

Supporters gather outside the offices at Old Trafford, eager to learn more about the news of the plane crash in Munich, while assistant manager Jimmy Murphy takes calls from other concerned fans



# Munich: the aftermath



The Munich victims receive a military salute as the repatriation flight leaves Munich Airport on February 11, while a week later Bill Foulkes leads the Reds out (left) for our first game following the disaster

Manchester United's small but dedicated group of staff had much to contend with in the days following the tragic air crash in Germany, but, as instructed by chairman Harold Hardman, they ensured the club would go on. Let us transport you back to Old Trafford in February 1958...

# 11

United's First Division champions line up ahead of another successful title tilt in September 1956, their domestic dominance paving the opportunity to fulfil Busby's European vision

**The final league match before the Munich Air Disaster was an absolute humdinger, one of the finest exhibitions of why United were a team loved and adored. Matt Busby's boys beat Arsenal by five goals to four, and perhaps the most famous picture features Duncan Edwards signing an autograph for a young lad in a duffel coat (below). In the background are his team-mates, hordes of people and the famous Clock End at Highbury. And on his left sleeve is a black armband.**

The armband was worn to mourn the loss of long-serving United director George Whittaker, found dead, aged 82, at the team hotel that morning. A funeral will be held in due course, as will a board meeting, to be arranged by club secretary Walter Crickmer, to choose Whittaker's successor. It will likely be one of two successful United-supporting businessmen, Louis Edwards or Willie Satinoff. Both are close friends of Busby, who has invited the latter to travel with the team to Belgrade to face Red Star. The team's kit is dropped off at Old Trafford, where 'Omo' and 'Daz', the nicknames of the two laundry ladies, will need some good detergent to get rid of the mud stains.

Busby's assistant Jimmy Murphy took a taxi to Old Trafford on the afternoon of Thursday 6 February. He carried a box of oranges, gifted to him by the Israeli national team, who his Welsh side had just beaten to qualify for the 1958 World Cup finals. He left the oranges by the door at 3.45pm and climbed the stairs, briefcase in hand, ready for a well-earned scotch after a long journey. He planned to get everything ready for the return of Matt and the players ahead of Saturday's key league fixture against championship rivals Wolves.



Edwards signs a young fan's autograph ahead of kick-off at Highbury, one of the poignant images from that famous final outing on home soil for the 21-year-old



Alma George was Busby's secretary and had seen the Busby Babes grow up under the tutelage of Jimmy, the stoic Welshman who was inside Old Trafford on the afternoon of 6 February and knew nothing of the Munich Air Disaster. Alma told him, with a lump in her throat, what she had learned only 15 minutes earlier, as Jimmy poured his scotch. "The plane has crashed." Murphy couldn't comprehend the message, so Alma delivered it again. "I don't think you understand," she said. "The plane has crashed. A lot of people have died." And still, it took one more time, Alma crying now, for Murphy to understand. The significance of her words finally dawned, and he went into his office and cried.

There must have been an eerie silence inside Old Trafford for a time. The news of the crash filtered in slowly through news wires. All those inside the ground knew was the plane had crashed, and some of those on board British European Airways flight 609 were dead.

The ground soon came alive again. Telephones rang, panicked relatives arrived. The ticket office closed, as did Old Trafford to non-members of staff. Supporters gathered on the forecourt looking for information, young boys running out of their homes, dressed in light shirts in the February cold. Joe Armstrong was the club's chief scout and often the friendly voice on the end of the phone for supporters wanting to buy tickets.

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Mourners line the streets as hearses journey to Old Trafford carrying many of their heroes (left), while the show of solidarity continues as fans keep their legacy alive and the Red flag flying by beginning to queue for FA Cup fifth-round tickets

