My Manchester United Years

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Now, when I look back on my life and remember all that I wanted from it as a young boy in the North East, I see more clearly than ever it is a miracle. I see one privilege heaped upon another. I wonder all over again how so much could come to one man simply because he was able to do something which for him was so natural and easy, and which he knew from the start he loved to do more than anything else.

None of this wonderment is lessened by knowing that when I played football I was probably as dedicated as any professional could be, though I claim no great credit for this. Playing was, in all honesty, almost as natural as breathing. No, the truth is that, although I did work hard at developing the gifts I'd been given, the path of my life truly has been a miracle granted to me. Why, I cannot explain. But in Munich in 1958 I learned that even miracles come at a price.

Mine, until the day I die, is the tragedy which robbed me of so many of my dearest friends who happened to be team-mates – and of so many of the certainties that had come to me, one as seamlessly as another, in my brief and largely untroubled life up to that moment.

Even now, forty-nine years on, it still reaches down and touches me every day. Sometimes I feel it quite lightly, a mere brush stroke across an otherwise happy mood. Sometimes it engulfs me with terrible regret and sadness – and guilt that I

walked away and found so much. But whatever the severity of its presence, the Munich air crash is always there, always a factor that can never be discounted, never put down like time-exhausted baggage.

I hope I do not say any of this in a maudlin or self-pitying way – how could I when I consider the lightness of the cost to me when I compare it with the price paid by the young men whose lives I shared so deeply and who so quickly had become like brothers? I confront Munich immediately only because the meaning of it, its implications, its legacy in my spirit, and the unshakeable memory of it, are still so central to my existence.

It would be possible to list a thousand good things that have happened to me before I deal with the moment I regained consciousness and faced that hellish scene at the airfield. With my first glance I saw that one beloved team-mate was dead after suffering injuries I could never bring myself to describe – and then Sir Matt Busby groaning and holding his chest as he sat in a pool of water. I could delve into so much that has been a joy to me before I come to the sight of seven of my team-mates laid out in the snow.

That, however, would be an evasion, a cosmetic device to obscure the truth I have lived with since 6 February 1958: that everything I have been able to achieve since that day – including the winning of the European Cup and the World Cup and being linked, inextricably, with two of the greatest players the world has ever seen, George Best and Denis Law – has been accompanied by a simple question: why me?

Why was I able to run my hands over my body and find that I was still whole when Roger Byrne, Eddie Colman, Liam 'Billy' Whelan, David Pegg, Tommy Taylor, Mark Jones and Geoff Bent lay dead, and Duncan Edwards, who I loved and admired so intensely, faced an unavailing battle for his life? Why had I been picked out to inherit so much of what they,

in the first surge of brilliant youth, had achieved so beautifully?

One of the few certainties that replaced my original belief that anything could be achieved in the presence of such great footballers is that I will never stop asking that question – no more than I will be able to shed those feelings of guilt at my own survival which can come to me so suddenly at any moment, night or day.

For many reasons it is not easy to speak of these things, not least because of the sensitivities of those who were left behind by the disaster, all those loved ones whose lives suddenly became so hollow. Even now, when I happen to meet them I suspect they are asking the question, 'How was it that you survived and the others didn't?' But then something I learned beyond all else, after the first shock had been absorbed, was that whatever happens to you, whatever hurt you sustain, and however it is measured, you always have at least two options. One is to submit to the impact of such a catastrophe, the other is to draw strength from those around you, and go on.

That I was able to take the latter course is a matter for gratitude that can never be adequately expressed, though I will do my best as my story unfolds. As the weeks and months extended into years there were so many points of support and inspiration. My team-mates and fellow survivors Harry Gregg and Bill Foulkes were the first to meet the challenge and show the way. They did it with courage and determination and their example taught me one of the greatest lessons I would learn. Then there were so many others. They ranged from my family in the North East, who reclaimed me from the hospital in Germany when I was still stunned and so dislocated, to Jimmy Murphy, Busby's ferociously committed assistant, and my dear friend Nobby Stiles, who would share the supreme moments of my football life at the finals of the World Cup and European Cup. Most importantly, my wife Norma and our daughters,

Suzanne and Andrea, gave true meaning to the rest of my life.

Beyond such key figures, the cast which shaped my world – gave me my values and my guidance – is so vast that it touches every moment of my account of the days that were moulded by the first important discovery I made as a boy: that I would never do anything more naturally, or so well, as play football. That was the gift which was retained only miraculously in the horror of that Bavarian night.

I need to go back before Munich now if I am to provide any insight into what was the central drama of my life, something which informed, inevitably, all that came after. I need to try to recreate the sheer, uncomplicated thrill that came with being a member of this young team. A team which, perhaps more than any other in the history of the game, was filled not only with talent but with what seemed a grace which came from some unchartable source, something beyond even the planning and the vision of the great Busby.

