



## **INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES HILL**

(NPA Life Member 1988)

*This interview with Charles Hill took place at his residence on Wednesday 24 July 1996 with the purpose of recording Charles' involvement in environmental protection, and in particular his role in the organisation and campaigns for the National Parks Association of the ACT.*

*REG:- When and where were you born?*

CHARLES:- On 28 May 1921 at West Melbourne which was my home, an inner suburb of Melbourne.

*REG:- What schools did you attend?*

CHARLES:- I attended the local infants school, went on to the primary school in the same building in King Street and then did two years at what they call a central school; two years of a secondary school. After that I sat for and gained entry into the boys secondary school at South Yarra [Melbourne High School].

*REG:- Did any of the courses you had at school have any emphasis on the environment?*

CHARLES:- No, I can't remember that there was.

*REG:- Did your parents show any interest in the environment at all? Early in those days there wasn't much of a movement towards the environment or spoken about.*

CHARLES:- No, I can't remember them particularly taking up the environment as such, but we did nearly every year manage to get three weeks holiday which we took, in most of my young years, down at Sorrento on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. We didn't have any deliberate tending towards the environment but when we went away, even for picnics, we all liked to walk or liked to take as much interest as possible in all the things that we were able to find in such places as rock pools in the ocean beach at Sorrento and on bush tracks. I can remember one time when, just for a day walk, my father and I went up to Mt Toomorang by the short track. My mother looked at its beginning and that is probably why she decided it wasn't on for her.

*REG:- Were you ever a member of the cubs or the scouts?*

CHARLES:- No I wasn't.

*REG:- Do you think your parents had any influence in creating environment interests in yourself?*

CHARLES:- Looking back, yes, I do think that was so. The holidays at Sorrento with two or three families involved, we got involved in all sorts of things down there. They come back to me pretty clearly as having some part to play in my development.

*REG:- What was your first job and where was it?*

CHARLES:- Well I sat, almost marking time, in the [Melbourne] Boys High School at South Yarra because I got through to the honours course well before the laid down age for leaving school. I just did extra subjects to pass the time.

I was 16, I think, when I took up a job in 1938. That was the time when there was a lot of tension in Europe, and it was pretty obvious there would be a war within the next year or so. I was sent to the Maribyrnong Naval Armament Depot to work, with the main emphasis being on arming merchant ships that would take part in convoys from the coast of the southern Australian cities to all parts of the world. We then saw that the men were trained and they had sufficient ammunition for their tasks. Some of these ships were subsequently sunk by enemy action during the war but others, we like to think, did use their weapons to good effect and either got through unscathed or left their mark.



*REG:- You remained with one employer all your working life, but where did it take you to after you left Maribyrnong?*

CHARLES:- I did several training courses at the Flinders Naval Depot in Western Port Victoria and then looked at some of the armament depots at Newington in Sydney. Newington is on the Parramatta River really, and two or three of us used to go for walks at lunchtime and look at anything interesting we could find on the way.

*REG:- After Newington, where did you go then?*

CHARLES:- I was still down at Maribyrnong in the early years of the war. When the war was becoming much more serious as far as Australia was concerned, I was told that I would be shifted to the Naval Armament Ordnance Depot on Spectacle Island in Sydney Harbour. Newington came in a little later. At times I served in various places in Sydney. There were a couple of spots on the Parramatta River, Newington and a place just across the river from it, where large ordnance was stored. These depots were run according to the regulations that were bought out in England by the Admiralty. What we did, we had no real say in policy and methods, but carried them out from textbooks which were sent from the Admiralty.

I was married in 1949. I had transferred myself to Sydney the year before, 1948, and right after the wedding and honeymoon we moved. I was married to Audrey and we shifted all our belongings and prepared for having a home in Sydney.

As time went on, I gained promotions in various positions, still in the Naval Armament Supply Branch. The courses I did were sometimes naval and sometimes run by the Public Service Board in administrative training.

