

Combat Mission: Afrika Korps

by Tom "WKLINK" Cofield

In the year 2000, Big Time Software and Battlefront.com released a title that took the wargaming genre by storm. *Combat Mission: Beyond Overlord* was a unique mix of 3D graphics, hard core realism, interactive gameplay, and immersion that instantly made it one of the classics not only of wargaming, but of strategy gaming in general. The praise and accolades for this title continue to this day. In the increasingly crowded field of WW2 based games CM:BO still stands out as one of the best.



About a year ago the sequel to BTS's title was released. *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin* expanded on the original title, taking the gamer from the hedgerows of Normandy to the steppes of Russia. While there were some changes to the game, mainly involving interface improvements and some graphic upgrades in general the game stayed true to its roots and developed a following of its own.

I have had the opportunity to play BTS's latest offering in the Combat Mission series. *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps* continues the tradition of the series but this time transports the gamer to the deserts of North Africa and the mountainous terrain of Sicily and Italy. In addition it introduces the soldier to the Italian Army, which had more of a minor role in CM:BB. In CM:AK the role is much more pronounced.

The question is raised with this game. Will the third time remain the charm for what is essentially becoming a four or five year old engine? In the early 90's SSI came out with a game called Panzer General, still considered among the 10 best computer wargames ever created. This led to a series of add-ons ranging from Allied General, to Fantasy General, to finally Pacific General. Over time the tarnish built up on the PG engine until the final version collapsed under the age of the predecessor. This isn't the first, nor will it be the last, time a game has had one too many versions released. The question then is, how well does Afrika Korps stack up in 2004?



Background and History

Combat Mission: Afrika Korps covers the period from 1940-45 in which the forces of Benito Mussolini fought against Great Britain for control of the North African desert regions as well as for control of the oil rich areas of the Middle East. Later Germany and the United States were drawn into the region. As the period progressed Italy herself was invaded.

The history of the African continental war started years before the conflict erupted on mainland Europe. In August 1936 Mussolini annexed the country of Ethiopia and in his subjugation of that impoverished nation released ferocity on the civilian population that was eerily predictive of the savagery that occurred six years later on the Russian Steppes. His control of the African nation placed Britain in a precarious situation, flanked on two sides by potentially hostile Italian armies in Libya and Ethiopia.

When the conflict broke out in September of 1939 Italy, although a signer of the 1936 Axis pact, stayed on the sidelines. Through the 'Phony War' of 1939 and early 1940 the question of Italian intervention was still unanswered. The blitzkrieg tactics of May 1940 solved the question once and for all. Mussolini, wanting to get in on some of the glory and thinking both Britain and France were finished, declared war on the Allies on June 10th. In a sign of things to come he attacked the French in southern France and was immediately bogged down.

Mussolini, figuring Britain was just weeks from being destroyed by the Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht decided to strike from Libya early so as to gain the most territory before any peace treaty. Holding the Suez canal would be a very ripe plum in the hands of the man that considered himself Hitler's protégé. Italian armies advanced 60 miles into Egypt in September of 1940, stopping at Sid Barrani. On paper the Italians had a massive and overwhelming superiority in troops and materiel, almost 3-1 in troops alone.

Unfortunately, the superiority was not as important as the quality of the troops. Most Italian tanks were either terribly unreliable or were hopelessly outclassed by their British counterparts. Likewise most Italian infantry were simple foot soldiers, fine for the terrain in Italy or France but woefully inadequate for the distances and extremes of the Egyptian countryside. Very few Italian infantry units were motorized and this led to a severe mobility problem in what is considered probably the best tank country in the world.

The British counterattack, led by Sir Archibald Wavell, commenced on December 9th 1940 and was more successful than the British dared to hope. The Italians, although vastly superior in men and equipment, were routed at Sid Barrani and were driven half way across Libya (almost 500 miles) in little over three months. The demoralized Italian armies were close to collapse. Exasperated Hitler was forced to divert valuable troops and equipment to shore up his ally. In February of 1941 a man associated with desert warfare arrived in Africa; General Erwin Rommel.

