

THEY SHALL NOT GROW OLD  
AS WE THAT ARE LEFT GROW OLD..  
AGE SHALL NOT WEARY THEM  
NOR THE YEARS GONDEMN ...

HEY, LOOK...  
IT'S CLAUDE!

WELL  
WELL  
WELL!

ABOUT TIME...  
YOU STILL OWE  
ME TWO  
BOB!

HELLO LADS!

...AT THE GOING DOWN OF  
THE SUN,  
WE WILL REMEMBER THEM..

CLAUDE CHOULES 1901-2011.

Alston.

# Last Great War combatant was a family man

**A**s an impressionable, energetic youth, Claude Choules was just one of the millions eager to join the armed forces to do their bit for the war effort. In his later years, almost a century on, he became a reluctant symbol of the enduring obsession with war and its commemoration.

The man himself, who died early yesterday at the grand old age of 110, would have been far happier if the focus had been elsewhere. But as fate had it, he lived long enough to become a legend. As the numbers of World War I veterans across the globe dwindled to just a handful over the past decade, more and more the British-born Mr Choules became the centre of attention.

Public fascination with the few remaining survivors of the so-called Great War meant that each birthday and each Anzac Day, he was asked for his thoughts on war and what it all meant.

But just as attention on Mr Choules grew, so did his distaste for the subject of war.

He always said his main interest in life was his family. According to those close to him, he hated war and didn't want to talk about it anymore.

In the end, he was the last of the last, as the title of his memoirs published in 2009 proclaimed. The last known living combatant from World War I and the last person who had served in both world wars, as well as the oldest person in Australia.

Born in 1901, he was witness to the momentous events of the 20th century. He joined the Royal Navy at 14 and served in the North Sea, where he was present at the surrender of the German naval fleet and later its scuttling. He lived through another great global conflict, countless other wars, the Great Depression and the rise and fall of communism.

Mr Choules may have said he was just an ordinary fellow who lived a long and fruitful life.

To others, he will always be much more. His death erases our final link to one of history's most extraordinary events. Of the estimated 70 million people mobilised to fight in WWI, none remain.

The fact that he was the last inevitably meant that in the public eye Mr Choules would be defined by his experience of war.

But his family and others who knew him would see something quite different. Mr Choules was a dedicated family man who preferred life's simpler pleasures. When he spoke to reporters, he always referred lovingly to his wife, Ethel, with whom he shared 76 years until her death in 2003.

It is important that we never forget the sacrifices of generations of young men, many of whom like Mr Choules were just boys when they went off to war. We must continue to honour their endeavour and bravery.

But for the last of the last, we should also remember him as man who did what he could to ensure the welfare of his family because they will be his lasting, and most meaningful, legacy. Mr Choules lived to see that family stretch into generations, with 39 direct descendants.

As with all the other Great War veterans who have gone before him, those who fought for their countries and for what they believed in, Claude Choules has well and truly earned his rest.

# Choules in high spirits until the end

JOSEPH CATANZARO

The last surviving combat veteran of World War I, Claude Choules, died in his sleep yesterday in Salter Point. He was 110.

Born in Britain in 1901, two months after Australia's Federation, Mr Choules was the last combatant left of the more than 70 million military personnel who were mobilised during the conflict, following the death of US veteran Frank Buckles in February.

Believed to be the seventh oldest man in the world and the oldest man in Australia, Mr Choules was the last surviving combat veteran of both World Wars.

Remembered by loved ones as a man who adored his family and hated war, politicians and military leaders yesterday lamented his passing.

Mr Choules' daughter, Daphne Edinger, 86, said she was taken by surprise when her children arrived at her home yesterday with news her father had died at the Gracewood Hostel.

"I didn't think he was really going, and I know he didn't. He thought he was going to last forever," she said.

Despite her father being blind and almost deaf, Mrs Edinger said when she visited him last week he was as

usual, lucid and in high spirits. She said "Da Da" was always humble and nonchalant about his place in history.

"He was proud of having such a big family and very fond of having them around him" she said. "He never thought about the fact he was the last; we did. We were all so proud of him."

Mr Choules' death attracted tributes from the nation's leaders.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce said Mr Choules would never be forgotten. Prime Minister Julia Gillard said he was the last of a generation who had made a sacrifice for freedom and liberty.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott said his death marked the end of an era.

Mr Choules joined the Royal Navy as a youngster and later witnessed the surrender of the German fleet.