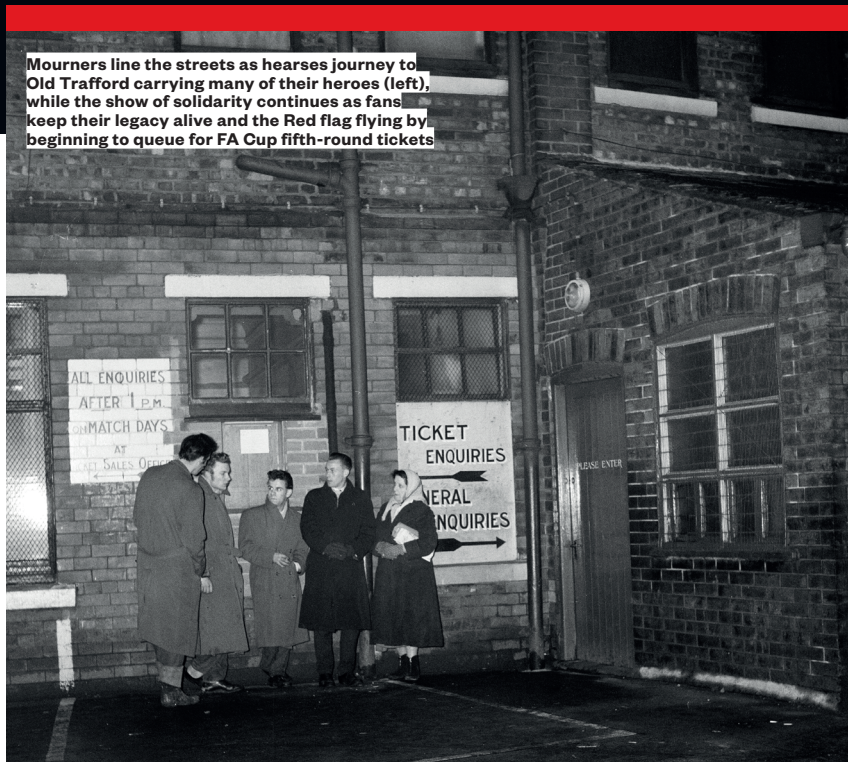
→ He told those who gathered to go home, for the club knew nothing more than they did.

Manchester United employed very few people in 1958. While the club's current staff numbers are close to a thousand, then it could almost be counted on two hands. Busby, Murphy and Armstrong were the 'Three Musketeers'; Crickmer was club secretary; Bert Whalley and Tom Curry were key to the coaching staff, as were Bill Inglis and Arthur Powell. Alma George, a young girl in her twenties who had grown up watching games on Old Trafford's 'Pop-Side' of the ground, was secretary to Busby and Crickmer. Les Olive was Crickmer's assistant, and there were the two laundry ladies, Irene Ramsden and Jean Taylor. The Royle brothers managed the grounds and chairman Harold Hardman led a small and unobtrusive board, still yet to replace George Whittaker.

Crickmer was a ravenously determined and diligent secretary who had served United since 1919, dragging the club through the Great Depression and the Second World War. What he left behind was not just a devastated family and many a heartbroken friend, but a gaping chasm at Manchester United. For four decades, he had learned everything there was to know about football administration. United's vision was dictated by James W Gibson and then Busby, but the mechanics were so often down to Crickmer. And so, while Mancunians cried, Busby fought for his life at Rechts der Isar Hospital and Jimmy Murphy created a new team, someone had to take on Crickmer's responsibilities.

Walter's 28-year-old assistant Les Olive immediately stepped up. A former goalkeeper who had turned out twice for United in April 1953, those who had died in the crash were Olive's close friends. And yet he met the quite unimaginable task head-on, with the same virtues of honesty and hard work as Crickmer. The crucial helping hand proved to be Joe Armstrong, who joined United along with Busby and Murphy in 1945, bringing his ready-made network of scouts with him. Armstrong had been responsible for 'finding' many of the Busby Babes – and those who he had not found himself, he welcomed to the club and placed them in their digs.

As solid information slowly came in on that Thursday afternoon, Armstrong was sent out into Manchester to the homes of the players whose families did not have



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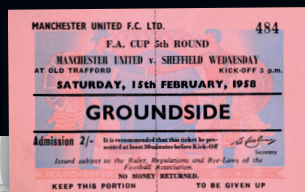
telephones. He had to tell them their sons, who he had cared for and watched come through, had died.

Les Olive remained inside Old Trafford, alongside Alma and Jimmy and several other volunteers. His wife Betty came to help. They desperately sought clarification on the condition of Matt and the others, often relying on press reports, and they called the grief-stricken families to confirm their worst fears. At 7.15pm, they called the home of Matt Busby. On the other end, his son-in-law Don Gibson heard the words meant for Matt's wife, Jean: "your husband is alive."

Transport to and from Munich was then arranged, most immediately for Jimmy Murphy and the relatives.

While Murphy is there at the hospital, he sees Duncan Edwards, who asks, "is the kick-off three o'clock?" and Matt Busby, who tells him to "keep the flag flying". That he does, insisting to the board that the club must go on. Louis Edwards is made director and Olive confirmed as the new secretary.

