

Premiers ANZAC Spirit School Prize: Wesley Paul Choat

Using a range of sources, research the experience of a South Australian service man or woman who served (Navy, Army, Airforce or Nursing) during either World War 1 and/or World War 2.



Figure 1: Soldiers of the 53rd Battalion the day before the battle of Fromelles (Australian War Memorial, 1916).

Australian history has many significant moments which changed our country, the failed Gallipoli campaign being one. Yet the worst day in our military history to this day is the Battle of Fromelles, fought over two days, from the 19th to the 20th of July, 1916 (Figure 1). On this one day, the ANZAC forces suffered over 5000 casualties and 2000 deaths. The Battle of Fromelles was a preventative attack against the heavily defended German army, to stop resources moving south towards Somme. It led to thousands of newly trained soldiers being killed in broad daylight (Australian War Memorial, 2019). Out of this tragedy, however, comes the incredible story of Private Wesley Choat. It is a story of bravery, perseverance and resourcefulness, in the face of all obstacles.

Private Wesley Paul Choat (Figure 2) was born on the 27th of August, 1896 in Cherry Gardens, South Australia, to Alice Broadbent and Joseph Choat. The third child of what would be seven, he was raised in Adelaide and educated at Goodwood Public School before leaving early to become a farm worker on the Yorke Peninsula (State Library of South Australia, 2019). Wesley was 19 years old when he enlisted on 12th July 1915, along with his older brothers Raymond and Archibald (Archie), 24 and 19 years old respectively (National Archives, 2019). Wesley, Raymond and Archie departed Australia as members of the 32nd Battalion from Port Adelaide on the 19th of November, 1915, to begin their training in Cairo (Choat, 1918).



Figure 2: Wesley Paul Choat, age 19 (Australian War Memorial, 1915)

After six months of training in Egypt, the Choat brothers sailed to France, unaware of the looming horrors of the Western Front;

“It seemed a veritable paradise, and it was hard to realise that in this land of seeming peace and picturesque beauty, one of the most fearful wars of all time was raging in the ruthless and devastating manner of "Hun" frightfulness” (Choat, 1918, pg. 7).



Figure 3: Raymond and Archibald "Archie" Choat (Australian War Memorial, 1915)

The 32nd Battalion would soon be faced with the reality of war, changing Wesley's life forever. The Battle of Fromelles began on 19th July 1916, with the 32nd Battalion in the firing line of the surrounding German army. Raymond and Archie were both killed, and Raymond's body has never been found (National Archives, 2019) (Figure 3). However, Wesley was struck on the nose by a piece of shrapnel, falling unconscious into a nearby shell hole, not waking for several hours. When he woke, he heard Germans rounding up the remaining living soldiers, Wesley one of them, soon realising his fate (Choat, 1918).

“...and then the awful realisation came over me 'I am a Prisoner of War'” (Choat, 1918, pg. 8)

Upon capture, Wesley was sent to Dulmen Prisoner of War Camp, located in the north-west of Germany, 40 kilometres from the Dutch border (Figure 4). Wesley soon learnt the harsh realities of being a prisoner of war;

“Imagine if you can, our feeling of remorse, and the sudden pang and tightening inwardly, making us realise even more what an awful and helpless position we were in, being prisoners of the inhuman merciless Hun.” (Choat, 1918, pg. 9)

Wesley worked at Dulmen from 6:30 am until 4 pm, levelling fields and building railways, all while surviving off meagre rations and stolen fruit and vegetables from nearby farms. Wesley spent his 21st birthday in the camp, later reflecting on how differently he spent this milestone compared to his older brother Raymond;

“I spent my 21st birthday rather differently to the usual manner... But we were in a strange land, and prisoners, and were soon to learn the differences of situation and the contrasts to the easy happy-go-lucky life we had been used to” (Choat, 1918, pg. 13)



Figure 4: A propaganda postcard of Dulmen sent by POW's to the Red Cross. (Australian War Memorial, 1917)

As the conditions in Dulmen continued to deteriorate, Wesley began planning his escape.

