

CLAUDE STANLEY CHOULES

Condolence Motion

MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier) [12.01 pm] — without notice: I move —

That the house records its sincere regret at the death of Claude Stanley Choules and tenders its deep sympathy to his family.

Mr Claude Choules has the distinction of being the last surviving man to have seen action in the First World War, but he should also be honoured as a brave, highly skilled seaman who gave over 40 years' service to the Royal Navy and to the Royal Australian Navy. He was a loyal Englishman who willingly embraced a life in Australia, and also a dedicated family man.

Claude Choules was born in March 1901 in Pershore, Worcestershire—by British standards a long distance from the ocean. Despite his mother leaving home, he enjoyed a rural childhood with his father, and his brothers, who emigrated to Western Australia in 1911. Henry and Douglas Choules joined the AIF—Australian Imperial Force—in 1914, and survived the fighting at Gallipoli and France, although three other relatives gave their lives. Sergeant Henry Choules was to win the Military Medal for “magnificent courage” at the Hindenburg line in 1917 and, like Claude, was to serve again in the Second World War. Such was the family of Claude Choules, who unsuccessfully tried to enlist him in the British Army in 1914 by putting his age up. He was, however, accepted for naval training in Hampshire and at Plymouth, and at the age of 16 joined the battleship HMS *Revenge* as a boy seaman, first class. After more than a year's service he witnessed the historic surrender and scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet in November 1918. He continued to serve on the HMS *Revenge* in the upheavals after 1918, with his ship participating in the Greco–Turkish war and the evacuation of White Russian forces from the Crimea.

This historical tapestry of Claude Choules' life continued with service on Britain's first purpose-built aircraft carrier and promotion to leading torpedo man. In 1925 he volunteered to help man the Royal Australian Navy. On the voyage to Australia in 1926 he met Ethel Wildgoose, a children's nurse emigrating under the sponsorship of the Victoria League, and this resulted in a devoted marriage of 76 years. After Claude Choules was sent back to Britain for courses at Portsmouth and Glasgow, the young family was able to settle in Australia in 1929. We understand that he firmly adopted Australia as his country and lost any desire to return to Britain. Following sea service on HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Australia* as an RAN reservist, Claude Choules spent nine years from 1932 as a chief petty officer torpedo instructor at HMAS *Leeuwin* in Fremantle, training many of the young seamen who would fight in the Second World War.

It was a mark of his competence and of his courage that he became the wartime chief demolition officer for Western Australia. His was the responsibility of staying behind to blow up facilities and ships in Fremantle harbour in the event of a Japanese invasion. In 1940 he was flown to Esperance to investigate the first German mine washed up on our shores, and from 1942 to 1944 he had the task of clearing the remains of wrecked flying boats from Broome harbour. Not surprisingly, the Navy assessed his character as “very good” and his efficiency as “superior” at the time of his compulsory discharge at the age of 50.

Claude Choules continued to lead an active and productive life as a dockyard policeman for five years until 1956, and then as a crayfisherman at Safety Bay for a further decade. In retirement in his 80s he took lessons in writing from Elizabeth Jolley and was to publish his own autobiography in 2009. His son, Adrian, writes that he was a deeply loving husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He understood the value of education, not only for his son, but for his two daughters. He saved to send them to good schools and encouraged all three of them to obtain university degrees. He cared for his wife, Ethel, until he reached the age of 100, when they moved to the Gracewood Hostel at Salter Point. I will again quote Mr Adrian Choules, who said, according to my notes, that “He had become the property of the world as he became one of the few remaining veterans of World War I—then especially, when he became the last survivor of that war”. Claude Choules was a humble man who declared he was famous only because everyone else had died. His naval service record, however, shows that he was being unduly modest.

This is the occasion to honour the memory of thousands upon thousands of young men in what was then the British Empire who between 1914 and 1918 put their lives on the line, with so many of them losing their lives in that horrendous conflict. We should not glorify war, but we can recognise that had the Allies not prevailed, the fate of Australia in a world dominated by a then authoritarian Germany would have been grim. Claude Choules' explanation that he enlisted “because of a sense of loyalty to my country and to my family” typified the spirit of his generation—a generation that has now finally departed.

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Claude Choules should be honoured for his own special contribution to his adopted nation and community, especially as an RAN chief petty officer whose coolness and professionalism could be relied upon under the real threat of invasion. He leaves a splendid memorial in his family and, on behalf of all members, I extend my sincere condolences to his three children, Daphne Edinger, Anne Pow and Adrian Choules; his 11 grandchildren; his 23 great-grandchildren; and his two great-great-grandchildren.

