PART THREE

“AN ALMOST HOPELESS CONDITION”: THE LEGACY OF OLIVARES IN THE ARMY OF FLANDERS, 1643–1659
CHAPTER ONE

“TIME TO ACT LIKE WHO WE ARE.” THE BATTLE OF ROCROI

Like other “great battles of history” Rocroi has been narrated and portrayed in words and pictures over centuries with various degrees of accuracy and flourish, but what follows is my own version of the event. I have not only given special weight to eyewitness accounts from both sides but I also visited the battlefield, (still recognizable in many of its major features) and toured the Rocroi area to gain direct knowledge of terrain and distances, get a feel for the event and make some sense of the discrepancies that primary sources often contain. However, since my primary objective is to explain this clash from the perspective of the leadership problems of the Army of Flanders, I have purposely excluded various incidents and details that may be of interest to those more concerned with other topics such as local history and lore, pure battle narrative or the combat experience of the common soldier.

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1 Rocroi’s status as one of the major battles of history seems assured. See the lavishly illustrated account by Cyril Falls in Cyril Falls ed., Great Military Battles, (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 17–30.

2 Acquaintance with the terrain is as important to historians as it is to military officers. Nevertheless, some of the most recent accounts of Rocroi present erroneous battle maps. For example, the map that appears in Jeremy Black’s Cambridge Illustrated Atlas of Warfare: Renaissance to Revolution 1492–1792, (Cambridge, 1996), 75, shows the town west of its actual position in relation to the battle, which if true would have made the encounter almost irrelevant, since it would have been quite easy for the French to outflank the Spaniards (who would, of course, have never lined up in that manner) and enter Rocroi. The same is true in John Childs, Warfare in the Seventeenth Century, (London, 2001), 75, whose map appears to be derived from Black’s but where the armies’ positions are even more distorted and stand perpendicular to the city. On the other extreme, Russell F. Weigley, The Age of Battles. The Quest for Decisive Warfare From Breitenfeld to Waterloo, (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 43, has the Army of Flanders line up right under the walls of Rocroi where it would have been in the sights of French artillery inside the town.

3 In addition to the archival material, the major printed sources for the battle and thus for this chapter are:
   a. the Spanish point of view: J.A. Vincart, Relación de la Campaña del Año de 1643, Codino LXXV, 415–484. Vincart was the army’s Secretario de Asisos Secretos de Guerra, or intelligence officer, and his account, designed to put the best face on the events must be taken with a small grain of salt. In addition see the letter Albuquerque wrote after the