Members of the Murphy family and their friends help out, as do stewards and ground committee members. They are paid in pats on the back, cups of tea and occasionally a sandwich. Jimmy's daughter Pat does secretarial work, and his son Phil filters through an enormous crate of letters. Hundreds of people are offering to play for the club and Phil checks to see if there are any with promising backgrounds before passing them on to Joe Armstrong. Olive arranges funerals and flowers, and then the signing of new



Murphy greets Stan Crowther (left) as he completes his move to United just an hour before Bill Foulkes and (future Red) Albert Quixall come together in the centre circle for the Reds' return to action



players. Twenty-one coffins receive a military salute at Munich Airport as their British European Airways carrier flight trundles down the runway. Four are taken off at London before the remaining 17 are carried to Manchester Ringway Airport. Crowds gather at the gate and then line the streets towards Old Trafford. Around 100,000 people stand in homage, hats firmly gripped in hands, heads bowed, contributing to a reflective hush.

Members of the youth team carry 10 of the coffins into Old Trafford, where the gymnasium is converted into a temporary mortuary. A week before, the laundry ladies had washed the players' kits. Now, they polished their coffins. It was their method of coping. Irene and Jean (known as Omo and Daz after the famous detergent brands), were two of just a handful of permanent United employees. Prior to the crash, players would head down to their room for a cuppa, a cigarette, a borrowed newspaper and to listen to the radio, the only one United owned. The whole team had gathered there only a fortnight prior, listening eagerly to the FA Cup fifth-round draw, in which United were picked out at home to Sheffield Wednesday. Many of the players were young boys, and the laundry ladies were a friendly pair of colleagues they respected greatly, as instructed by Murphy and Busby, and could rely on.

Outside the ground, crowds gather in the spot where Irene and Jean normally hang out the players' shirts to dry. One of those who makes it inside the gymnasium is amateur footballer and businessman Derek Lewin. Lewin had trained with the Busby Babes two years before in preparation for the 1956 Olympic Games. He had become good friends with full-back Roger Byrne and was paying his respects in silence when he felt a tap on the shoulder. It was Jimmy Murphy, back from Munich and doing everything he could to find a team. Lewin asked, "Is there anything I can do?" and the answer was, "Yes, you can get us some players."

Lewin's club, Bishop Auckland, ended up providing three players. There was Lewin himself and Bob Hardisty, one of the great England amateur internationals who had played for the Matt Busby-coached Great Britain team at the 1948 Olympics.

'We've all had a very trying time, only a few of us will ever understand that' – Jimmy Murphy



The rebuilding continues as Murphy observes a United training session in March 1958

And there was the younger Warren Bradley, who would turn out for United's first team for four seasons and become the first player to ever represent England amateurs and England professionals in the same year.

Three United youth-team players were altar boys at St Ann's Roman Catholic Church in Stretford on 14 February as Walter Crickmer's funeral was held, prior to his burial at Stretford Cemetery. Five days later, the Sheffield Wednesday match rushed around the corner, a mere 13 days after the crash itself. By that time, United had a new director, a new club secretary and a new team, who had been training under the direction of Murphy at the Norbreck Hydro in Blackpool.

Back at Old Trafford, the unremitting task faced by Les and Betty Olive, Alma George, Joe Armstrong and their colleagues is shown best by the day of the match itself. While Manchester prepared to mourn as one, behind the scenes was a desperate scamper to conclude the signing of Stan Crowther. An £18,000 deal was completed an hour before kick-off, by which time supporters were being turned away from the ground. Shay Brennan, who Armstrong had urged Murphy to start in the game, scores twice in a 3-0 win. After the game, the two friends Joe and Jimmy smile together and celebrate in the underbelly of Old Trafford, where United's small staff have navigated 13 incomprehensibly difficult days, working 15 or 16 hours at a time.

In late April 1958, Jimmy Murphy was still training the United team in Blackpool. He sent a letter back to Joe Armstrong, with two tickets to the FA Cup final, where United would face Bolton, enclosed. He writes: "Without you around, I could not have carried on. There are a hundred problems to sort out every day and you know the answer to most of them. I know it's hard, Joe, with things as they are at O.T., but do try and relax and don't worry about things. We have all had a very trying time, only a few of us will ever understand that." 📄