The passing of Claude Choules marks the passing of a generation. Lest we forget.

Members: Hear, hear!

MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont — Leader of the Opposition) [12.07 pm]: I join with the Premier to mark the passing of a great, albeit humble, man—a man whom age did not appear to weary, nor the years condemn. He was a quiet achiever—a greatly understated hero of our time. We speak today of Mr Claude Choules, the last known combat veteran and survivor of the more than 70 million military personnel who served in World War I. He died in his Perth nursing home on Thursday, 5 May 2011.

He was born in England in 1901. Mr Choules, like many men of his time, lied about his age and joined Britain's Royal Navy at just 14 years of age at the height of World War I. At 16 he was posted to the 40 000-ton battleship HMS *Revenge* and, as the Premier has said, witnessed the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet, the main battle fleet of the German Navy. According to my notes, he wrote in his biography that "there was no sign of fight left in the Germans as they came out of the mist at about 10 am". "So ended the most momentous day in the annals of naval warfare", he wrote. "A fleet surrendered without firing a shot."

In 1925 he answered a call for volunteers to man the Royal Australian Navy and headed for Australia. During his passage to Australia he met and fell in love with Ethel Wildgoose, whom he remained married to for 80 years. After a brief return to England for training, Mr Choules was posted to the heavy cruiser HMAS *Canberra*, which set sail for Fremantle, Western Australia, in 1928. With his family eventually joining him, Mr Choules established a home and settled in Western Australia, where he would continue the rest of his career. In 1932 he was appointed chief petty officer torpedo instructor at the Fremantle depot of HMAS *Leeuwin*, where he spent nine years training hundreds of members of the Royal Australian Navy.

When World War II began, Mr Choules was appointed chief demolition officer on the west coast of Australia. As the Premier said, Mr Choules was asked to dispose of the first German mine to wash up on Australian soil—it was near Esperance—during World War II. In 1942, when it was feared that the Japanese might invade Fremantle, he was tasked with preparing for the demolition of the harbour facilities and oil tanks. Thankfully, this was an activity he was not required to carry out. Mr Choules remained in the Royal Australian Navy after World War II and spent his final working years in the naval dockyard police before joining the crayfishing industry at Safety Bay, south of Perth.

Mr Choules served a highly distinguished naval career, and made a profound contribution to the cause of Australian freedom. He was loved by his Navy comrades for his loyalty and his wry sense of humour and humble nature. He was nicknamed, I am told, Chuckles. Despite his significant military career, Mr Choules was uncomfortable with the glorification of war and only participated in Anzac Day marches when ordered to. Mr Choules lived a happy and full life proudly defying the tolls of war and time, reaching 110 years of age. In his eighties, at the urging of his family, he took up writing lessons and wrote his autobiography *The Last of the Last*. He shared much of his life with wife Ethel, who lived to be 98, and was only parted from her by her death. He will be sadly missed by his family. Mr Choules is survived by three children, 11 grandchildren, 23 great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren. On behalf of the state Parliamentary Labor Party, I extend my condolences to his family.

In honouring Claude, we also remember a whole generation of Australian young men who fought in one of the most brutal and gruelling wars in history. Volunteers all, they distinguished themselves and our then new nation with their courage, vigour, morale and fighting capacity. Every town and suburb that existed in Western Australia at that time has its long list of casualties from World War I on its war memorial. As we honour Claude Choules, I think of my great-uncle Lach. I remember Uncle Lach in the 1960s still suffering from his shrapnel wounds from World War I sitting almost blind and almost deaf in front of his TV in Nedlands wearing his headphones to partially hear the program. That generation sacrificed so much and in such numbers for this country in World War I and in honouring Claude Choules we also honour that whole generation of Australian young men. I conclude by saying once again that we honour the memory of Claude Choules and say "lest we forget".

MR B.J. GRYLLS (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the National Party) [12.12 pm]: On behalf of the Parliamentary National Party, I also rise to support this wonderful condolence motion for Claude Choules. It is a

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wonderful opportunity to not only celebrate a wonderful life, but also pay respects to all our First World War veterans who have now moved on to another life. It is very important that we recognise the passing of Claude Choules.

