

Not just a veteran: battlefield survivor is world's oldest man

Valentine Low

Proving age had not dimmed his sense of humour, he once put his longevity down to "cigarettes, whisky and wild, wild women". Yesterday, Henry Allingham — one of two surviving British veterans of the First World War — officially became the world's oldest man.

Guinness World Records said that Mr Allingham, who celebrated his 113th birthday on June 6, took the title after the previous incumbent, Tomoji Tanabe, died in his sleep at his home in Japan, also at the age of 113.

A familiar face at Remembrance ceremonies, Mr Allingham's life has spanned three centuries. Born in 1896, the young man who signed up for the war thinking it would be a great adventure became a symbol of the sacrifice of a generation and a man with a string of "lasts" to his name.

He is the last surviving founder member of the RAF, the last man to have witnessed the Battle of Jutland and the last surviving member of the Royal Naval Air Service.

Yesterday, however, he came to symbolise something more — how Britons are living longer. In 1911, when he was a teenage apprentice, there were an estimated 100 centenarians in Britain. In 2006, there were 8,970. The Japanese still have roughly twice as many centenarians per head of population as Britain. Their longevity has been attrib-

ed to a combination of the right genes, helped by a diet low in animal fats. But better medical care and higher birth rates mean that other countries, including Britain, are catching them up.

Before he became a national symbol, Henry Allingham had a full life. Born in Clapton, East London, after



Mr Allingham at the end of the First World War, which he said was "stupid. Nobody wins"

his father's death, he was brought up by his mother, who persuaded him not to join up as soon as war broke out. But when she died in 1915 he promptly enlisted, serving first as a seaplane mechanic and then as a spotter, or bomber. He would admit later that he did not realise what war meant, but his experiences at the Third Battle of Ypres, more widely known as Passchendaele, ensured that his youthful enthusiasm was replaced by a lasting passion for peace. "War's stupid," he told the BBC. "Nobody wins. You might as well talk first, you have to talk last anyway."

The scenes he witnessed of soldiers

waiting to go over the top at Ypres have stayed with him ever since. "They would just stand there in 2ft of water in mud-filled trenches, waiting to go forward," he said. "They knew what was coming. It was pathetic to see those men like that. I don't think they have ever got the admiration and respect they deserved."

Mr Allingham and his wife Dorothy were together for more than 50 years. He now heads a family that includes his first great-great-grandchild.

After the war he went into the motor industry, eventually joining the design department at Ford before retiring in 1961.

When asked how he had lived so long, Mr Allingham, who holds the Légion d'Honneur, said: "I don't know if there is a secret, but keeping within your capacity is vital. I've had two major breakdowns, one during the war and one after but both when I was trying to do the work of three men. The trick is to look after yourself and always know your limitations."

His friend, Dennis Goodwin, said that Mr Allingham, who lives at St Dunstan's Care Home for blind ex-servicemen near Brighton, was still letting news of his distinction sink in. "He thinks he has got to a time where he is more than ready to go," said Mr Goodwin. "But as his mother used to say, 'Wait to be asked, Henry, wait to be asked.'"



Henry Allingham: "The trick is to look after yourself and know your limits"