratings. The counters include historical designations and standard unit symbols, although neither has any effect on play. The movement allowances of mobile units are printed on a red background, while leg units have a black background. Most units are double-sided, with two steps. As you will see from the photographs, the tan of the British units and the pale green of the German can be difficult to distinguish.

There isn't much terrain in the desert. There is some broken terrain and, of course, escarpments. There are roads and tracks. Near Tobruk, there is an antitank ditch. These all have the effects you'd expect. The most important terrain is manmade, in the form of minefields. The British laid large lines of them before the battle began, and they were a major impediment to German operations. In this game, minefields are a permanent terrain feature (no mine clearing). British units spend 2 MP to cross them, but Germans have to spend all their movement. Germans suffer a big column shift attacking into a minefield, but the British aren't affected by them. The British also have fortified boxes. Their effect is to absolve defenders of the need to retreat. However, boxes are always surrounded by minefields, and so those will affect any combat as well.

There are few special rules. The British can't move on the first turn. Both sides have two supply hexes. For the British, one is the supply dump at El Adem, and the other is on the eastern edge, in the direction of Egypt. The Germans have one on the west and one on the south. The only function of these hexes is to reduce their side's fire support allocation by half if enemy occupied.

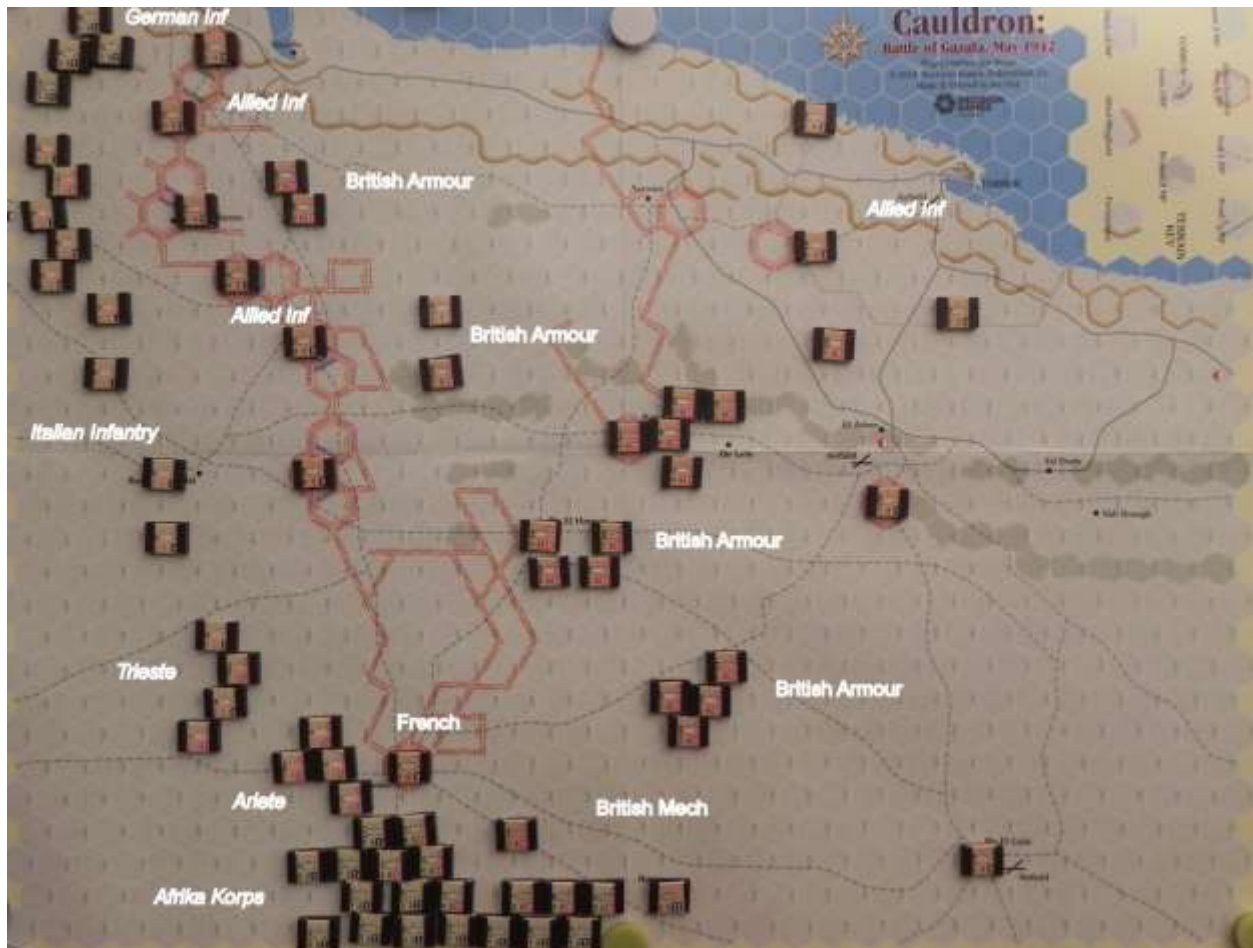
The game hinges on Tobruk. The instant that a German unit occupies Tobruk with a clear path to one of their supply hexes, the Germans win.⁴ If the turns run out and the British have a path from Tobruk to the east edge, they win. Otherwise it's a draw.

Okay, let's see how the game plays.

⁴ Another important bit of errata is that the Germans must *occupy* Tobruk as well as have a clear path. Without this specification, they win during the initial setup!

Turn 1

The Germans get 11 support markers per turn until Turn 17. The British get 6 in every turn.

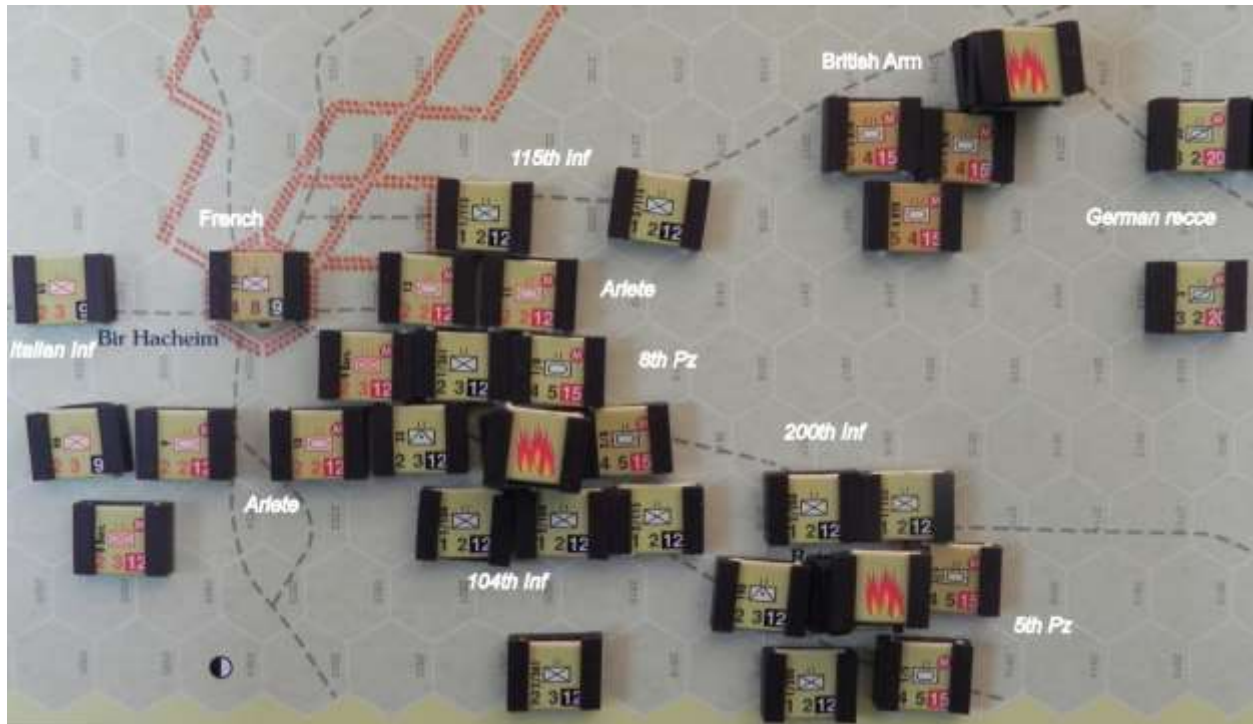


Initial Setup

Given that victory depends on driving a corridor through to Tobruk, the Germans decide that there is nothing to be gained by messing with the minefields to the west. Leaving a hedgehog of Italian infantry around the supply hex to forestall a British sortie in that direction, they start shifting everything they can southwards.

South of Bir Heichem, the Germans surround the two mechanized infantry brigades (3rd Ind and 7) blocking their way. The German recce battalions break out into the open desert and head towards the British supply hexes. Even if they don't reach them, the enemy will have to shift substantial forces to block their way.

With plenty of fire support, the Germans first bombard the mech units they intend to attack in the combat phase. They also use two markers to attack the 50 R mech unit in 2115, to keep it from interfering with the recce rush. The British, husbanding their markers for the combat phase, use one for counterbattery fire in support of the 50 R and one to support 7th mech at Retma.



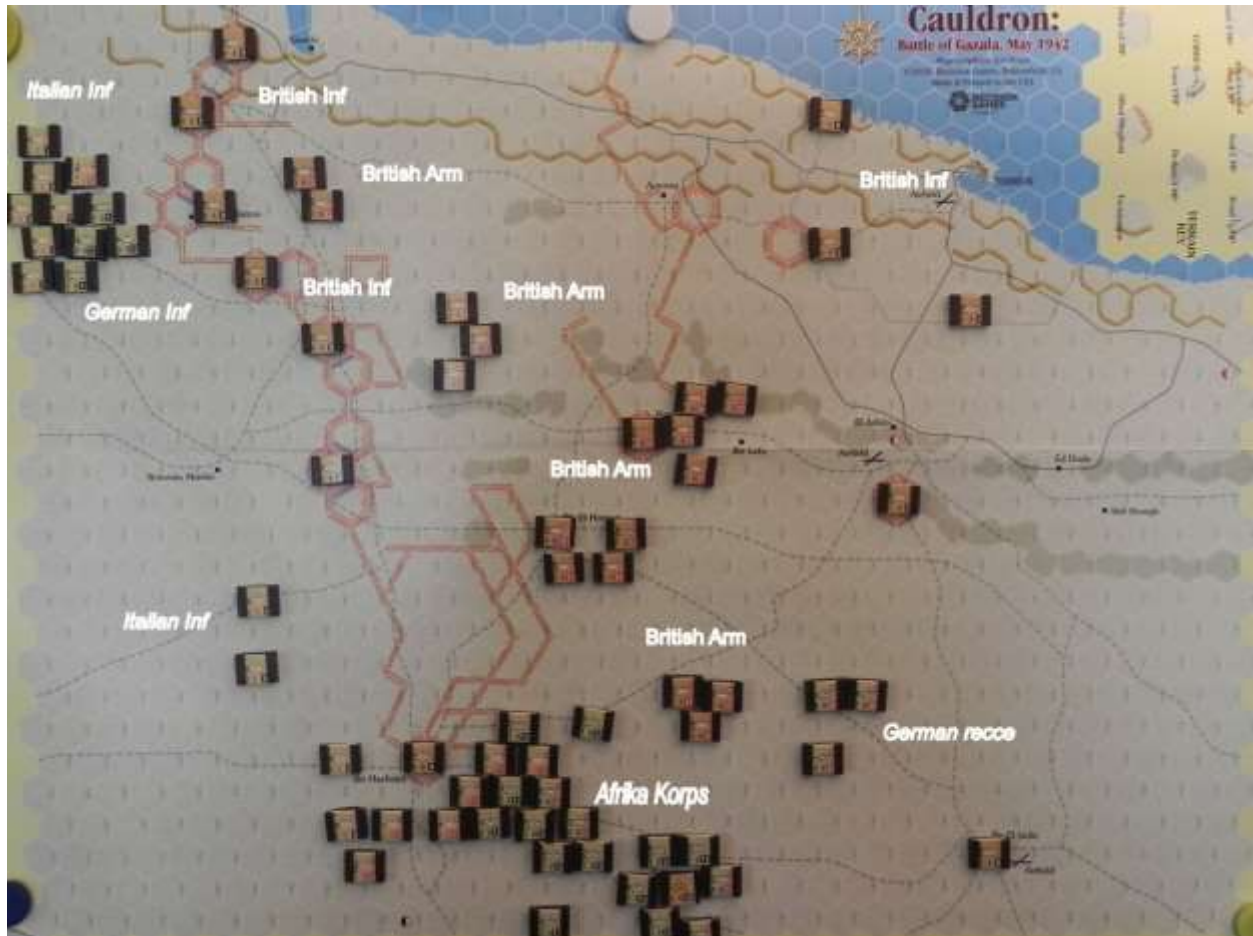
German Bombardment

The 2115 attack comes out as $+2+2-3$, for $+1$, but it has a surprising Ex outcome, and the first British unit is eliminated. The bombardment of Retma is $+3+3-3-5 = -1$, and the unit is unharmed. The bombardment of 3rd Ind is $+3+2-4 = +1$, but the result is (A), and so no harm is done there either.

In the combat phase, both sides commit two support markers to each of the two combats. The attack on 7th mech at Retma is a net $+7$, with result D2. Because it is surrounded, the unit takes a step loss. The attack on 3rd Indian is a $+9$, and the result is De.

Under the special first-turn rules, only British units adjacent to the enemy may move. The only one that fits that description is the 7th mech, which is surrounded. The British decline to attack with that unit, and they have no markers left for bombardment. Thus, the turn ends.

Turn 2



Beginning of Turn 2

The German *33rd recce* occupies the El Adem supply point, while *580th recce* is on the road east of El Duda. *3rd recce* is diverted to help the main effort cut off the retreat of the British armoured units. The panzers leave reducing 7th mech to the Italian armor while they turn towards the British tanks. *8th Panzer's* two battalions take on 5th RTR, while *5th Panzer* takes on 6th RTR. Each is supported by a battalion from *361st Infantry*. The units of *115th Infantry* screen the advance against movements by the next concentration of British armour to the northwest. *104 Infantry* starts to move eastward to keep an eye on the 29th Indian brigade in Bir El Gubi. *200th Infantry* supports the Italian armor and *Bersaglieri* who are trying to finish off 7th mech. Various Italian infantry regiments array themselves between the French in Bir Hacheim and the German supply hex. The German infantry to the west continue to stream southward, while the Italians set up a perimeter around the western supply hex.

The Germans begin with bombardment of 5th RTR and 6th RTR with two markers each. The British counter by committing one marker for counterbattery fire to each bombardment. Both bombardments are resolve in the -1 column and have no effect.

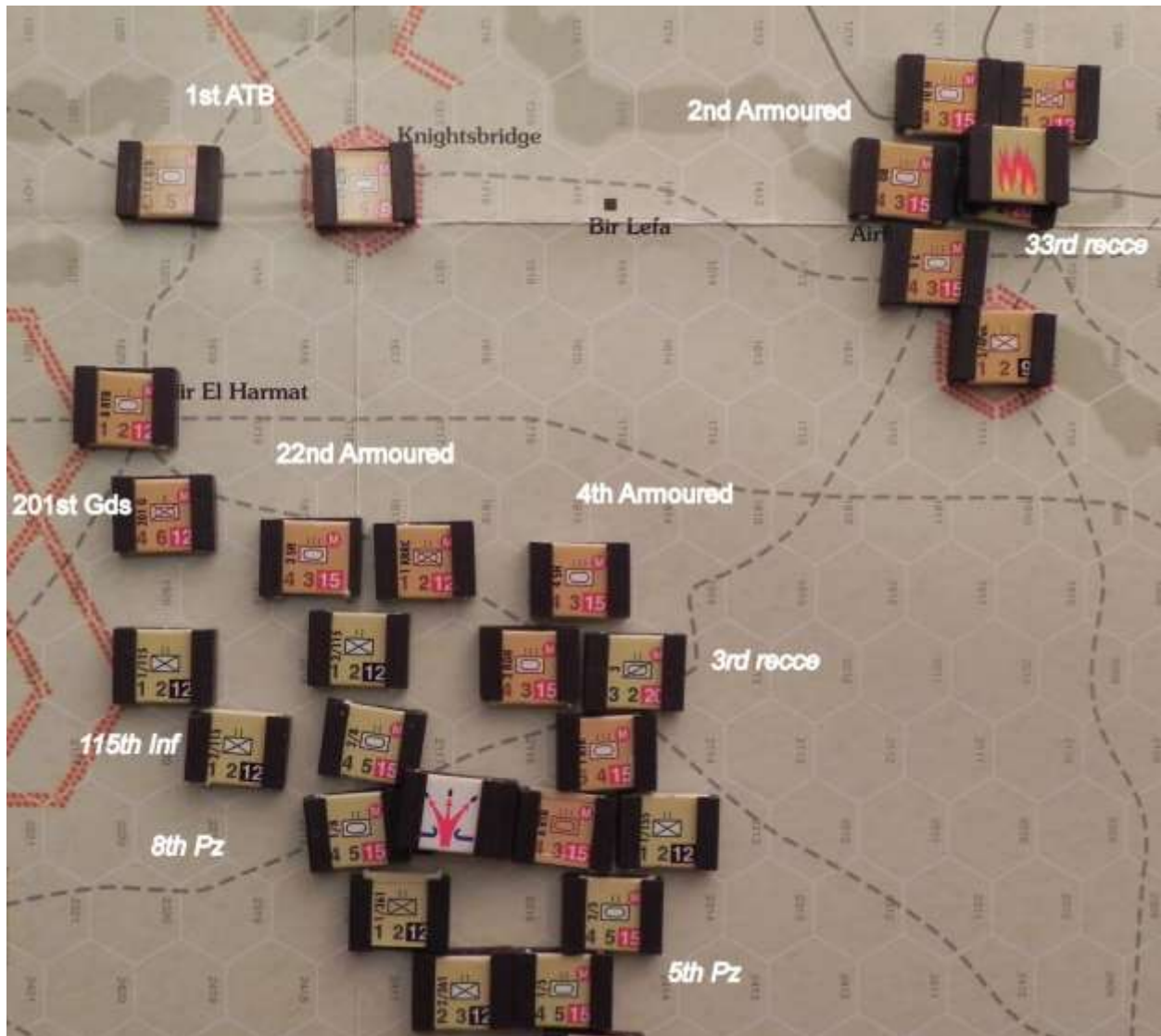
In the combat phase, the Germans allocate two markers each to 5th RTR, 6th RTR, and 7th mech. The British allocate two markers to the armour units, leaving the mech unsupported. The

attack on 5th RTR is a +5, and the result is Ex. 5th RTR and 1/361 are depleted. The attack on 6th RTR is a +4, and the result is D2. Because the defender can't retreat, it is depleted. The attack on 7th mech is a +9, and the result is Ex. 7th mech and 1/200 Infantry are eliminated.



German Combat Phase

Finally the British get to move. 9th rushes to occupy the eastern supply hex before the Germans can grab it. 29th Indian pulls out of Bir El Gubi and heads north. The tanks of 1st and 32nd Army Tank Brigades leave the infantry to watch the minefields and head east to help deal with the panzers. 2nd Armoured brigade near Knightsbridge moves east to attack the Germans at El Adem.



British Turn

In the pocket to the south, 1 and 6 RTR exfiltrate to the northeast an attempt to make a breakout. 5 RTR stays put, in the hopes of being able to move further in the mobile combat phase, after combat has removed some of the enemy ZoCs in its way. 22nd Armoured Brigade in the Bir El Hamat area moves to hit the Germans holding their compatriots captive, while the 201s Guards move out of Knightsbridge to anchor their flank.

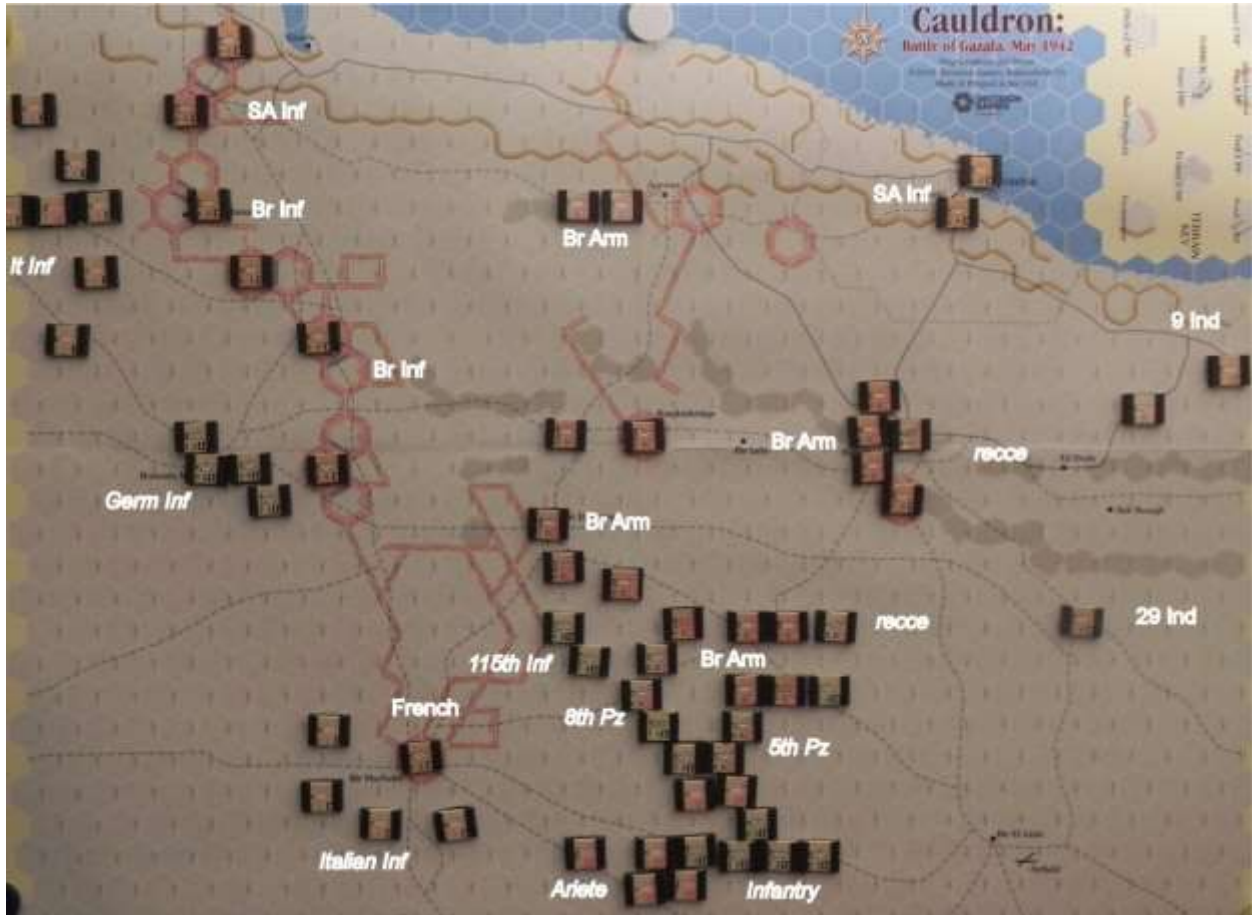
The Germans have one support marker left, and they commit it to 33 *recce*'s defense of El Adem. The differential is +7 in broken terrain, and the result is Ex. 33 *recce* is depleted, and 1st Rifle Brigade is eliminated.