I think that Claude Choules would be very proud of the fact that Western Australians and Australians are very, very keen to celebrate and recognise what the veterans achieved and to pay their respects. The respect shown on Anzac Day and all through the year by not just family and friends but all Western Australians is a very fitting way to recognise the sacrifices made by so many to ensure that we live in this nation we have today. Seeing the young students in the gallery today makes me think that many of them will probably participate in Anzac Day marches wearing the medals of men and women from their families to signify the sacrifices that were made. I think that the memories of Claude Choules and everyone who served in all fields of battle are very much well remembered, based on our wonderful tradition of Anzac Day.

It also brings to mind that in the modern age we are very quick to bestow on young footballers and young sportspeople the title of superstar. We are very quick to call them our heroes; however, Claude Choules and people who served are the real heroes of Australia and they deserve that title. It reminds me of that great quote from Keith Miller, the wonderful Australian cricketer, who, when asked about the pressure of playing cricket, said, "Pressure? Pressure is having a Messerschmitt on your tail at 5 000 feet!" I think that when it comes to deciding what we would rather do, I daresay playing cricket or playing football would be a much better way to earn those lofty titles.

I think this motion is a wonderful way for this Parliament to celebrate the life of Claude Choules. It is wonderful for us to again recognise the sacrifice made by so many. I think that as a nation we can be very confident that we will continue to celebrate for many, many years. The young students in the gallery will have the job after we have left this place to continue that strong sense of recognition of the work done by those people so many years ago. It is a wonderful way to reflect: lest we forget, Claude Choules.

MR B.S. WYATT (Victoria Park) [12.15 pm]: I too rise to make a brief comment about the passing of Claude Choules. It is extraordinary that the last remaining man of some 70 million who were mobilised for the First World War died here in Perth not long ago. When I think back to my days at school studying the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War, communism and all those significant events that occurred over more than 100 years, that this man who lived and died in Perth lived through all of those is extraordinary. I guess that when somebody passes away at 110, the common refrain is that it is the end of an era. Certainly, for the last remaining combat veteran from the First World War to die here in Perth is quite extraordinary. Words will not do justice, but as I think all the members who have spoken thus far have said, he is a man with incredible experience and worthy of reflection.

As one of many MPs who have a vague knowledge of and keen interest in military history, the fact that Mr Choules witnessed the scuttling of the German fleet at Scapa Flow is quite extraordinary. When the armistice on 11 November 1918 led shortly thereafter to wrangling and negotiations at Versailles for a period of months, the fleet of 70-odd German vessels were placed at Scapa Flow, which I think at the time—one of my naval colleagues will correct me when they get to their feet—was the anchorage of the British Navy. Although the German fleet had a skeleton crew, there were still thousands of German sailors. As the negotiations took place, it became apparent to the Germans that chances were the Allies would carve up the remainder of that fleet. As members can appreciate, Rear-Admiral von Reuter was somewhat concerned about that outcome. The British were concerned about dividing up the fleet and they wanted to keep it for themselves; they did not want to pass any of that fleet on to, perhaps, some of their wartime allies. In June 1919, the German admiral organised the scuttling of that fleet, which is quite extraordinary in light of the fact that the fleet had already been surrendered. Sixty-six German warships were scuttled on 21 June 1919, which still to this day is the largest sinking of warships. Bear in mind that not one sailor drowned on that day; however, apparently nine Germans were shot in the confusion. As members can appreciate, it was perhaps quite a confusing time. To think that Mr Choules who lived right up to recent weeks actually witnessed what was and is an extraordinary event in modern history, an event that I and people my age studied and could never really fully understand, is quite extraordinary. It is something that is worthy of strong acknowledgement by this house.

I want to make the point that, I guess, when one lives to be 110 years old, everything is measured in a huge number of years. Mr Choules was married to his wife Ethel for 76 years, which to me is, obviously, both terrifying and impressive that a man could have been married for so long.

Several members interjected.

Mr B.S. WYATT: I simply make the point!

Mr C.C. Porter: Get your copy of *Hansard* for this one!

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Mr B.S. WYATT: I simply make the point that if I live long enough to be married for 76 years, I will be very happy with my time on this earth.

There is no doubt that Mr Choules had an extraordinary life through his role in the Royal Australian Navy, which is two days older than him; his service to the Royal Navy before that; and his roles in Fremantle, as the Premier pointed out, and in Esperance. His life in Western Australia is worthy of acknowledgement. I want to conclude with the words of Mr Choules' son, Adrian, in his eulogy, which was published in *The Sunday Times* —

Our children share many fine memories of a fine man. Over the last few years, as Claude began to tick off the years beyond 100, we realised that he was no longer just our father, grandfather, etc. He had become the property of the world as he became one of the few remaining veterans of World War I—then, especially, when he became the last survivor of that war.