*REG:- When did you go to Melbourne, Charles?*

CHARLES:- There is a little bit to come first. I was selected to do a long-term course with the Admiralty in England, and Alga Skelton and myself sailed there by ship. I remember I had become interested in skiing by this stage, and I rather sneakily left my skis and skiing gear up in the ski lodge I helped build at Mt Buller in Victoria. We finally had one last weekend to bring my gear back to leave it at home in Melbourne.

*REG:- When did you join the Melbourne bushwalkers?*

CHARLES:- We had bought a house in Sydney by this time, and we were very happy there. It was with a certain amount of reluctance I was told I was going to be transferred to Melbourne permanently.

*REG:- What year was that Charles?*

CHARLES:- It was 1954.

Several members of the branch were interviewed in early 1944 to receive a commission in the Navy as a Lieutenant. I was selected to do the task. I was in the special reserve on active service and had a beat across the south-west Pacific where my responsibility was to examine and supervise all the ammunition dumps in that area. This was when the Japanese were being driven from the various spots they had. The ammunition was being stored quite often on desert islands with palm trees and other growth, it was good for scenery, lovely to look at but it didn't do the ammunition or the guns any good.

I had no staff myself but had authority to use staff from anywhere else in the Navy to do what was needed. This went on until the war ended on VJ Day. I remember that day and night very clearly. The Captain of HMAS Magnetic where I had my headquarters while I was up further north but which I had only visited a couple of times, he thought that the atmosphere in the towns or city was such that quite a few young ladies would attempt to gain entry during the day and night all in good fun. I would have less of a task keeping order with a few men than if I had formed



friendships previously. This was true enough. I didn't get much sleep but, I think, the personnel of the Depot had a lot of fun. All this came back fairly clearly to mind when the 50th year celebration of this event took place recently.

After VJ Day I took some leave, which I hadn't been able to get at all while I was in the Pacific, and reported to Headquarters in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne. I volunteered to go back to the Pacific and finally clean up all the remnants of our ammunition dumps and stores which now had to be got out of the way as safely and speedily as possible. I had gained quite a liking to some of the spots I had explored on walks when we had some local leave while I was up there. I thought it would be very nice to look at these spots without pressure of occasional bombing and so on and be able to take, I hoped, a little bit of time to look at the beautiful rivers and gorges and mountains in Papua New Guinea. However, the answer was clear and very firm, I was not to return to the north at all. Other people would take care of this task as there were things down in Melbourne that I was required to do, amongst them write a chapter in the Navy confidential publication of lessons learnt from the war.

My base had been shifted down to Melbourne at this time. I did a course then, mentioned earlier in this interview. It was in Admiralty and took 14 months altogether. There were about half a dozen Admiralty senior young executives on it with Skelton and myself. We did fairly well and I came top of this course. We flew back to Australia in a converted Lancaster Bomber with bunks being made on the extra petrol tanks inside. Still, you get used to funny local environments in the Naval Armament world. I was observing what I could from the plane. It wasn't built for sight seeing; you either had to kneel on the floor to get enough height to look out the small windows or sit on a seat and twist around in it in a fairly uncomfortable position. I didn't complain because it was a beautiful trip from the point of view of scenery.

As a young man in Melbourne, before I transferred to Sydney, I used to play tennis in the local club that my father played with. This was my main sport apart from being keen to get out into the bush and continue to get down to Sorrento as much as I was able to.

*REG:- You were saying how during the war all the sporting organisations were disbanded because of lack of numbers to support them?*

CHARLES:- That's right.

The little club I joined locally for tennis was in this category, so my main sporting facility was gone. My parents were a little worried that I wasn't getting out and about as much as I should, and when they had a few days holiday up in one of the resorts at Healesville they talked to a chap who was a bit older than me and he said that what he thought would help me quite a lot, and I'd enjoy it very much, was to go out with the Melbourne walking club. It had a longer name in those days, being also called a walking and touring club.

So I got this young chap, when the holiday with my parents was over, to take me into the club rooms in Melbourne city and I started walking with them. I remember the first camp I went on while the war was on, it was in the hills of the Dandenong Ranges. I also went for a private walk, by invitation, with Bert Bennett of Canberra and Keith Gross of Melbourne, who regretfully died some years ago of lung cancer, being one of the fallen due to the tobacco industry. This private walk was up in the Dandenong Ranges around Powell Town and it was a very long walk. We had to catch a train on the Sunday afternoon to get home, and that was the only train or any means of transport to get back. We worked out that we would have to keep up a fine jogging pace for the next hour or so, and we just caught the train by the skin of our teeth. I was pretty tired.