2 RGH and 2 SH of 22nd Armour attack 3 *Recce* as part of the 4th Armour breakout attempt. The result is D2, and the Germans retreat rather than take casualties. The British advance along the path of retreat. 1 and 6 RTR inflict the same result on 1/155 *Infantry*, which also falls back and is pursued. 3 SH Armour and 1 KRRC Mech launch a +3 attack against 3/115 *Infantry*, but both infantry units are lost in the resulting exchange.

In the mobile phase, 5 RTR exfiltrates from *8th Panzer's* embrace and fills the hole left by the loss of 1 KRRC.

Turn 3

The British get only 3 fire support markers because of the occupation of El Adem.



Start of Turn 3

The German infantry that were trekking from the northwest reach the minefield triangle north of Bir Hacheim. *104* and *200 Infantry*, with some attached antitank units, pass through Bir El Gubi and start up the trail towards El Adem. Now that it's clear that the *recce* units are not going to be able to take and hold the British supply hexes, they pull out and screen the right flank of the main German advance.

5th Panzer wheels to the east, where it again surrounds *6th RTR*. Similarly, *8th Panzer* forms the other side of the pocket, including *1st RTR*. One regiment of *Ariete* goes into action against *5 RTR*, aided by *33rd recce*, which traps it from the north. The other units of *Ariete* swing to the east.

The Germans use two support markers to bombard *2 RGH Armour*. The differential is +1, and it accomplishes nothing.



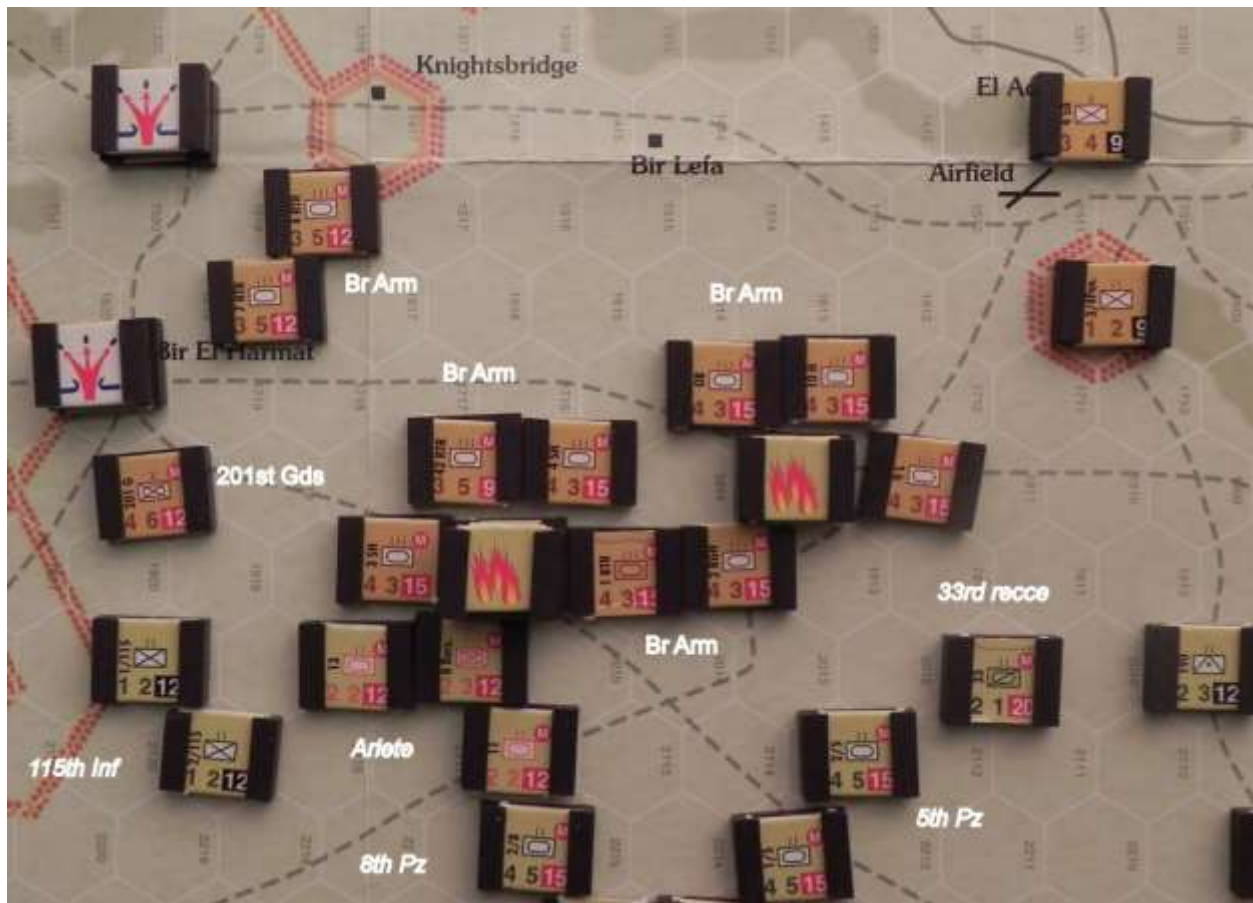
Turn 3 German

In the combat phase, the two *5th Panzer* units and *1/155 Infantry* attack 6 RTR, supported by two markers. The British expend one of their own. The attack goes in at +8, but the British at least get an exchange, eliminating both 6 RTR and *1/155*. *1/5 Panzer* advances into the hex.

The next attack is on 1st RTR, by *8th Panzer* and the depleted *1/361 Infantry*. Again, the Germans use two support markers and the British one. This time the differential is +7, but the result is D2. Since the unit can't retreat, it stands its ground and loses a step.

The Italians and the German *recce* attack 5 RTR, with the same employment of fire markers. The result of the +8 is D3. Since the British unit is surrounded and already depleted, it is eliminated. *8th Bersaglieri* advances into the hex.

In the British turn, *29th Indian* continues moving north to garrison the El Adem supply hex.



Turn 3 British

(It's getting difficult to track the British movements in terms of the larger formations, since this game doesn't identify them in any way, and the individual unit names are not related to their parent formations.)

Being surrounded by enemy ZoCs isn't that much of a handicap in this game, since there are no supply rules, and mobile units can move directly from one ZoC hex to another. The surrounded British armour pull northward. One of them, 4 SH, manages to break free of the encirclement entirely, while the other two at least move in position to help attack the German recon units blocking their way. In fact *3rd* and *580th recce* are the targets of most of the British armour, including 2nd Armour Brigade, moved down from El Adem, and one of the 1st Army Tank Brigade units (42nd RTR). Now the *recce* units are themselves surrounded. 44 RTR and 8 RTR remain in reserve status, so that they can move in the mobile phase.

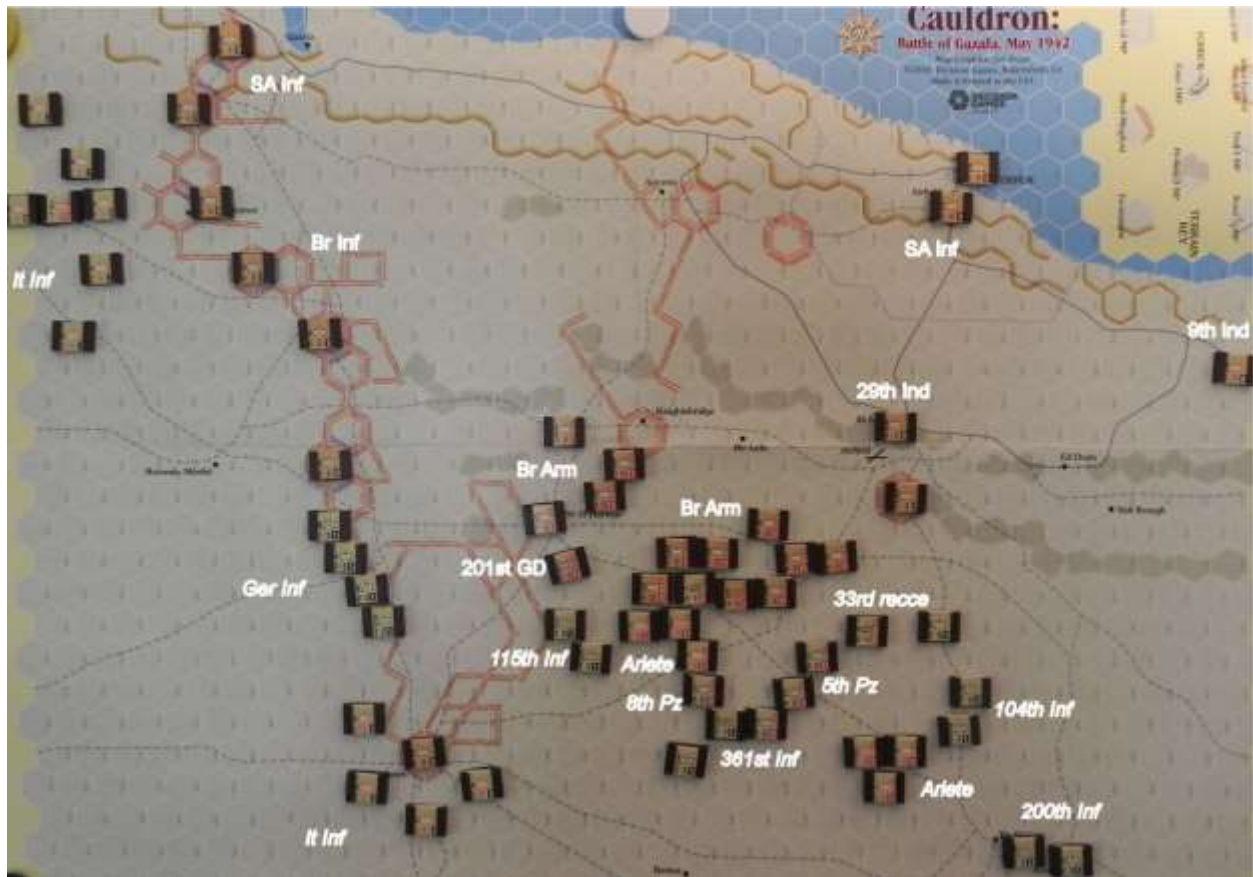
The Germans had reserved three fire support markers for defensive purposes. They allocate two to help *580th* and one to *3rd*. It's little enough: when the smoke clears, *580th* is eliminated, and *3rd* is depleted, with no loss to the British.

Given the success of the attacks and the congestion on the battlefield, the British decide not to move 44 RTR or 8 RTR in the mobile phase. In their current locations, they are positioned so that they can either intervene in the armor battle to the southeast or move southwest if the German infantry crosses the minefields.

Turn 4

The situation is becoming clearer. The German offensive power is in their four panzer battalions and their fire support. Their infantry and the Italian armor are better suited to holding the flanks and for absorbing losses in exchanges. The British have more good armor units than the Germans do. Their infantry is all out on the minefield line, with a few exceptions. Because of their lack of fire support, they have to concentrate their ground units and expect to encounter German defensive artillery.

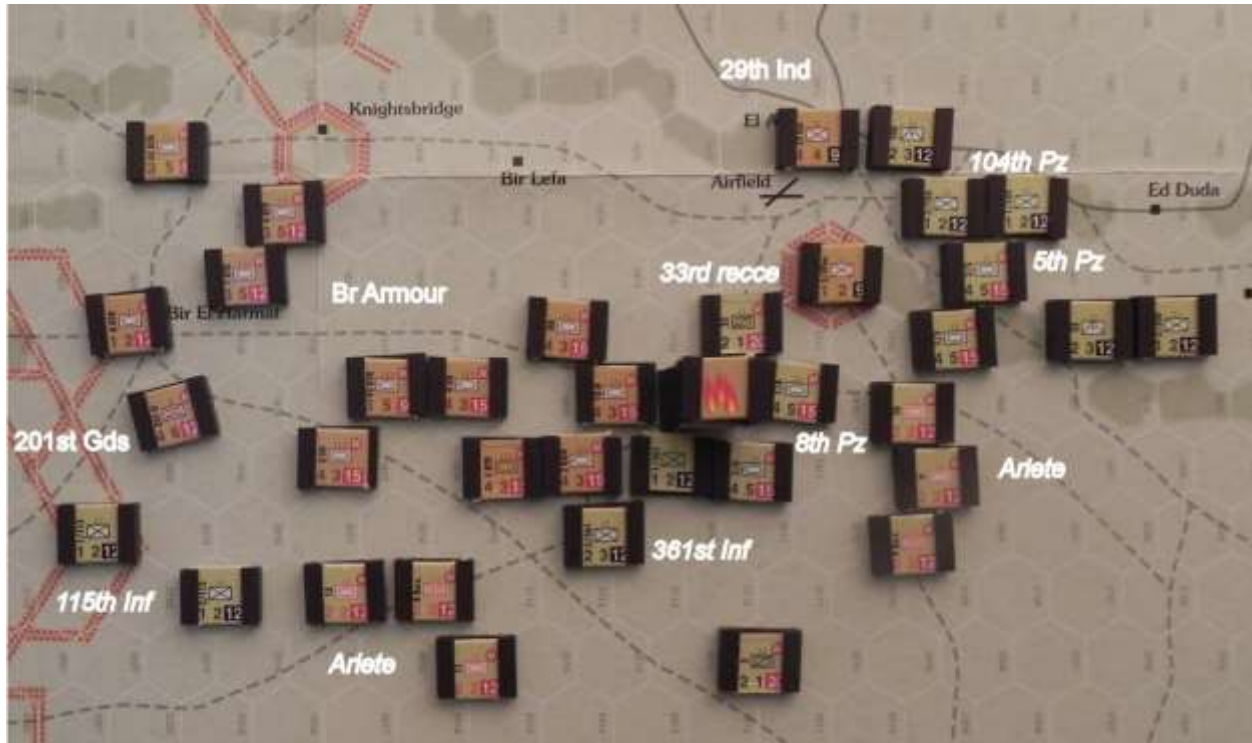
For the Germans, the objective is to take Tobruk. Eliminating the British units is useful only in so far as it gets them out of the way. There isn't anything to be gained in massing enough force to assault the fortified boxes, unless they become an impediment to maneuvering towards the objective. Taking the British supply hexes will be helpful that doesn't cost too much in time or casualties. The Germans have to protect the panzers. They can't risk attacking with them unless there are infantry units to absorb any exchange results.



Turn 4 Start

The German infantry west of the minefields cross over. Because of the width of their front, two of them cross into the triangle area, where they will have to cross another line of mines before they can get into open country. East of the triangle, *1/155 Infantry* also enters the minefields in order to make *ZoC* contact with the units approaching from the west.

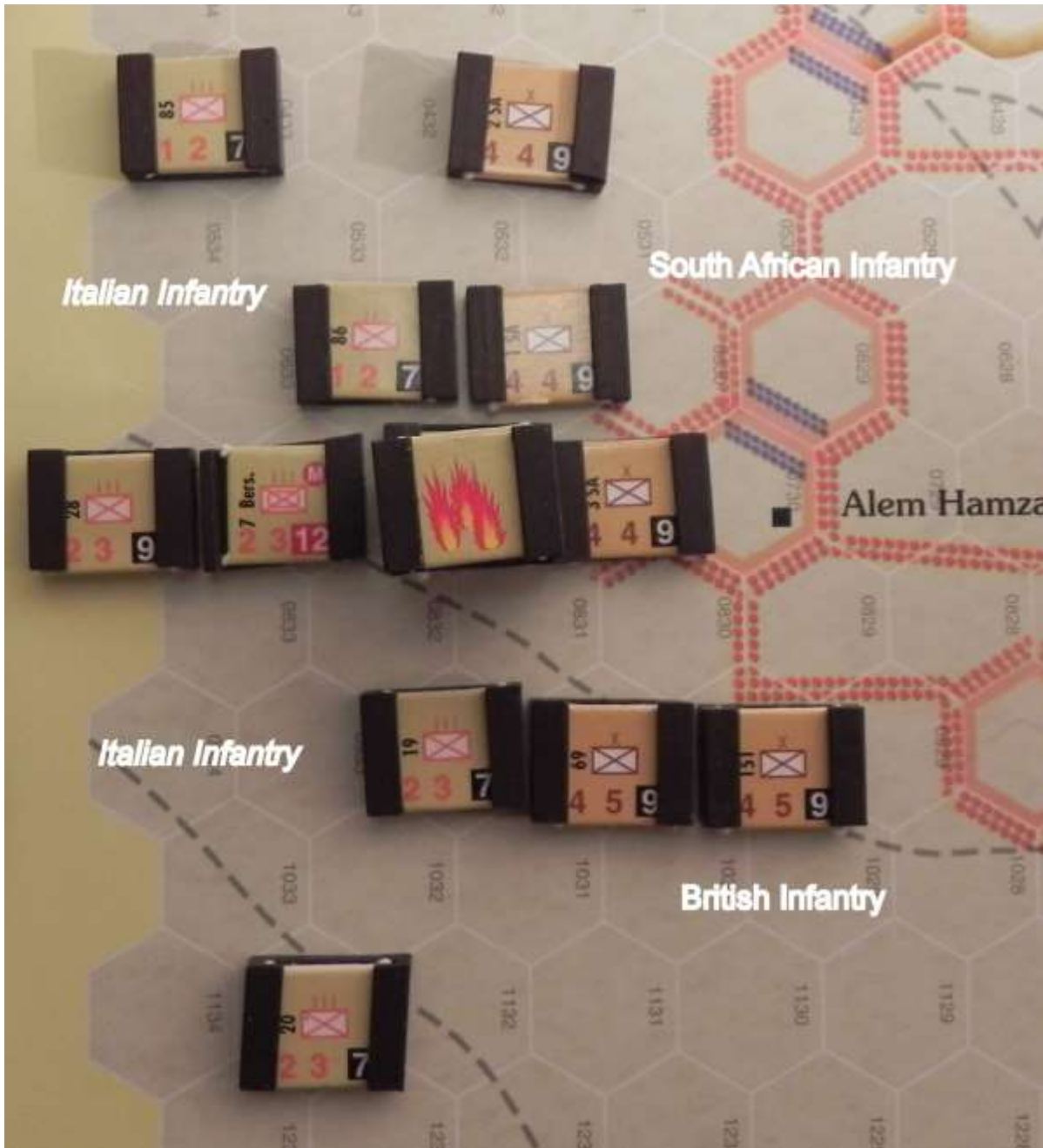
5th Panzer crosses the ridge east of the El Adem Box as it races for the open flank and the route to Tobruk. It is preceded by elements of *104th* and *200th Infantry*. The depleted *33rd recce* infiltrates between *9th Lancers* and the El Adem Box to isolate that unit while *8th Panzer* and *361st Infantry* hit it from the south. The other German and Italian units pull back from the British armor in order to screen the flank movement of the panzers. One brigade of *Ariete* follows in the panzers' wake, while the other helps with security duties.



Turn 4 German

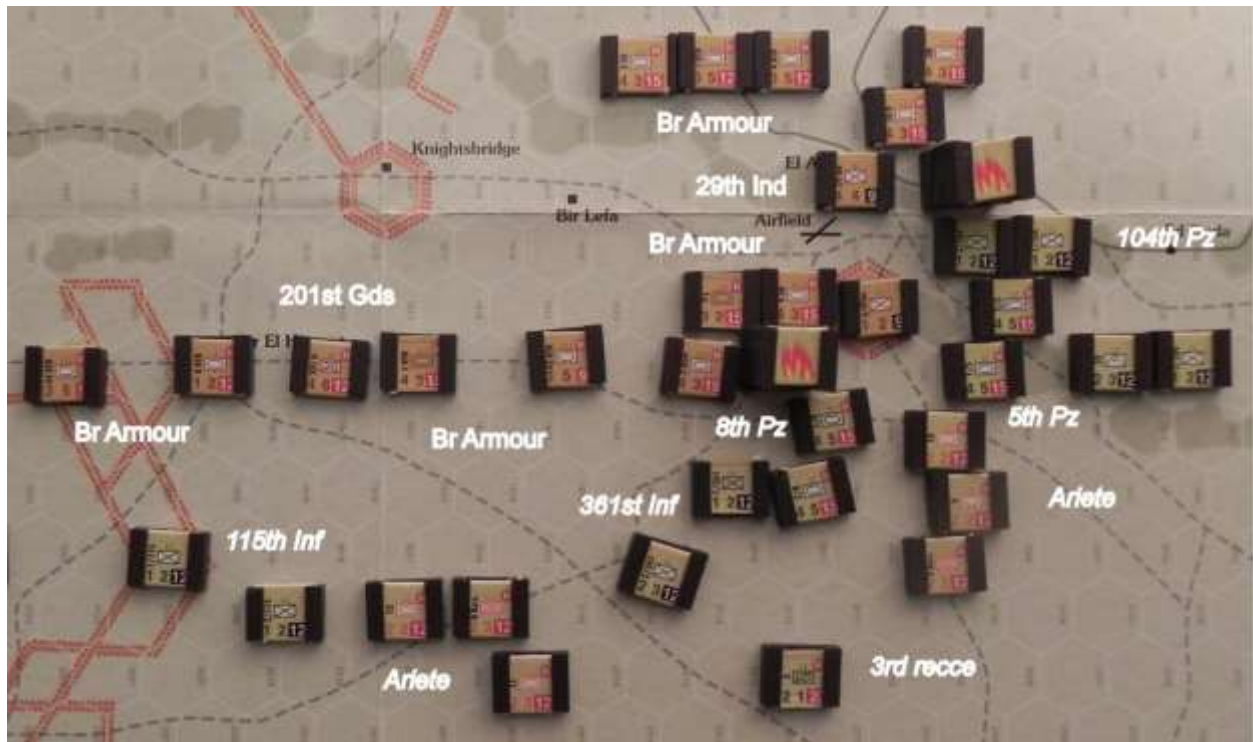
The only combat is the attack on *9th Lancers*, and both sides apply their full load of fire support. It is resolved on the +7 column, and the British unit is depleted for lack of a retreat route.

