

THE OCCUPATION OF SIWA OASIS

ROMMEL'S TEA

Since ancient times, Siwa Oasis has been a place of significant importance. The Persian king Cambyses II sent an army across the desert to conquer it but it disappeared. Alexander the Great visited the oracle temple of Amun at Siwa where the priests called him Pharaoh of Egypt and thus divine.

During the Western Desert campaign, Siwa served as a base for the Long Range Desert Group, who used it as a starting point to cross the Great Sand Sea of Libya to conduct reconnaissance and raids behind enemy lines. There was also a small garrison of the Egyptian Frontier Force at Siwa, but apart from the LRDG presence, there were no other forces. Holding it against a strong Axis push was impractical. With the fall of Tobruk and Unternehmen Aïda plans were set to conquer Siwa. On July 23rd 1942, thirty Junkers JU 52s with fighter escort landed at Siwa, linking up with ground reconnaissance units from Jalo. This was the largest air assault in the North African campaign. The British however had gone, having left a month earlier.

The loss to the British was significant. The Axis forces saw an opportunity carry out LRDG style raids and some Italians suggested they could even cross and take the Nile. However, geography and lack of fuel conspired against these daring proposals. Unlike the Great Sand Sea to the west of Siwa, the Qattara Depression to the east was partly salt marsh – very unsuitable for vehicles. There was a high escarpment on the northern side of the depression, meaning it could not be used as a route to outflank the British at El Alamein. The capture proved more of a burden than an asset. The runway in Siwa town could only be made suitable for Cr42 Falcos and the northern landing strip was too far from the town's defences to be protected. Thus only a single Italian battalion guarded it.

The British weren't going to leave Siwa be. On the evening of September 13th 1942, they staged a raid. Dummy parachutists were dropped, packed with flares and incendiaries. At the same time, the Sudan Defence Force made a feint towards Siwa and then retired. Rommel visited on September 22nd, bearing gifts of British tea for the garrison!

Siwa was reoccupied by the British on November 14th, the Italians having left a week before under the watchful eye of the LRDG. The Italian garrison had left some sup-

plies for the natives. When the 8th Army returned, the natives celebrated by serving them brews of Rommel's tea!

GAMING SIWA

Siwa was never a major threat to the allies and its large native population (of some 3000 with nowhere to go if the shells started falling) ruled out a direct attack. So apart from the dummy raids and the LRDG monitoring the oasis, this was a quiet sector. However, let us imagine there was a significant threat there. Perhaps the Axis had found a way past the Qattara depression or the airfields were operable to Axis aircraft. Then the British would have been forced to take action. In addition, if recaptured, the LRDG could wreak havoc to Rommel's supply lines.

Italian Forces at Siwa

The initial force at Siwa consisted of elements of the 136th Infantry Division supported by reconnaissance elements (an Italian news reel of the time shows Autoblinda AB 41 Armoured Cars and SPA TL 37 75mm portees). As the battalion was flown in, the amount of heavy weapons and equipment would have been minimal. Likewise, while some strong reconnaissance elements would be available, transport would be limited.

Potential British Opposition

The LRDG generally avoided armed confrontation, even the latter formed No1 Demolition Squadron under Pop-ski were particularly careful and minimised their risks. They did provide a 'taxi service' for the Special Air Service on their raids behind enemy lines. However, they could enter into combat as they did at Kufra with the support of the Free French and Sudan Defence Force.

There were also elements of the Sudan Defence Force, which had proved an effective fighting force in the liberating of Abyssinia and in the capture of Kufra. Their equipment was limited to improvised armoured cars and machinegun companies, but with plentiful transport and supplies. Soldiers would be a mix of Sudanese and British troops.



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Surely the Italian player will wish for tank support when the LRDG attack his undefended convoy.

Scenarios

It is clear that the British intended to use the minimal amount of force against Siwa, just enough to make it look like it was threatened and have Axis manpower and supplies wasted in guarding it.

The "Crystal Palace" scenario written by Mark Backhouse in WS&S 82 would make an excellent starter for a raid on the Siwa desert landing strips or for a raid into the town to blow up supplies. Further actions are also possible. As an example, here is an ambush scenario.

RAID ON ROMMEL

An Italian resupply convoy is en-route to Siwa (resupply by air is far too expensive in fuel and aircraft). The British have decided to intercept and ambush the column at a point of their choosing along the desert road to Siwa. The game is played on a 6' x 4' table.

Deployment

A desert road runs along the middle of the table, from the middle of one short table edge to the other. The road does not need to be completely straight and can meander a bit. The terrain consists of bushes, depressions and low hills. As the site was chosen by the attacker, he may choose where the scenery falls.

The defender's column of vehicles includes three cargo trucks laden with supplies for the Siwa garrison. All vehicles enter from one end of the road, one at a time in a column. All the attacker's forces are placed in ambush in the opposite half of the table (at least 36" from the defender's starting board edge).

Forces

The Italians should have a motorised platoon to escort the three supply trucks. A portee gun (20mm Breda or 75mm AA) or an armoured car may be in support. As the Italians are going to be at a disadvantage, give them an extra section of conscript troops in a truck to even the odds.

The British would have SAS or LRDG with machinegun armed transport and a portee gun (typically a Breda 20mm AA) with possibly a Boys AT rifle in addition. Alternatively, it could be the Sudan Defence Force with LRDG support. If the Italians have an armoured car, the British will have something which can hurt it. Another option is for the British to have mined the road at the ambush point.

Rules

There are plenty of good rule sets out there, each which would be adaptable to this setting. Notably: The recent release of *Duel in the Sun* for Bolt Action offers many special rules (for desert terrain, conditions and mines) which would fit perfectly with gaming at Siwa.

Victory Conditions

If the Italians manage to break through the ambush and deliver one supply truck to Siwa, it is an Italian victory, if only a moral one. If the trucks are destroyed, it is a British victory. As an option, the Italians can retreat their trucks once one of the supply trucks has reached the middle of the table and the ambush has been sprung. It takes a turn for a supply truck to turn round. If they manage to get their three trucks off the starting edge of the table, it's a draw.

CONCLUSION

Gaming around the Siwa Oasis offers many opportunities for 'what ifs'. A mini campaign could be made up where the British have to harass the Italians but keep their own losses to a minimum. The Italians would have more manpower but the majority would be limited to the settlement at Siwa itself. If the air strips were operational, the Italians could call upon air support, that is until the LRDG or SAS conduct a successful raid... **WS&S**

Siwa Oasis and the Qattara Depression both appear in the film Ice cold in Alex. Maybe 'Katy' (Austin K2/Y) needs to make an appearance too?