

## Charles Stuart Mackie, ace bush pilot inspired by his love for nature

*Tribute by Russell Taylor*

Born October 6, 1948 in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia

Died July 24, 2016 in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Charles Stuart Mackie, and Charlie as he was known to his friends. His mother, Peggy was a naval WREN and father Rod, a RAF Pathfinder bomber pilot during WWII flying night sorties in Avro Lancasters and de Havilland Mosquitos, so it is not surprising that aircraft and flying would become a passion of Charles, and indeed an important part of his professional career. Born in Salisbury (Harare), Charlie received his high school education at Plumtree School. He was a ferocious rugby player, but better known as ‘captain of the poaching team’. In this role he developed his love of the bush, guns, dogs and birds, displaying an intellectually enquiring mind regarding nature and biology in general.

Following school, Charlie joined the Government Department of Veterinary Services in 1967, based in Gokwe District in the country’s

northern Sebungwe Region, to which he would return time and again later in his professional career. Charlie left Veterinary Services with a Merit Certificate in Animal Health to join the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (NPWM). His first ranger posting was at Chipinda Pools in Gona-re-Zhou National Park, where I had the privilege of meeting him in 1971. We became firm friends, a friendship that was to last until the last time I saw him a few days before he died from pancreatic cancer.

At the time Charlie was undertaking a study of hippo grazing and feeding behaviour on the Runde River downstream of Chipinda Pools for his Certificate in Field Ecology in the Division of Biological Sciences at the University of Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). Gona-re-Zhou was of lasting importance for Charlie. Under the tutelage of his first Warden, John Osborne, he laid the foundations for his career, developed his deep understanding of elephants.

While on patrol in Wankie, (now Hwange National Park), In 1978 Charlie and his colleagues came under fire following an ambush. Charlie was badly wounded in the abdomen and was hit by shrapnel in an eye. Following hospitalization, operations and a period of intensive care, Charlie made an amazing recovery, although his wounds were to continue plaguing him for the rest of his life. It was during this period of his life he met Jane Hendrie, who became his wife in 1979. They had two children, Rory and Kerrie, while Charlie continued to pursue his eventful and adventurous career.

Early on Charlie began to hone his flying skills, and one weekend he arrived at my camp at Tashinga in Matusadona NP with costs and specifications to purchase and rebuild a Piper PA-22 Tri Pacer light aircraft. Family and friends were tasked with finding materials such as dope and fabric for its completion, and within a short while he was flying his Tri Pacer on Park duties. This was only the beginning though, and Charlie became licensed to fly the Piper PA 18 Super Cub, an aircraft which was the backbone of the Department’s early aircraft fleet, and subsequently flew Cessnas 182, 185 and 206, undertaking low level aerial surveys of elephants across many of Zimbabwe’s conservation areas, among other duties.

After re-habilitating Chizarira NP Headquarters in Zimbabwe’s northern Sebungwe region, Charlie took the decision in 1984 to leave the Depart. NPWM to take up the position of Senior Management Advisor to the Garamba Rehabilitation Project in Garamba NP,

northeast Zaire. The urgent need to ensure the security of the last remaining wild northern white rhinos in Garamba had been identified a few years earlier at a meeting of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group in Hwange National Park. During the Mackie family's tenure in Garamba, Charlie and his colleagues were able to improve the fortunes of the Park and its rhinos for at least a while longer.

While in Garamba, Charlie discovered an abandoned framework of a Super Cub in nearby Goma, which he not only rebuilt but also flew untested from Garamba to Nairobi's Wilson Airport to have its official Certificate of Airworthiness test, a 7-hour flight that included huge tracts of central African forest. All in all, Charlie logged over 8,000 hours of bush flying, including many aerial surveys to count elephants, which he had begun before he left Zimbabwe.

Returning to Zimbabwe in 1990 Charlie joined WWF as a Wildlife Management Specialist, working with its Multispecies Animal Production Systems Project and providing support to the CAMPFIRE Project. During this time he continued flying aerial surveys, and these extended to northern Mozambique. Here he was attracted to Niassa Reserve, which was being re-established, and where he later became Project Director for the Sociedade para a Gestão e Desenvolvimento da Reserva do Niassa (SGDRN). In August 2002 Charlie moved to Ghana for three years, where he was IUCN's Principal Technical Advisor for its Support Project to the Wildlife Division of country's Forestry Commission. This was followed by other short term contracts and consultancies in the region before eventually he returned to settle permanently in Harare.

Over the years Charlie became increasingly interested and involved in many aspects of wildlife conservation across different parts of Africa and he made many constructive and valuable contributions. His work took him to Gorongosa NP and Marromeu on the Zambezi Delta, Mozambique, Queen Elizabeth NP in Uganda, and Virunga NP in eastern Zaire. He drew on his wide wildlife management experience in reviewing wildlife monitoring systems and designing problem animal management schemes to mitigate human-wildlife conflict, as well as for fire management and in radio telemetry research.

One of Charlie's last assignments was to fly over the larger part of Zimbabwe's elephant range during the 2014 Great Elephant Census. Covering some 56,000 km<sup>2</sup> in north west Matabeleland, the Sebungwe Region and the Zambezi valley, Charlie added a further 254 hours to his log book. Remarkably, he had also been one of the two survey pilots for the previous country-wide survey in 2001. Resourceful and resilient, Charles was a man with a great love for the outdoors and a deep knowledge of its habitats and wildlife. He was intellectually motivated and inspired by nature, making his mark with his deep knowledge and understanding, competence and dedication.