

MANCHESTER UNITED TRAGEDY:

On the fringe of a Munich airport lies the wreckage of an airliner, still smouldering from a crash in which 21 people were killed. Tragedy enough, at any time; but in that plane were a group of young men who were almost the personal friends of millions - Manchester United, the finest soccer team Britain has produced since the war. And seven of them died in the crash. Ten others, as well as their famous manager Matt Busby, were injured - some so seriously that their lives hung in the balance.

"Busby's Babes", as they were affectionately called, were on their way home from Belgrade when the disaster struck. They were on top of the world. Their 3-goal draw with Yugoslavia's Red Star team had put them through to the European Cup semi-finals. They had high hopes of the English F.A. Cup. Now, those hopes are snuffed out, like the lives of seven of their finest players.

Three days before, the press had carried pictures of a confident team leaving for Belgrade - pictures which remind us that with them were eight of the North's finest sporting journalists who would never see home again.

Remember Matt Busby leading his "Babes" on to the Wembley turf for the Cup Final, that brilliant day last Spring? Roger Byrne (in the plain shirt) skippered them against Aston Villa. United were already League Champions - and that day they came within an ace of bringing off the double. Here's Manchester winger John Berry beating his man and passing to Tommy Taylor - a fine pair, that.

Luck was against United when an accidental collision with Villa's MacFarland robbed them of goalie Ray Wood in the seventh minute. MacFarland soon recovered, but Ray Wood had to be carried off for a time. His place in goal was taken by Jackie Blanchflower - and splendidly, for Matt Busby trained his players to be versatile. Being a man short didn't prevent United from attacking again and again. Tommy Taylor was in there fighting - and Eddie Colman, too. Ray Wood came back to play on the right wing - and his colleagues concentrated on the left to give him a chance to recover. They kept up the pressure on the Villa goal - where a lesser man than goalie Sims would have been overwhelmed.

Bill Whelan and Roger Byrne show Manchester United tactics at their best.

Manchester's only goal came from a corner which Duncan Edwards fed to Tommy Taylor for a magnificent header into the top of the net. Aston Villa won by a one-goal margin - but Busby's Babes had nothing to be ashamed of. They had lost to the only side in history to win the F.A. Cup seven times! No one could guess the tragedy that awaited the runners-up less than a year later.

Duncan Edwards, injured. Bill Foulkes, injured.

Mark Jones, killed.

Ray Wood, injured.

Eddie Colman, killed.

David Fagg, killed.

Dennis Viallet, injured. Tommy Taylor, killed.

Roger Byrne, killed.

Bill Whelan, killed.

John Berry, injured.

At the time of going to press, Matt Busby was fighting to save his life. The team secretary, Walter Christner, was killed.

Manchester, from the moment the news came through was a city in mourning. Newspapers sold as fast as they could be printed. It was as though every family, in a city of three-quarters of a million people, had suffered a personal loss; and so indeed they had. At Old Trafford, the saddest football ground in the world, the flags flew at half-mast - and on hundreds of other football grounds, other flags were dipped in sympathy; for this disaster is perhaps the most tragic single blow British sport has ever suffered.....