Shoring up the Italian army (and proving that the Italian soldier can fight) while introducing his new German troops into battle Rommel struck at El Agheila in later March 1941. Catching his British opponents tired and overstretched he drove Wavell all the way back to Tobruk. The stage was set to start some of the most exciting battles of the Second World War, and in some cases the only good news to hit Britain during these dark days.

Explaining the rest of the conflict, from El Alamein to Tunis, to Sicily, to the Gothic line would take forever and is not in tune with the idea of a game review. Needless to say Combat Mission: Afrika Korps tries to simulate some of the company and battalion level actions that occurred during these periods.

Installation, Setup and Manual

Setup for CM:AK is pretty straight forward, just like it has for other games. I have never been able to get auto run to work with the game but go to the CD-ROM drive, hit setup and the game installed without a hitch. Unlike some early difficulties with CM:BB the game shipped with no CD problems, at least for me. Included with the CD is a small gameplay manual and installed is a 213 page game manual.

In all honesty, I was slightly disappointed in the decision to put the main manual on PDF. The manuals for CM:BO and CM:BB were both, IMHO among the best printed manuals ever released for a game. I am not surprised that the game was sent with a PDF manual, that is the trend these days and it is a cost saving measure, but the manual has always been a great bit of sit around reading and it's loss, at least for a while, is a loss for the game.

Now the manual itself, even if it is on PDF, is just as good content wise, as anything Big Time Software has made in the past. The manual, at 200 plus pages long, is well written, avoids large amounts of fluff, and gives the reader all the information he or she would need to become proficient in the game. If you read the manual there is no reason that I know of for you to not understand the game. This version even comes with some of Bill Mauldin's best Willie and Joe cartoons. For those of you unfamiliar with the famous cartoonist of WW2 Mauldin was an infantryman in southern Europe whose alter ego's Willie and Joe were enjoyed by millions of servicemen. Loved by troops, and hated by some brass (Patton in particular hated the cartoons) they have become part of the fabric of 1940's America that you rarely see these days.

Setup of the game is simple. CM:AK detects the video resolution of your game and asks you if you want to run at that resolution. Click yes and you are pretty much done from there on. A word of warning for those running GeForce type cards. There is a problem in the software (or in NVIDIA's drivers) that causes a black screen of nothing if you have AA enabled in the window's settings. It is very similar to the problem some folks have had with FS2004. Setting the AA to automatic or off fixes the problem. This is the only real problem that I have had visually with the game.

Graphics, Sound and Game Interface

The interface for CMAK is essentially the same as the ones for CM:BO and CM:BB. Upon entering the main screen the player has the opportunity to play single missions, enter the multiplayer aspects or get involved with the mission editor/creator.

CM:AK comes with a plethora of single mission games. In all honesty, there are few games out there that come anywhere close to giving you the number of single missions available in the Combat Mission series. If there was a major combat action that occurred in Crete, North Africa or Italy you can bet it either was



represented in this game or has been made as an add on. Selecting a game gives you the opportunity to play each scenario from either the allied or axis side. In addition you have the opportunity to vary the intensity of the game by overloading your side with extra troops, changing the fog of war to allow partial or complete observation of the enemy. Games can be played as single player, 2 player hot seat, PBEM or direct play for those folks that don't mind several hours connected.

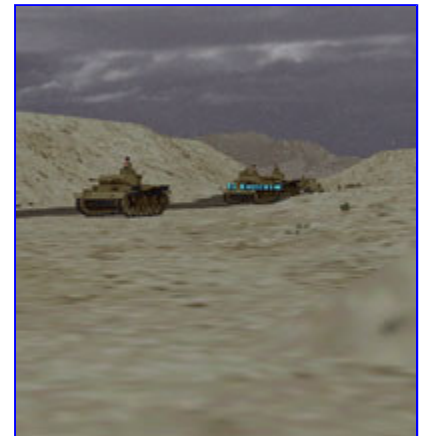
In addition you have the opportunity to play what are called operations. Like its predecessors CM:AK does not have a true campaign. Instead the game has a prolonged single game that runs over several rounds. These 'mini-campaigns' simulate several days of battle and allow for more reinforcement and replacement.