In a completely ahistorical display of initiative, the British infantry cross the minefields and launch an attack on the Italian units protecting the western supply hex. The South Africans slam into the Italian *15th Infantry*. The British *69th* and *151st Infantry* move in support, while *150th Infantry* moves to block the German units from moving further on the other side of the minefields.



Turn 4 British West

In the armor battle, the British units pull back north in order to free up units to head off the German flanking move. 10th Hussars joins 29th Indian in attacking *190th antitank*, adjacent to the supply hex. 9th Lancers 4th SH, and 2nd RGH gang up on *33rd recce*.



British Turn 4 East

The South Africans' attack on the Italians results in an exchange, reducing both 3rd South African and 27th Infantry.

The attack on 190 antitank is only a +3, and in rough terrain. The result is no effect.

The attack on 33rd recce is a +7 and results in an exchange. The German unit is destroyed, but 4th SH is depleted.

Turn 5

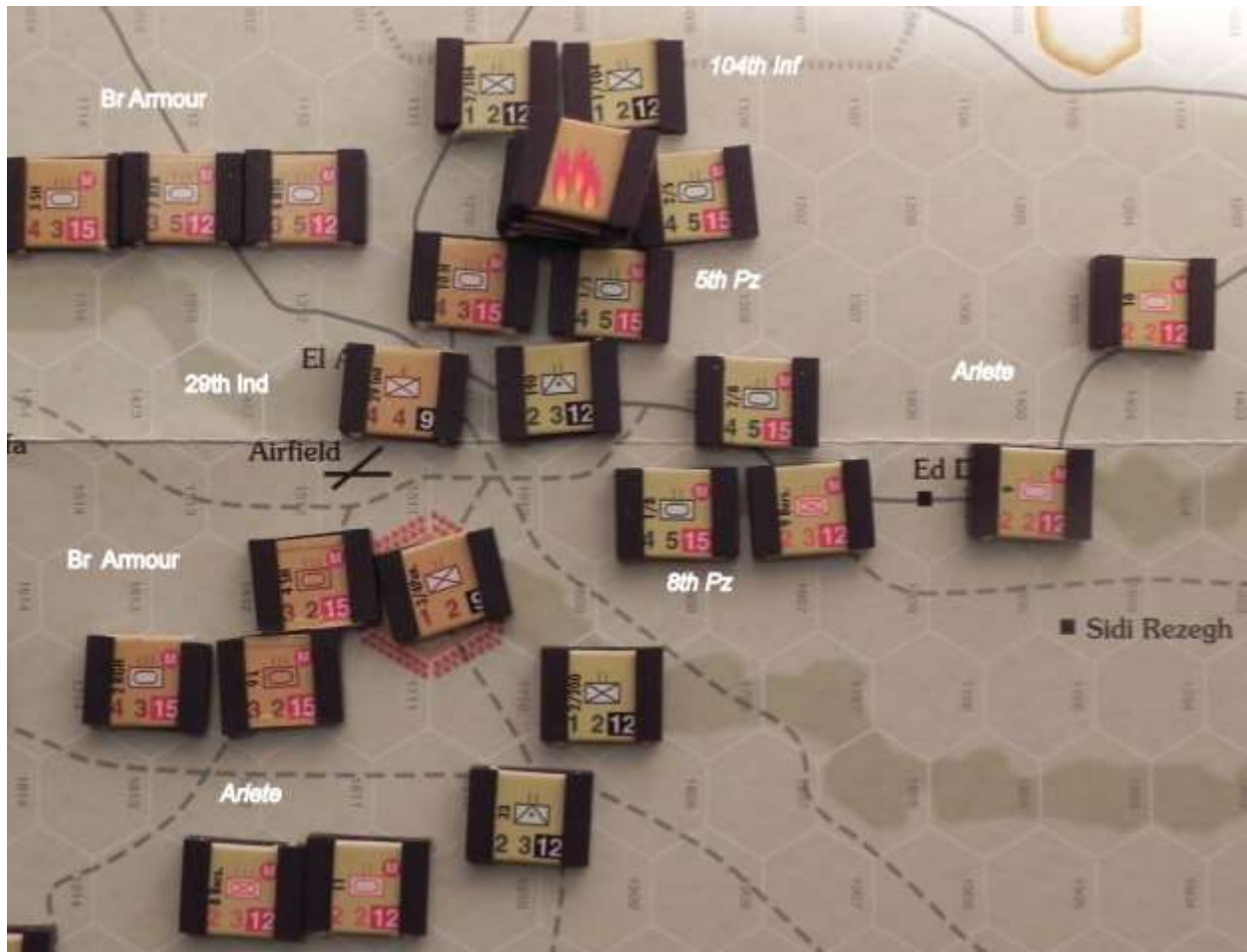
(I forgot to take a picture of the map at the beginning of this turn.)

104th Infantry and 5th Panzer continue to race around the British flank, hitting OB Armour. 8th Panzer remains unengaged, crossing the rough terrain east of El Adem. One brigade of Ariete takes off in the direction of the eastern supply hex. Most of the rest of the German infantry is now holding a screen from the minefields all the way to El Adem.

Three of the German infantry units that had crossed the minefield now cross right back so that they can go to the aid of the Italians defending their supply hex. Those units can't do a lot, since they don't have much offensive power. The Italians pull out the depleted 27th Infantry and replace it with the fresh 28th. They also move up their one mobile unit, 7th Bersaglieri, to give the impression they're going to attack 3rd South African.

The Germans bombard 3rd South African and OB Armour with 2 support markers each. The British respond with one each as counterbattery fire. Both bombardments are ineffective.

The Germans then assault OB Armour with *5th Panzer* and *104th Infantry*. Both sides use two support markers. The result is an exchange, eliminating *2/104 Infantry* and depleting the British armour.



Turn 5 German

The British continue their drive against the German supply hex. 1st South African along with 69th and 151st Infantry attack *7th Bersaglieri*, while 2nd and 3rd South African attack *68th Infantry*. To the south, 150th Infantry moves back into one of the fortifications to interfere with the German infantry's relief column.



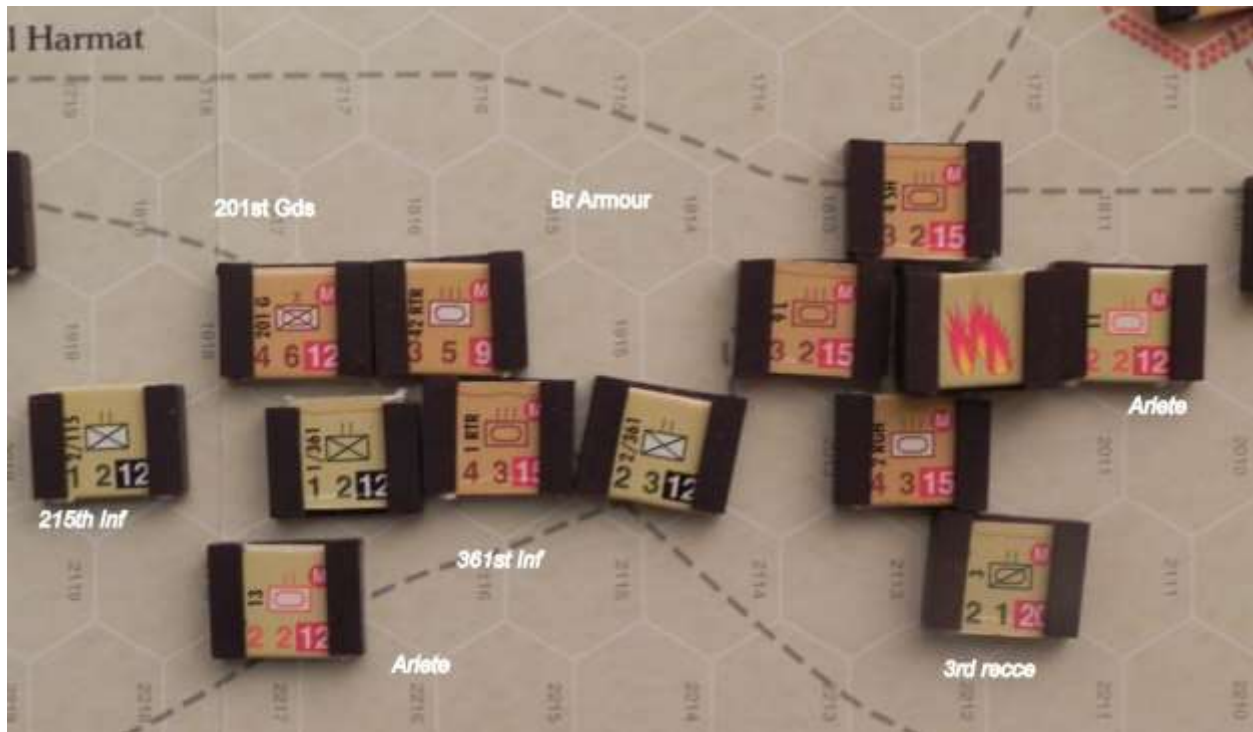
Turn 5 British West

Near Tobruk, British armour runs around the German advance to attack *1/104 Infantry* while two more armoured battalions take a crack at weakening *1/5 Panzer*.



Turn 5 British East

In the central area, the British decide to make use of their advantage in strong units. They send three armour battalions each against *8th Bersaglieri* and *1/361 Infantry*.



Turn 5 British Central

The British had used up most of their fire support on defense. They allocate one each to the attacks on *7th Bersaglieri* and *1/5 Panzer*. The Germans reserved 5 markers for defense, but they still don't have enough to cover all the battles. *1/361 Infantry* has to do without.

1/104th is defended by a handy antitank ditch. That and the artillery support cause an (A) result, which depletes *3SH Armour*.

The attack on *1/5 Panzer* is an exchange, which weakens one of the vital panzer units, albeit at the price of depleting *10th Hussars*.

The attack on *8th Bersaglieri* has no effect.

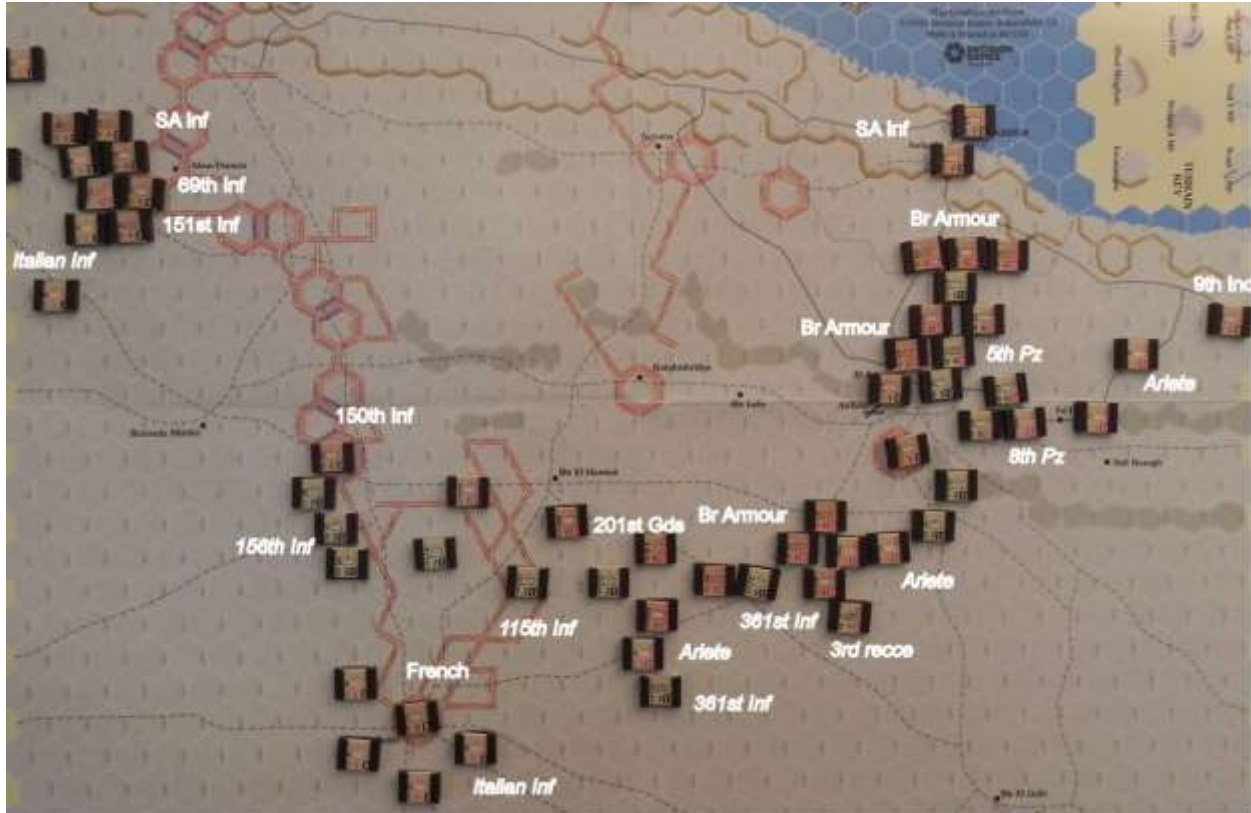
The attack on *1/361st Infantry* results in a D3. The Germans have room to retreat. *42nd RTR* advances until it comes into contact with the Italian *13th Armor*.

The attack on *7th Bersaglieri* is an exchange, depleting it and *69th Infantry*.

The attack on *86th Infantry* is also an exchange, eliminating the Italian unit and depleting *2nd South African*.

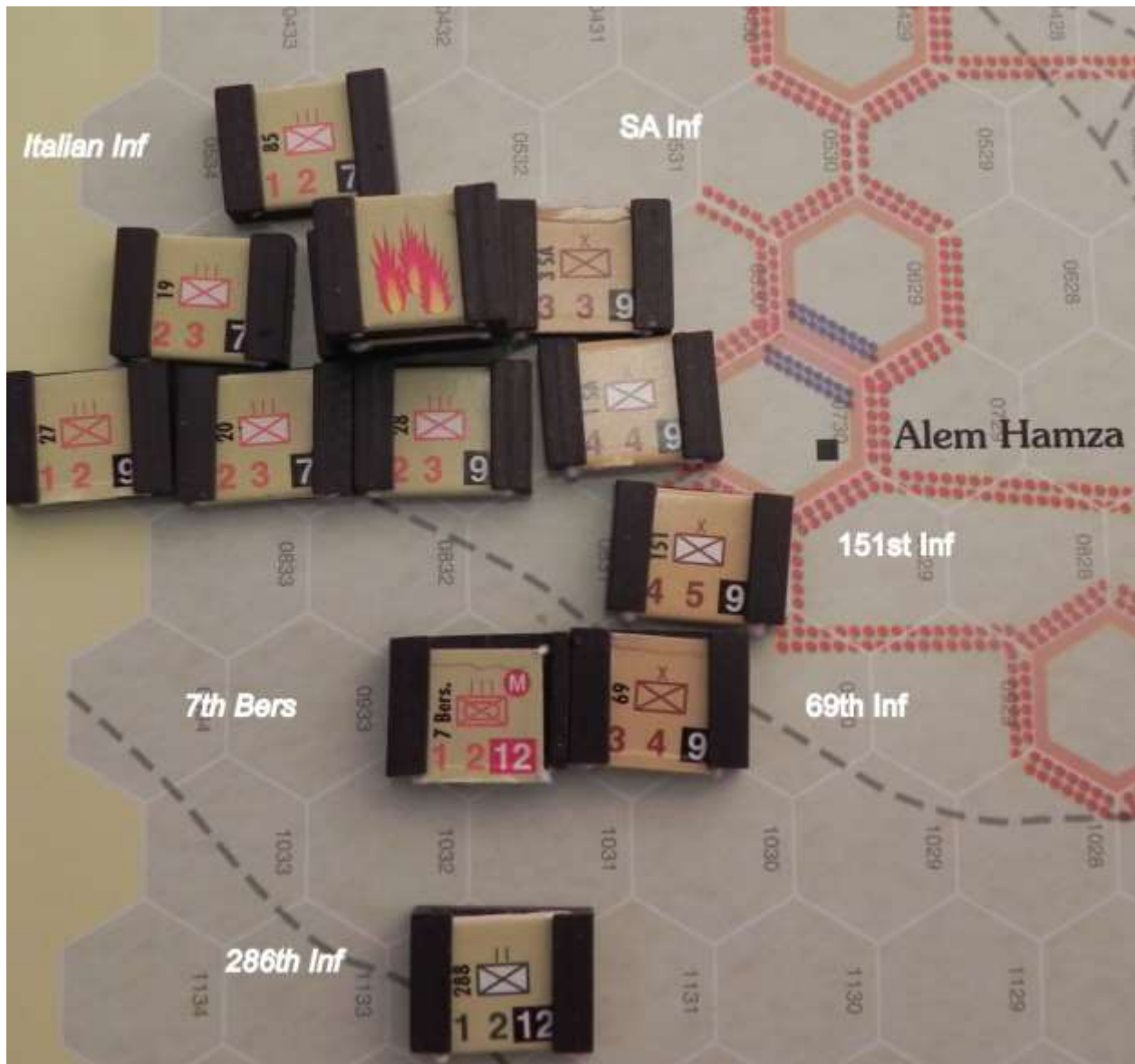
Turn 6

The British get two reinforcements this turn: *10th Indian* and *3rd RTR*.



Turn 6 Start

The German relief column starts to make contact with the Italians defending the supply hex. The Italians scrape together enough units for a decent attack on 2nd South African.



Turn 6 German West

Southwest of El Adem, the Germans and Italians are also scrambling to contain the British armour. They mount an attack against 2 RGH.

8th Panzer slips between the El Adem box and the supply hex, in order to mount an attack on the supplies, supported by *190th antitank*. On the east map edge, elements of *Ariete* attack 9th Indian, which is holding the other supply hex. In the neighborhood of Tobruk, *5th Panzer* and *1/104 Infantry* attack OB Armour.

The Germans use two fire support markers in each combat, which leaves them with only one for defense. The British apply two each to the defense of the supply hexes but reserve the remaining two for their player turn.



Turn 6 German East

The Italians wind up trading the weak *85th Infantry* for the destruction of 2nd South African.

2 RGH, trapped by enemy ZoCs, loses a step with no loss to the Axis.

The attack on the El Adem supply hex results in an exchange, reducing 29th Indian and *190th antitank*.

In the attack on the eastern supply hex, 29th Indian loses a step with no loss to the Italians.

Near Tobruk, OB Armour is forced to retreat, pursued by the panzers.

The British reinforcements are supposed to be placed in the eastern supply hex. Under the rules, they are placed at the end of the movement phase and cannot move until the next turn. Thus, they cannot be overstacked. 29th Indian moves out of the hex in order allow 3rd RTR to be placed. Together, they attack *Ariete's 9th armor*.

In the El Adem area, the British seize on the opportunity to hurt *1/8 Panzer*, which has wedged itself between British units in order to get at the supply hex. The British pull armour from their

southern counterattack in order to accomplish that. They also attack *190th antitank* with 10th Hussars and 7 RTR in an effort to completely surround both units of *8th Panzer*. The unengaged 3rd SH goes into reserve so that it can possibly move in the mobile phase.

Although some of the oomph has gone out of the southern counterattack, 1st and 42nd RTR surround and attack *1/361 Infantry*.

Over to the west, 1st South African plus 69th and 151th Infantry attack *7 Bersaglieri*. 44th RTR crosses the minefield and trails after the German relief column, to add some counter-relief to the battle.

The British allocate their remaining fire support to the battle for the eastern supply point and the attack on *1/8 panzer*. The Germans use their one marker to defend the panzers.

The battle for the eastern supply hex is another exchange, reducing the Italian armor and eliminating 29th Indian.

190th antitank succumbs in an exchange that reduces 7th RTR.

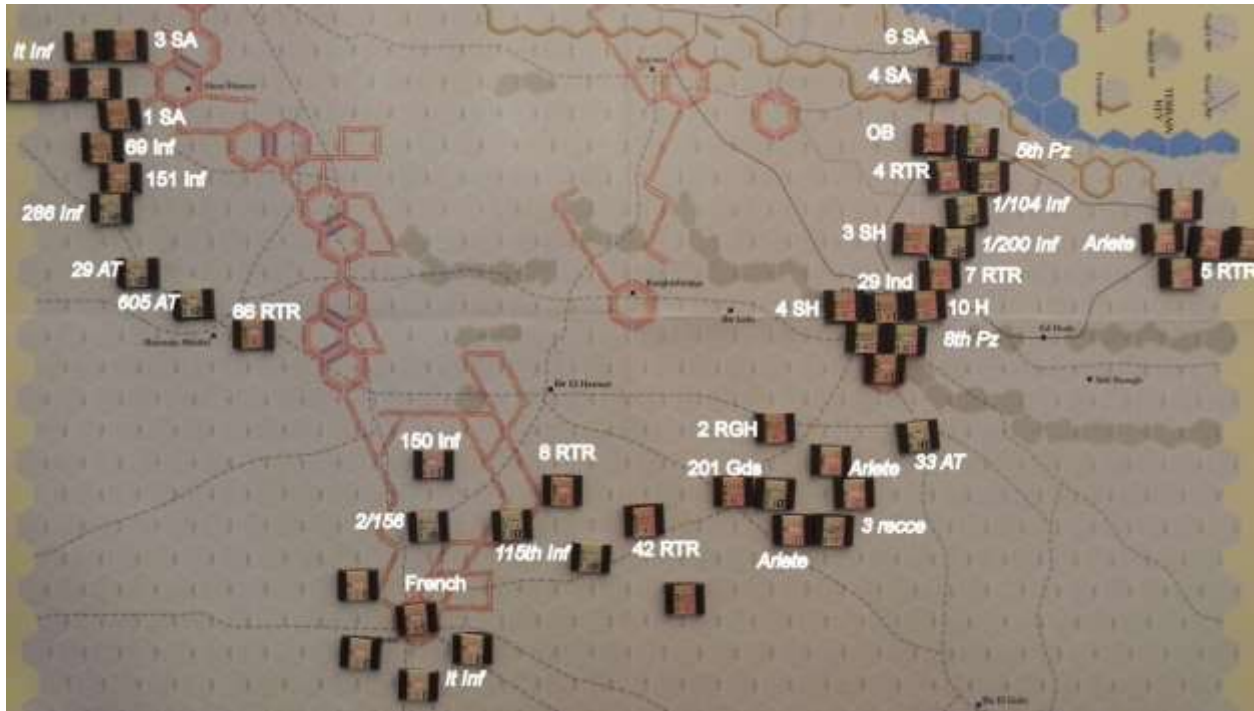
The attack on *1/8 Panzer* is also an exchange. 9th Lancers is eliminated.

