

CRASH OF THE BUFFALO



The Tragedy that Killed a Football Team
and Rocked the World

JAY MWAMBA

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Quirk of Fate

TWO DAYS before his 41st birthday and 12 years after leading England to World Cup glory, Bobby Charlton suited up against African opposition for the first time in his fabled career. It was an autumn Monday evening in Shropshire, near the Welsh border, when he donned the blue and amber of Third Division title contenders Shrewsbury Town as a guest player at Gay Meadow on 9 October 1978. It would be one of his last games at organised level. The opposition? Zambia's national team in its first game on its first tour of Britain, the country the southern Africans had gained independence from 14 years earlier.

The Zambians were awed.

Skilful, dynamic and master of the thunderbolt shot, Charlton had brought glory to both club and country. As captain of Manchester United, the attacking midfielder had become the first English player to hoist the European Cup, forerunner of the Champions League, scoring twice in the 1968 final against Benfica.

A decade later, the enormous skills that had earned Charlton many honours, veneration and a world-class reputation may have diminished with the years. But they were still ample enough to beguile a team of talented but

starstruck amateurs – at least in the opening 45 minutes during which Shrewsbury led 3-0.

In 2014, Vincent Chileshe, Zambia's teenage goalkeeper on that tour, recalled Charlton's scintillating display and attempted to exculpate his defenders. 'Sometimes it's [normal], where you find that if you are playing a player who's well known, the defenders are sometimes scared. That's how it is,' he said in Tampa, Florida.

Mesmerised was more like it, on what felt like an icy winter's night for the visitors from the tropics. Five years after leaving Manchester United with a then club record 249 goals, Charlton put on a clinic against opposition blindsided early by both his skills and the elements. The 40-year-old nodded in a dipping cross at the back post. A one-two with his striking partner split the Zambian defence and put him one-on-one with Chileshe; Vincent's next act was plucking the ball out of the net. Charlton would complete his hat-trick before the interval, beating the 19-year-old Chileshe with another header to add another match ball to his enormous collection.

'They were scoring through headers – you know how the [English] played,' recalled Chileshe, evoking the English game of that era, replete with long balls and crosses into the box. 'They'd go to the byline, square the ball and by the time, *mebbe*, you've covered the near post, they've put it in at the far post.'

At any rate, Zambia's pedigree would be more discernible on resumption, reported *Zambia Daily Mail* sports reporter Wellington Kalwisha, who accompanied the team. 'They showed great composure in the second half when they completely took charge, reducing their hosts to only one more goal despite the masterly distribution in midfield by the English maestro – the great Charlton, whose brilliant footwork delighted the crowd,' wrote Kalwisha.

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The friendly, the first match of the Zambians' three-week, seven-game British tour, ended in a 4-0 drubbing.

Said Charlton to Kalwisha, 'I was greatly impressed by the natural ability displayed by your team. The skill is there but what they lack is the directness in front of goal. They have that fatal hesitation in front of goal but otherwise the approach is superb.'

At the final whistle, the Zambian players were predictably eager to shake hands with Charlton. It's likely that he shook hands with forward Godfrey Chitalu, a sometimes-fiery former boxer nicknamed 'Ucar' and, even then, Zambia's greatest player ever – based on his scoring and match-winning prowess. Six years earlier, Chitalu had struck a record 107 goals in one season for club and country. That remarkable tally would earn him posthumous global fame four decades later when his name was embroiled with Lionel Messi's in an impromptu debate on who had netted the most goals in a calendar year. Chitalu's idol was Charlton's former Manchester United team-mate Denis Law. That adoration had reportedly once earned the powerful Zambian striker – a precursor of the great Liberian George Weah in physique and style – a dismissal for his cheeky retort to a referee in a league match in 1967. The story, according to his biographer Jerry Muchimba, goes that warned earlier for rough play, Chitalu committed one infraction too many. Asked his name by referee Peter Bell, Chitalu responded, 'Denis Law.' Bell immediately ordered the striker off.

Decades later, Charlton's brief encounter with Chitalu could be interpreted for what it was: a quirk of fate. One of the most famous survivors of the tragic 1958 Munich air crash that ultimately claimed eight Manchester United players had just crossed paths with a future victim of an air disaster that would wipe out an entire national team.

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Chitalu, then Zambia head coach, would perish along with his entire squad, and the crew of a Zambian Air Force transport plane, in Libreville, Gabon, on the night of 27 April 1993. Sir Bobby Charlton would live for 45 more years after his hat-trick against the Zambians, dying aged 86 on 21 October 2023.