While all of these are interesting I still miss the idea of a campaign mode. One of the best parts of a CM:AK contemporary, *Steel Panthers: World at War*, is its ability to make and craft a fine tuned combat unit starting from scratch. You tend to become attached to units, particularly ones that you develop from green rookies to crack troops. If there is one weakness in the CM series it has to have been this.



Well, graphically the game hasn't changed a great deal from the original game. The game has had some graphical updates and improvements to include better trees, changes in terrain resolutions and vehicle fidelity. Compared to the stock version of the original game the game does look a lot better but overall I can't say the graphics are at the outstanding stage.

I don't want to dig on the graphics too much since it is a wargame but since it is a 3d game it probably needs to be evaluated based upon its graphics clarity. The graphics are sharp and clear, especially on high end machines and there are some nice features like transparent buildings (when occupied), decent rain and snow effects and the ability to turn down the level of trees and foliage based upon your system's speed.



Unfortunately the buildings look pretty much the same as in older versions; flat and not particularly realistic. Smoke and flame effects still look fake, trees look better but not that inspiring and infantry units still are represented by three guys. Originally this was a concession to performance; units of men were represented by 3 troops that would decrease to two troops when 1/3 of the men were incapacitated and one when 2/3 were gone.



It works and probably cuts down on the clutter but it detracts from some folk's perception of realism. In addition it has a limit on gameplay, you can't detach one guy to go looking around an area and come back. You can split squads but that is the extent of it. In real life you wouldn't send a whole squad over the hill, you would have one guy crawl up there and tell you what he saw. It's a nitpick for sure but with today's processors you would think that the game could render twelve guys without any problems.

This probably points out the inherent problems with creating a 3d game like the CM series, especially when compared to older hex based games. There really isn't much you can do to 'jazz up' older 2d style games. 3d games, however, are at the 'cutting edge' as far as video game graphics go. This means that a game that looked great just a couple of years ago can really look outdated quickly. We have seen this with the flight sim genre and now the phenomena is starting to get into wargames.

That's not saying the game looks bad, it just looks dated. Wargamers in general certainly are not a graphically demanding group. If they were then games like *Uncommon Valor* or *Korsun Pocket* wouldn't be as popular as they are. It is all about gameplay in wargames, the AI, the accuracy of weapons systems and

armored values. So the real test of the Combat Mission series is it's ability to maintain the edge in realism.

Sound in this game is outstanding. I am not sure that they really did much to change anything but to me the game sounds even better. Sounds of combat are directional and you can often figure out where the battle is going (in relation to your position on the map) based upon where you hear the sounds. I can't think of any other wargame where a four speaker system improves the play of the game.

The game is full of little sounds that add to the immersion, from the background battle sounds or the nature sounds you find just before battle starts, to the full blown explosion sound and cries from your troops to do or fix something. The sound effects are often secondary in many wargames but BTS did a very good job of not ignoring the sound input and it shows.

How to Play

The real bread and butter of any wargame is its playability. Wargamers are not FPS players, although there are folks that play both. Wargaming is a slower paced method of play; folks with ADD probably wouldn't enjoy wargaming. Planning is much more important than execution in most wargames. Go rushing in helter skelter in this game and you will find out.

For those that have never played a Combat Mission game, first, shame on you. Admonishments aside the games essentially play the same. There are some changes over the series over the years but essentially the CM series is the same, if you have played one you should be able to dive into another without a whole lot of problems. This means that CM veterans can probably skip this section.



Most wargames are either turn based or real time strategy. Good examples of both are *Steel Panthers* (turn based) and *Close Combat* (real time strategy). Both have their advantages. Turn based games give the most control over an environment and are great for slow relaxing gaming both offline and in PBEM games. The problem is that some people find the boring and unrealistic. RTS games tend to be faster paced and more 'realistic' but they can easily become

overwhelming when large numbers of troops or formations are needed. The Combat Mission series attempts to bridge the gap between the two genres to create a game that minimizes the weaknesses of both styles while keeping the strengths at the forefront.