This is the turn for exchanges. 42nd RTR takes a loss while eliminating *1/361 Infantry*.

To end the turn, *7th Bersaglieri* is lost, and 1st South African takes a step loss.

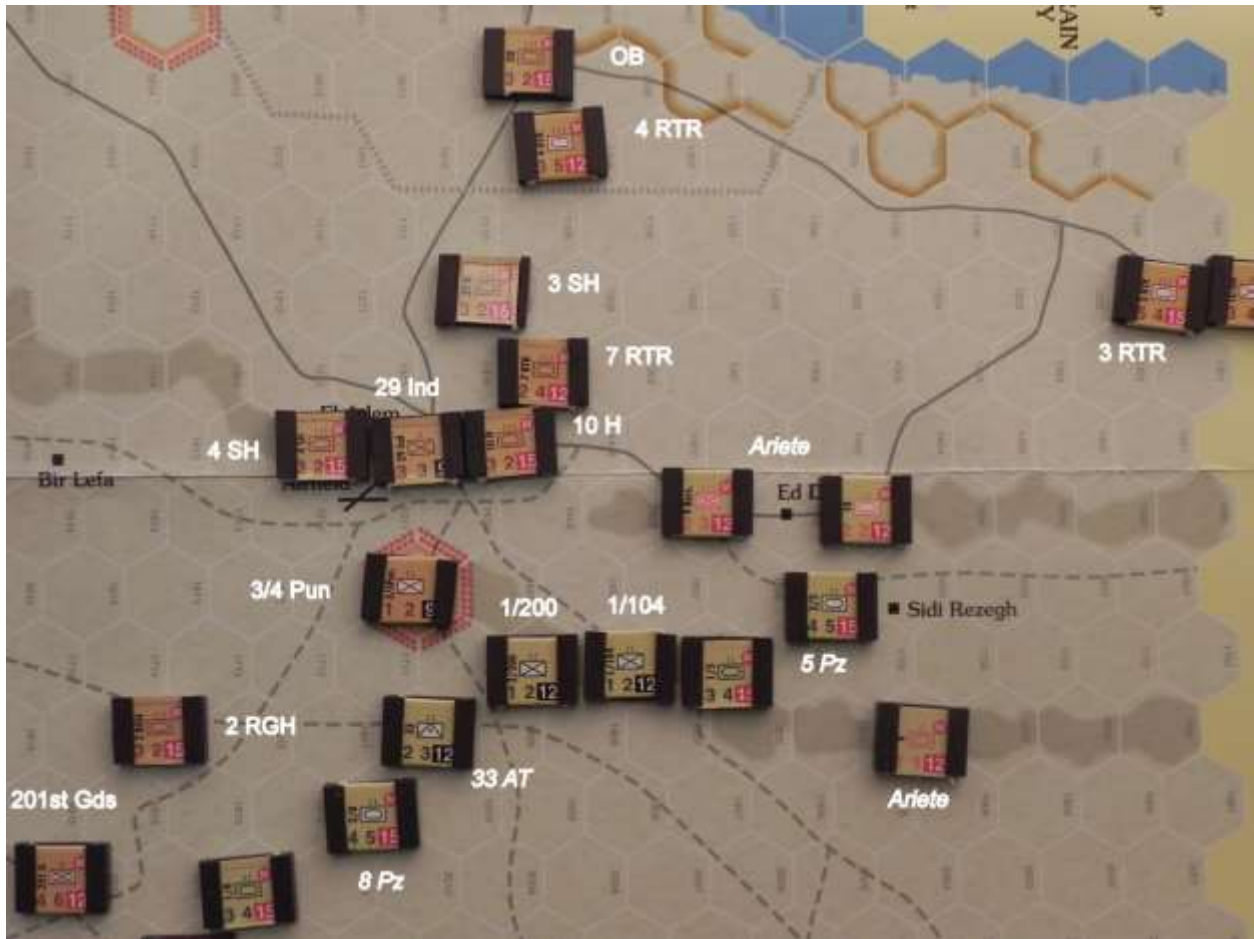
Turn 7

The German effort is starting to fragment. *2nd Panzer*, plus remaining elements of *104th* and *200th Infantry*, is near the escarpments guarding Tobruk. *8th Panzer* is stuck between the El Adem Box and the units defending the supply point. Half of *Ariete* is outside the eastern supply point, where it faces little prospect of success against 3rd RTR. The other half of *Ariete* and an assortment of German infantry are having increasing difficulty containing the British counterattack towards the southern supply point. Much of the Italian infantry is masking the French at Bir Hacheim. The rest is in a slugging match with British infantry around the western supply point.



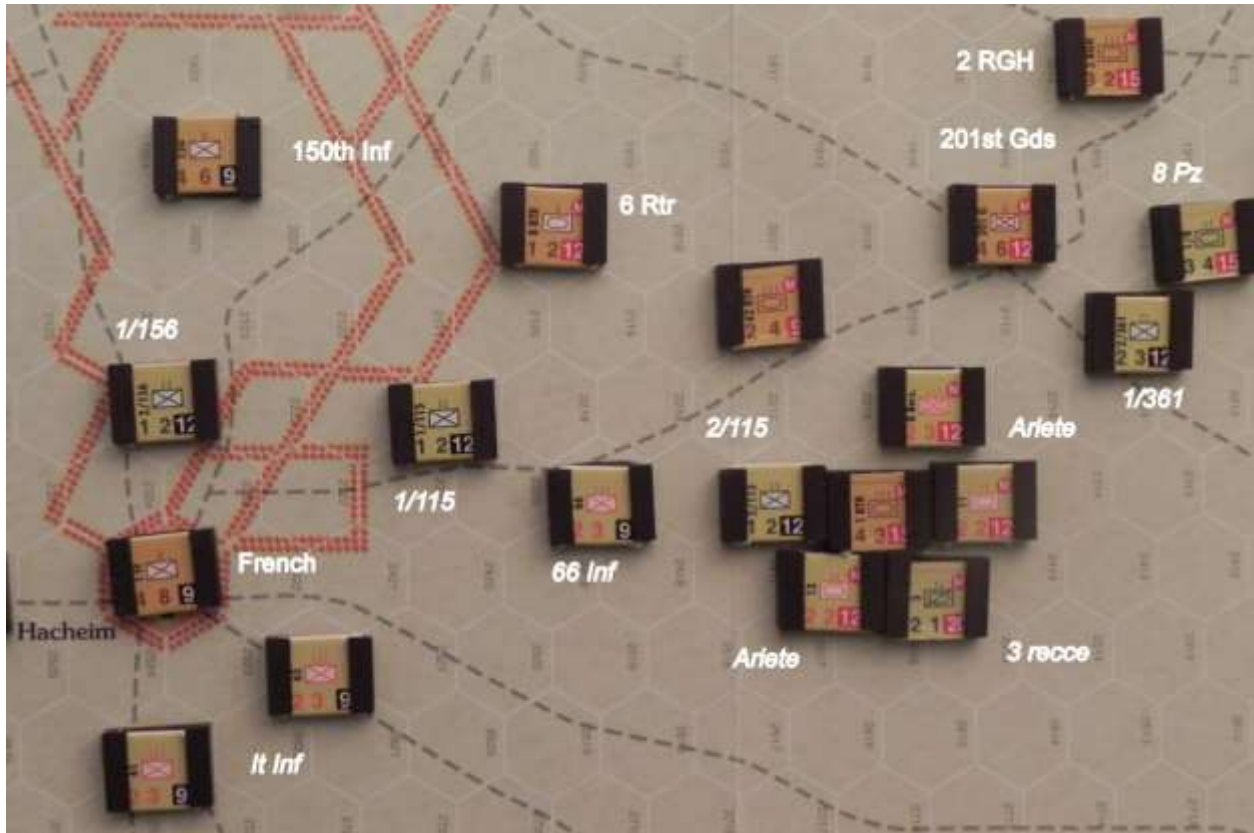
Turn 7 Start

Recon centration is in order. The part of *Ariete* by the eastern supply point pulls back to the rough terrain around El Duda. *5th Panzer* retires behind them, assembling a bit southeast of the El Adem Box. *8th Panzer* infiltrates past both sides of the box and reassembles southwest of it.



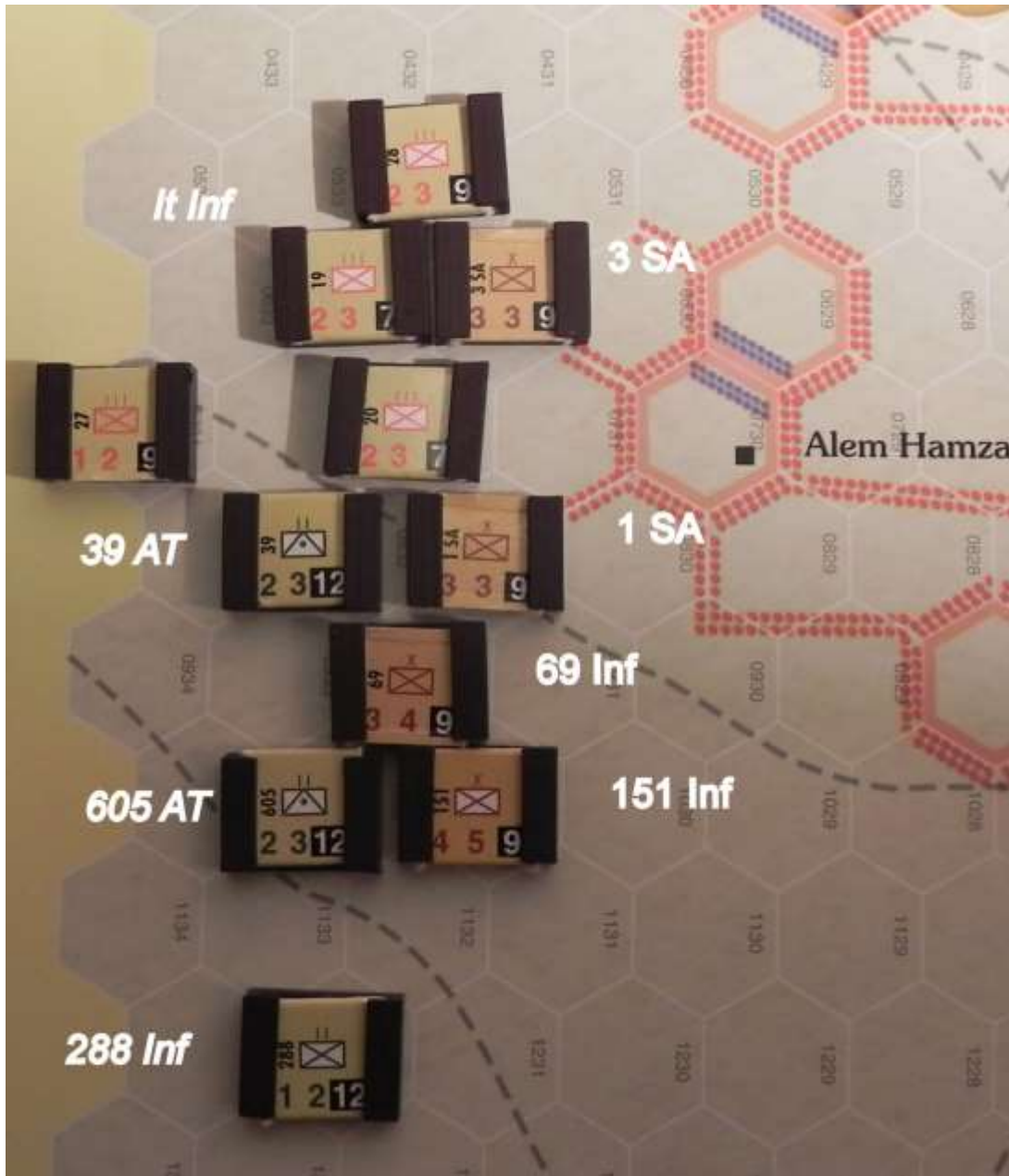
Turn 7 German East

The other half of *Ariete*, *2/115 Infantry*, and *3rd recce* surround and attack 3rd RTR. The Italians thin out the screen around Bir Hacheim so that *66th Infantry* can help hold the line against the British thrust.



Turn 7 German Central

In the west, the Italian *19th*, *20th*, and *28th Infantry* attack 3rd South African, while the newly-arrived Germans take over the defense of the southern flank.



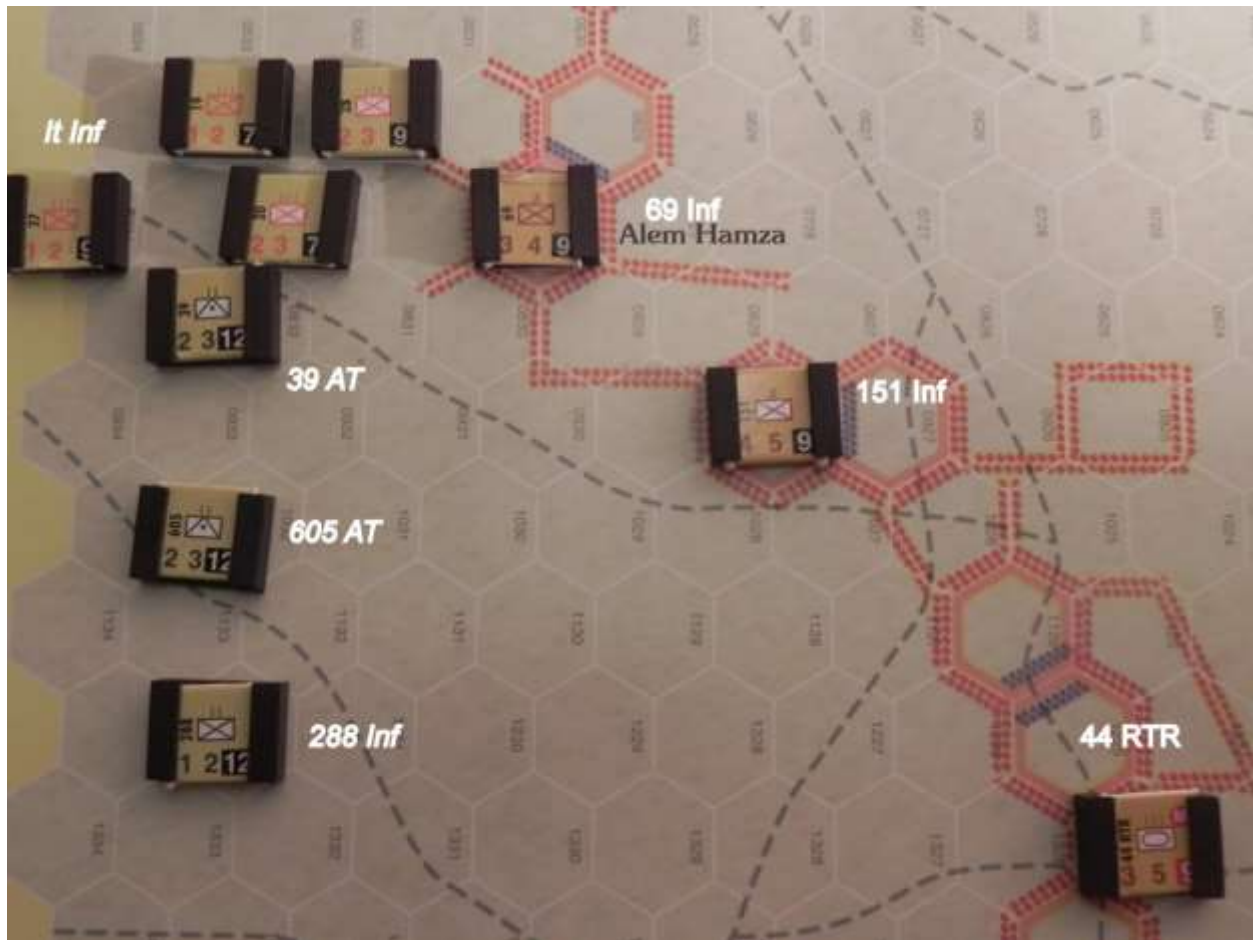
Turn 7 German West

The Germans risk two fire support markers on a bombardment of 1st South African. They get lucky with an exchange result. The already depleted unit is eliminated.

Both sides allocate two fire support markers to the attack on 3rd South African. The result is another exchange. *19th Infantry* is reduced, but 3rd South African is eliminated. These losses knock out a major prop from the British drive.

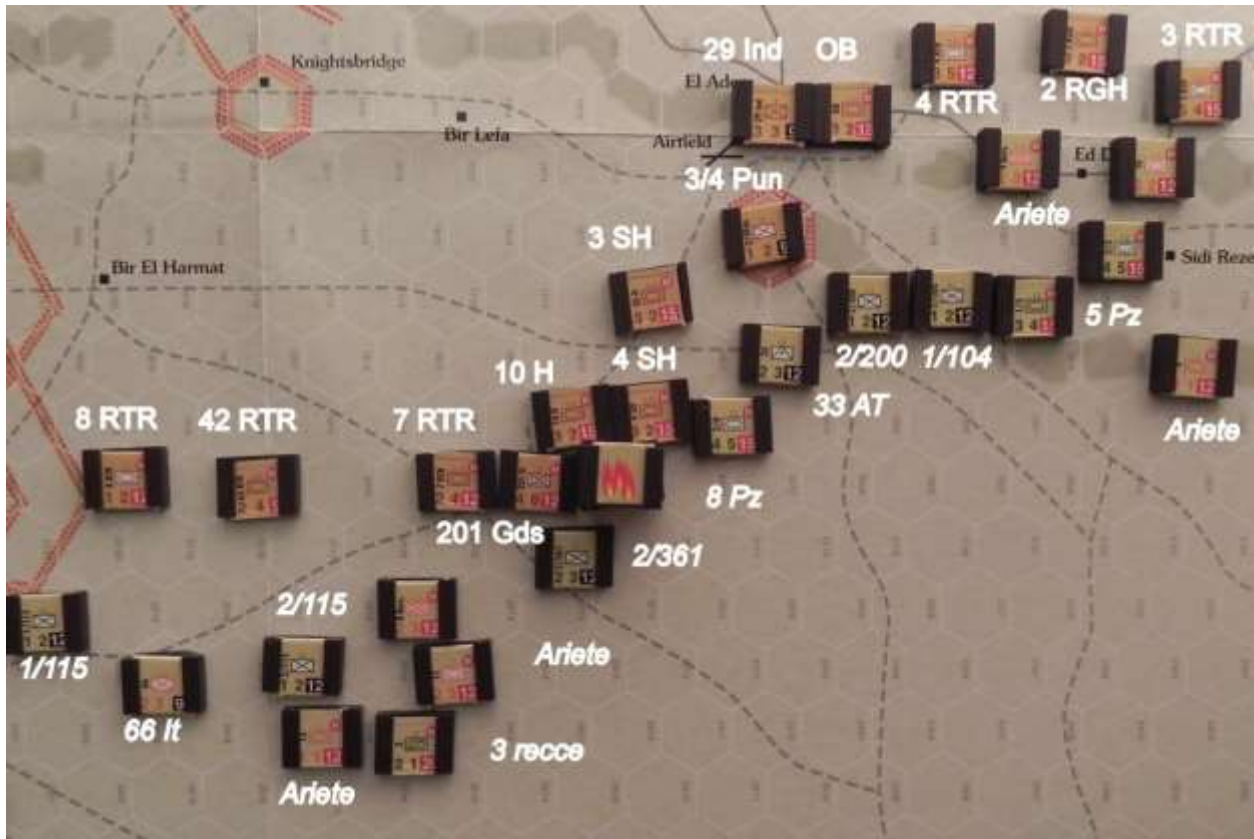
The attack on 3rd RTR also gets full support on both sides, and also causes an exchange. 3rd RTR is eliminated, and the Italian *13th Armor* is reduced.

The British have seen the oomph go out of both of their attempts to take the German supply points. In the west, 69th and 151st Infantry, and the late-arriving 44th RTR, all withdraw behind the minefields.



