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Selfless acts of grave care

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IN a windswept corner of the northwest coast of England lies the grave of Cairns airman Henry Marinus Atherton.

For 17 years, the graves of Flt-Sgt Atherton, who died in 1943 aged 21, and five other Australian airmen have been lovingly cared for by a secret guardian.

While other headstones in the local cemetery fell into disrepair, those of the five Aussies remained neat; the grass about each headstone trimmed to exacting lengths and a new set of red velvet roses placed before each regularly.

Officials from the War Graves Commission have recently discovered it is resident Lynne Wilkinson who cares for the plots in the small cemetery near the village of Haverigg.

Ms Wilkinson is not Australian, is not related to them nor has she ever met them but for 17 years she has walked 1km from her home to care for the men she likes to call "my guys".

"I do it because they have nobody here and are so far from home," she said of the five Australians as well as five Canadians, eight British and one unknown airmen whose graves she keeps.

"Seventeen years doesn't feel like a long time to me, I do it just because I felt something needed to be done to honour their sacrifice."

The now Sydney-based family of Flt-Sgt Atherton, who died in a Hurricane aircraft during a training mission, recently found out by accident what Ms Wilkinson was doing and made contact and sent a photo of the airman.

She described receiving the photo and that of another Canadian airman as one of the most emotional moments in her life, a face for the grave.

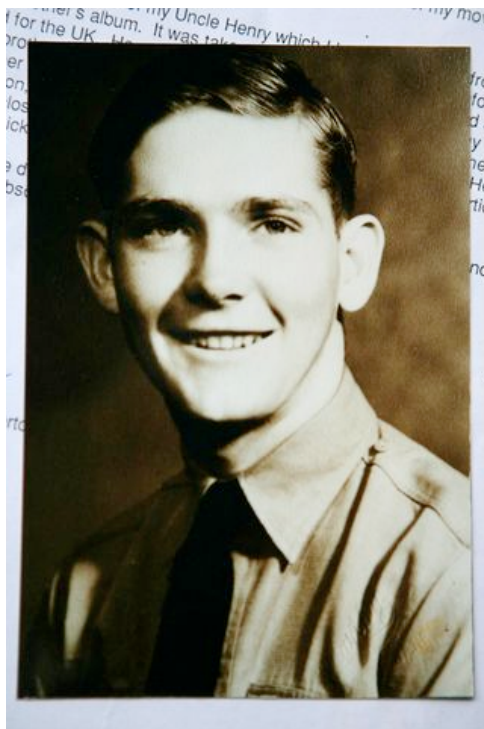
"I had a picture in my head of all my 19 guys but when you open an envelope and you see a picture it is really emotional," she said.

"They are my guys, I have adopted them and I will always care for them."

Flt-Sgt Atherton was the son of Ernest and Honoria Atherton, of Cairns.



Unearthed: Lynne Wilkinson has been looking after Australian war graves in England including Cairns airman Henry Atherton for the past 17 years.



One of my guys: The family of Cairns airman Henry Atherton

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