

The tactical genius of Pete Quesada was critical to the Normandy invasion and the march across Europe.

By Rebecca Grant

# Quesada the Conqueror

**J**UST before noon on July 4, 1944, a P-51 of the 354th Fighter Group took to the air. Wedged into a makeshift observer's seat behind the pilot was Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied invasion force. At the controls was 40-year-old Maj. Gen. Pete Quesada.

"General Eisenhower wanted to see the terrain at St. Lo for himself," Quesada said. "I flew him around the area, getting low enough so he could see how rough the country was." Three P-51s clung to Quesada's aircraft as escorts.

Eisenhower urged Quesada to fly faster. Quesada flew the Mustang 50 miles beyond Allied lines. Eisenhower for 45 minutes contemplated breakout plans and watched artillery flashes below. Eventually, Quesada recalled, "I started getting anxious about the fact I had the supreme commander stuffed behind me in a single-engine airplane with no parachute over enemy territory."

Quesada brought Eisenhower back safely, though both men received reprimands for their joyride. To Gen. Omar N. Bradley, the two looked like "sheepish schoolboys caught in a watermelon patch." The next day, Eisenhower had to explain to his boss, Gen. George C. Marshall, that the flight "was pure business."

If Eisenhower, Bradley, and the other senior US Army commanders in Northern Europe had held a contest to select their favorite airman, Pete Quesada might have been the man. Quesada was the commander of fighter-bomber air support for the Normandy campaign.

"Although Quesada could have passed for a prototype of the hot pilot, with his shiny green trousers,



broad easy smile, and crumpled but jaunty hat,” wrote Bradley in *A Soldier’s Story*, “he was a brilliant, hard, and daring air-support commander on the ground.”

Quesada was a genius of air warfare execution. His insatiable appetite for new technologies and better performance led him to push his IX Fighter Command to a stunning rate of innovation in the tactics and techniques of air warfare. He developed real-time control of his fighter-bomber forces and formed them into a weapon that could chew up German forces attempting to maneuver and pound entrenched defensive fortifications.

His employment of airpower was an essential part of Allied success during the march across the continent after Normandy.

Quesada’s place among the great air warriors rests on two achievements: his ingenious, flexible support of American armies coming ashore for the Normandy invasion and his success in the summer and fall in constantly adapting tactics to the changing demands of the battlefields of Northern Europe.

### Before the War

Elwood R. “Pete” Quesada was indeed a hot pilot. Son of a Spanish businessman and his Irish-American wife, he was born in Washington, D.C. Quesada signed enlistment papers in 1924 after a flight with Army pilot Millard Harmon at Bolling Field, D.C. In the decade before World War II, he flew as one of the crew of *Question Mark*, served as assistant military air attaché to Cuba, flew one of the air mail routes, and pulled duty as personal pilot to a string of high officials and generals.

Quesada survived eight airplane crashes. In one of his earliest, Quesada ran his student-pilot Jenny into his commander’s aircraft as they taxied for takeoff. Along the way, however, he earned a reputation as an exceptional flier.

In 1928, he and Air Corps chief Maj. Gen. James E. Fechet flew an amphibian to Newfoundland on a well-publicized rescue mission.

In 1934 when the Air Corps was flying the air mail, Air Corps chief Maj. Gen. Benjamin D. Foulois devised a stunt in which a B-10 bomber would fly the air mail all the way from California to New York. The B-10 pilot took ill near Cleveland.

When he landed, Quesada was there, with former *Question Mark* crew chief Roy W. Hooe. Quesada and Hooe had never flown a B-10, but they took the ship on to New York. When informed of the switch, Foulois remarked that Quesada could fly anything.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Quesada’s reputation opened doors for him. He studied or flew with men such as Bradley, H.H. “Hap” Arnold, Carl A. “Tooney” Spaatz, and many others who would go on to become the influential generals and airmen of World War II. He was assigned as personal pilot to Marshall at Ft. Benning, Ga. A year at the Army Command and General Staff School at Ft. Leavenworth, Kan., convinced Quesada that “future war will require all sorts of arrangements between the air and the ground, and the two will have to work closer than a lot of people think or want.”