As his birth took place two years before the Wright brothers flew the first aeroplane at Kittyhawk, his life spanned the 100-plus years that surely has seen the greatest amount of human development of any such period in the history of the planet.

The link that he was with the past has gone.

With those few words I, as all members do, strongly support this condolence motion and offer my condolences to Mr Choules' large family of which he was so proud.

MR M. MCGOWAN (Rockingham) [12.21 pm]: I would like to join members in passing on my condolences and thoughts to the family of Claude Choules, a remarkable man but in many ways an ordinary man. He was quite remarkable due to the number of years he lived and the events he saw during his lifetime. It occurred to me just then that Mr Choules was 50 years of age when the Leader of the Opposition, and perhaps the Premier, was born. He was 66 years of age when I was born. Mr Choules saw so many events during his long lifetime, but in so many ways he was ordinary. I will get on to that in a moment. He was an ordinary individual and representative of his time.

When we consider the fact that 27 or so countries participated in and contributed combatants to the First World War, and 70 million or so service people wore uniforms and participated in that conflict, it is absolutely amazing that the last combat veteran from that war lived here in Perth and was a constituent of mine during his later years. In the British Empire alone, as it then was, 750 000 young men died predominantly as a consequence of the war. As one historian has written, it was an iron gate with the past. The First World War was one of the most defining events in the history of the world when we think about it in terms of not only the number of people who died and suffered as a consequence of it, but also the fact that it spawned things such as Nazism and allowed communism to get a foothold around the world. The war destroyed four empires: the Russian, the German, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires. The war also resulted in massive social change. The role of women in the workplace today came about largely because of the role that women—predominantly on the allies' side, but on all sides—played in the First World War to support the war effort. The war spawned advances in medicine and technology in warfare and in the broader non-warfare activities of humankind. There has never been as significant an event in world history as the First World War. The last person who directly played a role as a combatant in that event lived here in Perth, Western Australia. That is amazing.

It is amazing that out of all those people from all those countries and with all those events that were spawned from World War I, the last of that generation lived here in Perth. I think of that generation as a great generation. That generation came from farms and fields, factories and schools, the aristocracy and the working class to play their role. No matter which side they served on, those people were generally unquestioning of the justice of the cause they were serving. Many people went to war to stop the Kaiser; some went to support the Kaiser. Many people went to preserve little Belgium or to ensure Germany's might and empire was protected, or so they thought. Some people went for a sense of adventure and to escape what they regarded as the boredom of their ordinary lives. Some people were conscripted and many went out of a sense of duty, mateship and patriotism. The motivations were many and varied, but all combatants believed in the justice of their cause. Participants on all sides were naive by today's standards and much simpler in their tastes and beliefs. These were days when most people had never seen an aircraft or an automobile, people had only heard of moving pictures, and radios were a rarity. These people lived in an age in which technology and the destructiveness of modern warfare caught up with them very quickly. They were the victims of that and of political inflexibility, which for many resulted in death or shocking wounds.

Claude Choules was a lucky person. He was young when the war broke out. He joined the Royal Navy as a boy sailor. The Royal Navy is a fantastic institution and undefeated. Perhaps joining the Navy preserved Mr Choules' life. The Royal Navy was not defeated in any significant sense by its foes during that conflict. Although its foe,

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the German High Seas Fleet, was a formidable opponent, the Royal Navy never really had to extend to the degree it perhaps could have to combat the German High Seas Fleet. Had Mr Choules, on the other hand, joined the British Army, the Royal Flying Corps or even the Merchant Navy service, we may not be conducting this condolence motion here today. His name may well have been among hundreds of thousands of names on one of the many memorials scattered around France or Belgium. Had he joined one of those other services, his name may have been forgotten and unmourned, a little line on a memorial sitting in a foreign field. Fortunately for Mr Choules, he avoided much of what we know of World War I, such as the Somme, Passchendaele, the Ypres salient and all the other famous sites where soldiers of the British and commonwealth armies served. Mr Choules' experience was quite different, but he saw momentous events. He saw the surrender of the Germany High Seas Fleet. He saw the scuttling at Scapa Flow, which was probably one of the greatest manmade spectacles in the history of the world. The sinking of a massive fleet of the most modern warships voluntarily by its captains was witnessed by not only some sailors—only a few sailors witnessed it because that day most of the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet was at sea—but also a group of schoolchildren on an excursion from school on a little boat called the *Flying Kestrel*. The remaining ships of the Grand Fleet thought that they would fire upon the German ships to prevent them from scuttling themselves. In any event, that did not prevent 70 ships from becoming scuttled. Claude Choules witnessed those events and the Depression, and participated in the Second World War. He witnessed the Cold War and so many of those events that have shaped the world as we know it today.

