Despite the claims of engineering incompetence, despite the numerous complaints about delays, and despite the explicit rejection of many of Vauban’s sound techniques, besieging forces in the Low Countries were still surprisingly effective. The resulting sieges were often poorly conducted in a technical sense, straying far from the efficient siege Vauban conducted at Ath in 1697 and even further from the perfect siege he had envisioned in his writings. But they were effective, and for many generals and politicians this was sufficient. Attacking armies captured their Low Countries targets 88% of the time and every major siege that was undertaken was successfully concluded; in the non-Flanders theaters the rate was a slightly lower 82%. Furthermore, two-thirds of the Flanders sieges lasted no more than a month, while 40% of these places could hardly resist two weeks. Apparently Vauban’s efficient attack was not the only way to capture places in a relatively short period of time. The competing histories of the period provide few explanations for this unexpected result: the Marlborough biographers (themselves immersed in the cult of vigor) present sieges as a time-consuming betrayal of the Duke’s battle-seeking strategy, while the Vauban literature portrays rejection of his scientific techniques as the highest form of ineptitude. Why, then, were besiegers so successful when their commanders rejected the underlying impetus for Vauban’s method and forced engineers to use exactly those bloody techniques that he had railed against? There were of course many factors that dictated the exact outcome of any particular fortress’s defense: the relative strength of the attackers and the defenders (the size of the forces available to them, their morale, their leadership, their equipment, their logistics, the competency of their technicians, etc.), the design and maintenance of the fortifications under attack as well as the terrain in which they were situated, the weather, the role of relief efforts, and even chance occurrences. The length and resolve of each garrison’s defense depended on a unique combination of such factors—and we have already discussed the importance of weak fortifications for the many
Spanish *bicoques*—but we should emphasize the common traits that all these sieges shared and which practically guaranteed (statistically speaking) their success—the brute force techniques the besiegers used to conduct the attacks. Three factors were of critical importance: the besiegers’ trenchworks of course, but just as importantly, their reliance on overwhelming firepower, coupled with their political masters’ abilities to continually resupply their armies with the men and materiel needed to maintain this vigorous approach in siege after siege.¹

In short, attackers supplemented Vauban’s imperfectly-implemented attack with overwhelming power, enabling them to succeed while ignoring Vauban’s appeal for finesse and efficiency.

1. *Vauban’s Trench Tactics*

As Chapter 6 suggested, the military engineers and Vauban’s methods deserve at least some of the credit for the success of besiegers. Even the most biased commanding generals needed their engineers’ advice on and supervision of the trenches, as they simply could not ignore their expertise altogether, nor did they replace them with more vigorous-minded candidates from outside the corps. Certainly Vauban’s trench parallels were a pivotal part of practically every siege. How closely besiegers followed Vauban’s specific advice to “always make three parallels; locate and construct them well, making them as wide as is necessary” is not always clear, though there is plentiful evidence that in the War of the Spanish Succession both Allied and French attackers made use of trenches dug parallel to the front under attack—contemporary plans of almost any siege of this

¹ The impotence of relief forces also merits further analysis. We should further note that there is very little evidence of the importance of pre-siege blockades by partisan forces that George Satterfield emphasizes in his discussion of the Dutch War (*Princes, Posts and Partisans*). There are several reasons to discount this claim, in the last of Louis’s wars at least. Most of the targeted towns were chosen only a month or less before they were invested, while the defending side communicated freely with its frontier fortresses and even reinforced threatened garrisons up until the investment itself. As we shall see in this chapter, the advantage of weakening the defenders with a pre-siege blockade would rarely have been decisive in any case, since almost every fortress surrendered long before it ran out of supplies, while garrison commanders never mention this factor when explaining their need to surrender. Partisan forces were more active in the Spanish Succession war attempting to surprise strongholds away from the main area of operations.