In general the Combat Mission series has been very good at this. After setting up your forces (depending on the rules of the game you can often move and place your units prior to kicking off the game) you give your units orders. Orders can range from running from one place to another, sneaking, hiding, engaging, using smoke, moving until you contact the enemy and then attacking, hunting (similar thing but using tanks), firing indirect fire and so on. Each type of unit has things it can and can't do.

Once you have given your units their orders (and your enemy in online games) the game executes exactly one minute of real time combat. Unlike RTS games, during that time you can't give any orders to your units. Basically you are helpless to watch as your units either reach and seize their objectives, or become cannon fodder to that unseen 88mm FlaK gun. Once that minute is up you have the chance to change your unit's orders-if there are any left. This continues until the turns run out or if one side annihilates the other.



I have said before that this is a game that is easy to learn but very hard to master. I know that is cliché but in reality it is true. It is very easy in the beginning to give that Sherman an order to move to blah blah location. The trick is to move

units so they don't get shot up by long range artillery or anti-tank fire. That sixty seconds can seem like an hour as you watch your tanks getting picked off one by one.

This is a down and dirty way of playing. The manual does a pretty good job of getting new armchair Colonels up and running. There are scores of missions that come with the game, you can create a quick mission where the game generates terrain and (optional) units, or you can create your own custom missions with terrain and units you can pick. One of the big draws of the game is the mission editor, which will be discussed a little bit later.

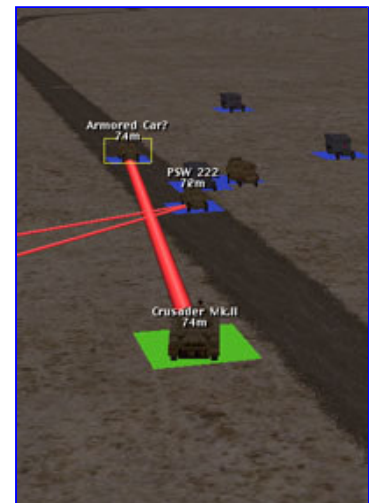


Gameplay

Well, overall the gameplay of the first two games is brought forward into this game. The strengths and weaknesses of gameplay are still there, for good and bad.

AI is a mixed bag in this game. I've said before in other reviews that the AI is very good on the defense but very suspect on the offense and I hate to say it but CM:AK is not really any different. I played one game where my well placed Hetzer knocked out over six enemy Shermans, ensuring a victory. What was frustrating was that the AI just kept coming over the hill, taking hits and losses. It seems that the game gets a path hard coded and come hell or high water they will use that route to ensure victory. While good for my self esteem it makes many of the defensive battles somewhat boring.

I think that the AI's weaknesses are really shown in this game. While CM:BO and CM:BB had the same problems, in those games the terrain view limitations (due to trees) often minimized the AI stupidity. The AI could sometimes move up without being seen. In CM:AK a large number of the missions occur in the desert, where the terrain and lack of vegetation really limit any kind cover and concealment.



In reality infantry forces in desert environments are nothing more than cannon fodder. The tank is truly king of the battlefield here and it shows. Take a couple of Matilda IIs out and you can literally run roughshod over the map. Infantry in the open don't have a chance. This is probably realistic but it sure does lose some of the fun. Tank in tank stuff is still fun and infantry does have its purposes on the Italy. In fact, the tables are somewhat turned in Italy, the mountains make armored movement risky at best and dangerous in the norm.

For the most part the game does pretty well if you are on the offense. The AI does a good job generally in placing its forces to repel your attack. The AI on the defensive can sometimes be quite a nut to crack; the placement of pillboxes and machine guns seems almost psychic sometimes. It almost never fails that I will move to a spot covered by an AT gun or infantry squad. It takes wise use of artillery and air support as well as good combined arms tactics to crack some of the scenarios in the game, many I still can't quite figure out.