Keith and Bert had thought that they would never see me again, but I did turn up at the next meeting and went on many other walks. Eventually I went to their in-club training to be recognised as a leader of day and longer walks.



REG:- *Melbourne Walking Club was a men's only club, wasn't it?*

CHARLES:- It still is Reg, but they have a fairly lenient attitude to women participating in many of their day and camp walks. But I think it is rather good myself, even Audrey agrees with that.

REG:- *Did the Melbourne Walking Club interest itself in environmental matters at all? Did it lobby people about the environment or creating national parks?*

CHARLES:- In those early days, the answer is no. We belonged to the Federation of Walking Clubs and they had some interest this way, but it certainly wasn't one of our prime aims in those early days. We gradually became more interested in the environment as we did walks and saw what was happening in erosion and bush fires and other events.

REG:- *Did your club send delegates to the Federation?*

CHARLES:- Yes, they did.

REG:- *Were you ever a delegate?*

CHARLES:- No, I wasn't, and fairly soon I was transferred to Sydney.

REG:- *What year was that Charles?*

CHARLES:- I think it was 1947 or 1948.

REG:- *You met Audrey in Sydney, did you?*

CHARLES:- No, I met Audrey in Victoria. I met Audrey on the first peace time opening of Wilsons Promontory to visitors after having been closed off during the war. I started to attend functions of the Youth Hostel Association in Melbourne, and I gave a talk at one of these meetings. I gave some information about my recent trip to all parts of the British Isles and a little bit of Europe when I took leave. Audrey happened to be at the place and, strangely enough, I happened to ask her to go out on several other occasions. But all too early I was posted to Sydney, and so we only had six months to get to know each other, but most of that six months was from one State to another.

Getting back now to being married and coming away from Melbourne to Sydney. As I said, we were quite happy with the house we had bought in Sydney in West Ryde. Then came bad news, I got word that I would be transferred from Sydney down to Melbourne and also to the Personnel Branch down there, as they had a need for a senior inspector for organisation and personnel work. New to me, but I had attended some organisation courses on this subject.

REG:- *Did you join any walking clubs when you were in Sydney at all?*

CHARLES:- No. What happened was that Audrey and I didn't know anyone in Sydney and I thought it was only fair that I spend all of my spare time with her, and we roamed over a lot of NSW using my knowledge of leading walks, etc to keep out of harm's way. Using our feet more than anything else as we didn't have any wheels at that stage. I still was a member of the Melbourne Walking Club, and still am today.

About this time it was decided to move the Defence Headquarters from Victoria Barracks, Melbourne to Canberra, but it was decided that the job I was in would not go to Canberra. We had been in our house less than a year when a job, which was a good promotion for me, fell vacant in the new branch in Canberra. We were pretty unhappy, particularly Audrey, in leaving the nice house we had and starting all over again in Canberra, but the job was too good to let go. So we decided that we would do that, and we came to Canberra.

REG:- *What year was that Charles?*

CHARLES:- It was 1960.

REG:- *When did you hear about the NPA or join them?*



CHARLES:- Well two or three of the older Melbourne Walking Club members were in Canberra and as we had started a family by this stage, these old friends thought that the National Parks Association in Canberra would be more in keeping with our needs than the Canberra Bushwalkers.

REG:- *What year would that have been, Charles?*

CHARLES:- It was about four years after coming to Canberra, about 1964 probably.

When we came to Canberra we had a house built for us, a private house, using an architect and builders of course. I decided it would be unfair to take on a new activity like joining the NPA while Audrey was left home with young kiddies, and I had a lot of work to do in establishing a garden etc. So I decided we would wait for four years and then, when the children were at an age when they could get some advantage from coming out with us, I got in touch through Bert Bennett, I think, with the NPA Publicity Officer and started walking with them, going to meetings and getting involved.