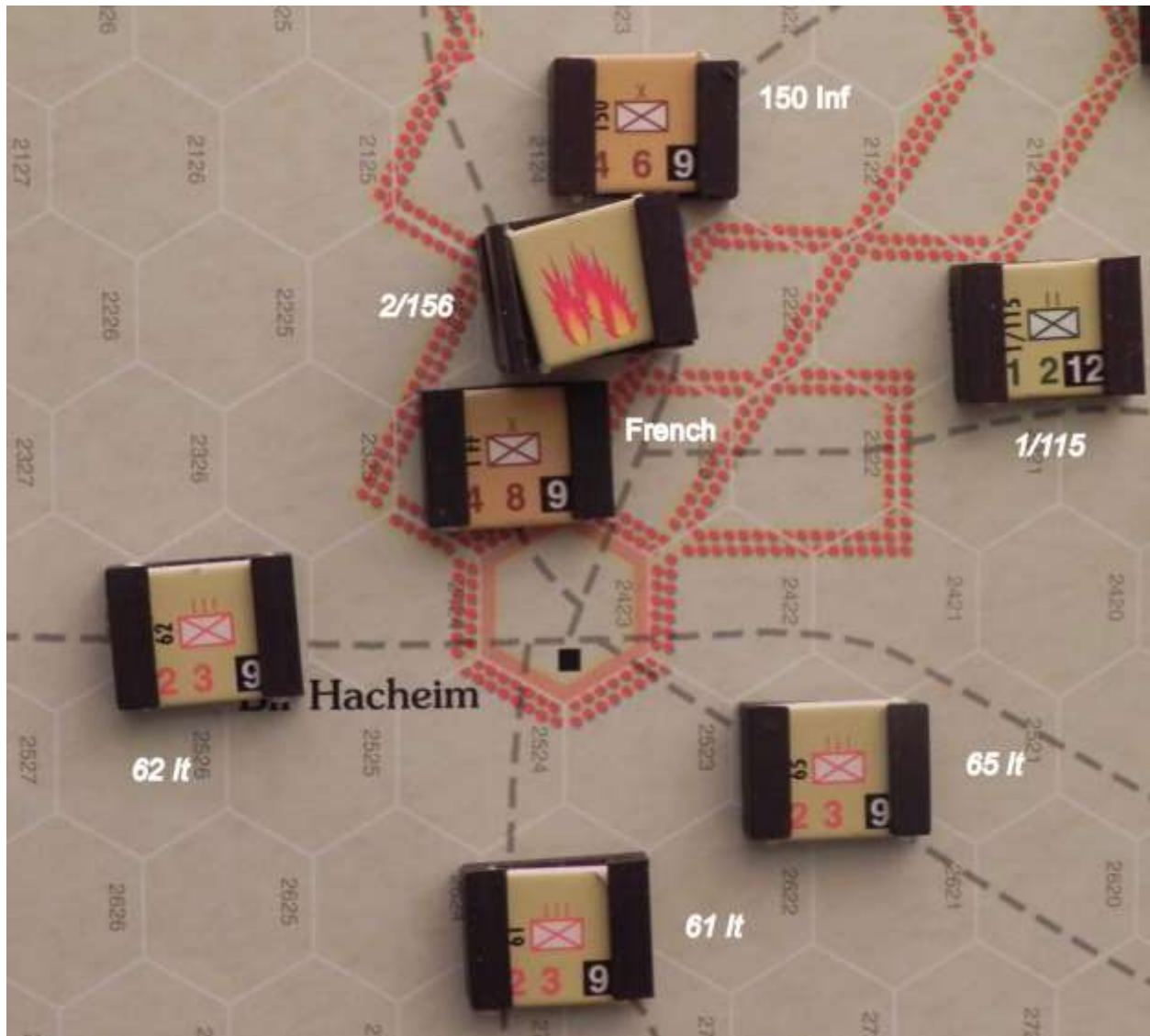
Turn 7 British West

On the positive side, the British have defended their own supply hexes and fended off the German attempt to bounce Tobruk. Now the problem is to reduce the *panzers* to the point where they can't try it again. The British have a lot of armour units left, but most of them are on their reduced sides. They place the ones with the best defensive strengths opposite the Italians at El Duda, since that is the shortest route to Tobruk. 201st Guards, 10th Hussars, and 4th SH attack the depleted *I/8 Panzer* southwest of El Adem.



Turn 7 British East

The French brigade in Bir Hacheim sorties to the northwest and joins 150th Infantry in a sandwich attack on 2/156 Infantry, which is caught between the minefields in the triangle.

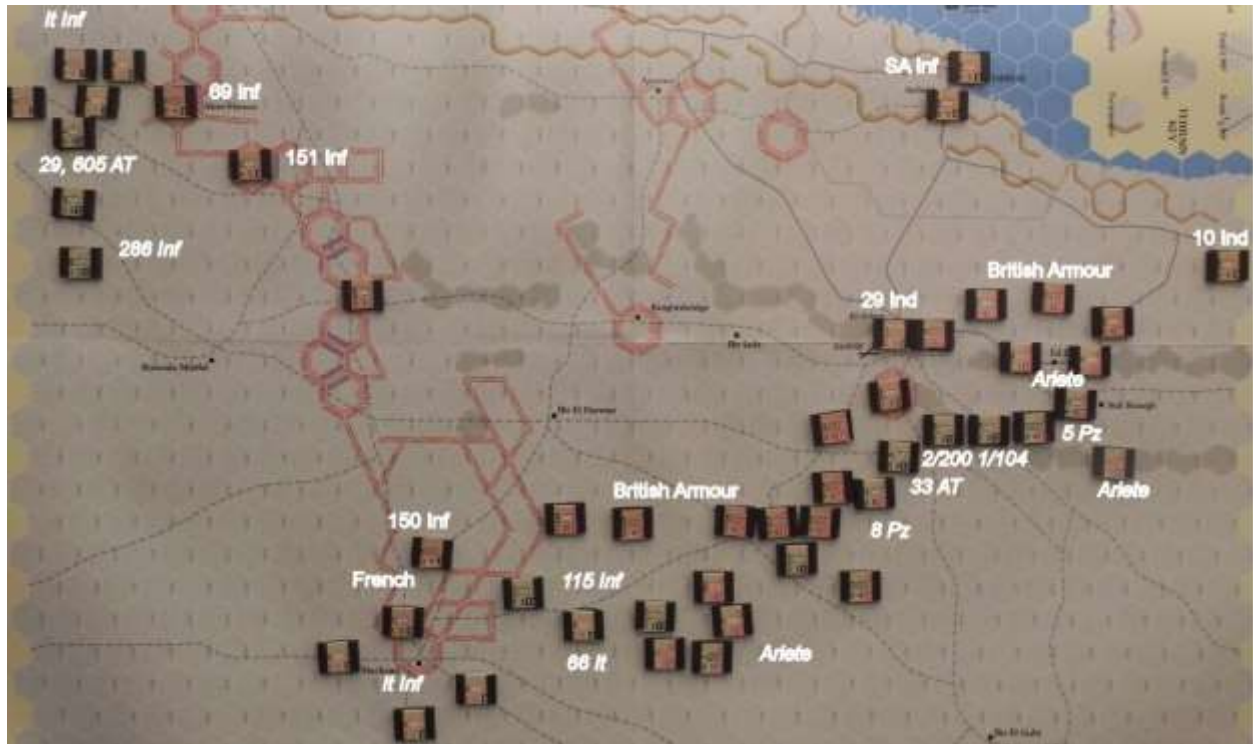


Turn 7 French

The British allocate all their remaining support to the attack on *1/8 Panzer*, and the Germans match them. The result is D2, putting a dent in the German line but not harming the *panzers*.

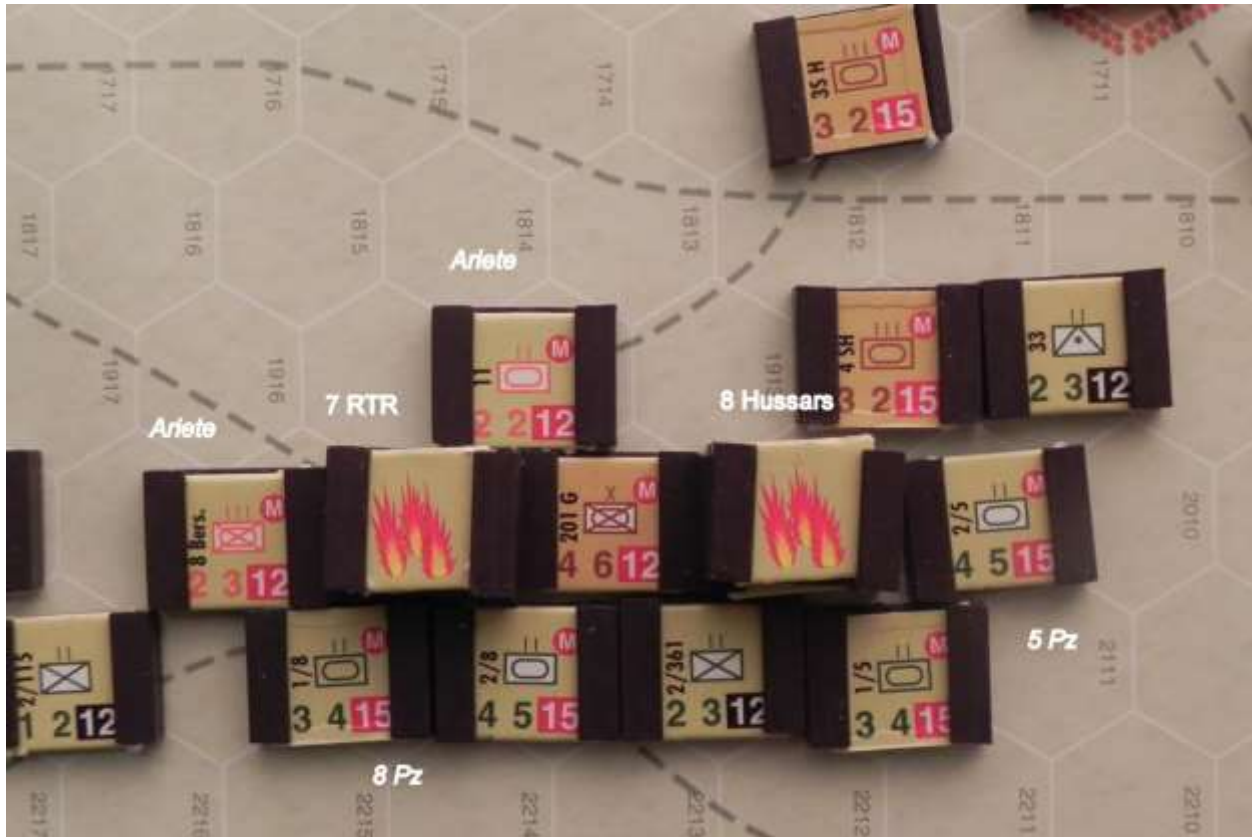
Without support, the British and French infantry have to attack in the face of German firepower. However, it's still two brigades attacking one battalion. The result is an exchange, reducing 150th Infantry and eliminating the German unit. This does mean that the reduced British unit will now be free to redeploy to either the west or east.

Turn 8



Turn 8 Start

The Germans decide to use this turn to eliminate some of those depleted British armour battalions. The *Ariete* units to the east fall back to the rough terrain south of Sidi Rezegh in order to shorten the line. The compatriot *11th armor* slips around the units that had attacked *1/8 Panzer* last turn in order to cut off their retreat. Then *8th Panzer* goes after *7th RTR* while *5th Panzer* attacks *10th Hussars*.



Turn 8 German

The units screening Bir Hacheim close in around the fortress. They won't be able to enter it before the French can infiltrate back in, but they will make another sortie more difficult. The units around the western supply point establish another cordon and await developments.

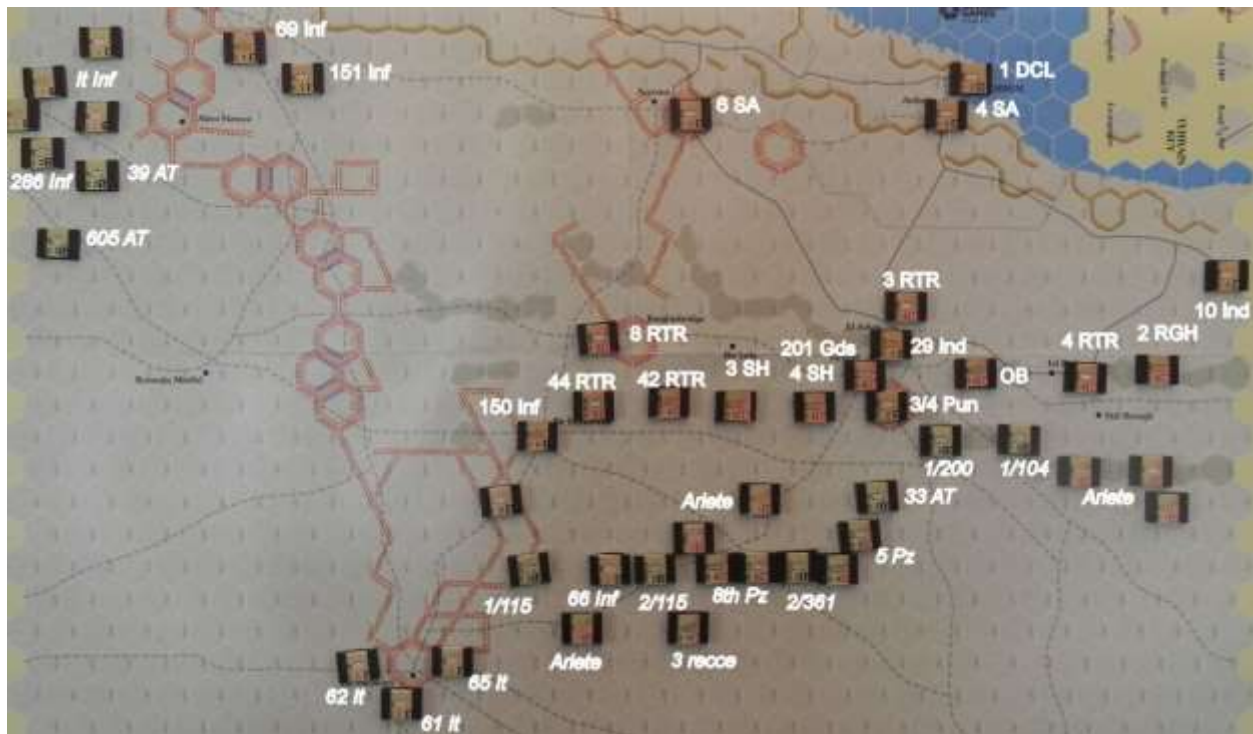
Before the assaults go in, the Germans bombard 3rd SH and 4th SH with two markers each. The British allocate one marker to each of those as counterbattery fire, reducing the differential to 0 in each case. The bombardments have no effect (except inducing the British to use up their scarce firepower).

Both sides allocate two markers to the ground combats. The attack on 10th Hussars goes in at +6, and the result is D2. The unit cannot retreat and is eliminated. The attack on 7th RTR is a +5, and the result is Ex. The British unit is eliminated, and 11th armor is reduced.

The British are out of fire support markers, but the Germans aren't. That means they must plan on have six more defense strength points applied to any attack they make. They come to the conclusion that losing a step or two each turn defending open desert isn't a profitable strategy. They pull back towards the rough terrain along the Knightsbridge-El Adem line. Likewise, glaring at the Italians through the minefields is a waste of good defensive units. The units in the west start to move back to the second minefield line. That goes for Bir Hacheim too. The French head north. No point in making an epic stand in this game.

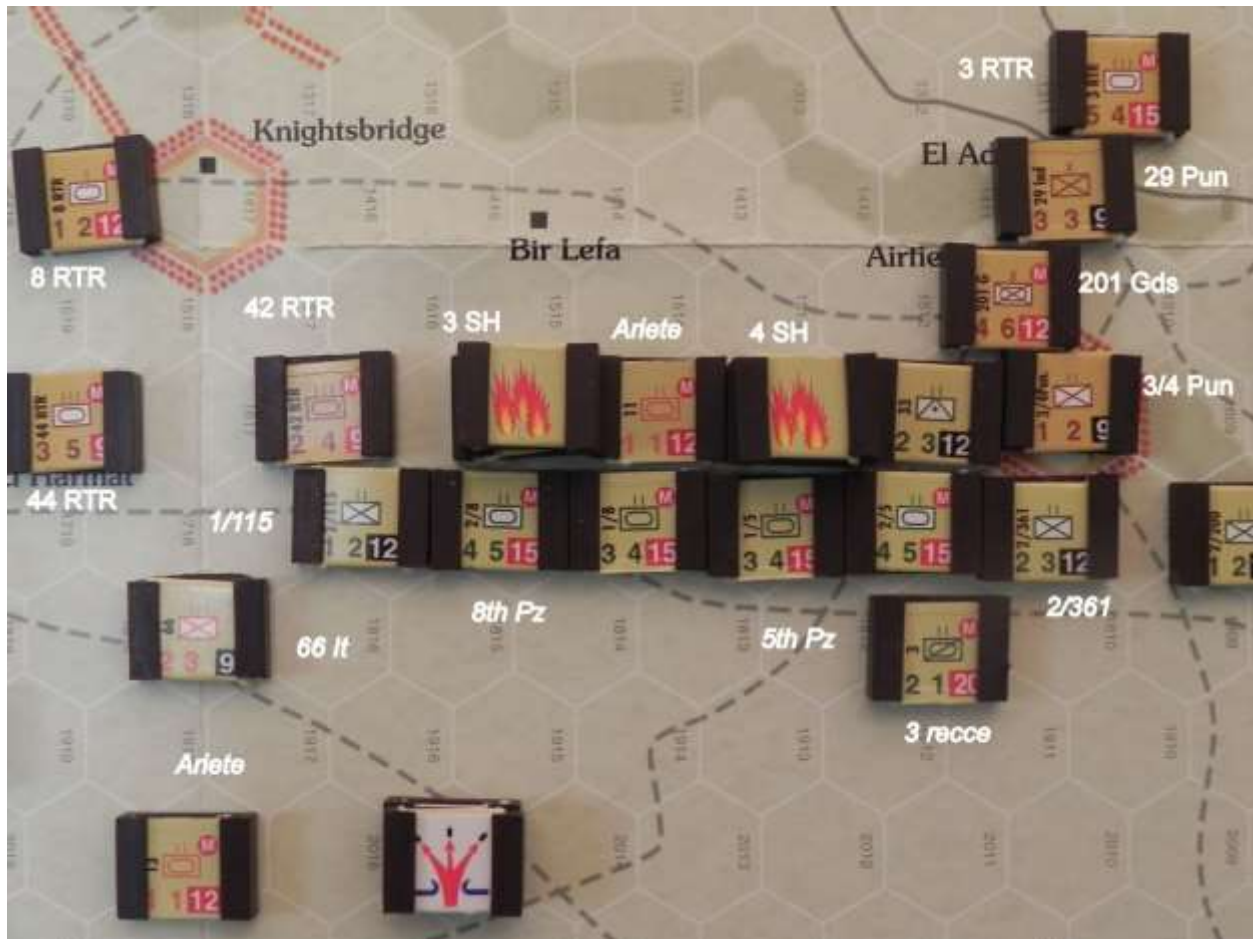
One British reinforcement, 1st CDL Infantry, arrives at Tobruk. To make room for it, 6th Tobruk leaves town and occupies the Acroma Box, which guards the coast road's path through the escarpment.

Turn 9



Turn 9 Start

The Germans pursue the retreating British, trying to pick off a few more of them before they can reach defensible terrain. *5th Panzer* goes after 4th SH, while *8th Panzer* attacks 3rd SH. *8th Bersaglieri* stays in reserve, in case an opportunity arises in the mobile phase.



Turn 9 German

In the west, a few weak Italian and German infantry units remain to cover the supply hex while the rest seek out thin spots in the minefield. To the south, the story is much the same, with the Italian infantry that was screening Bir Hacheim now bypassing that position to move northward.

The Germans bombard 8th RTR and 42nd RTR in the hopes of eliminating one of them before it can garrison the Knightsbridge box. This causes a dilemma for the British: do they support the units with counterbattery fire or preserve some of the markers for attacks in their player turn? This time, they decide not to expend the markers. It works out okay. The weaker 8th RTR suffers no effect, while 42 RTR is forced to retreat—which it was trying to do anyway.

Both ground assaults get full support from both sides. 4th SH gets a D2 result and is eliminated for lack of a retreat route. 3rd SH gets an exchange, which the Germans absorb by eliminating the Italian *11th armor*. The undepleted elements of both *panzer* regiments advance after combat. In the mobile phase *8th Bersaglieri* moves up to secure the left flank from a counterattack by the units clustered around Knightsbridge.

The loss of two units put a whacking big hole in the British line, and they have precious little to fill it with. The El Adem supply point is now on the front line, albeit partially covered by the defensive box in front of it. The British move 201st Guards, one of their strongest units, into the supply hex. Another strong unit, 3rd RTR, is placed in the rough terrain just to the west. The

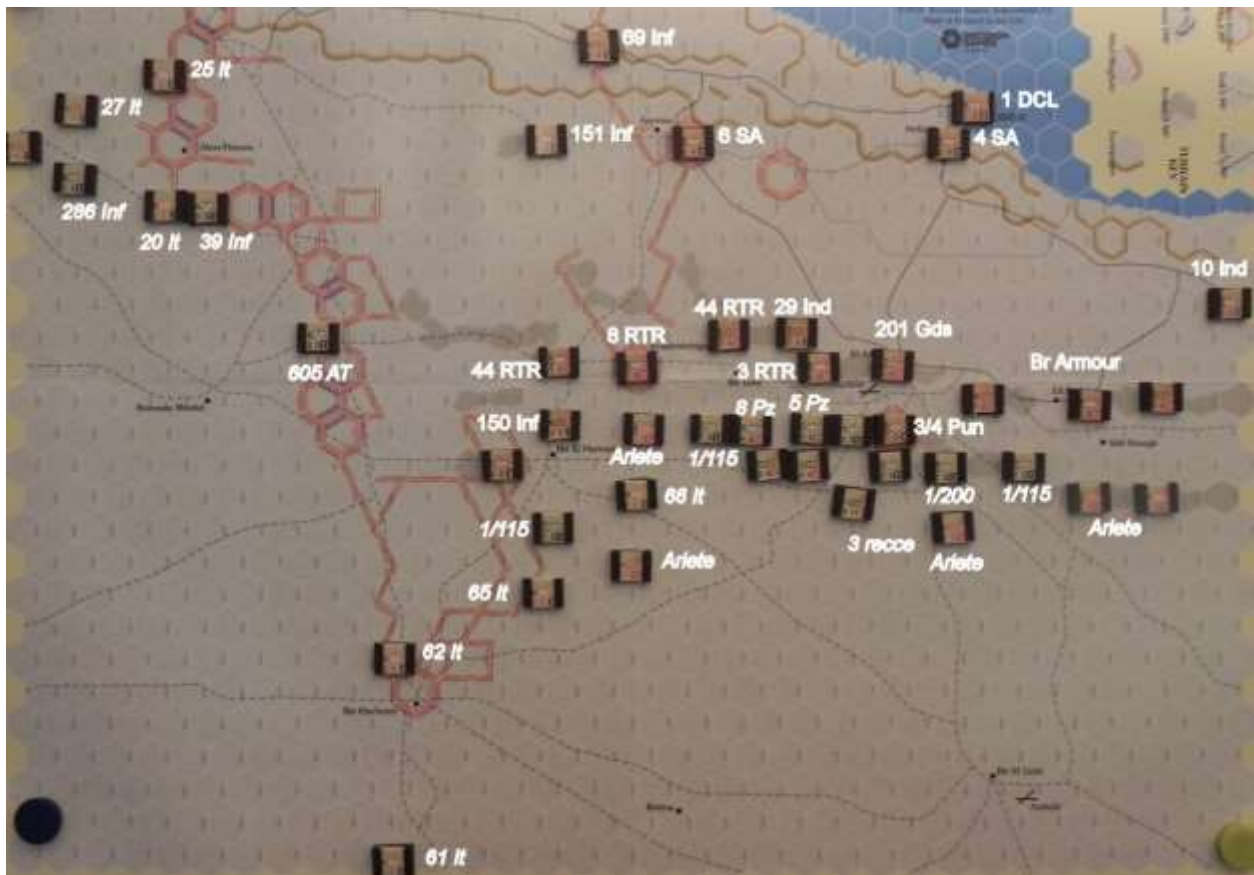
former garrison of the supply hex, 29th Indian, moves into the center of the new line, while 42th RTR provides the link between the rough terrain and the Knightsbridge box (occupied by 8th RTR). West of Knightsbridge, the French make their way north, impeded by their own minefields. 150th Infantry holds the gap between the minefields and Knightsbridge. 44th RTR is in reserve northwest of the line, where it can also react to the German infantry moving through the western minefields.

