For centuries fortifications presented an unavoidable obstacle to mobility and decision. This strength of the medieval tactical defensive was only briefly interrupted by an interlude of crumbling castle walls as gunpowder was put to use in the sieges of the early- to mid-fifteenth century. The gradual development and deployment of the *trace italienne* from 1470 onward once again returned warfare to stasis by the middle of the sixteenth. Yet the pendulum would swing back once more as anonymous engineers and soldiers worked throughout the next century to capture these works more efficiently than before. Vauban was the culmination of this collective effort, combining old techniques and new improvements into a rationalized system that epitomized the efficient balancing of delays, lives and costs. His attack offered, for the first time, a successful alternative to brute force. The reality of sieges, however, was quite different from the rhetoric of scientific, clockwork sieges. Even Vauban had difficulty conducting the attacks according to his wishes, and those engineers that came after him had even less authority. Furthermore, the ranks of the French, Dutch, English, Spanish, Austrian, and German engineering corps were constantly depleted thanks to the dangerous duty, low pay and even lower standing, making application of the efficient ideal a difficult task. In contrast to the rhetoric of siege history, the engineers did not, in the end, dictate the conduct of the siege attack. Without Vauban’s personal presence, his ultra-efficient ideal was rejected by many of the generals who oversaw the sieges. Accelerating the opening of the trenches, ignoring Vauban’s recommendations for artillery use, storming the covered way rather than rely on the sap, bombarding the town indiscriminately—all these tactical decisions, as much as their frequent complaints, illustrate the general officers’ utter impatience with the engineers. In opposition to the Vaubanian ideal, many generals supplemented efficient tactics with brute force, tactics which suited their wide-ranging belief in the importance of vigorous action. The resulting amalgam of techniques was enough to force most towns to submit, yet the results were unsatisfactory for
both sides. The engineers were compelled to unnecessarily risk lives through the use of impatient tactics. Generals who had wished to avoid sieges in the first place were just as frustrated by the delays imposed by the overly-cerebral technicians and their time-consuming sieges.

Many of the most successful (and most trusted) field commanders quickly tired of the slow pace of operations and looked for other alternatives. Their most commonly stated preference was for a field battle that might decide the matter within the timeframe of a single campaign, though this was rarely a possibility. If fortified positions could not be bypassed, perhaps a storm, surprise or bombardment could achieve the same results as a siege, but with fewer delays. More inventive plans to overcome Vauban’s pré carré were also discussed. Among the most well-known to English historians is Marlborough’s 1708 alternative to a siege of Lille—a project to break free of their supply lines by somehow skirting around the pré carré while being supplied by the Royal Navy. The Dutch Lieutenant-General Hompesch also focused on the logistical part of the equation when faced with the same prospect, witness his musing that hand mills might replace bread convoys and allow the army to march past the enemy’s belt of fortifications straight into their heartland.1 These remained only fanciful hopes, however, and the attritional war of sieges continued for another four years.

The struggle between efficiency and vigor would continue well beyond the War of the Spanish Succession, and the victory of vigor would inform more modern views of the ‘proper’ conduct of war. Not every general was a vigorous one, but an energetic outlook has been a requirement for ever-lasting fame. Great captains like Gustavus Adolphus, Condé and Turenne, but particularly the Spanish Succession heroes Marlborough and Eugene, left their mark on the rest of the century. In France the aged yet still vigorous Villars would continue to influence the French army while serving on young Louis XV’s Regency Council, and he would even command an army in the field as late as 1733. More broadly, biographies and campaign histories of the twin Allied captains provided models for battle-seekers the

1 Veenendaal, Jr. (ed.), *Briefwisseling Heinsius*, vol. 7, p. 484 #1053, Hompesch to Heinsius, Amougie, 27 August 1708. An earlier Allied attempt in 1705 to strategically bypass the pré carré by marching through the Moselle ended in stalemate and starvation.