A second, no less tragic participant in the Zambia-Shrewsbury encounter that autumn 1978 night was the Zambia boss and former Aston Villa player Brian Tiler. He'd die before Chitalu – the victim of a car crash after the Italy-Republic of Ireland World Cup quarter-final in Rome at Italia 90. A survivor in that doomed vehicle was one Harry Redknapp, then Bournemouth manager. Also quarter-finalists in Italy then were Cameroon, who'd made their World Cup debut at the 1982 finals in Spain. They'd returned to the big stage after spectacularly crashing out 5-2 on aggregate to Zambia in the 1986 qualifiers – several years after Tiler had left the Zambia job.

* * *

On a cool autumn morning in that part of the southern hemisphere, Zambians awoke to news of the worst aviation accident in its young history as an independent nation. It involved a utility aircraft manufactured by Canada's De Havilland company. Nine people, including eight of the southern African nation's best military pilots, had perished in the crash of a DHC-6 Twin Otter 300. The accident occurred during a demonstration flight for the Zambia Air Force (ZAF) on the morning of 3 May 1976, near Monze, a town 118 miles south-west of the capital Lusaka. Zambia was cast in mourning.

The plane reportedly came down a kilometre beyond the runway. The crash occurred during a demonstration of the Twin Otter's ability to recover from single engine failure

on take-off. Going back to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, it was the deadliest air disaster in what's now the Republic of Zambia since the mysterious crash of a Swedish Transair Douglas DC-6B operated by the United Nations in the northern city of Ndola. That tragedy, on the night of 18 September 1961, would ultimately claim the lives of all 16 people on board including Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN's charismatic secretary-general. They were flying to Ndola on a Congo peace mission when their plane dropped from the dark sky for reasons yet to be conclusively determined.

At any rate, the devastating loss outside Monze of some of its finest officers from the first cohort of ZAF pilots did not deter the Zambians from concluding a deal with De Havilland for the supply of new aircraft in 1976. They came in the form of seven recently developed De Havilland DHC-5D Buffaloes, the most advanced of the Buffalo series of short take-off and landing (STOL) utility transport turboprop aircraft originally developed from a 1962 requirement by the United States Army. The Americans would take delivery of four DHC-5s in 1965 and place no more orders thereafter. By 1966, the US Air Force was placed in charge of large fixed-wing transport craft and saw no need for the Buffalo.

Still, production of various variants of the Buffalo would continue even though only 126 planes would be manufactured over a 21-year period – with the last DHC-5D delivered to the Kenyan Air Force in December 1986. That's minuscule compared to most military aircraft. Lockheed Martin, for instance, has rolled out more than 2,500 of its popular C-130 Hercules transport plane, a workhorse of many militaries worldwide, since 1954. Add to that the more than 4,600 F-16 Fighting Falcon jets produced by General Dynamics as of 2018 and the nearly

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11,500 Soviet-designed MiG-21 fighters, and the Buffalo output pales by comparison. Along with its capacity to carry 41 troops or 24 stretchers at a maximum speed of 290mph (467kp/h), the Buffalo's incredible ability to take off and land on unprepared airfields made it ideal for Third World nations. With a range of almost 700 miles (1,112km), the DHC-5D became popular with buyers from Abu Dhabi to Zambia. The Zambian Air Force's seven purchases put them only behind Brazil (24), Peru (16), and Egypt and Kenya, who each bought ten planes.

In addition to its primary military role for the ZAF, the Buffalo became the go-to transport for urgent civilian duties when needed. When opposition politician Simon Kapwepwe, a founding father of Zambia, died in January 1980, a Buffalo piloted by a young ZAF officer named Victor Mubanga flew his remains to Chinsali, in northern Zambia, for burial. Later, as Zambia's copper-based economy hit hard times and the country's football association struggled for funding, ZAF and its Buffalo fleet would become the national team's default air carrier. Neither the loss of two of ZAF's seven DHC-5Ds, in crashes between 1982 and 1990, nor several scary experiences over the years would deter Football Association of Zambia's interest in ZAF aircraft.

And even while the players may have griped about the plane's lack of comfort, in the increasingly tough economic times of the 80s and 90s, the relatively cheap to charter Buffalo with its lack of baggage restrictions (maximum take-off weight 49,200lb or 22,316kg) was a delight for football officials, according to ZAF pilots who flew the team pre-Gabon. Before the liberalisation of the Zambian economy, when luxury goods were at a premium, foreign trips doubled as shopping junkets of sorts for team members. Ironically, a De Havilland bid in the early 1980s

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to develop a 48-passenger Buffalo for civilian use, dubbed the 'transporter', came to naught. The programme was scrapped when the prototype crashed on landing at the 1984 Farnborough Airshow in the UK.