REG:- *When did you become a committee member, Charles?*

CHARLES:- I'm not quite sure, we'd need to look at the books. I was still pretty heavily involved in the life we were building around the new house and the church we had joined in Canberra.

REG:- *Do you remember who asked you to come on the committee or did you volunteer yourself?*

CHARLES:- One of the short walks with the NPA we felt was good for the family, was George Chippendale's botany excursion on Black Mountain. George Chippendale led this and I talked to him. He no doubt was influential in inviting me onto the committee and suggesting that I had the right training to be a leader on walks. I then became heavily involved in the NPA and in particular with the moves to get a new national park for the ACT.

REG:- *Did you ever hold office on the committee as president, secretary, treasurer or something of that order, outings secretary?*

CHARLES:- No, I didn't.

By this time in Canberra we were fairly heavily involved in the local Uniting Church. After our new home and garden had settled down I decided that I would accept an invitation to join the committee, but I held office as treasurer and several other things with the church and I had to ease myself out of those a little to be able to take on much else.

REG:- *I suppose you led a good few walks with the NPA?*

CHARLES:- Yes. With the family growing up not all walks were suitable for them, so it mightn't be as many as you might think. Noel Semple was one of the ex-Melbourne Walking Club people who I went on a walk with and which he led. The walk was really very interesting although a little short, because the time was taken up with fairly rough country. It was to Mt McKeahnie from the Corin Dam road.

REG:- *When you were a leader, did you involve yourself in much preparation for your role as leader, in preparing notes or information or going on the walk beforehand to familiarise yourself with it?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I continued to follow a rule that was pretty well laid down with the Melbourne Walking Club, that leaders would not lead any walks that they hadn't been over themselves. Except, of course, those walks that were so far removed that this was impossible, and anyone that went on these sorts of walks were aware that they were breaking new ground and couldn't expect to know exactly in advance what they were going to find.

REG:- *Have you ever been a contributor to the NPA Bulletin, do you write articles for the Bulletin?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I have written quite a few articles for the *Bulletin*.



REG:- *On what sort of subject matter?*

CHARLES:- Well, probably several of them were on the tree growing project. I undertook the organisation of this for the NPA on the Glendale site in conjunction with the rangers and their Service.

REG:- *There were some 400 odd trees planted, weren't there?*

CHARLES:- Yes.

REG:- *This involved a great deal of organisation, gathering the seed and raising the seedlings, preparing the ground?*

CHARLES:- Yes, and I have written up each stage of this in articles in the *Bulletin*, and that would be the best source of information on what we did.

REG:- *What do you think of the Bulletin today compared to what it was when you first joined, when it was a very small publication?*

CHARLES:- I don't think today's *Bulletin* is necessarily any better, but it is certainly different. Each Editor of the *Bulletin* has their own ideas, and I always thought they were fairly adequate for what they were intended to do.

REG:- *Do you think that the Bulletin plays an important role in publicising the Association with the public and all the Parks Service. Getting the views of the Association presented to them?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I think it does. It is important first of all that the members of the Association can see themselves with a definite aim and responsibilities, not just a mixture of changing things that have no sorting out at all.

REG:- *Were there any other major projects that you were involved with the NPA, work parties?*

CHARLES:- I was on most work parties that went on over the years, not lately I must admit.

REG:- *What were some of the earlier ones? You contributed quite a bit to the Yerrabi Track.*

CHARLES:- Yes, that was one. In fact the Yerrabi Track was one that came with more problems for the NPA after Audrey and I explored it and found a way up which was quite simple to the trig on the top of the ridge which gives one of the best views of the, now, National Park.

I used to take, for some time, a heritage walk where I was the leader but we had several people who were helpers. We had these people stationed at strategic spots along the route. The route was marked with plastic ribbon which we had to put up beforehand and carefully remove afterwards. We had over eighty people go on one of the earlier walks and we served tea to them. Reg [Alder] and some of the other hearty souls carried water and all the makings, and we set up a spot on top. These were quite fun but attendance has dropped off because those who went on it wouldn't necessarily continue to go on the same walk.