We felt nothing was beyond us as we talked so animatedly and laughed on that journey home from Belgrade, where we had played with great maturity to reach the semi-finals of the European Cup. In two days we were to face Wolves in another game of vital importance, one which could well prove decisive in our pursuit of a third straight league title. The sky was low and filled with snow as we landed in Munich for refuelling, but we saw little or no reason to doubt that our own horizons stretched out quite seamlessly.

It was a mood which so cheerfully overcame a long and irksome journey, as most of our travelling was in those days. In less optimistic circumstances I might have been more conscious of my dislike for this particular aircraft bearing us down through the low clouds, a chartered British European Airways Elizabethan. Since the first time I had flown in one, I had been made uneasy by the length of time it took to get airborne. The

plane seemed to need an age to get off the ground. The Elizabethan felt like a heavy aircraft, one that needed a long runway and plenty of time to produce sufficient speed. It was all right after you had completed the ascent. You were reassured then by the steady throb of the engines. The first time I experienced a take-off in the plane I found myself saying, under my breath, 'This is a long one.'

When we put down in Munich you couldn't help noticing all the slushy snow on the runway, and as we had coffee in the terminal I imagined they would be clearing it away. Today, I suppose, it would take just a few minutes. There was no tension as we talked eagerly about the days ahead. We were, after all, the team who could apparently do anything. In the last few days we had beaten Arsenal in what some said was the most spectacular game ever seen at Highbury, and in Belgrade we had been equal to anything thrown at us by the tough and skilful players of Red Star. Now we were in the hands of an airline which surely knew, just as we did in our own world, what they were doing.

Even after two aborted take-offs, and a second visit to the terminal for another coffee, as far as I was concerned the spell was scarcely broken. Some players had changed seats, moved to places which they considered safer, but doing that never occurred to me or my companion on the leg from Belgrade, Dennis Viollet. Later, though, when I stood on the cold field in a state of disbelief and shock, I was glad that I had decided to keep on my overcoat. Why did I do that, why was it that I was able to remove the coat and place it on Busby as he waited on the wet tarmac desperately in need of medical assistance?

By the third attempt at take-off, conversation had dwindled almost to nothing. Dennis and I no longer talked about the growth of the team and the possibilities offered by the Wolves game. I looked out of the window and as I did so I was suddenly conscious of the silence inside the plane. Outside, the snowy

field flew by, but not quickly enough it seemed. I knew it was too long when I saw the fence and then we were on the house. There was an awful noise, the grind of metal on metal. Then there was the void.

When I came to, I was on the ground, outside the wrecked plane, but still strapped into my seat. Dennis had been pulled out of his seat and was lying beside me, conscious but obviously hurt. Later, I learned that Harry Gregg and Bill Foulkes had helped to get some of the injured out of the plane.

I could hear sirens blaring and then Dennis said, 'What's the matter, Bobby, what's gone on?' Instantly I regretted my reply, which was, 'Dennis, it's dreadful.' He was not in a good condition and at that point I should have protected him from the worst of the truth, but as the horror was overwhelming me, I suppose I was removed from rational thought. I saw the bodies in the snow, though one small and passing mercy was that I didn't recognise among the dead either of my closest friends, Eddie Colman, who with his family had befriended me so warmly in my early days at Old Trafford, and David Pegg from Yorkshire, who shared my roots in the mining community. In addition to my seven, ultimately eight, fallen team-mates, the carnage that confronted my still blinking and dazed eyes had robbed another fourteen, and in time fifteen, souls of their lives – a combination of team officials, journalists, flight personnel and a travelling supporter, who, like us all, had been expected home that evening.

Eventually, I was helped into a mini-truck, one that seemed to have been diverted from its normal task of shifting coal. Gregg and Foulkes came with me as we raced through the blizzard into the city hospital. There, the walking wounded were taken to a waiting room.

Mostly, I stared at the wall. I had one small bruise on my head and I was suffering from concussion. Reality came drifting in and out, but at one of its sharpest points I noticed an orderly

smiling, as if to say, it seemed to me, that all this was a routine matter and that the world would still be turning when the dawn came. But of course it wouldn't, not for the football team that was supposed to conquer the world. I was filled with rage and it was directed at this hospital worker who seemed to understand none of that. I screamed at him. What I said exactly is, like much of that night and the days that followed, lost to me now, but I remember vividly the pain that came to me so hard at that moment. Soon after, a doctor stuck something into the back of my neck.

My next memory is of waking the following morning in a hospital ward. In a nearby bed was a young German, who was looking at a newspaper that was spread before him. I could see from the photographs that he was reading about the crash. He spoke little English, but when he looked up and saw me he managed to say, 'I'm sorry.' At that moment I had to know who had gone and who had survived.