In World War II, Arnold brought him to his headquarters and then sent him to command a fighter group. Quesada subsequently set up the First Air Defense Wing, which soon deployed to North Africa.

Bradley’s later description got Quesada just right: “He had come into the war as a young and imaginative man unencumbered by the prejudices and theories of so many of his seniors on the employment of tactical air. To Quesada, the fighter was a little-known weapon with vast unexplored potentialities in support of ground troops. He conceived it his duty to learn what they were.”

### North Africa

For Quesada, North Africa and the Mediterranean were to be the proving grounds. Jumped up to one-star rank, Quesada’s brash immaturity made dents along the way. Though he’d been a captain just two years before, Spaatz placed him as deputy to British Air Vice Marshal Hugh P. Lloyd so that he might absorb some command style. For a time, Lloyd and Quesada were barely on speaking terms. When he left North Africa, however, Quesada thanked Lloyd for his tutelage. “He had a great deal of experience,” said the American, “and I was anxious to have some of that experience rub off on me. If I did have any success thereafter, a great deal of it must be attributed to the fact I was able to mimic him.”

Quesada commanded the 12th

Fighter Command and served as Lloyd’s deputy for the Northwest African Coastal Air Force, one of Spaatz’s five commands in the Northwest African Air Forces. Here, he immersed himself in the new technologies of radar, radio communications, and signals. Part of Coastal Air Force’s job was to vector fighters to attack German shipping convoys. A new microwave early warning radar could also be fine-tuned to locate lost aircraft and pass coordinates to pilots.

During the buildup for the invasion of Sicily, Quesada honed his skills in direct command and execution of air operations.

On June 27, 1943, for example, radars spotted Luftwaffe aircraft heading for an Allied convoy of more than 40 ships, code-named Tedworth. Correctly sensing this was a major attack, Quesada sent Spitfires from RAF 242 Group from Bizerte and Tunis, Tunisia, to intercept the German Ju-88s. Next he sent American P-40s to take on the second wave, FW-109s, and, at twilight, he scrambled the last of his P-40s, P-39s, and Beaufighters to meet the third Luftwaffe wave and joined them himself in his P-38. Quesada’s counterattacks held off more than 220 German aircraft with no ships lost.

Some lessons were hard. The invasion of Sicily on July 10, 1943, was an air disaster for the first few days. The Luftwaffe held the skies and repeatedly attacked Allied forces; Americans received little tactical air assistance initially. High winds, smoke, and a difficult flight path caused several C-47s to drop their paratroops miles off course and led to hundreds of casualties. Gunners on both American and British ships mistakenly shot down 22 C-47s full of paratroops. The only bright spot was that Quesada’s radar stations directed 83 of 87 lost or battle-damaged C-47s and other aircraft back to safe landings. As his biographer Thomas A. Hughes wrote: “From that point on, Quesada consistently recognized the importance of signal communications and radar in tactical operations.” These were the lessons he took forward to Normandy.

### Quesada’s Tactical Air Force

In fall 1943, Maj. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, Eighth Air Force commander, called Quesada to England to take over IX

Fighter Command under Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton's Ninth Air Force. Brereton was an ineffectual commander, and Quesada more than stepped into the void, exercising considerable autonomy as he prepared his forces for the upcoming invasion. "Lewy cared more for his troop carriers and medium bombers, so he gave me all the freedom in the world to do my thing," Quesada recalled.

As one of Arnold's aides, he had observed firsthand the remarkable feats of RAF Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain. "I wanted tactical air to perform in new ways that were better than the Army ever visualized," Quesada said.