REG:- *After the fires, after 1983, did you work on any of the fire trails then, rehabilitating them?*

CHARLES:- Yes. Fiona Brand had one, I think, or it might have been two or three, restoring to a more natural state the tracks which had been bulldozed to fight the fire.

REG:- *What about the Orroral Homestead? You have worked on that at some time, haven't you? It has been going for a long while, for 15 years?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I have done a little work on that, not as much perhaps as I should or could have.

The Orroral Homestead, incidentally, was one of the places that was visited on a Christmas trip by the Melbourne Walking Club, walking from there over to Kosciuszko. We were picked up after a good deal of the main range had been walked, getting a bus down to Canberra on an unsealed road.



Then when the time came for restoration of the homestead, a photo taken by one of the Melbourne Walking Club members appeared on the cover of its journal *The Melbourne Walker*. That was the only photo which included the kitchen which was separated from the house, but was in reasonable condition at the time of the Christmas trip which I was on. This picture has been used in the restoration.

The poor old kitchen was too far gone now, and now only the foundations are really visible. But the homestead itself is now back in good condition.

*REG:- Have you ever attended any seminars on behalf of the NPA or been a delegate/representative to put opinions to Government Departments or the Parks Service?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I have. Various persons would be asked to come along to put a view and these were productive. I took my turn in doing this and found them very interesting.

*REG:- Do you think that your involvement with the movement has had any influence on your own children? Have they taken up the cudgels or joined the bushwalkers?*

CHARLES:- If you had asked me this question a month ago I would have said disappointedly, no. But that has changed and my eldest son, Stephen, now well over 40 and with his two children more or less off his hands, for recreation has spent a lot of his own time, as he puts it, soaking up the calming atmosphere of the mountains in Namadgi and joined up in the last month [1996]. I don't know whether he has contributed much, he may.

He borrows his eldest son's, his only son's, mountain bike and uses it now to go along tracks and fire trails. He has his own favourite list of special view points which he has taken us to.

It is very clear that if you have a full time job in the Public Service or otherwise there are all sorts of other pressures on you and some priority has to be worked out.

*REG:- In conclusion, Charles, would you like to say anything about the NPA, the management of Namadgi or the future of the environmental movement, any thoughts on those sort of things? Do you think the NPA is playing a bigger role now than it did years ago? I know it is a different role with Namadgi now a National Park there are other conflicting things we have to address ourselves to?*

CHARLES:- Yes, I realise that. I was on the committee for a lot of the years when we were writing up charters and management plans. In particular, I took an interest, both orally and in writing, to put up the Consultative Committee that was formed. I was certain that such a Committee would be a great help with the management of Namadgi, and I think this was proved in practice although it has changed very considerably in the last two or three years.

I might say on this subject that I utilised the experience I gained in the Department with industrial relations commissions and so on and dealing with trade unions to draw on when I put up one or two drafts, and I am pleased to say they seemed to be successful. We have had some very good representatives of our own organisation on that committee.

*REG:- What do you think of Namadgi now since 1978 [sic] it was declared as Gudgenby Nature Reserve and then later as Namadgi National Park, that the management of it is now better organised than it was when they first started off? I know we have an out of date management plan now, the new one's in progress, but do you feel the future of Namadgi is better now than it might have been many years ago?*

CHARLES:- It is going through different stages, Reg. Yes, I do feel this and you have gone from being the naughty boy to being a trusted adviser, I think, in later years. This isn't to say that any one way of doing things was right and the other way wrong, they all had to meet certain changes in, as experience grew and certain changes in aims. I myself feel very worried that we are entering a phase now when we might have to be fighting again to keep the National Park devoid of



development, which is going to make it more a Tidbinbilla type of park instead of placing more emphasis on keeping it pristine, so that we have something that is of more value to future generations. There are a few people like Reg who have gone through all these stages and it is also good to see some quite new members, new to me anyway, voicing views now. I think we are going to be a much better organisation if we can do this and keep our co-operative outlook towards with the management team.

*REG:- Thank you, Charles, for your patience and carrying out this interview. I'm sure it will be a valuable adjunct to the Association's record of its pioneer members.*