Survivor of World Wars 'an ordinary bloke'

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A tale to tell: Claude Choules, 108, with a photograph of his wife Ethel, who died in 2003.

For a chap from Wyre Piddle who served in both World Wars and has survived to see 39 direct descendants come into the world, Claude Choules sums up his life with typical British understatement.

"Uneventful," he says. "I am just an ordinary bloke."

Reminded ever so gently about some of the twists his life has taken over 108 years, Claude concedes: "I have had a few extraordinary times."

Fortunately, he has put some of those times down on paper. The Last of the Last, his autobiography, refers to his status as World War I's only remaining combatant.

But it is so much more.

A tale of the scrapes and misadventures of a small boy in a small English village, of life on the high seas, of war and war's aftermath, life in suburban Perth when there were few suburbs, of messing about in boats. And family.

Through it all, says Claude, runs the importance of family. "My family is the most important thing," he says.

This is understandable. Claude's mother left their home when he was five to go back on the stage and he never saw her again. His two sisters went to live with relatives, leaving just Claude and his brothers Douglas and Leslie at home

with father Harry. Soon there was just Claude at home after his brothers moved to Western Australia in 1911.

Leslie and Douglas answered the call in the first month of WWI, joining the Australian Imperial Force and surviving the Gallipoli landing.

Inspired by their "very exciting" letters, Claude couldn't wait until he was 14 and able to leave school to follow in their footsteps.

After his bid to join the army as a bugler was rejected, he was accepted on to a training ship a month after his 14th birthday.

Claude thrived and at 16 joined the British Grand Fleet aboard HMS Revenge.

After Armistice Day ended hostilities, Claude saw much of the enemy fleet go down at Scapa Flow after the Germans, anxious to keep their vessels out

of British hands, scuttled their own ships.

In 1926, Claude was part of a group of Royal Navy instructors seconded to the Royal Australian Navy. On the way to Australia on the passenger ship SS Diogenes, Claude was struck by "a tall brunette with dark brown eyes, a real stunner".

The young lady concerned was on her way to Melbourne. And so it was that Ethel Wildgoose, 21, a children's nurse from Scotland, met her future husband. After 76 years together Ethel died in 2003, aged 98.

The lure of WA was strong, and the family settled in Fremantle. Yet war was not done with the world, nor with Claude.

As World War II engulfed the region, Chief Petty Officer Choules was again serving his

nation's cause, wiring up merchant ships in Fremantle Harbour in case they had to be scuttled in the event of a Japanese landing and clearing Broome anchorage of bombed flying boats.

And after war's end, there was still work to be done at sea, crayfishing. And teaching a new generation about boats.

We meet at the Gracewood Hostel in Salter Point.

"I have had a happy life," he says. "I don't think there was anything in my life I would wish had not happened.

Perhaps the most uplifting line of Claude's book comes at the end. But I won't reveal it. That would be telling.

Claude Choules: The Last of the Last is published soon by Hesperian Press