In November 1943, Quesada received the first group of P-51 Mustangs to arrive in the European Theater. Soon, they were in combat, escorting bomber formations over Europe—with great success. Through the early months of 1944, the demand for long-range P-51s kept them lashed to bomber missions, but Quesada had other tasks for them. Already, troop exercises in England and rehearsals for the Normandy landings were beginning. Quesada knew his airmen were unprepared to assist in the invasion.

He made up for it, in part, by immersing himself and his airmen in ways to improve air support. More than 200 officers from his IX Fighter Command went to Italy to see how Maj. Gen. John K. Cannon was running bombing and air coordination there, while others spent time at British air support schools.

Quesada trained his pilots in the techniques they'd need for Normandy.

"A fighter pilot naturally wants to get a crack at shooting down his share of enemy planes," Quesada wrote later. "We had to teach him that air support involved low flying against tanks, even though hazardous." He forced them to work at dive-bombing, a technique that was not emphasized in Stateside pilot training. Dive-bombing missions against French targets started to outnumber escort missions in April 1944.

This was the training the fighter-bomber pilots needed. As proficiency and attitudes improved, Quesada realized the fighter-bombers could be a precision bombing tool. By May, Quesada's pilots were able to attack moving trains. On May 7, eight



**Maj. Gen. Pete Quesada inspects ignition connections and vital electrical parts German forces abandoned in railcars in Cologne, Germany. The city fell to the Allies under punishing raids by IX Fighter Command dive-bombers.**

P-47s, each carrying two 1,000-pound bombs, attacked a French railway bridge at Vernon and cut it in half. Quesada told Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the Allied Expeditionary Air Force's overall air boss, that his fighter-bombers ought to join in the bridge interdiction campaign, and Leigh-Mallory approved it.

Quesada had a gift for igniting a pilot's killer instinct. "I have never had nor met a commander with such charisma," one of his group commanders told Hughes. "By the time he finished talking I wanted to forgo the dinner and rush back to my base and start the invasion."

The "dicing" missions of low-level photographic reconnaissance of the Normandy beaches also fell under Quesada's command. These extremely hazardous missions had to be flown at altitudes of 15 to 20 feet against heavy defenses. Doubts abounded until Quesada personally talked to the pilots. They then refused practice missions and diversionary tactics, telling him, "We're ready now. Just tell us what you want and we'll get it."

#### **Time in France**

In France, the job of Fighter Command's IX Tactical Air Command was to assist the US First Army. This was the first contingent of American forces ashore on D-Day, and it was the only one there until Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr.'s Third

Army was activated several weeks later. Heavy and medium bombers were chopped to Eisenhower for the duration of the invasion period. But for immediate response and ongoing assistance, Quesada's fighters were the main source of firepower.

The IX Fighter Command's arrangements for D-Day were sophisticated. Drawing on his own operational seasoning in North Africa and the Mediterranean, Quesada spent the months before D-Day doing all he could to improve communications and the picture of the battle. He requisitioned radar sets and crammed them into the D-Day cargo manifests for early delivery to the beachhead. He trained air controllers to go ashore with the first assault waves. At Middle Wallop, UK, he set up a signals communications center to receive calls for close air support and interdiction.

Despite the preparations, Quesada's air liaisons and aviation engineers were stuck on Omaha Beach. The larger signals unit at Uxbridge, UK, became overwhelmed on D-Day. At 1:15 p.m., Quesada's crew at Middle Wallop took over. He delegated tactical control of his 1,500 aircraft to two of his colonels on ships in the Channel and put four fighter groups on strip alert in England. With this timely intervention, Quesada's signals net enabled airmen to fill six close air support requests on June 6 and scores more in the days that followed.

Quesada himself on June 8 landed at the first invasion airfield, a 2,000-foot strip cut into the terrain just above Utah Beach. He stayed as close as possible to Bradley. The two often shared meals.

