

60 years later, a tribute

*BY JOE DUGGAN / Lincoln Journal Star
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The florist remembers the call. Make a silk arrangement suitable for a grave. Deliver it to the country cemetery south of Arnold on Nov. 11. So Lisa Geiser, owner of Pretty Petals Floral, set it on the grave of Lt. Roland C. Potter, an American pilot who died in combat Jan. 14, 1945. The arrangement was ordered by a former German fighter pilot named Theo Nau. Six decades ago in the skies over Germany, Nau and Potter met briefly as enemies.

He's not sure if the memory is his, or if the story was told to him. Either way, what happened feels like a memory to him now.

It was 1948, and Roland K. Potter was 5. The boy everyone called by his middle name, Kerry, was dressed up, standing with his mother and other adults. The boy asked why everyone was crying.

"She said, 'When you get a little older, I'll explain it to you.'"

Over the years, he would understand they were crying at the funeral of his father, Roland Potter. After his P-47 Thunderbolt went down, the remains of the 23-year-old were buried in Germany. Then they were moved to France. Finally, three years after his death, the pilot's father brought them back to the Sandhills.

Roland C. Potter was born Sept. 4, 1921, and grew up on a farm outside of Arnold, but he knew he didn't want to spend his life tethered to the ground. In the early 1940s, he took flying lessons in Chadron while he was a student at the local college.

His life moved quickly after the United States entered the war. He enlisted in the Army in May 1942 and was assigned to the Air Corps. He married Betty in November and, a month later, was assigned to active duty.

Their son was born Sept. 1, 1943, while the pilot was learning to fly P-47s in Texas. The mother waited to name him until her husband made it home on leave, so for a time, relatives called him P-47.

When he returned to Arnold, Betty snapped a photo of her husband holding their son. Family legend says the name Kerry came from a character in a comic strip, a pilot.

By November 1943, the father was flying combat missions in the European Theater.

Theo Nau learned to fly when he was 14. After he joined the German Luftwaffe, he eventually was put behind the controls of one of their primary fighter planes, the Messerschmitt 109.

On Jan. 14, 1945, Nau was flying with a squadron of German fighters who had a lone P-47 in their sights. The 19-year-old pilot engaged in the battle and hit the American plane above Heltersberg, Germany.

The Thunderbolt trailed smoke and appeared to be attempting a crash landing. Nau wanted to follow, to learn the pilot's fate, but he only had time to note the plane's tail number before realizing another American plane was firing behind him.

Comment:

Theo Nau did not attempt to follow the American and did not identify his tail number.

Bullets struck the tail of Nau's plane, then just behind the cockpit. Nau pulled into a turn but couldn't lose the Thunderbolt, which stayed about 50 yards behind. After about five minutes, one of the American pilot's machine gun bursts struck the Messerschmitt's engine.

Smoke poured out of the plane. Nau bailed, but not before he saw the numbers on his adversary's plane.

Comment:

Like in the above mentioned case he did not see the tail number.

He severely broke his arm and was hospitalized for three months. Later, he was taken prisoner by Americans, who turned him over to the Russians. He escaped from a POW camp and when he made it back to his hometown, he found bombs had destroyed his family's home and killed his father.

The war was over, but the pain was just beginning.

Back in the Nebraska Sandhills, Betty Potter worked at the bank in Arnold to support her son. She rarely spoke of her dead husband but made sure her son knew Roland Potter was a good man who died for his country.

In 1950, she married John Nelson. Together, they had two daughters, Sandra Jespersen, who now lives in Lincoln, and Susan Nelson, who lives in Arnold. John Nelson raised Kerry like his own and today they share a father-son relationship.

As a kid, Kerry Potter built plastic models of P-47s and collected books about the Thunderbolt. He attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he studied geology and enrolled in the ROTC program. After college, he joined the Air Force and trained as a pilot.

He married his sweetheart, Elizabeth VanSickle of Lincoln. In May 1969, he left behind his wife, pregnant with their first child, to serve in Vietnam. He flew more than 200 missions in F-4 Phantoms and returned about a year later to his wife and daughter.

He made the Air Force his career and was stationed all over the world, including Germany. He retired as a colonel and lives with his wife in Wasilla, Alaska.

For a period in the Air Force, he was assigned to pilot an A-10 jet, also called the Thunderbolt II.

Nau spent his working life running his family's wine and brandy distillery in Germany. Now retired, he and his wife live in Bacharach, on the Rhine River.

For decades, he wondered about the fates of the Americans he met Jan. 14.

Over time, he made friends with former American pilots who helped him track down U.S. military records of the dogfights that occurred that day. Using the plane numbers and times and locations of the fights, they eventually came up with the identities.

Comment:

It was solely the merit of Uwe Benkel, leader of the German Search Group for the Missing, who – together with his wife – found out the background information on this crash: place, tail number, name of pilot, eye-witness accounts etc. Theo Nau also received the address of Potter's son and the information on the burial site of his father from them after they had been able to obtain it with the help of another newspaper in Nebraska.

He learned the pilot who shot him down was an ace fighter named Capt. Joe Cordner, a Native from North Dakota who died in 1965.

Just months ago, he learned the pilot he shot down was another ace who had survived 80 missions and brought down three enemy aircraft.

His name was Lt. Roland C. Potter of Arnold, Neb.

So Nau contacted a friend, Carl Kahn of Lincoln, who flew American planes in World War II. At his friend's request, Kahn made the arrangements to have flowers placed on Potter's grave.

"I was a very young kid then and Lt. Potter was a young kid then," Nau said, explaining his gesture. "We loved to fly. We did not love war.

"The war was terrible ... it was terrible and I hope we have no war in the future."

When Kerry Potter heard about the flowers from a friend in Arnold, he was shocked. Then he felt touched by Nau's gesture.

Fighter pilots, regardless of uniform, share an unwritten code of respect. They know what happens in the skies is duty.

Nothing personal.

"This particular pilot did not set out that day to kill Roland Potter," he said. "I think it was nice of him and an honorable thing to do."

Still, Potter said, he has no plans to talk to the old German pilot.

Not because he harbors hard feelings, but because he's concerned it would be difficult for Nau to hear what the war forced him to take away 61 years ago.

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