He was seconded to the RAN in 1926 and during World War II helped plant explosives in Fremantle Harbour in case the Japanese invaded.

Premier Colin Barnett said he would be prepared to discuss helping the family with funeral arrangements.

Mrs Edinger summed up her loss: "We will never see his like again."



Stunner: Ethel Wildgoose with Mr Choules. They were married for 76 years.



Trainee: Claude aged 14.



Youthful: Mr Choules in 1924.

# Family, service and sea



MALCOLM QUEKETT

In many ways the image encapsulates what made Claude Choules tick.

He wears a jacket, sits upright and holds a photograph of his beloved wife, Ethel. On a bedside cabinet rests a photograph of Mr Choules in uniform and nearby is a painting of a sailing ship.

The photograph, right, taken in 2009 to mark the release of his autobiography, *The Last of The Last*, captures what was important to Mr Choules: Family, service and the sea.

Mr Choules was the last link to a time the rest of us can only imagine or read about.

Yet he lived it.

And what a life. In the typical

no-nonsense manner so characteristic of his time and place, he began the book of his life story simply. "I was born on the third of March, 1901, in Pershore, Worcestershire."

The family moved to the village of Wyre Piddle, and he was able to recall the first motor car arriving accompanied by a man "trotting along in front with a red flag".

His mother left when he was five and he never saw her again. His two sisters went to live with relatives, leaving just Mr Choules and his brothers Douglas and Leslie at home with their father.

His brothers moved to WA in 1911 and joined the Australian Imperial Force, surviving the Gallipoli landing.

Their influence on Mr Choules was strong. In his book, Mr Choules wrote that "their occasional letters were very exciting, and I couldn't wait till

I was 14 to leave school and join up".

He tried the army but was rejected because the recruiting officer knew just how young he was, but his father got him a place on a training ship a month after his 14th birthday.

Training was not for the faint-hearted. Boys who admitted they had not been in the water before were told: "Jump in". They were taught to swim using a stave, which instructors would dangle just out of reach, and the cane across the fingers, to encourage them not to try to climb out using the stave.

The paymaster dropped a sixpence into their caps once a week. At just 16 in 1917, Mr Choules joined the British Grand Fleet aboard HMS *Revenge*, and saw action in World War I.

After Armistice Day ended hostilities, Mr Choules

# defined last of the last

witnessed much of the enemy fleet go down at Scapa Flow after the Germans, anxious to keep their vessels out of British hands, scuttled their ships.

He served in the Mediterranean, and in 1926 was seconded to the Royal Australian Navy.

Sailing to Australia on a passenger ship he saw "a tall brunette with dark brown eyes, a real stunner".

It was Ethel Wildgoose, a children's nurse from Scotland. Mr Choules wrote it was "love at first sight". They married in 1926 and settled in Fremantle.

Mr Choules became a chief petty officer instructor in the naval training depot, and during World War II again stepped up to do his bit.

His tasks included dealing with the aftermath of a Japanese air raid on Broome and preparing explosives for oil

tanks and ships in Fremantle harbour when a Japanese invasion was feared. He was told that should he have to detonate the charges, he would "probably be the last man to leave Fremantle".

After the war he helped put everything back to a peacetime footing, including dealing with mines which washed ashore.

Then came a stint in the Naval Dockyard Police. He helped safeguard the Queen when she visited WA in 1954 in the midst of a polio epidemic.

Mr Choules retired from the service in 1956, aged 55, but was not done with the sea. If anything, he got even closer, with a new home on the ocean front at Safety Bay and a new life as a crayfisherman, often accompanied by his wife.

Their partnership was only broken when, after 76 years together, Ethel Choules died in

2003, aged 98. When he was in his 80s, Mr Choules took creative writing lessons and wrote his memoirs. He sprinkled interviews with light touches, and if asked the secret of a long life would sometimes advise "keep breathing".

He would assess his life with typical British understatement. In 2009, he professed to being "just an ordinary bloke" whose life had been "uneventful".

In other interviews he said he joined the navy because of "a sense of duty and loyalty to my country and my family".

In recent years his family told how he had become convinced that war was futile. What was important was family. "My family is the most important thing," Mr Choules told me. "I have had a happy life.

"I don't think there was anything in my life I would wish had not happened."



Family: Mr Choules with his daughter Anne Pow shortly before he turned 108.

Picture: Nick Ellis



Distinguished: Pictured in uniform in 1936.



**Sad reflection: Mr Choules in 2009 with a photograph of his wife Ethel, who died in 2003.**