One of the good/and bad things about the game is the size of the battles. The game can render battles which are huge. While CM:BO and CM:BB (to a lesser extent) were limited to battalion size operations or less, CM:AK allows players to play games made up of over a hundred units each.

The problem with this lies in the massive slowdowns you find playing the larger battles. My computer is no slouch (PIV 2.8, 1 gig RAM, Radeon 9800 Pro) but the large battles you can play literally bring my box to a crawl. It can take up to

ten minutes for the game to compute the outcome of a battle, at times longer than it took to put the attack together. I can't imagine trying to play some of these battles on a slower machine. In essence what it does is really limit the ability for the average wargamer to play some of the larger battles in the game. I honestly do think that the game engine has outstretched its functional ability to render some of these larger battles.

Some folks won't mind this, I play some of the large battles knowing I will sit there for a while waiting for the game to figure out the combat phase. Just like many of the larger games out there the Combat Mission series is not for those that want a quick and dirty game. In essence, if you like the CM series then you are not an impatient person. Most of these folks will probably not mind a few extra minutes. Still, I wouldn't try the larger games unless you have a fairly powerful computer, it may be too much for it. I could play CM:BO and smaller CM:BB games on my PIII laptop, I don't even try it with CM:AK.



Where this game really shines is in multiplayer mode. Like the first two games (well, after CM:BO was patched) there is an option to play either by e-mail (pbem) or head to head. Against a real player the AI inadequacies disappear. There are several online head to head and pbem wargaming clubs out there that allow people to meet and pick matches against each other. The game does a good job preventing cheating among multiplayer games, passwords are needed and the pbem is setup to prevent people from sneaking peaks at game results before they send them off to the opponent. You have the ability to play any of the single missions or operations in multiplayer as well as quick missions. Many leagues and tourneys have sprung up with specific rules pertaining to the game. If you can't find an opponent in this game then you haven't looked very hard.

Overall Opinions and Recommendations

There are few games out there that compare with the Combat Mission series in scope and depth of gameplay. For amateur tacticians, and for some professional ones, there are few games that match it. To win in the game you need to take terrain, weather, the enemy, your strengths and cover/concealment into consideration. There are very few times when a blind rush will win you a game.

So overall I guess the question to pose is: Is Combat Mission: Afrika Korps really one of those must buy games? I pretty much said absolutely to the first two games in the series. I still highly recommend CM:AK but not to the level that I recommended the first two titles. I don't want to be too negative about the game but the hits in performance, even on high end machines, really does not offset the improvements in graphics or battle size.

If you have the first two and want the third you probably will enjoy it; it delivers pretty much what you expect from the series. If you are interested in getting into the game then I recommend the first two games, which come as a bundle from Battlefront. Not only do they play better on most people's machines, but you get a larger variety of mission types and units. That's not to say that new players would go wrong buying Combat Mission: Afrika Korps, but I personally think that the first two games are better suited to the novice to the game.

Combat Mission: Afrika Korps is a good game. Not flawless, but still very good. It isn't the gee whiz game that its predecessors were but it still delivers solid gameplay and good value for the money. Right now the only place to get the game is at www.battlefront.com. If you like the genre, are interested in the fighting in Italy and North Africa, and are not ADD then most will find this game fun and rewarding.

Author's note: I want to extend an apology to Battlefront and to Big Time Software for the tardiness of this review. Due to a mistake on my part I thought the review copy had been sent to site. I then left for a military course and promptly forgot about everything. This is a mistake on my part and should have been caught by myself several months ago. Again I apologize to the folks at Battlefront. They have always been a class act and have been very helpful.

Test System Specs

- Dell Dimension 4600
- Pentium 4, 2.8 GHz (HT)
- 1GB 400MHz DDR RAM
- 80 GB Ultra ATA 100 HD
- Radeon 9800 Pro
- Creative Audigy 2 sound card
- Broadband cable connection for online play