69th and 151st Infantry move east as fast as their legs will move them.

Since the British have no attacks pending, they use their fire support to bombard *13th armor*; in the hopes that exchange will eliminate that depleted Italian unit. The Germans, of course, use their full capacity for counterbattery fire. The result is no effect.

Turn 10

The British have established a good line in defensive terrain, but there are no units behind them to plug any gaps. Some of the units on the line are already depleted. The Germans have the initiative and are closing in on Tobruk. However, their superiority in fire support will be less effective against the strong British positions. They still have to be careful of bleeding off their strong units through exchanges.



Turn 10 Start

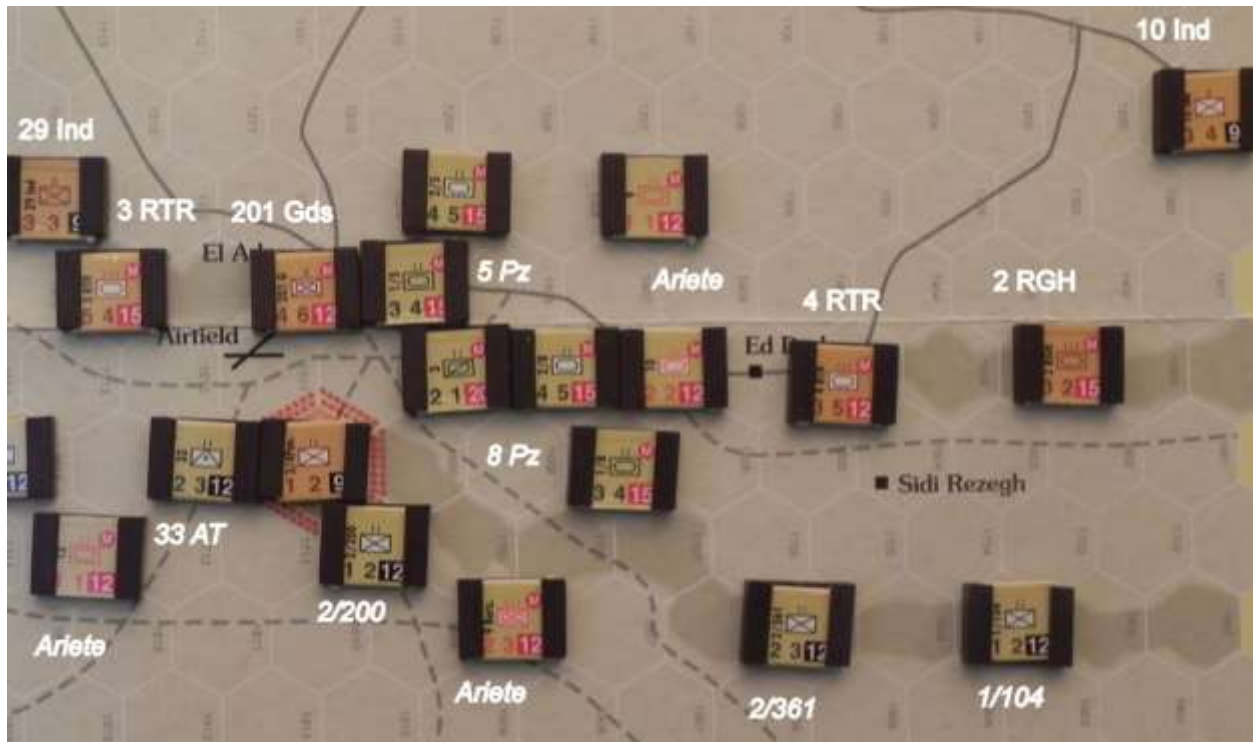
Seeking a weak spot in the British line, *8th Panzer* swings around the El Adem Box and attacks the depleted OB Armour with support from *3rd recce* and the Italian *10th armor*. *5th Panzer* and the two depleted Italian armor units (*9th* and *13th*) remain in reserve for possible action in the mobile phase. German infantry and A/T units deploy eastward in order to allow *9th Bersaglieri* to move off the defensive line, so that it might take offensive action in a later turn. Similarly, the German and Italian infantry in the Knightsbridge Box area sort themselves out, so that the Italians are holding the left flank and the Germans the center, with *8th Bersaglieri* behind the line.

Out on the western minefield, the German and Italian units cross over.

The Germans bombard 2nd RGH Armour, on the far eastern end of the British line, and 3/4 Punjab, in the El Adem Box. The British use one marker of counterbattery fire to protect El Adem but rely on the terrain to defend the armour. Neither bombardment has any effect.

Both sides give the ground combat their full support. The result is D2, which eliminates the surrounded British unit.

After the combat, *5th Panzer* and *9th armor* move through the gap. Once again, there is nothing between the Germans and the escarpment. (Although I'm not entirely convinced it's a good idea, I want to see how this mobile movement phase works.)

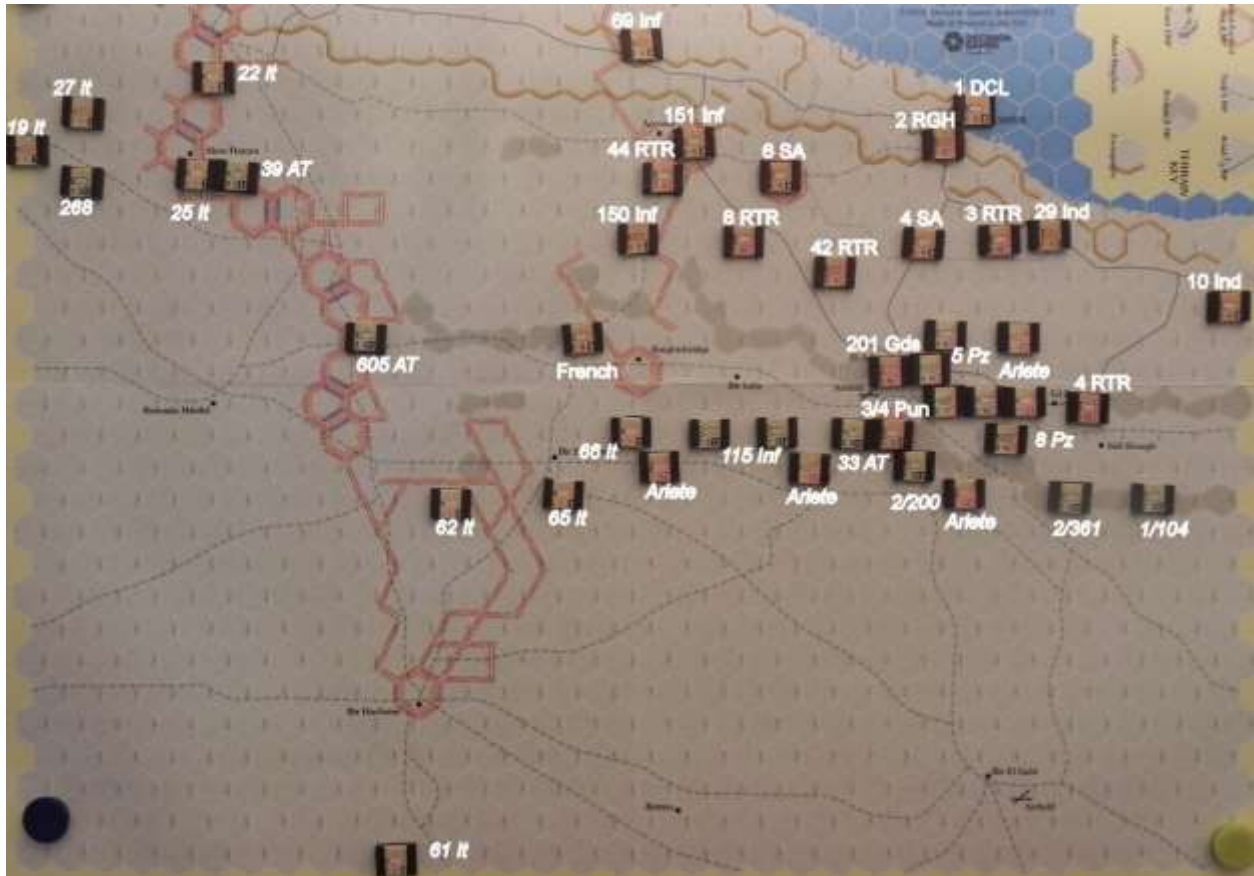


Turn 10 German

The British again find themselves with little choice but to fall back. They could scrape together enough force for a local counterattack, but those units would be dangerously exposed to being surrounded in the next turn. They begin a general movement back to the antitank ditch around

Tobruk. 2nd RGH armour occupies the Tobruk airstrip so that the stronger 4th South African can hold the point where the coast road crosses the ditch. 29th Indian occupies the other road crossing. 69th Infantry enters the minefield on the western side of the perimeter. 151st Infantry occupies the Acroma box, allowing 6th South African to occupy the box just to the east. The units that were in the Knightsbridge area straggle back as well as they can, with the French bringing up the rear. The units in the El Adem Box and the supply hexes stay put, although they will soon be behind German lines.

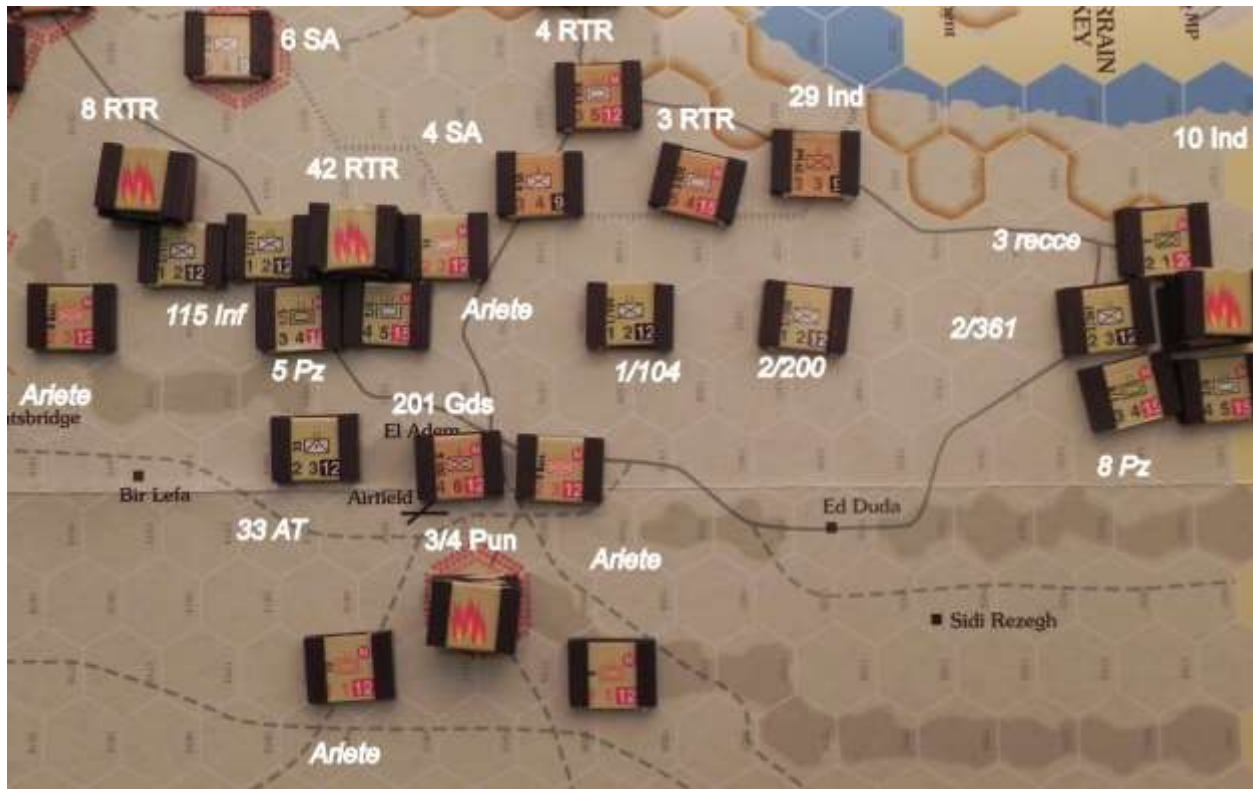
Turn 11



Turn 11 Start

The Italian and German units that crossed the minefields last turn begin streaming eastward. The Italian *62nd Infantry*, coming up from Bir Hacheim, crosses the minefield out of the triangle.

The Axis units throw a cordon around the units in the El Adem area while they try to pick off some of the retreating British units before they reach the antitank ditch. *5th Panzer* goes after 42nd RTR, while *8th Panzer* attacks 10th Indian, defending the eastern supply point. The Italian *65th* and *66th Infantry* regiments surround the Free French brigade. They aren't strong enough to attack it, but if they keep it hemmed in by ZoCs its redeployment will slow to a crawl.



Turn 11 German

The Germans bombard 3/4 Punjabi and 8th RTR in the hopes of getting a lucky exchange or at least inducing the British to expend fire markers to protect them. The British decline to take the bait—a decision they might regret, as the Germans roll up two exchanges. This means that the El Adem box is finally cleared.

British luck turns in the attack on 42nd RTR, when the Germans roll a rare A1. The British tanks live to fight another day. However, the attack on the eastern supply hex results in a D2. 10th Indian stands its ground and is depleted.

The British are due two reinforcements this turn, 8th Hussars and 9th Indian, both of which are to be placed in the eastern supply hex. 10th Indian does a ZoC-to-ZoC move to slip out of the hex so that it can be replaced by the fresh armour unit. 9th Indian will have to wait, as there is nowhere for it to deploy. The Hussars and Indians attack the depleted 3rd *recce*.

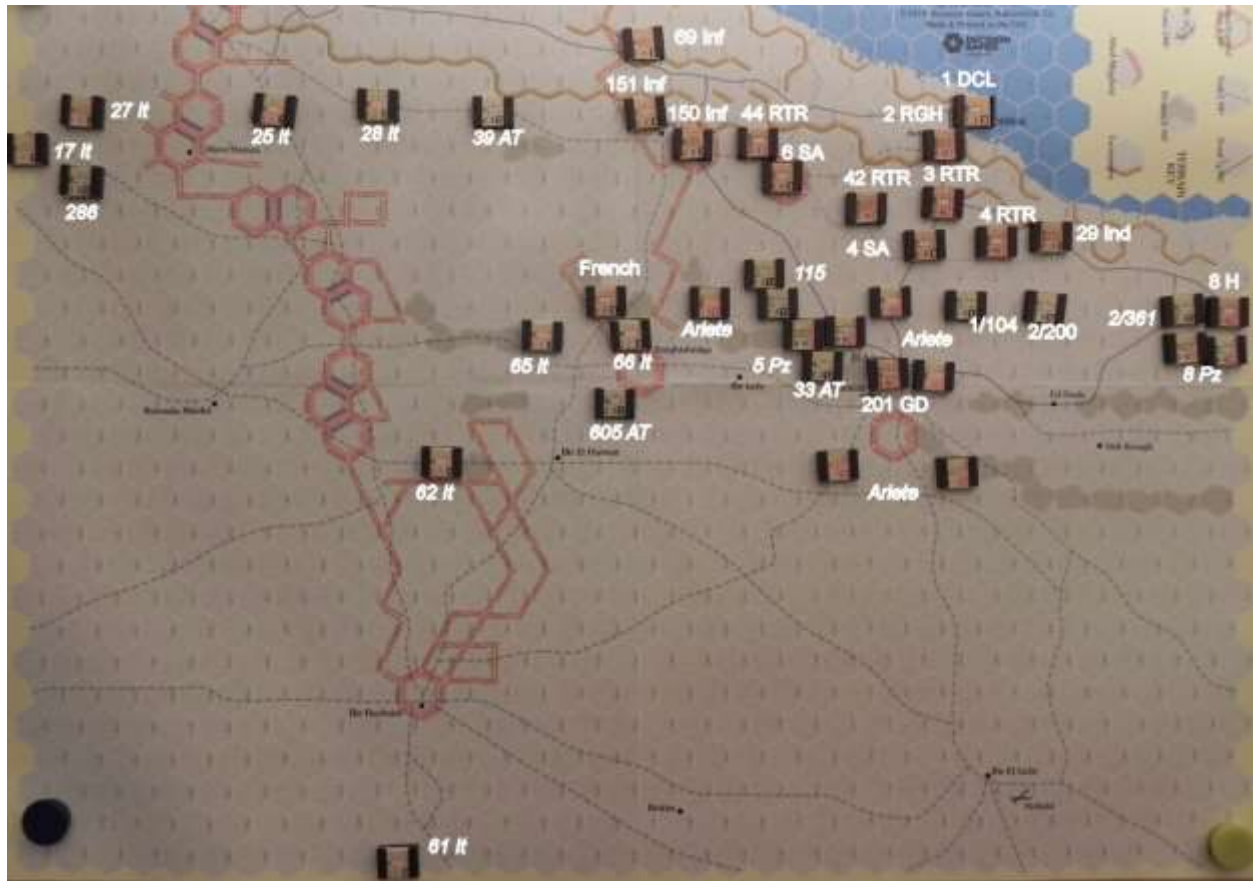


Turn 11 British

Elsewhere, a few more units move into the Tobruk perimeter, which is now held by fairly strong infantry units, with a few armour units in reserve. As expected, the Free French movement pushes through the Italian ZoC, moving one hex closer to the British position.

The outcome of the attack isn't as much as the British could have hoped for. The German unit is destroyed, but so is 10th Indian, leaving 8th Hussars alone to defend the supply hex.

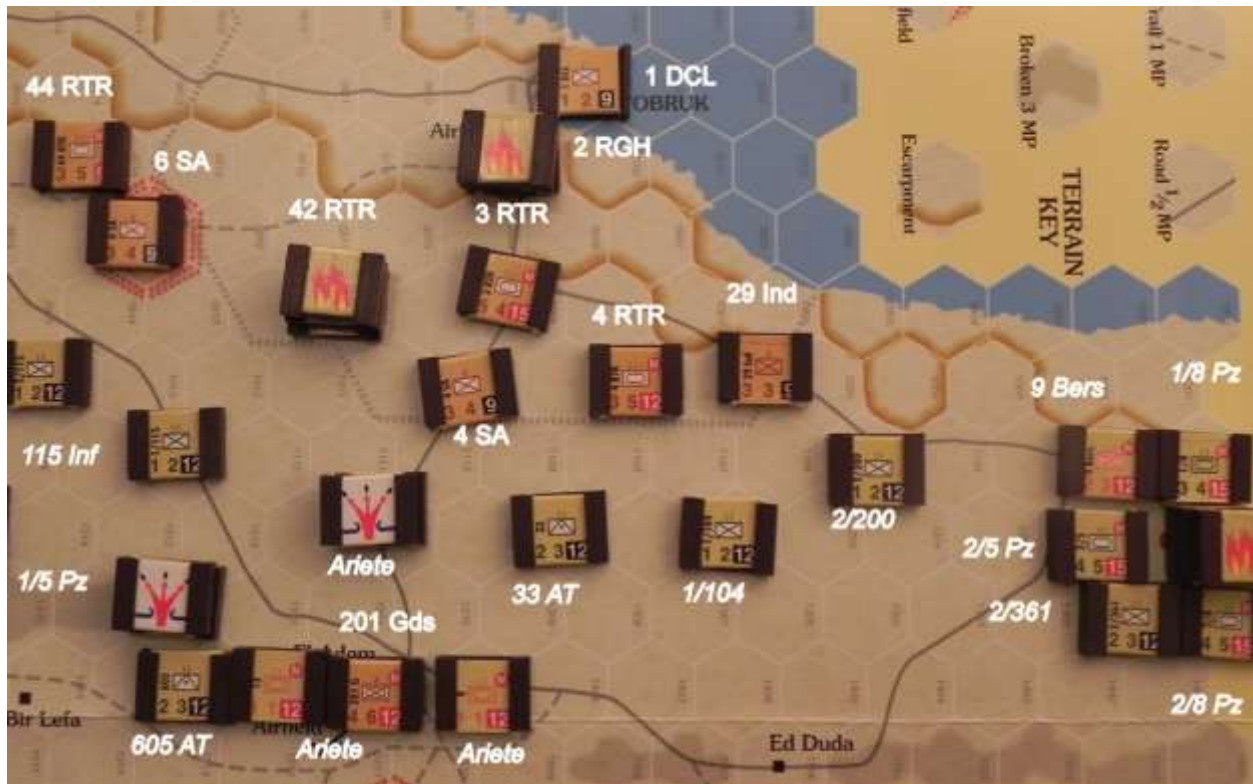
Turn 12



Turn 12 Start

The Germans continue their assault on the eastern supply hex, bringing in *2/5 Panzer* and *9 Bersaglieri* to help. They take care to surround the hex entirely, so that the British can't pull in the same stunt of slipping in a fresh unit as they did last turn.