Mr Choules was a man of simple taste; he liked his crabbing and he loved his family. He was a man of straightforward ideas. His experiences in wartime and perhaps the experiences of his families and friends convinced him of the horrors of war and how it should be avoided and not glorified. I hope that most, if not all, of us share that view. Mr Choules' generation was a great one and we owe it a debt of gratitude. We need to thank the people of that generation and remember them. We need to avoid the errors of the past and make sure we do better in the future.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot) [12.30 pm]: I also want to offer my sincere condolences to Claude Choules' family. As some of my colleagues in this place will know, the Royal Australian Navy is a very close family unit. Regardless of which part of the Navy we have served in, if we have worn a uniform in the Navy, we have a particular connection with generations who have served in the Royal Australian Navy, both before and after us. I come from a Navy family. My father and my grandfather had been career sailors in the Royal Australian Navy, so not long after I left school, I joined the Navy as a junior stoker as well. I did that out of a sense of service. I understand the reasons that Claude chose to join the Navy. What sprung to mind when I listened to the member for Rockingham is that the member for Rockingham and I have something in common with Claude. It is that, like so many other people, we have chosen to make Western Australia our home. Claude could have lived anywhere in the world after he left the Royal Australian Navy, but he chose to make Western Australia his home. On days like this, as sad as condolence motions are, we should be very proud of the contribution that Claude made, and we should be very proud that out of all the places in Australia, or anywhere else in the world, in which Claude could have chosen to live, he chose Western Australia. I want to acknowledge the fact that he did that, because Western Australia is without doubt the greatest state in the commonwealth of Australia, and we are honoured by the fact that Claude chose to spend his life in this state.

I acknowledge, on behalf of my friends in this chamber who have also served in the Royal Australian Navy, the contribution, the closeness and the sense of camaraderie that we get out of having great men like Claude walk among us. I also acknowledge Claude's family, who must still be feeling such a great loss, but also such a great sense of pride in the contribution that Claude made to pursuing freedom for all of us.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro) [12.31 pm]: As the third ex-Navy man in this chamber, I too would like to reflect very briefly on the extraordinary coincidence it was that Claude Choules came to live in Western Australia. It is extraordinary that the very last man standing, out of the scores of millions of veterans of the First World War, should call Western Australia home. The value of Claude's presence was brought home to me when he passed away just before Anzac Day and when I opened the paper and showed my almost 14-year-old son his story. I believe, like everyone, and as Adrian, Claude's son, has reflected upon, that Claude was valuable property—not only my property, but the property of the world. As I looked at that very young face that peered back at me from his recruitment photo, I reflected on the millions of people who have passed on and who have contributed in the same way as Claude has done, and also on all those other people who have come subsequently, many of whom also joined the Navy at a very young age. It is interesting that Claude served as an instructor at HMAS *Leeuwin*, where thousands upon thousands of Royal Australian Navy junior recruits were trained for many decades. I am sure that Claude made an incredible contribution, partly because he was able to reflect upon what it was like to have joined the Navy at such a young age. He beat me by one year—I joined the Navy when I was aged 15—but

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I can only guess at what he encountered going to sea in a battleship during World War I as a 16-year-old. It would have been an incredible experience.

It is also wonderful for us in Western Australia to look at those photos from Claude's life and read his interviews and his story about his tremendous marriage. I think everyone who has looked at that photo of Ethel when he met her on the ship coming out to Australia would agree she was indeed a "stunner", as he indicated. It is heart-warming and uplifting to reflect upon the fact that they remained together for so many decades and lived such a wonderful life. I can only join with other members of this chamber and those members who have spoken on this motion in offering my condolences and heartfelt thanks to the family of Claude Choules. They have contributed wonderfully to this state and nation. Claude was, and remains, a tremendous contributor not just to the United Kingdom through his service with the Royal Navy, and not just to Australia, but to the entire world, particularly with his reflections on war and what a damaging thing it is, and the value that he placed on peace.

The SPEAKER: Order! Members, in order to support this motion, I would ask you to stand and spend a minute in silence.

Question passed; members standing.