

## Pfc. William L. Rohde killed in action when flight home crashes

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

Imagine the excitement of the three Rohde sisters and their father on Grand Island after receiving a hand-written letter from their older brother and son, Willie, shortly after World War II had ended in 1945. "I'm leaving tomorrow for the good old U.S.A.," he wrote.

Private First Class William L. Rohde was 35 when he enlisted into the U.S. Army in April 1942, leaving the family farm on East River Road near Edgewater; his father, Herman; and sisters Ruth, Leona and Millie. His mom, Sophia Long Rohde, had died in 1929. Rohde did not attend high school after going through grade 8 on the Island. He worked with his father on the family farm, along with working at Bell Aerospace.

After joining the military, Rohde regularly wrote to his family through letters to his sister, Millie, who was married and living on Whitehaven Road. The letters never told where he was stationed or what his assignment was, but the sisters always looked forward to receiving them, according to Millie's daughter, Karen Vanthoff. A lifelong Islander, Karen lives in the family home on Whitehaven and has a binder full of letters, photos and stories about her uncle.

Rohde was not sent overseas to fight for his country but rather to a remote post,



Pfc. William L. Rohde, center, with sisters, Millie Rhode Vanthoff, left, and Leona Rhoda Kloss in 1943 when he was home on leave

Kiska, in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, in late 1943 after being in several locations in the United States. He was a radar technician, and the location was critical in defending the North Pacific, Canada and the United States due to its close proximity to Japan, which had attacked Kiska in 1942 and held the small island until 1943.

Willie's sisters first learned he was in

Alaska by the postmark on the envelope of his final letter sent on October 8, 1945, in which he also wrote: "I don't know when we will arrive in the states. When I get there, I will let you know and when I will be home."

His sisters were excited and word spread quickly that Willie Rohde was coming home from the Army.

The next news about their brother came

later that month when former Grand Island Clerk Elsie Stamler, who lived a few houses away, knocked on Millie's door late at night, saying someone from the Army was on the phone for her. The Vanthoffs did not have a phone back then, so she followed the clerk to her home where she heard her brother and eight others were killed when their plane crashed in the Aleutian Islands on their way home.

"My mother was very emotional and she

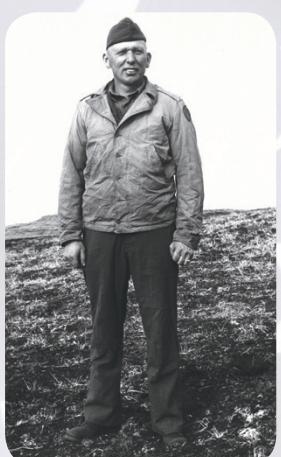
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### WILLIAM L. ROHDE July 12, 1907 - October 21, 1945



William was born on Grand Island to Herman and Sophia Long Rohde. He was the oldest of 4 children and their only son. William enlisted in the Army in April 1942 at age 35.

After serving briefly at several locations in the U.S., he was transferred to the remote Kiska post in the Aleutian Islands, Alaska in late 1943. He served as a radar technician. This location was critical in defending the North Pacific, Canada and the United States due to its close proximity to Japan who attacked Kiska in 1942 and held the small island until 1943.

The war ended in September 1945. On October 21, 1945, PFC William L. Rohde and 8 others were onboard a plane returning to the United States. The plane crashed in the Aleutian Islands and all on board perished.

After temporary burial at Fort Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska, all 9 soldiers were returned to rest together in the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, 1948.

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