Elsewhere, *201st Guards*, at the El Adem supply hex, is invested by some weak units in the rough terrain in order to prevent a sally. The Italians continue to chase after the French and keep them surrounded by zones of control. Now that the British have been confined to the Tobruk perimeter, the Axis decide it's safe to start bringing forward the units that had been garrisoning their own supply hexes. The rest of the Axis force throws a screen around the British position. *1/5 Panzer*, *8th Bersaglieri*, and the Italian *10th Armor* go into reserve just in case an opportunity arises in the mobile phase.



Turn 12 German

The Germans begin the combat phase by bombarding 8th Hussars, 42nd RTR, and 2nd RGH with two markers each. The British support each attack with one marker. None of them have any effect.

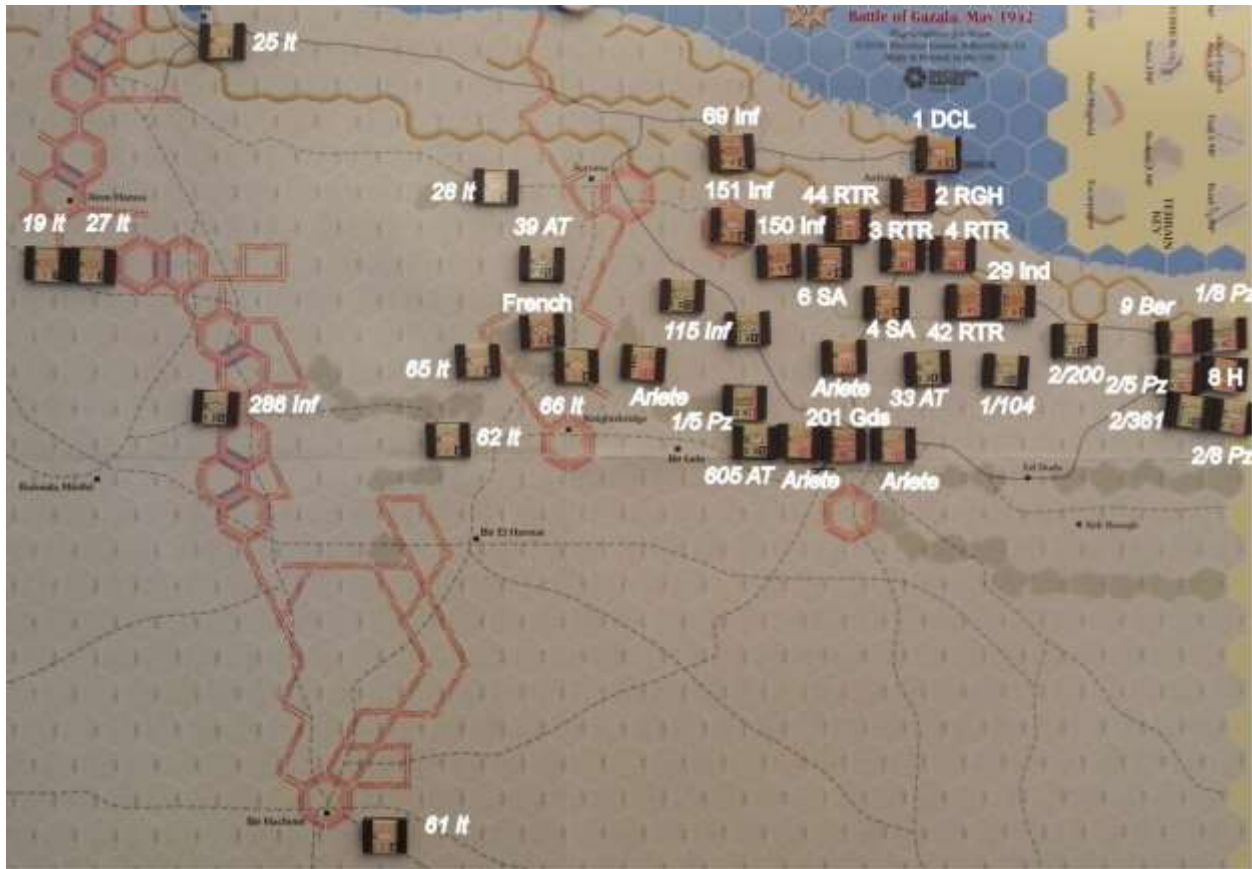
The ground assault on 8th Hussars is supported by two markers on each side. The result is D2, depleting the British unit.

The Germans decide not to push their luck and do not move in the mobile phase.

The British are in a difficult position. Their perimeter is solid, based on the antitank ditch, minefields, and defensive boxes. Behind that, they have the escarpments to fall back on. However, they will lose their fire support in a few turns if the Germans are left to batter their way into the supply hexes. Besides that, the British will not be able to bring on their reinforcements with the eastern supply hex in German hands.

The only way to constitute a reserve with which they can launch counterattacks is to contract their perimeter. They pull back from the minefield and the Acroma Box. The western flank now rests on the escarpments and the unnamed box east of Acroma. On the road to Tobruk, the British assemble four armoured units to constitute their mobile force.

Turn 13



Turn 13 Start

The siege of the eastern supply hex continues, with another assault on 8th Hussars. Given that the defenders are already depleted, 2/5 Panzer pulls out, to be replaced by 33rd A/T. 2/5 joins 1/5 and 1/200 Infantry in an attack on 29th Indian, which holds the eastern edge of the British perimeter. This isn't the start of a general assault, but just a way to keep 5th Panzer employed while 8th completes the reduction of the supply hex.

The Germans again bombard 42nd RTR and 2 RGH with two markers. The British support the weaker 2 RGH with one marker but let 42 RTR stand on its own. 2 RGH has to retreat, which does no harm; the bombardment of 42 RTR is no effect.

The procedure for applying fire support to ground combat is that the attacker applies one, and then the defender announces whether or not he will apply one. After that, the attacker may decide to add a second one, and then defender may decide to add a second one. In the attack on the eastern supply hex, the Germans apply their first marker, but the British decline to match it. The Germans then withhold their second. The attack goes in at +16 (off the chart), and 8th Hussars is destroyed. The Germans occupy the hex with 2/361st Infantry.

Both sides give their full support to the attack on 29th Indian. The attack is a +4, on the "ditch" row of the CRT. The result is an exchange, eliminating the defenders and 2/200 Infantry.



Turn 13 German

The British decide on a sortie to disrupt the German plans while they still have some firepower markers. 3rd and 4th South African move out of the perimeter to attack *1/104 Infantry*, with 150th Infantry providing flank security. All of the mobile units on the British side stay in place, waiting for the mobile phase.⁵

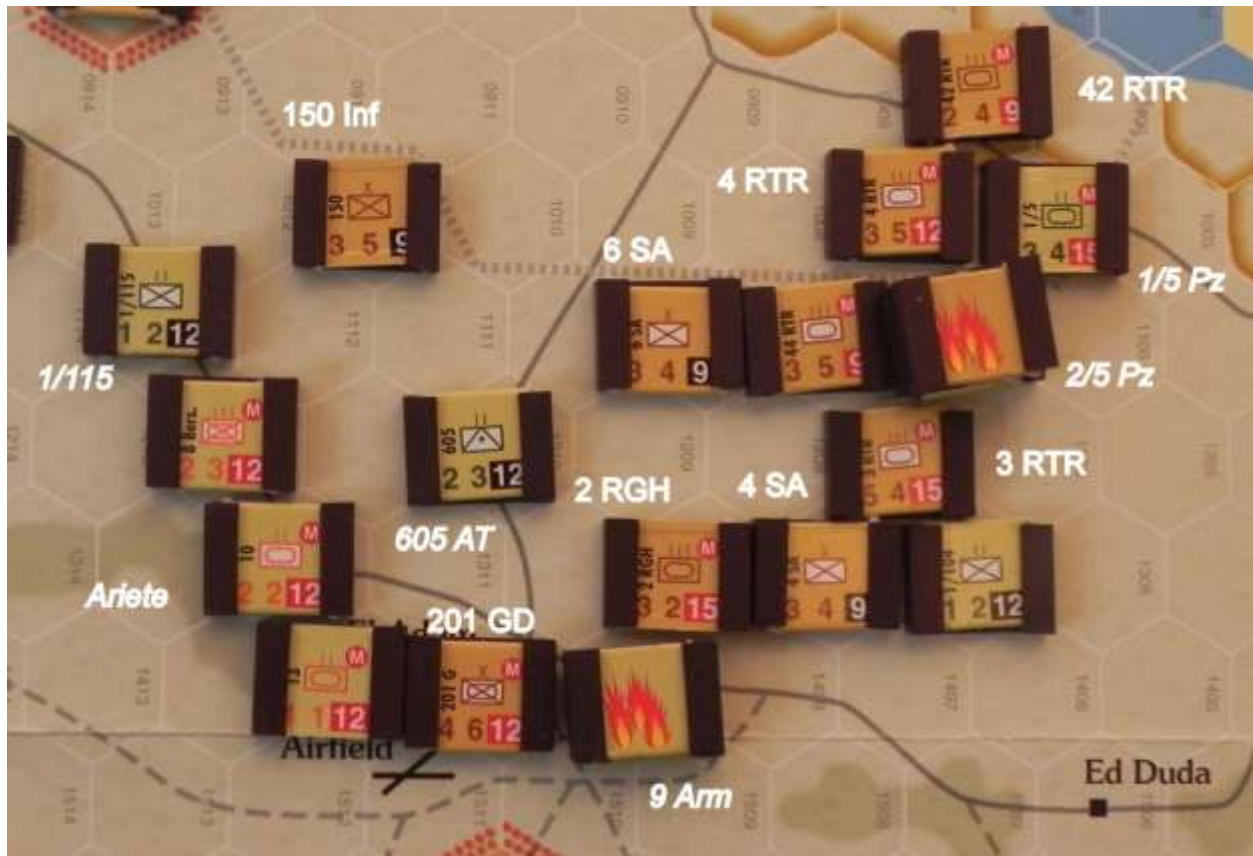
⁵ There aren't enough markers for all of them in the counter mix, and so the photo shows some of them unmarked.



Turn 13 British Regular

Both sides use two support markers for the combat. The result is D2, sending *1/104* reeling backwards. 4th South African advances after combat.

The whole of the British mobile force now goes into action. 2 RGH moves through the gap and joins 201st Guards in an attack on the Italian *11th Armor*. 3rd, 4th, and 44th RTR attack *2/5 Panzer*.

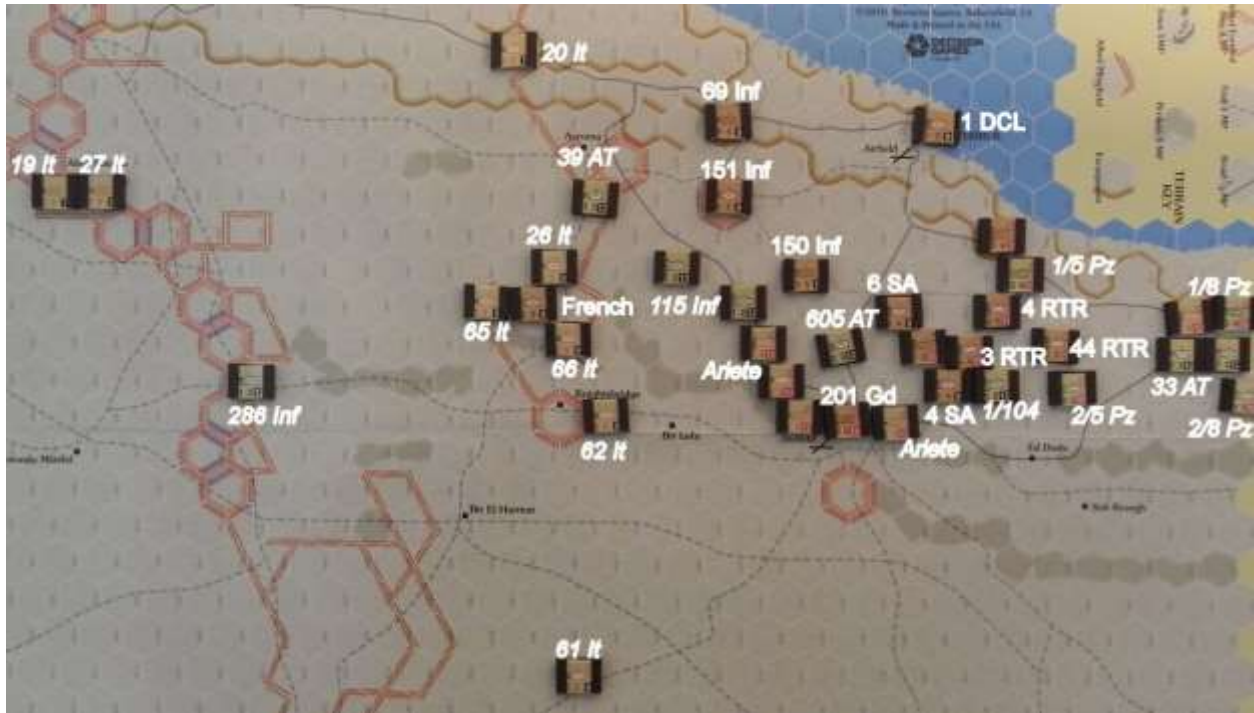


Turn 13 British Mobile

The British allocate their remaining fire support to the attack on the *panzers*. The Germans split their two remaining markers between the battles. The attack on *2/5 Panzer* results in a D3, forcing the Germans to the southeast. 4 and 44 RTR advance after combat. The attack on *11th Armor* turns out badly for the British, with an A1 result. Because 201st Guards is surrounded, it must take a step loss instead of retreating. Thus, the sortie has weakened the British hold on the El Adem supply hex.

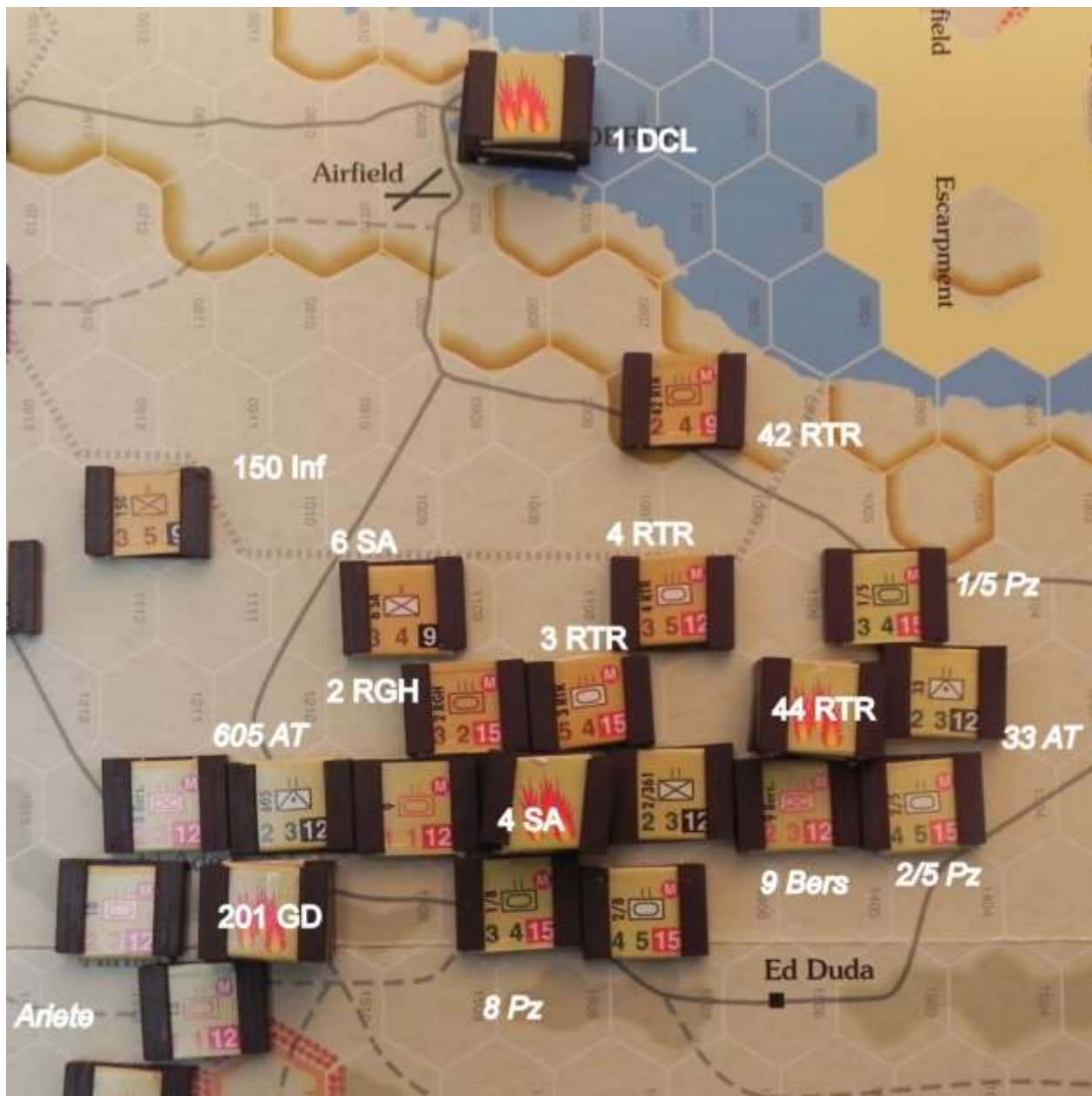
Turn 14

With the loss of the eastern supply hex, the British are down to three fire support markers.



Turn 14 Start

The Germans respond to the British sortie. *5th Panzer* attacks 44th RTR, while *8th Panzer* goes after 4th South African. Elements of *Ariete* attack the depleted 201st Guards in El Adem.



Turn 14 German

The Germans bombard 1 DCL in Tobruk. Although the British decline to use any of their scarce firepower on counterbattery fire, the town is enough protection. There is no effect.

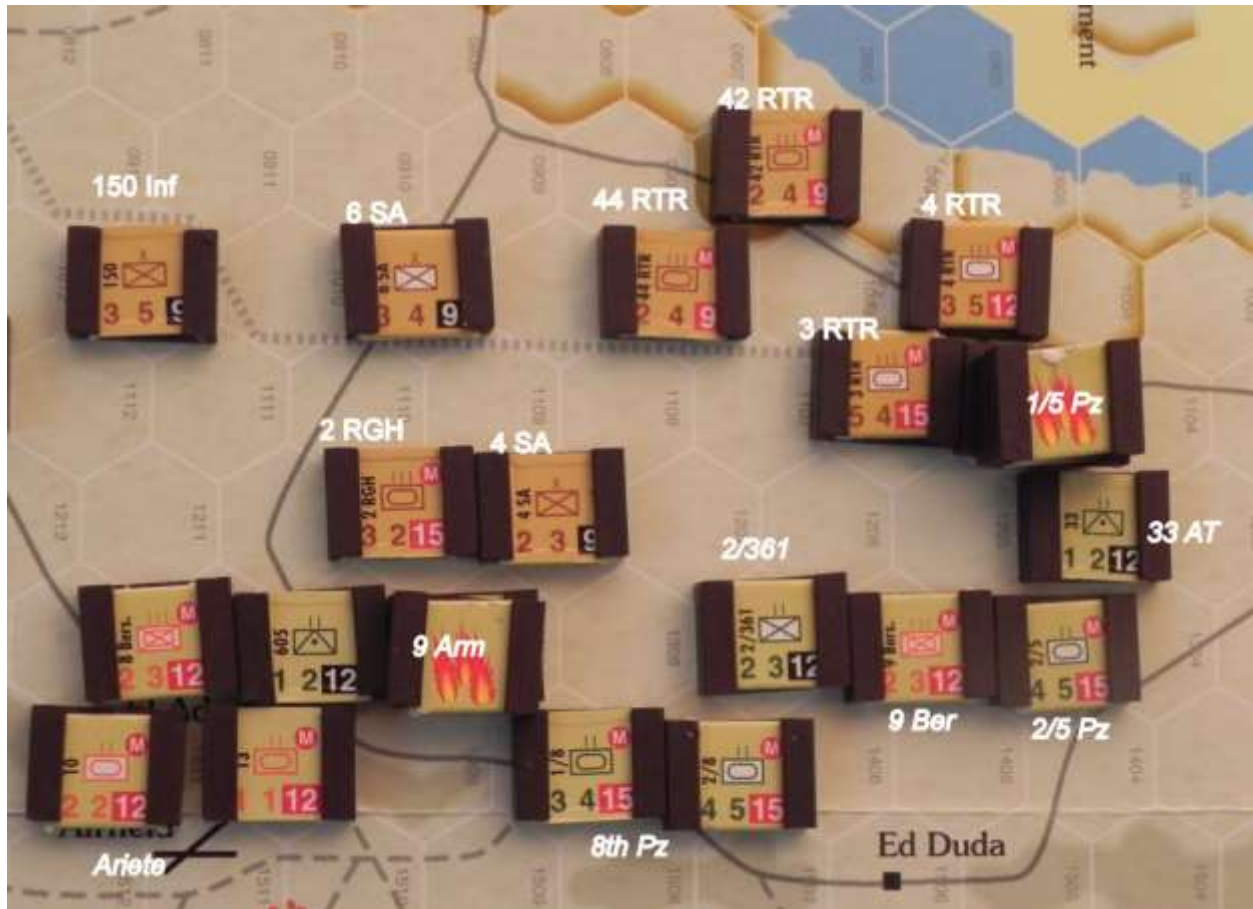
The Germans use two support markers in the attack on 44th RTR, while the British use one. The result is an exchange. The British unit is depleted, and the Germans deplete 33rd antitank.

In a similar situation 4th South African suffers a D2 result. It is depleted because it can't retreat.

The attack on 201st Guards is an exchange. The proud guards are eliminated, and 605th antitank is reduced. The Italian 11th Armor occupies El Adem.

The British are eligible to receive another Indian brigade, but it is slated to enter at the eastern supply hex. That means they now have two waiting reinforcements they are unlikely to ever receive.⁶

The British move to extricate themselves from the German embrace. 3 and 4 RTR launch a spoiler attack against *1/5 Panzer*, while 4th South African and 2 RGH attack *9th Armor*.



