

Training for Decision Making

“Operation Crusader” reviewed by Captain Brendan B. McBreen, USMC

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Operation Crusader. By Atomic Games and Avalon Hill. The Avalon Hill Game Company, Baltimore, MD, 1994, \$69.95.

“Operation Crusader” is a truly professional computer wargame - historically accurate, tactically challenging, visually stunning, and easy to learn. As a tool to practice military decision making, it offers a unique opportunity for professional officers. Most useful of all, it can be played by email, allowing Marines to compete with one another across the country.

“Operation Crusader” is a recent offering from the creators of the excellent “V-for-Victory” series of computer wargames (see *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1994, page 30). An operational-level simulation of the “Crusader” battles fought in the North African desert during November 1941, it captures the fluidity and challenges of desert warfare in a straightforward format. Unlike a board game, all of the complex administrative tasks are handled by the computer. The player is free to concentrate on his tactical situation and decisions.

The screen displays the terrain surrounding Tobruk. Wadis, escarpments, desert tracks, and fortifications all affect both movement and combat, and wide expanses of desert offer plenty of room for envelopments. Axis and Commonwealth units are portrayed down to the battalion level with some specialized companies shown. The simulation offers multiple types of movement, attacks, air and artillery support, as well as weather and leadership options.

In addition to its overall high quality and ease of play, two features elevate this simulation to a level above other wargames: play by email and “fog of war.” There

are three choices of opponents—the computer, a local opponent on the same machine, or a distant opponent on email. The fog of war feature truly makes the simulation. Neither player has an accurate picture of the battlefield. The screen displays only those enemy units that have been sighted. Wide expanses of desert appear blank, yet enemy units are moving freely across them. Reconnaissance, both air and ground, becomes all-important. Maintaining a reserve becomes second nature. The unpredictability of the enemy—unexpected events, reinforcements, and opportunities—creates continuous challenges. The player learns first and foremost that he must make decisions based on imperfect intelligence.

Other features contribute to the simulation's realism and usefulness. Although players alternate turns, execution is simultaneous. A unit with high mobility and morale moves more quickly than a unit with less mobility and morale. Opposing units that collide fight unplanned meeting engagements. The importance of supply and logistics is effectively represented. Players must allocate a finite amount of supplies among their combat divisions, realizing that the strength of individual units is directly tied to their logistics support. Supply lines must be maintained. Exposed supply lines are especially vulnerable and cut off units weaken rapidly. Unit strength and mobility also are affected by fatigue and disruption. Well-rested units with good morale fight better. Artillery and air support are simulated in a realistic manner. Limited assets, weather conditions, and range restrictions force players to plan carefully.

“Operation Crusader” is not perfect. Some aspects, especially the terrain-based victory conditions, are less than ideal. However, the intelligent player can work around the minor limitations.

Realistic, well researched, and challenging, “Operation Crusader” is an ideal vehicle for professional military education. Try it out. Learn from it and teach from it. If you need someone to play, email me your first scenario—I'll fight you.

“Operation Crusader” is available for PC-compatible computers with MS DOS 4.01 or higher, minimum 386 or better, 4MB RAM, 5MB for optional sound, hard drive, 3.5-inch floppy, SVGA, 512K VESA card, and mouse. Also available in CD-ROM.

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