

CHARLES JAMES ROBERT MORRIS 7 JUNE 1926 – 4 JUNE 2015

Charlie has written that as a boy *“my family was poor. Not penniless, but really poor”* and once described himself *“as a very lucky and mediocre man”*. But he was wrong.

Readers Digest used to have a column inviting readers to submit who was the most unforgettable character in their lives and I think many of us here would nominate Charlie. He was larger than life, fun to be with, knowledgeable on art, music, films, books, good food, wine, conversation and all things French. He was a self-made man who ticked all the boxes that are worth ticking. We all have some stories of Charlie and this is a good time to reflect on some of his life.

He was born in Paddington, London on 7th June 1926. His childhood was mostly happy and he was proud of his London background and knowledge of London. Having lived through the pre and early war years, he remembered many highlights that became part of history. He was a strong monarchist and in the crowd when the royal processions were in the streets. He was 13 when war was declared and thousands of children, including Charlie, were evacuated to the country for safety. Charlie had other ideas, and in 1940 returned home twice, without permission, and his father finally decided he must have had enough.

At fourteen he left school and began as an office boy at an insurance company in the City of London and lived through the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. Despite all the chaos he became involved in art by attending painting classes at his old school at the Moberley Institute in Paddington. It started a passion for art and painting that lasted the rest of his life. In later years he would say he wished he had made a career of it. He used his talent to produce paintings that people treasure and gave him much pleasure to produce. His studio was always full of amazing artworks, experiments in screen printing and developing new techniques, and materials that sometimes worked and were always interesting.

As a boy during the war he was a member of the Sea Scouts and the Army Cadets, but at 17 volunteered and joined the Royal Navy. It was another milestone in Charlie's life. After basic training he emerged as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class (Electrical) and was posted in 1945 at age 18 to his first ship, the escort carrier HMS Slinger, a light weight aircraft carrier built by the Americans under Lend Lease.

Charlie's time at sea began in January 1945 on HMS Slinger. He was always in awe when watching the launching and landing of aircraft on a carrier deck. He was on 'Slinger' when they sailed through Gibraltar and the Mediterranean to end up in Sydney Harbour full of dozens of warships - part of the British Pacific Fleet. It was Charlie's first time in Australia. 'Slinger' joined the fleet and ended up in the war zone south of Japan. When Japan surrendered in August 1945, 'Slinger' was based in Australia before sailing back to Plymouth where Charlie landed with hundreds of others to face a new future back in England. He was demobilised and out of the navy by the end of 1946.

Back in civilian life Charlie worked for the Kuwait Oil Company in 1947 where he met in the drawing office draughtswoman Margaret Eleanore Gare known forever after as MEG. In August 1948 Charlie was shown an advertisement for volunteers to sign on in the Royal Australian Navy for service in the new Australian Fleet Air Arm. The possibility of serving to become a Chief Petty Officer and complete 20 years for a pension was a winner with Charlie and he signed up. He and Meg married in March 1949 and the next week Charlie had to join the new HMAS Sydney at Plymouth and sail for Australia arriving in May.

Back at Nowra Charlie met Frank McCaffrey who was starting an athletic club needing a hammer thrower and Charlie agreed to give it a go. It was start of another 'string to Charlie's bow' and he became very interested in athletics. He also began to take seriously his painting. He was promoted to Chief Petty Officer and in mid-1954 passed the exams for commissioned ranks but there were no vacancies. He signed on in hope of further promotion for another six years and would be sent to England to assist the program for the new aircraft being bought for the AFAA.

He and Meg returned to England in 1955 and the next year saw the arrival of daughter Christina on 27 April 1956 in London. It was 2 years later before Michael was born 8 May 1958, Charlie never got over his tragic death 51 years later. Apart from navy work Charlie met Dennis Cullum, England's No.1 Hammer throwing coach who improved his distance enough for Charlie to be included in the NSW Olympic training squad where his throw of 177ft 10½in was an Australian record and earned him a place in the Australian team for the 1956 Melbourne Games. Nerves and bad luck on the day resulted in Charlie being placed 13th. He went on for another 6 years in hammer contests and in 1962 made a throw of 196ft 6in, a NSW record, but could not repeat it in his final competition at the Seventh Commonwealth and Empire Games in Perth the same year and was placed fourth. It was his second Commonwealth Games having come sixth at the Cardiff Games in 1958. Charlie was now well known in athletic circles and later made a major contribution in the initiation, planning and organisation of the Pacific Conference Games held in Canberra in 1977.

In the following years there were many changes in Charlie's naval life and numerous position changes including time spent on the carrier 'Sydney', his promotion to Lieutenant Commander in No 723 Helicopter Squadron, and importantly, chosen as part of a team to visit several helicopter manufacturers to report on and recommend the best for the next Australian purchase. On their return the team report recommended the French Super Frelon helicopter as a clear winner on all counts and the only one to meet all requirements. Two years later politics entered the scene and a different maker chosen to the one recommended by the team report – much to Charlie's disgust. It was probably one of the reasons for Charlie to resign from the navy and join the French company 'Office Francaise d'Exportation de Materiel Aeronautique (OFEMA), an organisation in several countries set up to promote sales of military and civil aviation products.

It suited very well Charlie's background, particularly his ability at that time to speak some French which later on in the job became quite fluent. Based in Canberra his role was to liaise with all potential military and civil customers that could be sold French equipment. It included government departments, military personnel, and industries such as ship building, trains, aircraft and aviation products. Charlie was popular and well liked and good at his job which included entertaining customers and a chance to use his expertise in food and great wines. He joined airline management visiting the Paris and Farnborough Air Shows over several years. Who could forget some of the wonderful restaurants that Charlie would entertain at both here and overseas?

All things come to an end and Charlie resigned from Ofema in 1975 to re-join the navy. He had received an offer and a chance to improve his pension and be more secure than at Ofema. But it also saw him reach his dream goal of Commander in January 1980. Way back in 1945 Charlie was asked what he would really like to do when he was demobbed he replied: *"What I would really like to do is to stay in the Navy, to get a commission and retire as a Commander"*.

But it does not end there as after Charlie finally retired from the navy in 1980 he re-joined Ofema in 1983 due to the retirement of manager Roy Roberts and Charlie himself finally retired from Ofema in 1990.

Last but not least, Charlee's life cannot close without mentioning Adele's wonderful contribution to Charlie's life through the years in every way. They were an inseparable couple and her care and love for Charlie in the later years of his life have been inspirational for those of us who know her.

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So much for Charlie saying he was just a 'mediocre man.' Vale Charlie, you will be sadly missed.

R.H.B
10 June 2015