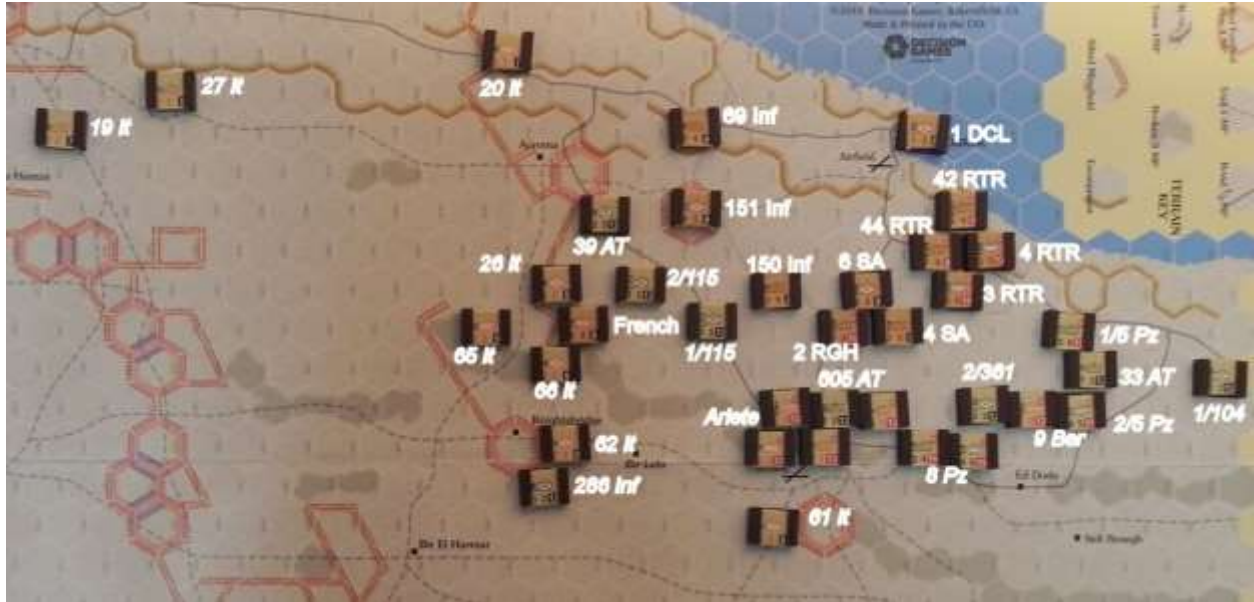
Turn 14 British

The Germans use two support markers to protect the *panzers* and one to help the Italians. Both attacks require the British to retreat—which is the direction they were heading anyway.

Turn 15

Now the British have no fire markers at their disposal.

⁶ Unlike many other games, the rules of this one specify that if a reinforcement hex is occupied, the units simply stay off map until they can be placed there. There is no shifting to a nearby hex. Perhaps this represents the units taking up defensive positions further east, on the road to El Alamein.



Turn 15 Start

5th Panzer swings around to the west, attacking 150th Infantry. *8th Panzer* follows in its wake, creating quite a bit of congestion in that section of desert. Most of *Ariete* goes into reserve, hoping to exploit the opening created by *5th Panzer*. The Germans are hoping to trap most of the British armour on the east side, keeping them away from the road to Tobruk. To this end, they are passing up the opportunity to mount attacks that might result in the enemy retreating into the route they hope the Italians will be able to follow.

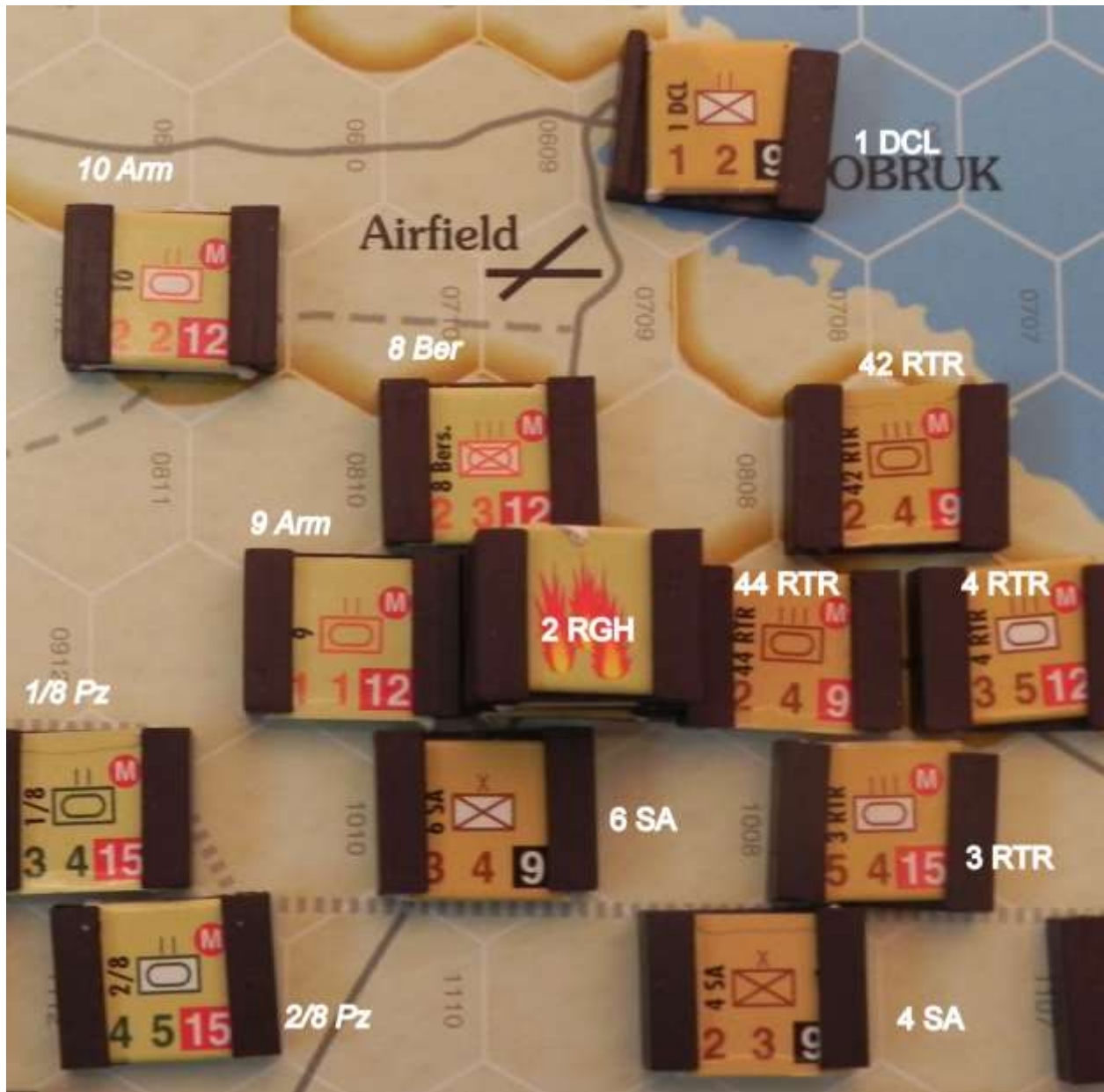


Turn 15 German

The Germans once again bombard the weak units, 1 DCL and 2 RGH. They force the latter to retreat, which may not be so good for their plans.

The attack on 150th Infantry is an exchange, eliminating the British brigade and reducing 39th antitank.

Now the Italians go into action. 10th Armor crosses the escarpment via the trail to the west. 8th Bersaglieri and 9th Armor seize the road crossing and attack 2 RGH from behind, with plenty of fire support. The resulting exchange eliminates both 2 RGH and 9th Armor, leaving 8th Bersaglieri to face the British counterattack on its own.



Turn 15 German Mobile

The British have no choice to counterattack, with the bulk of their forces trapped between the German lines and the Italians. Further west, 69th Infantry moves around *10th Armor* to block the route to Tobruk. 151st Infantry leaves its defensive box in order to block the path down the escarpment from the south.



Turn 15 British

The attack pits the elite black shirts and Axis firepower against British armour and South African Infantry. The result is D2. Unable to retreat, the Italian unit is reduced.

Turn 16



Turn 16 Start

The Germans launch a massive attack from the west. They manage to slip a couple of infantry units to aid *10th Armor* in its fight with *69th Infantry*. *8th Panzer* attacks *151st Infantry*, now that it has left its box, and *5th Panzer* attacks *6th South African* in an effort to relieve *8th Bersaglieri*.



Turn 16 German

They start the combat phase by again bombarding 1 DCL. They finally get lucky with an exchange. Tobruk has no garrison.

The attack on 69th Infantry is an exchange. The Axis takes the loss by reducing the Italian *20th Infantry*, while the depleted 69th is eliminated. *2/115 Infantry* advances after combat.

The attack on 151st Infantry is an exchange, reducing that unit and the Italian *28th Infantry*.

The attack on 6th South African is a D3, but they have nowhere to go and so must take a step loss.

In the mobile phase, *13th Armor* swings along the road to reinforce the group north of the escarpment.

The British squeeze around in the remaining space available to them and put a substantial force between the Germans and Tobruk. The other units form a hedgehog around the eastern escarpments. 151st Infantry, now on the wrong side of German lines, tries to link up with the French, who are still wading through the ZoCs that the Italians keep throwing around them.

Turn 17

The Germans now receive 12 fire support markers per turn instead of 11.



Turn 17 Start

The counter density is now so great that it's difficult to tell where the crucial gaps in the escarpment are. It is difficult for the Germans to bring their numerical superiority to bear because so many hexes are blocked by terrain. The most open route is along the northern edge, from the west, where units can at least deploy two abreast without having to cross an escarpment to attack⁷. However, before the panzers can redeploy to that area, they have to deal with the French brigade and 151st Infantry, which are sitting astride the road and trail. Leaving infantry units to hem in the main British force, *5th Panzer* attacks the French, while *8th Panzer* tackles the 151st. Both are supported by German and Italian infantry.

⁷ Which you can do along a road or trail.



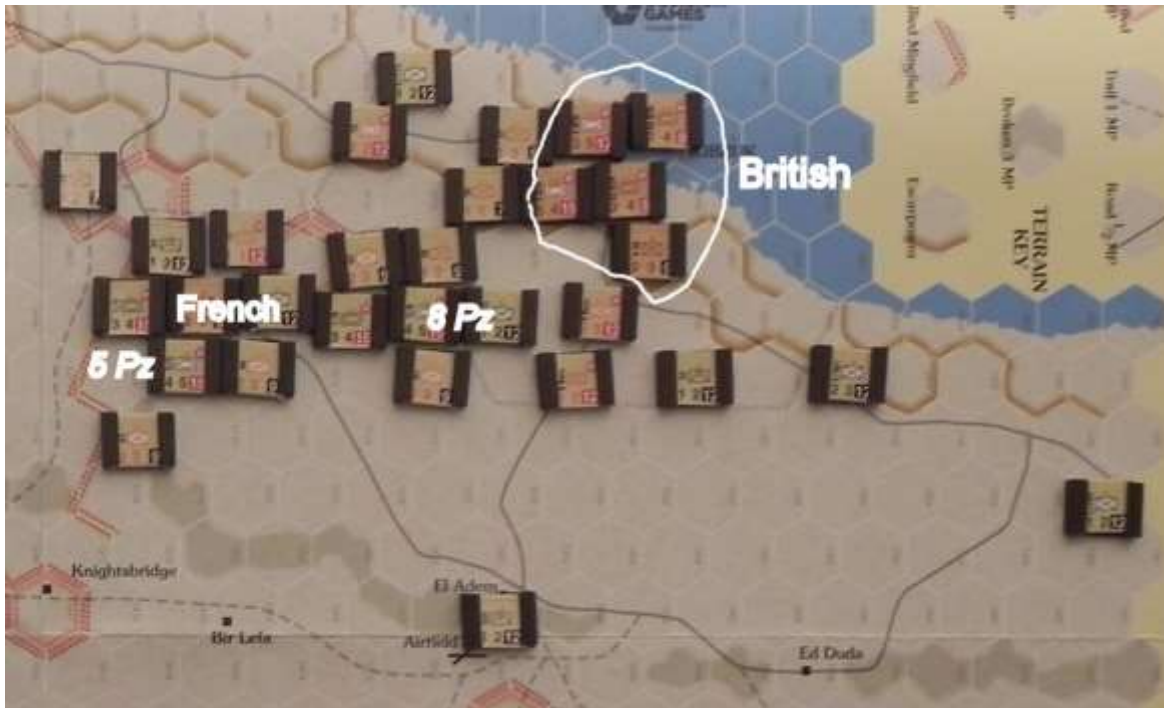
Turn 17 German

Before pressing home the attacks, the Germans bombard 4th and 6th South African, both of which are understrength. 6th South African is lost in an exchange result.

In the ground assaults, both allied units suffer retreat results, which they cannot satisfy. The British unit is destroyed, while the French is depleted.

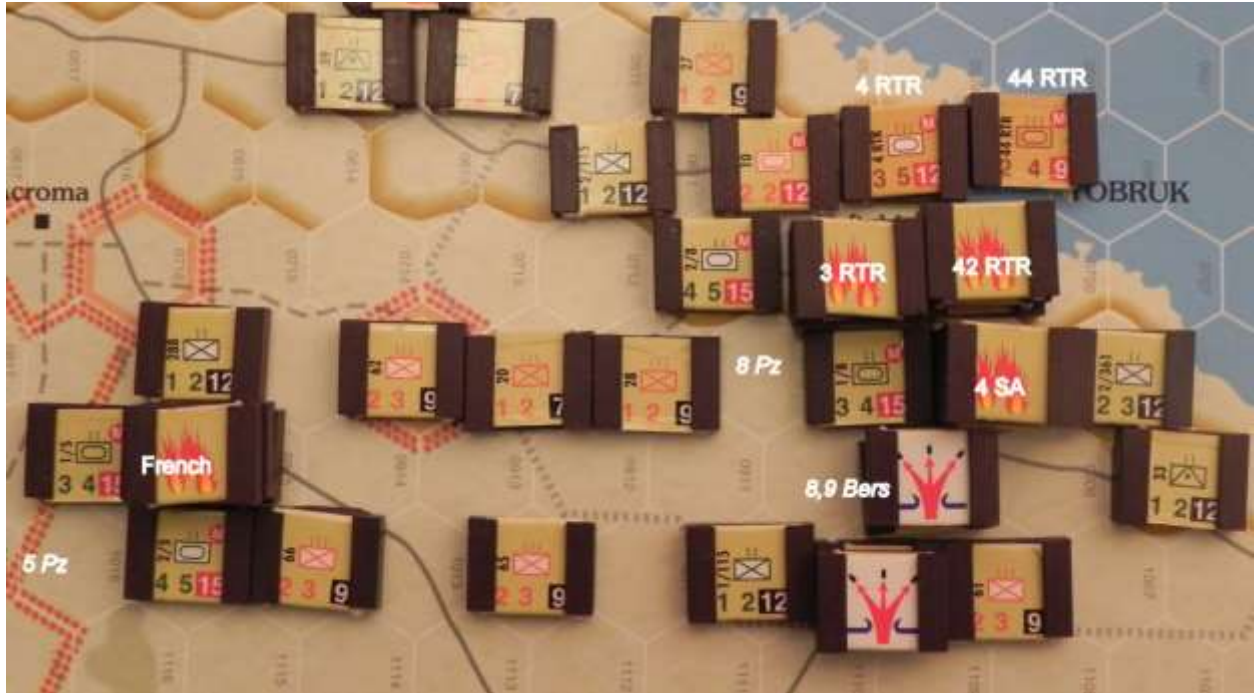
The British can read a map as well as the Germans can, and so they rearrange their defensive to put their strongest units, 3rd and 4th RTR, in the probable path of attack. 44th RTR occupies Tobruk itself, while 42nd RTR and 3rd South African cover the south and east. They consider whether the French should attempt a breakout by attacking one of the weaker units surrounding it, possibly in conjunction with a diversionary attack by the British armour. However, the Germans still have four fire support markers available, and so they could fully support the defenders in both attacks. If the Germans have to reduce the French, that will be one more turn that they can't go after Tobruk.

Turn 18



Turn 18 Start

The battle has reached the point where it is no longer enough room to deploy much of the Axis force. The infantry hangs back where it won't be in the way. *8th Panzer* continues the process of reducing the French brigade. *8th Panzer* splits, with *1/8* joining *2/361 Infantry* to attack *4th South African*, while *2/8* and the Italian *10th Armor* attack *3rd RTR*. *8th* and *9th Bersaglieri* wait in reserve.



Turn 18 German

The Germans first bombard 42nd RTR. They get an exchange result.

The attack on 3rd RTR also is an exchange, reducing that unit and *10th Armor*.

4th South African is eliminated in another exchange, which also reduces *2/361 Infantry*.

One more exchange eliminates the French and depletes the Italian *66th Infantry*.

In the mobile phase, *9th Bersaglieri* occupies Tobruk airport, formerly held by 42nd RTR. Throwing caution to the wind, they assault 3rd RTR from behind, supported by copious artillery. They get a D2 result, and the British unit is eliminated.



Turn 18 German Mobile

At this point, there are only two British units left on the map. I decided to end the game, rather than grind out the two or three turns it would take to eliminate them and take Tobruk



Game End

Outcome

The game is clearly a German victory, with the British forces almost entirely wiped out.

Fun and Gameplay

When I first read the rules, I wasn't impressed. They seemed pretty bland. However, the new zone of control rules really open up the game. It's hard to form up a line that can't be penetrated and surrounded. That works for both sides, of course. The units you use to do the penetrating and surrounding are prime candidates for the same treatment in the following player turn. Being surrounded isn't as bad as it is in many games. Units have a limited ability to slip through the cracks, and they can also fight their way out because their combat strength is undiminished.

The firepower markers bother me a bit. Because they have unlimited range, the side that has more of them has a big advantage. Even though the British side retained strong units almost to the end of the game, its ability to counterattack was badly constrained by the reality that any concentrated attack could be met by an extra six strength points dropping from the sky. The game got distinctly one-sided once the British lost their firepower allocation. Also, the fact that you can wipe out battalions from bombardment alone doesn't seem right, nor does counteracting an enemy bombardment by applying your own firepower.

I didn't use the mobile phase very much. It was hard enough pulling together the combat strength for a couple of good attacks in the regular phase, without leaving some of the best units

out of the fray. However, there were a few instances on both sides where mobile movement and combat made a dramatic difference.

History

Folio games emphasize ease of play. While they don't advertise that as "at the expense of historical accuracy," something has to give, and that's it. Thus, this section is complaining that the game isn't what it didn't intend to be. It does fit the general historical parameters. The map is about right. The order of battle is similar to what I've seen in other games. There *was* a big supply dump at El Adem. Note that I'm not an expert on this battle—I've read one book, and I've played some other games about it. So I wouldn't recognize moderate inconsistencies in the OOB or the terrain. That said, my impression is that you get a reasonably accurate framework for the battle. However, some key aspects are missing, and that leads players to act in ahistorical ways.

Everyone knows that supply was important in North Africa. In this battle, the initial Afrika Korps sweep from the south had gotten to the Knightsbridge Box when the Germans had to turn around and attack the triangle area from the east in order to open up a supply line through the minefields. The actual "cauldron" part of the battle involved the panzers eliminating 150th Infantry Brigade's box while their antitank units held off the British attempt to trap them. There's no reason for any of that in this game, because there are no supply rules. No units have to worry about water, ammunition, or fuel.

The minefields and boxes that are so prominently in the narration of the battle are relatively unimportant in this game. In the historic battle, the Italian infantry worked to breach the minefields and open up a route for the Axis supply columns so that they didn't have to go all the way around Bir Hacheim in order to link up with the front line units. In this game, it's neither necessary nor possible to breach the minefields. The epic siege of Bir Hecheim doesn't happen, because the Axis has nothing to gain from reducing the French garrison. That bridge in Paris will have to be named after something else.

Both sides had to deal with command control problems, although the British side suffered more. Their corps and division commanders were not experienced leading mechanized formations, and there was also a fair amount of personal animosity among them. Thus, their actions were disjointed, and they could never bring their numerical superiority to bear. Subordinates neglected to carry out orders that they thought were unwise, and so attacks were uncoordinated. On the German side, the Italian infantry was often torpid. They did not carry out their tasks without considerable prodding. Of course, the Axis also had the positive benefit of Rommel's leadership. Flying around in his Storch, he could galvanize whatever units were most crucial at any given moment. By contrast, in this game all of the units are under perfect control. Parent formations don't matter. You can combine the units in any way that's handy for the purposes of the current player turn. There have been a number of developments in game design since the quad games were first published. Some of these, such as activating units by formation, make it more difficult for the player to coordinate his own units. Decision Games has used these rules in some of its publications, but they are absent from the Fire & Movement system.

Accounts of the battle make much of the fact that both sides worked to repair damaged tanks and return them to battle. The British also replenished their units with stocks of spare vehicles. Most games on this battle have some mechanism to account for this. However, there is nothing in this game. Once a step has been lost, it's gone forever.

This was a pretty early period in the war. The integration of armor, infantry, and antitank weapons was not as well integrated as it was later, particularly on the allied side. However, you won't see any of that in this game. Units have attack strength and defense strength. The unit type doesn't matter at all.

The whole game hinges on the capture of Tobruk. While the Germans certainly wanted to do that, the British weren't all that keen on defending it. Richie and Auchinleck did not want to defend the port, although in the end they did make an effort due to pressure from Churchill. However, their main interest was in preserving as much of the 8th Army as they could as they fell back into Egypt. In this game, there is no incentive to do this. The game all comes down to Tobruk, and there is no reason not to sacrifice every Allied unit to accomplish this.

Final Thoughts

Cauldron: The Battle of Gazala accomplishes what the game design set out to do. It's a small, simple, fast-playing game. Experienced gamers will have no trouble picking it up, because you know the rules already—it's just a question of which familiar bits are used in this one. It has the basic framework of history, in terms of terrain, OOB, and so forth, but it still remains quite generic, without much of the special circumstances of Gazala. So, if you play it for what it is, and not for what it isn't, you should have a good time.