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## **Like father, like son**

*By Sharron Hollen*



Roland C. Potter holds his infant son, Roland Kerry Potter, shortly before leaving for Europe where he was killed in action when his plane was shot down over Germany.

The snapshot was probably taken with a Brownie box camera. The black-and-white photo is of a young man in military uniform who cradles an infant in his arms. The young man is 1st Lt. Roland C. Potter. The baby he holds is his son, Roland Kerry Potter.

The snapshot, taken more than 60 years ago, and a few yellowed newspaper clippings that are brittle with age, are about the only tangible ties that Roland Kerry Potter, that baby who is now 62 years old, has to his father.

Roland Kerry Potter, who has always been called Kerry, was not yet 2 when his father, a World War II pilot, was killed when his Thunderbolt was shot down over Germany on Jan. 14, 1945. His father was in basic training when Kerry was born; he saw his son only once before he was sent to England with the 9th Air Force, 368th Fighter Group, 397th Fighter Squadron.

Kerry Potter had long believed that a few mementos, along with the stories his mother had shared with him, were all that he would ever know of his father. That has been changing over the past weeks.

The change began when Uwe and Martina Benkel of Heltersberg, Germany, began a search for relatives - perhaps brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews or cousins - who might still survive Lt. Potter. The Benkels had located the plane that Lt. Potter was piloting when he was shot down near Heltersberg.

Potter, like his father, was born and raised in Arnold. He now lives in Wasilla, Alaska. He was visiting in Arnold when a call came to the home of his stepfather, John Nelson, inquiring about the family of 1st Lt. Potter.

"It was stunning. At age 62, I thought I had garnered everything I would ever know about my father," Potter said of the news that his father's plane had been found.

Potter's mother, Betty, remarried when Kerry was about 8. Her husband raised Kerry as his own. "He's the only dad I ever knew," Potter said.

Kerry's grandparents, Esther and Guy Potter, had shared stories about their son with their grandson, although, Potter reflected, "Talking about my father was often painful for them." As Kerry grew to manhood, he was told how strongly he resembled his father, about similarities they shared.

Roland Potter, who graduated from Arnold High School in 1939, had learned to fly while attending college in Chadron. When World War II broke out, it seemed only natural that he would join the U.S. Army Air Corps. Kerry Potter, who graduated from Arnold High School in 1961, learned to fly while attending the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He entered the Air Force and in 1996 retired as a full colonel with 30 years of service.

There were other parallels, too.

During his military career, Kerry Potter for a time flew an A-10 Thunderbolt II, named to honor those original P-47 Thunderbolts like the one his father was flying when he died.

It was the war in Vietnam that called Kerry Potter to action just weeks before his first child was born. "That was hard on my mother. It brought back such difficult memories for her," said Potter. Kerry Potter was stationed in Germany, his wife with him, when the couple's second child, a son, was born. "It seemed as though all had come full circle when my son was born in the same country where my father had died," Potter reflected.

Although 1st Lt. Roland Potter died in action on Jan. 14, 1945, in Germany, it was almost three years before his body was returned for burial in the Arnold Cemetery on Aug. 13, 1948. The services were just days shy of his son's fifth birthday. "I remember the graveside part of the funeral and my mother crying. But I didn't really understand it all. Some of what I recall may be my memory, some may be what has been filled in for me," Potter said.

The Benkels of Heltersberg, Germany, would like to provide Kerry Potter with some of the items recovered from the crash site of his father's plane. The German pilot, Theo Nau, who shot down 1st Lt. Potter's Thunderbolt has offered to meet with Kerry Potter. He recently sent flowers for Potter's gravesite in Arnold. Kerry Potter is undecided about those things, not for himself but out of concern for the now elderly gentleman who, like his own father, was a young pilot that January day in 1945.

For now, Kerry Potter has found it sufficient to take that tiny snapshot and the brittle newspaper clippings from their place of safekeeping, to sort through a precious few mementos and recall the things he has been told about the father he never got to know.