

Day Australian war veteran never forgot by Shireen Khalil, April 25, 2026

Australian war veteran Don Bitmead had a mission in Malta but couldn't go due to appendicitis. What happened next changed his life forever.

Jenny Higgs vividly remembers spreading her late father's ashes at the very airfield where the war forever changed his life.

Ms Higgs' father, Australian war veteran Don Bitmead, served in the RAAF's 458 Squadron during WWII.

He was stationed in North Africa before being posted to Malta – one of the most heavily



Don Bitmead served in the RAAF's 458 Squadron during WWII. He was stationed in North Africa before being posted to Malta.

bombed places in the war which suffered more than 3000 air raids between 1940 and 1942.

“It was very overwhelming,” Ms Higgs, from Forster, NSW, said about the ceremony last year.

“Every time I think about it I get teary. My father would have been so proud but embarrassed.

“They had a red carpet, trumpeters, it was done at sunset while officers saluted him. It was just beautiful and something my mum had always wanted before she passed (four years ago).”

Ms Higgs, together with her brother Peter, travelled to Malta for the international reunion marking 80 years since the end of WWII.

On the tarmac of Luqa Airfield, she scattered her father’s ashes, returning him to the place that had stayed with him his entire life.

Mr Bitmead, who was 21 at the time and lived to the age of 95, never forgot the mission



Last year, Ms Higgs and her brother Peter travelled to Malta for an international reunion marking 80 years since the end of WWII – fulfilling a wish her late mother had always held.

that would change his life forever. It involved carrying out a series of anti-submarine sweeps in Malta.

But at the last minute, he was grounded after suffering from “excruciating pain and vomiting” due to appendicitis.

That same day, in heavy fog, the aircraft crashed, killing most of those on board.

Before his passing eight years ago, Mr Bitmead wrote a piece for the 458 Squadron detailing what had happened.

“I notified Russell McMillan (flying officer) of the distress I was in, and he called me in for



At sunset, on the tarmac of Luqa Airfield, with a red carpet and trumpeters, Ms Higgs scattered her father's ashes, returning him to the place that had stayed with him his entire life.

an examination,” Mr Bitmead recalled.

“He used the unusual practice of pricking with a pin, to find the inflamed area. Next thing I knew, I was being carted off to Algiers, to have my appendix removed.”

He said flight sergeant Arthur John Huntley volunteered to take his place for the mission on May 19, 1944.

“Upon returning at dusk, after carrying out their patrol, Malta was blanketed in thick cloud,” he wrote.

“With nil visibility the aircraft crashed off the end of the runway, while trying to land. The Wellington burst into flames, wreckage scattering.



Ms Higgs described it as 'overwhelming' and 'emotional'.

“Russell McMillan & the volunteer who took my place, Arthur Huntley, along with the rest of crew, were killed.

“The only survivors were Wal Clark (warrant officer) and Reg Bullen (flying officer). Wal Clark, having extensive burns, was sent to England. Wal and Reg kept in touch for many years when the war was over.

“As you can imagine I was most distressed when the Anglican Padre, Bob Davies, informed me of this tragedy. My number wasn't up.” Ms Higgs said her father carried the weight of surviving when others didn't and never fully recovered emotionally, living with deep depression for decades after the war.



Ms Higgs (right) with her sister Lesley (left) and brother Peter (centre) who is wearing their late father's medals.

Ms Higgs said her father never spoke much about it, but the incident impacted him greatly.

She spoke of his strong ties to Malta, and said having the opportunity to scatter his ashes on the tarmac of Luqa Airfield meant a lot to her family.

She added it was great to see Malta preserving its rich history through its National War Museum with two halls dedicated to its significant role in WWI, the Inter-War period and WWII.

Mario Farrugia-Borg, director of Visit Malta, Australia and New Zealand, said many Australians are surprised to learn just how deep and meaningful the connection between Australia and Malta is, particularly during the two world wars.

“For a small island, Malta played an extraordinarily significant role, and thousands of Allied servicemen – including Australians – passed through, served here, or were forever linked to Malta through their wartime experiences,” he told news.com.au.

“It’s a story that, until now, has largely remained untold.

“Today, there is a growing desire to bring that history to life. Visitors can stand at Luqa Airfield, where RAAF squadrons were once stationed, explore the underground Lascaris War Rooms where critical Allied operations were co-ordinated, or visit the Malta Aviation Museum, which preserves the legacy of RAF and Allied air missions, including those involving Australian forces.”

He said places such as Ta’ Qali War Cemetery offer a deeply moving opportunity to honour those who served, while Valletta and the Grand Harbour stand as enduring reminders of Malta’s strategic importance and the resilience shown during some of the heaviest bombing of the war.

“We are now seeing more Australians travel to Malta not only for its natural beauty, but to reconnect with personal histories – to walk where their parents or grandparents once stood, and to honour those stories in a very real and meaningful way.”

“There is a powerful emotional connection here, and it’s one we are proud to help visitors rediscover.”

This article was posted on-line on Anzac Day 2026:

<https://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-updates/travel-stories/excruciating-pain-day-australian-war-veteran-never-forgot/news-story/8f1797b8d00fc4ab4cbba8052b706eb4>