nior generals and the men who did the dying, people like Bradley, Collins and Quesada found a common ground. Therein lay the significance of the early Normandy campaign for air–ground relations. The friendships these men developed paid dividends in the future. Later, when the campaign stalled on the German frontier, when there was little optimism among officers, when frustrations among men ran high, these commanders would need to call upon this reservoir of good will.[58]

June 22 was a beautiful day. Collins, Quesada, and Nugent drove to the front near Valognes, a mere half-mile from the German positions, to watch the attack. The VII Corps troops were already there, waiting in foxholes that were perhaps a little deeper than usual. At 1240 hours more than a hundred British Spitfires screamed overhead, sweeping first this way, then that way, riddling the front with bullets and bombs. Smoke rose from the ground. German shrieks wafted through the fleeting silence that sometimes punctuates the roar of war. As the Royal Air Force left, the American generals hunched further behind their hedgerow, peering through slits of brush. American planes would be above them soon.[59]

Back at Christchurch in the south of England, Colonel Chuck Young had just led forty-eight Lightnings of the 367th Fighter Group into the air. Joining 509 other IX TAC planes over the Channel, they stormed over Cherbourg at 1300 hours. The Spitfire attack had both obscured the area and alerted the defenders, who were now throwing up an unprecedented barrage of flak. For an hour the pilots flew into the dust, smoke, and chaos of war. Although they were aiming for six defensive clusters scattered over twenty-five miles, the confusion and gunfire forced a haphazard approach. Pilots merely formed up over the front and attacked any target of opportunity.[60]

Lieutenant Edward Michelson realized immediately that he and his fellow flyers were ducks in a shooting gallery. "The ground fire was so intense it seemed the only safe place to be was below treetop level." Every farm, crossroads, and tree grove was alive with German gunners. Pilots traveling 300 miles an hour strained to orient themselves as black billows rose from the ground. Some got lost. One flight fired on friendly forces.

"We were on the deck in a ravine when all hell broke loose," Captain Jake Reed recalled. Caught in a deadly crossfire of flak, two planes im-

mediately in front of him burst into flames and crashed to the earth. Within minutes, pilots Deuron Robertson, John Morgan, John Langston, Frank Golden, and Donald Stevens were dead. Reed managed to survive, dropping his bombs on a flak battery and gun position. But losing his friends was demoralizing. When he left the skies over Cherbourg, he felt the raid had been "pretty futile."

For the 367th Fighter Group the plight did not end with the turn for home. Lieutenant Vernon Wedul had run full bore into a tree, clogging his P-38 engine intakes with twigs and leaves. He navigated the English Channel on first one propeller and then the other to stave off a meltdown. Just when it appeared that he would make it home, both his engines burst into flames and he crashed into the sea. Coastal naval patrols were slow to reach him, and his entire flight watched him drown in the cold sea.

The skies over Cherbourg and Wedul's death spooked the survivors when they arrived back at Christchurch. That night, the living sat as if dead, quietly trying to comprehend the day. "The milk run to Cherbourg was an unqualified disaster for the 367th Fighter Group," one remembered. In sixty minutes over Cherbourg, Quesada's command had lost twenty-seven aircraft. Allied pilots were not used to this kind of fighting. The air war, which they had dominated for weeks, had just tightened up. To make matters worse, the flyers had missed their intended victims all along the front, though they had cut German communication links and had shot enough ammunition to preoccupy the defenders for crucial minutes.[61]

At precisely 1400 hours, ground troops just a fifth-mile off the bomb line rushed across the choppy Cotentin terrain, taking sixty-five shaken prisoners in a 1000-yard sprint. As the infantry continued this forward rush, 400 medium bombers staggered over the battle. Not accustomed to close support operations, these pilots experienced even more difficulty than their fighter cousins. By now clouds had rolled in from the sea, forcing the use of blind-bombing techniques. Disaster ensued. Twice the mediums attacked the American Ninth Division, making that division doggedly air-shy for the rest of the war. But it could have been worse. Forward components of the Seventy-ninth had overrun their own bomb line and were in territory vulnerable to yet more friendly fire. Fortunately, no flyers found them in the haze.[62]