Using armed reconnaissance, Quesada's units scored their most significant successes that first week against German forces trying to move into the battle area. On June 9, Mustangs behind German lines spotted the two-division Kampfgruppe Heinz moving into place for a counterattack. Six Mustangs attacked and radioed the position of the German concentration back to Middle Wallop. Quesada realized the significance of the find and vectored other fighter-bombers to the area.

Testament to Quesada's effectiveness came from the Germans themselves. German Army Group B reported that the Allied aerial reconnaissance turned into air attack "almost immediately" and even the smallest formations were attacked. Their commander, Gen. Karl Rudolf Gerd von Runstedt, reported that the zone up to 124 miles behind his main line of resistance was entirely dominated by the Allied fighter-bombers on armed reconnaissance.

The Germans were impressed with two things, wrote historian W.A. Jacobs: "speed of attack and Allied willingness to commit resources to strike anything that moved."

When bad weather shut down his air operations, Quesada worked on a blind-bombing technique, later called "pickle barrel" bombing. A microwave radar on the ground tracked the fighters, who, by radio, transmitted their speed, altitude, and other data into a Norden bombsight mechanical analog computer on the ground. Controllers then tracked and selected the moment for weapons release.

### Mr. Big

For all his success, Quesada's personality could grate on nerves. Many pilots disliked him. Some actually feared him. His IX Fighter Command pilots nicknamed him "terrible-tempered Mr. Big." An officer Quesada fired in North Africa described him to biographer Hughes as "opinionated" and biased against "West Pointers like myself." Another told Hughes, "He flew in with that toothy grin, which always seemed to be



**A maintenance crew works on a P-47 in France. Quesada's pilots gained experience in air-to-ground tactics as the number of dive-bombing missions soared. In May 1944, eight P-47s attacked and cut in half a French railway bridge.**

contrived and phony, and took all the credit for himself." A veteran Normandy P-47 pilot animatedly recalled long after the war how Quesada had come to visit the 36th Group in his P-38. The officers assembled to meet the boss but laughed among themselves when Quesada "busted up the landing."

Quesada was also a risk-taker. Flying Eisenhower behind German lines was not the only time he courted danger. One morning when his IX TAC forward air control station could not give him a fresh battle update, he and Col. Gilbert Meyers took a jeep forward to the front lines so he could see the situation for himself.

Rounding a corner, they spotted a German Tiger tank. Quesada remarked that the tank didn't appear to be knocked out. The Tiger opened fire, sending a shell right under the seat of Quesada's jeep. Quesada and Meyers bailed out and had to slither back to American lines. The next day, the Army division commander came upon the mangled two-star jeep and sent it back to Quesada's headquarters with a bow on it.

Quesada flew 21 operational missions in North Africa. In France, he continued to fly combat missions, usually to see for himself how new techniques were working out.

Example: 1st Lt. Philip N. Wright Jr. of the 36th Fighter Group was in Quesada's four-ship formation testing pickle barrel bombing. One pass called for straight and level flight

through German 88 mm flak. Just as the formation completed its run and spread out, "six bursts of 88 went off right where we had been," Wright remembered. "Without knowing it, the Germans had come within a gnat's eyebrow of bagging a renowned two-star general." Quesada "had a lot of guts," Wright acknowledged.

Above all, Quesada blended technologies and tactics to make airpower flexible enough for whatever challenges the war threw his way. Writing after the war, he summarized: "We had to be ready to invent new methods, try out new ways to attack, change what we had been doing to meet new conditions. The Luftwaffe lacked this flexibility, while we had it."

### July Stalemate

Quesada needed all the flexibility he could muster as the Germans dug into the Normandy hedgerow terrain and held on stubbornly at Caen and other places. To break the stalemate, the American ground forces would need much better air support.

