

The Growth of Fighter Command 1936–1940

by **T C G JAMES**

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Reviewed by Group Captain Peter W Gray

In the annals of British air power history, only a relatively tiny number of documents stand out as being of huge significance. Arguably, General Smuts' report leading to the formation of the Royal Air Force is one such work of seminal importance. In terms of the survival of the nation, Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's letter of 16th May 1940 to the Under Secretary of State at the Air Ministry was critical. As Commander-in-Chief of Fighter Command, Dowding very properly drew the attention of his colleagues in the senior headquarters to the fragile state of our fighter defences. The popular myth is that Dowding refused to send more Hurricane squadrons to France. It is, however, clear from this, now declassified, official history of Fighter Command that Dowding 'request[ed] that as a matter of paramount urgency the Air Ministry will consider and decide what level of strength is to be left in Fighter Command for the Defence of this country' (reproduced in full at Appendix 11). The subtle difference is important. What is arguably more important, however, is the note reproduced in the following Appendix written by Air Chief Marshal Sir Cyril Newall (Chief of the Air Staff) in full support of his front line Commander. The chain of correspondence immediately highlights the benefit for air power students of having this sort of material immediately to hand in the excellent series of Official Histories.

These documents were originally classified and were written, by the Air Historical Branch, while the War was still in progress. This volume, and its successor (which covers the Battle of Britain), was written by Cecil James – a young Cambridge historian who had been invalided from the Army after service in Malaya. James had unlimited access to the contemporary files, and arguably more importantly, to those involved in the respective corridors of power. As the editor points out in the introduction, the fact that the work was intended for publication allowed James to discuss many issues with somewhat more candour than would otherwise have been the case.

The book, true to its title, outlines the growth of Fighter Command from its formation through to 1940. It is worth noting, however, that the narrative commences in 1922 when steps were originally taken to ensure that Home air defence was an integral part of the peacetime defence of the United Kingdom. This stands somewhat at odds with those who contend that the Royal Air Force was totally fixated on strategic bombing. James chronicles the formation of the new functional Command with admirable clarity. He outlines the basis of the layered defence system that had been gradually built up into what was subsequently – and erroneously – termed 'Dowding's System'. James's analysis also allows the reader to see the relationship between the Commander and his colleagues on the Air Staff and their role in the establishment of a coherent radar-based air defence system.

It is axiomatic that one of the roles of history is to strip away myth from the realities of events. It is also essential to be able to view these happenings through the eyes of those in place at the time. This book greatly facilitates both approaches and should be mandatory reading for anyone seriously contemplating work on Fighter Command during World War II.

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