The German lad read out the names and then, after a short pause, said, 'Dead.' It was a terrible roll call, and I make no excuse for repeating once again . . . Roger Byrne, David Pegg, Eddie Colman, Tommy Taylor, Billy Whelan, Mark Jones and Geoff Bent. How could it possibly be? It was as though my life was being taken away, piece by piece. I had invited David Pegg to my home for a North Eastern New Year, had spent so many hours in Eddie's house in Salford, where the talk was mostly of football and soldiering; I had shared digs with Billy Whelan, and most Saturdays I would have a few beers at the Bridge Inn in Sale with Tommy Taylor, who would wait for me if I had been away with the reserves.

It was impossible to grasp that these days were gone, that I would never see Eddie swaggering into the ground again, humming some Sinatra tune, walking on the balls of his feet – or have Mark Jones, the kindest of pros, touching my sleeve after a game and giving me some encouraging word. A game

never seemed to pass without that tough Yorkshireman taking the chance to say something like, 'Well done, son,' or 'That was a lovely touch.'

There was some relief when I was moved into a ward with a few of the other survivors: the Welsh winger Kenny Morgans, goalkeeper Ray Wood, Dennis Viollet who was looking better than when I last saw him lying in the snow, Albert Scanlon the talented, unpredictable film fan from Salford, who was known to spend most Fridays using his free pass at one of the city-centre cinemas before emerging groggily into the street after gorging on Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth. I wanted to shout, 'At least we're OK,' but then I thought of Duncan Edwards, who was fighting for his life, and the badly injured Johnny Berry and Jackie Blanchflower, who would never play again, and that took away any such urge.

Harry Gregg and Bill Foulkes passed through the ward on their way to what they saw as their duty to the dead, back at Old Trafford. I shivered when I thought how it must be in Manchester. We had been screened from much of the news, but then, as the days passed, you heard of the funerals and something deep inside you was grateful that you weren't there, because it would have been so hard to say goodbye with so many eyes on you. All the time the question came pounding in: why me, why did I survive?

When you heard how Manchester was stricken, how many people were turning up at Old Trafford, aimless in their grief but just wanting to be as close as they could to the team who had so lifted their lives, who they had seen growing up before their eyes, you felt there had to be a match as soon as possible. This was something to try to latch on to, as you might to a piece of flotsam in a wild sea. A match would help everybody, players, fans, the whole city of Manchester. A match would take away some of the horror. It was a small piece of escapism and it didn't take you far. It couldn't, because upstairs Duncan

Edwards and Matt Busby were in oxygen tents and fighting uphill battles to stay alive.

Eventually, I was able to see them both. I went up with my heart pounding. Later, I was told that Duncan's fight, which lasted nearly a fortnight, was the result of freakish strength and willpower. The German doctors did all they could and then just had to shake their heads in disbelief that anyone could fight so hard against such odds.

He was in obvious pain when I visited him, but his spirit was still as strong as ever. When he saw me he threw back his head and said, 'I've been waiting for you. Where the bloody hell have you been?' I whispered my encouragement, feeling my eyes smart while wondering all over again how it could be that this young giant of the game was so stricken while I could prepare to walk down the stairs before packing for home. Big Dunc was more than the admired team-mate and older friend who had looked after me so well when we were in National Service together in Shropshire, who went scouring the camp for a better mattress when he saw that the one I had been issued with had bits falling out. He was the embodiment of everything I admired in a footballer. He had skill and courage and tremendous power. He could do anything, play anywhere, and the world awaited the full scale of his glory.

Once, when I was training with United in Fallowfield, at the same time as England gathered for some work en route to a game with Scotland at Hampden Park, I saw Edwards lapping the field in the company of two of the great internationals, Tom Finney and Billy Wright. The three of them chatted amiably as they jogged and I couldn't help wondering what other teenaged footballer would look so relaxed, so confident, in the company of such stars.

Duncan Edwards wore his own greatness lightly, but he knew it was a suit that fitted him perfectly. Maybe that was one reason why he fought so hard in that hospital in Munich. I could only

pray for his survival after Jimmy Murphy took me by train to the Hook of Holland for the ferry to Harwich, where I was met by my mother Cissie and my brother Jack for the drive home to the North East. I didn't say much on the journey back to where everything had started, and where I had to persuade myself, in the company of my own people, that football could once again occupy the core of my being.

Of course I would know it soon enough. What would take a little longer to understand was that nothing would be quite so simple ever again. Some, including Jack, insist that Munich changed me. If it did, I like to think that eventually it was for the better, at the very least in that it told me that even when riding a miracle you still have to remember how easily you can fall. If you are very lucky, you survive, and while you're doing it you fulfil every dream, every ambition, you ever had. This is what lies at the heart of my story, but to tell it properly, first I had to go back to Munich. Without doing that, I know I couldn't begin to define my life.