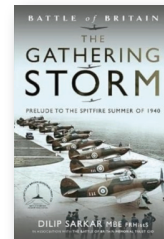


The Gathering Storm: Prelude to the Spitfire Summer of 1940

by Dilip Sarkar

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When Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin returned from Germany after his meeting with Hitler, and declared peace in our time, the RAF was predominantly equipped with slow, obsolete biplanes, no match for modern German Messerschmidt fighter aircraft. Had Britain gone to war at that stage, it would have undoubtedly lost the Battle of Britain. *The Gathering Storm* provides a comprehensive backdrop to the strategic circumstances, political climate, military situation and the miscalculation that resulted in Britain being so ill equipped to defend itself for the coming war.

Author, Dilip Sarkar was awarded an MBE for services to aviation history, and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Unsurprisingly, for a retired police detective with First Class Honours in Modern History, his work has always been evidence-based - often challenging long-accepted myths. It includes the authorised biographies of Group Captain Sir Douglas Bader and Air Vice-Marshal 'Johnnie' Johnson; the best-selling *Spitfire Manual* and *The Few*. Specialising in World War II air warfare, his 50th book was published in 2022. Seeking out official documents and checking first-hand testimony against the known facts, he weaves the personal stories of those involved in the history into the narrative. *The Gathering Storm* is an excellent example of this skill.

In the 1930s conventional wisdom acknowledged the importance of bomber aircraft over fighter aircraft, delaying the build-up of an adequate fighter force to defend the homeland. It also denied the opportunity to develop tactics appropriate for the modern high-performance aircraft that would fight in the Battle of Britain. The author provides an informed description of the air defence system developed in the late 1930's and the state and organisation of the RAF.

There is an excellent history of the development of the Hurricane and Spitfire aircraft and the advancement of a stagnant aircraft industry that the development of these aircraft stimulated.

Early chapters cover the invasion of Norway and *blitzkrieg* during the invasion of the low countries. The German use of coordinated land, sea and air forces was effective and overwhelming and drew on experience gained in Spain. A comparable level of effectiveness was not achieved by Britain until well into the war.

The Gathering Storm describes events leading to the Battle for France, its costs and inevitable outcome, addressing issues Britain faced when endeavouring to support a close ally, but while keeping a credible force for its own defence.

The RAF was much maligned for a lack of a presence over the beaches of Normandy. However, the Air Force

protected the retreating army by holding the Luftwaffe at bay further afield. All told, the RAF lost 453 aircraft and 80 pilots in France and over Normandy, leaving a meagre reserve for the defence of the homeland.

The many threads that collectively represent what was the gathering storm, including the persuasion of Hitler to agree to a seaborne invasion of England, and the first tentative aerial engagements of England are presented in a clear, logical discourse.

The development air defence capabilities for Great Britain are considered in some detail with a concise description of the development of Fighter Command into an effective fighting force incorporating: centralised command and decentralised control rooms; fighter groups, radar networks; anti-aircraft artillery and the many other capabilities required to mount an effective defence.

The author provides a most interesting mix of vignettes of personal recollections and squadron records of events within the overall circumstance of the moment. The pilots' combat reports provide a fascinating insight into aerial engagements while the author's research provides the identities of the Luftwaffe pilots on the other side of the fight.

The Gathering Storm is very well researched, and while covering some of the ground that other books address, the depth of information is second to none. There is an interesting set of photographs of people who prepared the air defences for the UK and those who fought the battles. There are an excellent collection of maps and charts illustrating the organisation and capabilities of the RAF and disposition of its assets, and those of the Luftwaffe. A comprehensive glossary assists the reader to interpret acronyms used in the book, along with an excellent and comprehensive index .

When it was decided to provide a special clasp to the 1939-45 Star for those aircrew who flew in the Battle of Britain, it was difficult to fix an exact date when the battle began. Somewhat arbitrarily, it was declared that the battle began on 10 July 1940 and this book concludes at this juncture.

The Gathering Storm provides the prelude to the coming Battle of Britain and is the first book in an eight-volume series being published in association with the Battle of Britain Memorial Trust, and will comprehensively deal with the Battle of Britain.

I recommend *The Gathering Storm* to readers interested in the history of air warfare during World War II, and have little doubt that the series will be a valued addition to any book shelf.

Bob Treloar