Six months after his arrival at Dulmen, Wesley and 5 other men escaped through the barbed wire fencing that surrounded the camp, after the guards had finished their rounds. They took a train to a nearby town, posing as Belgian workers, but were unfortunately caught by police soon after, when a prison coin was found on them. Captured just 5 kilometres from Allied territory, they were taken to a new prisoner of war camp located near Dusseldorf. As punishment, all the men were held in solitary confinement for two weeks (Choat 1918). After this Wesley once again focused on one goal: escape.



Figure 5: Privates James Pitt and Wesley Choat. (Australian War Memorial, 1918)

While at Dusseldorf, Wesley met Private James “Jimmy” Pitts, who helped Wesley obtain compasses, railway maps and timetables, and they began planning the next escape (Figure 5). In mid-September 1917 they executed their escape. They first took the train to Kleinenbrach, where upon arrival they began to walk to the Dutch border around 50 kilometres away, arriving at a small Dutch town 4 days later. They were given food, water and shelter from locals, and wrote to their families in Australia and officials in England, telling of their story (Choat, 1918). Choat and Pitts arrived in England on the 13th of January, 1918. While waiting to be sent home to Australia, Wesley wrote a short memoir titled “*A Bold Bid for Blighty*”, detailing his experiences as a prisoner of war. This book is how we know the details of his courage and intelligence during his escape. Wesley and Jimmy were sent home to Australia on April 7th that year (National Archives, 2018).

“... a right good welcome awaited us as we drew up at Adelaide Station, thankful to be once more in Home – ‘Sweet Home.’” (Choat, 1918, pg. 58)

Wesley returned from the war, as he was barred from returning to the front line after his mother wrote to the AIF asking him to stay in Australia following his ordeal and the loss of Raymond and Archie. His mother was also struggling to look after three other sick children and her husband, whose health deteriorated after the news of Raymond’s and Archie’s death. Upon his return to Adelaide, Wesley was involved in a government-funded school campaign, teaching school children the importance of nobility and self-sacrifice, and the danger of feeling indifference to war (Williamson, 2016). On May 5th, 1919, he was awarded the Military Medal; “in recognition of gallant conduct and determination displayed in escaping, or attempting to

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escape, from captivity” (London Gazette, 1920, pg. 1233). He married Lulu Lillian Fox on December 28th, 1919 at St Mary Magdalene’s Church, and lived at Unley Park for the rest of his life, with his wife and daughter, Venloe Beth Choat, who was born on January 21st, 1921. Wesley Paul Choat died on January 15th, 1977, age 81. He is buried at Centennial Park (Williamson, 2016).

RESOURCES:

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Ekins, A. (2019). Battle of Fromelles. [online] Australian War Memorial. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/fromelles> [Accessed 22 Mar. 2019]

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Choat Wesley Paul : SERN 68 : POB Cherry Gardens SA : POE Keswick SA : NOK M Choat Alice Mary National Archives of Australia, First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1914-1920, Series No. B2455, Barcode: 324. Available at: <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=3245275&isAv=N> [accessed 15 Mar. 2019]

IMAGE CREDITS:

Figure 1: Lorking, C. (1916). Men of the 53rd Battalion. [image] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C612?image=1>

Figure 2: State Records of South Australia, (1915). Studio Portrait of Wesley Paul Choat. [image] Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/state-records-sa/26271276692/in/photostream/> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019].

Figure 3: Australian War Memorial, Studio portrait of 67 Private Raymond Hadden Choat. (1915). [image] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P09291.188> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019].

Studio portrait of 66 Private Archibald Percy Choat. (1915). [image] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P09291.189> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019].

Figure 4: Australian War Memorial (1917). A lithographic postcard showing a group of Prisoners of War. [image] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P01981.059/> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019]

Figure 5: Australian War Memorial (1918). Studio portrait of escaped Australian Prisoners of War (POW) 2954 Lance Corporal (L Cpl) James William Pitts. [image] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P03236.156> [Accessed 22 Apr. 2019]

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