When reports of the tragedy reached Collins, he was glad Quesada and Nugent were there "to observe this incident firsthand, as we flattened ourselves against our hedgerow while several successive flights roared by." Closer to the fighting, division commanders were less concerned with pilot errors and more interested in the actual results of the attack. But even there the medium bombers fell short of Allied hopes for them. As the Fourth Division commander sadly relayed, "The medium bombing did not destroy the permanent fortifications."[63]

The whole performance added to a growing disdain for medium bombers among the ground forces. By both conception and capacity, the B-25 and B-26 were caught between the strategic and tactical missions of the air force. Requested for missions every day by both tactical and strategic air leaders, the medium bombers needed at least forty-eight hours' notice for any operation. As a result, with the single exception of interdiction, they did no mission well. Commanders at all levels complained of lengthy liaison procedures, and General George Patton bluntly declared that it took "too damn long to get medium bombers when needed." Bradley concurred, believing the mediums left "much to be desired in close-support operations." For that, he blamed both misconceptions among ground officers and a "hesitancy on the part of air forces to employ bombers in close-support operations for fear of violating the sacredness of their air doctrine."[64]

Even pilots disliked medium bombers and their orphaned status in the war. Flyers had nicknamed the B-26 Marauder the "Murderer" after some pilots had died in training accidents. Later, they took to calling it the Flying Prostitute because with its hefty fuselage and slight wings it lacked any visible means of support. "The Marauder is a wonderful invention," one pilot recorded, "but it will never take the place of the airplane." Whatever the cause of medium-bomber impotence, the net effect among ground leaders was to rely increasingly on fighters for the close work required in combined-arms operations. This would prove to be both a windfall and a headache for Pete Quesada.[65]

With less then stellar air operations, the VII Corps had overrun only a small fraction of the battle by nightfall on 22 June. American infantry managed a few penetrations of limited depth along the city perimeter, but there was no clear breakthrough anywhere. In most areas the Germans clung to their dug-in positions with skill, tenacity, and fear. Still,

In a strategic sense, the campaign to capture Cherbourg was a hollow victory without the use of the port. The harbor would not handle any Allied supplies for months, and it was well into autumn before it reached its peacetime capacity. Yet Cherbourg was the first major tactical success on the Western Front at a time when the Allies were advancing much more slowly than anticipated. Armies sometimes need such morale builders, and Cherbourg gave the Anglo-Americans a reason to be optimistic.[70]

Air power's role in the victory was hard to judge. Against a determined foe in well-fortified positions, 1,822 sorties and nearly 500 tons of bombs were not enough to cow Cherbourg's defenders into submission. In the end, the city surrendered not from fear of air strikes but from the force of ground action. Bradley understood this and reflected that even with relentless pounding from the air, tactical aviation could at best only neutralize a fortress city. As with wars in past centuries, "the doughboy was going to have to move in at high cost. Air could not do it alone."[71]

Since the early spring, Quesada's men had been preparing to provide the best air support possible, but in the Cherbourg assault they had learned that there was no substitute for the hard classroom of the battlefield. Although tactical aviation in Normandy was at times breathtakingly effective, particularly in interdicting the battlefield, it was not perfect. In Normandy, airplanes were not able to destroy well-fortified positions with impunity; area air attacks on towns could be wasteful of scarce resources; friendly fire could poison the relationship between pilots and soldiers; and there remained no good mechanism to shift planes already in the air in response to urgent pleas for air support or to avert friendly fire.

Nonetheless, these were indeed the critical days in the development of tactical aviation. War can compress time, accelerate learning, and engrave lessons like no other human endeavor. The first weeks in Normandy did what two decades between the wars could not. In a fortnight, the basic patterns of tactical aviation emerged. Amid the mud and blood a system was born—crude perhaps; flawed certainly; impotent sometimes. But still a system, a scheme around which to operate, a structure on which to drape the many components of tactical air power.

Besides, Quesada now had some of his groups stationed on the conti-