Quesada was the first to put common radio sets in the cockpits of lead tanks and fighter-bombers. The tank crew gave up the armorer's position and inserted a pilot, who then became the forward air controller for the tank formation. On the radio with his airborne pilot buddies, the controller could direct fire much more accurately and quickly. Per Hughes, Quesada promised Bradley, "This



**President Eisenhower in 1958 appointed Quesada to be the first director of the Federal Aviation Administration. Commercial pilots remember him, not always fondly, as the man who imposed mandatory retirement at age 60.**

way the direction from the ground will be in language the fighter boy in the air can understand.”

Armored column cover became a highly flexible mission for the fighter-bombers, and it paid off during the breakout at St. Lo in late July. Quesada kept four P-47s over an armored column at all times. The flight lead contacted the pilot controller in a lead tank. On one run, P-47s took out a German 88 mm gun positioned at a road crossing, where it was picking off tanks. In another incident, four P-47s flew to the head of the American tank column and found two big German tanks just around the bend in the road. They left both Tigers burning and American tanks advancing.

The system was flexible, too. When a lead tank took deadly fire from an 88 mm that pilots thought they'd destroyed, the column's surviving pilot controller in another tank called them back to knock out the gun for good. Teaming air with tanks also cut down on friendly fire incidents.

More innovations followed. On July 17, P-47 pilots employed rockets against locomotives. Also in mid-July, Quesada's P-38s started dropping the jellied gasoline known as napalm. Quesada had heard about rockets and napalm and applied the new weapons directly to his own ground support needs.

Quesada could also redirect his fighters even while airborne. He was at a microwave early warning radar station on July 18, observing a ra-

dar blind-bombing mission that had to be aborted, when, over the radio, he heard that medium bombers had missed a rendezvous with fighters. The P-47s from the bombing experiment were still airborne with ample fuel. The combination radio-radar apparatus gave controllers positions on the fighters and they were redirected to the medium-bomber join-up point. Primitive though it was, the technologies were there for air control. It took Quesada's tactical execution skills to put it to best use.

### Questioning His Tactics

Bradley showered praise on him, but Quesada found himself less appreciated in his own American chain of command. Maj. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, who took over from Breton, complained that too much of Quesada's force was employed 30 to 40 miles in advance of the Army's front line. But Quesada's tactics were the right ones. As Patton took off with Third Army, air support by IX Fighter Command's XIX TAC for his deep drives followed the pattern set by Quesada. Interrogated German generals proved the point. “Invariably they said that Allied air-

power was one of the primary causes of their defeat,” Quesada wrote. “I am content to let it rest at that.”

Quesada saw command of Ninth Air Force go to Vandenberg. After the war, Quesada activated Tactical Air Command, placing his headquarters at Langley Field, Va. He received his third star in 1947, but the de-emphasis on tactical aviation narrowed his path to further promotion. The Air Force under Chief of Staff Vandenberg had no place for Quesada, even as the outbreak of the Korean War pointed out an urgent need for tactical air support.

Quesada retired in 1951. In 1958, President Eisenhower named him to be the first director of the Federal Aviation Administration. While there, Quesada continued to irritate pilots and set precedents by being the first to impose a mandatory retirement at age 60.

“I hope this moron [Quesada] has a special hot place reserved for him,” complained longtime commercial pilot Capt. John Deakin, “because he made an unfair, arbitrary, and illogical rule that has now clipped the wings of thousands of fine young 60-year-olds.”

Quesada later held executive positions in the defense industry. He died in February 1993, aged 88.

Quesada's World War II tactics and flexible control of airpower were mirrored in Operation Desert Storm and other combat operations since. Airmen may enjoy technologies superior to those of others, but they would do well to heed Quesada's advice, delivered in an essay he wrote after World War II. He attributed the success of the World War II tactical air operations to the kind of close liaison with ground forces that “can come only from day-by-day contact—especially at command levels; there must be almost instantaneous communication between ground and air and through all the chain of command.”

His battle instincts and demand for top performance helped the Allies deliver victory. Bradley summed it up this way: “This man Quesada is a jewel.” ■

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