

GUIDE TO THE ROBERT L. ZWERLEIN COLLECTION



Robert L. Zwerlein, 1967

Collection Abstract: Letters from Robert Zwerlein to his family, personal items, photographs, awards and military medals documenting Zwerlein's life. Also correspondence with Mr. and Mrs. William Zwerlein regarding Robert Zwerlein's death aboard the USS Forrester in 1967 and other material collected by them about the USS Forrester disaster.

Collection Title: THE ROBERT L. ZWERLEIN COLLECTION

Inclusive Dates: ca. 1961-2007

Size: 2 Boxes (.75 l.f.)

Source: Gift of Peter J. Zwerlein & William G. Zwerlein

Accession Number: 2009-007

Prepared by: Francesca Pitaro, 2009

Repository: Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

ROBERT L. ZWERLEIN COLLECTION

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Robert L. Zwerlein was born in Port Washington on June 19, 1946. Robert was the son of William C. and Ruth Zwerlein who moved to Shore Road after their marriage in 1941. Robert Zwerlein graduated from Schreiber High School in June 1964. The Zwerlein family has a long history in Port Washington and Robert followed his father into the Port Washington Fire Department as a member of Protection Engine Company No. 1.

Zwerlein joined the Navy in April of 1964 and was assigned to the USS *Forrestal* in April 1967. The *Forrestal*, an aircraft carrier, was then deployed to the Gulf of Tonkin. On July 29th 1967, as a result of an electrical malfunction, a rocket was accidentally fired across the flight deck into a plane waiting to take off. Zwerlein was a plane captain who was on deck at the time working to insure that the aircraft was ready for flight. The jet fuel from the damaged plane ignited, beginning a chain reaction that exploded bombs and other ordnance aboard the carrier. Robert Zwerlein was among the 134 men killed in the *Forrestal* disaster. He died on August 1, 1967 of injuries sustained in the fire.

SCOPE AND CONTENT:

The Robert L. Zwerlein Collection includes letters from Robert Zwerlein to his family in Port Washington and photos and memorabilia from his high school, his years in the Navy and his work with the Port Washington Fire Department. Zwerlein's letters describe his experiences in the Navy and also reflect his affection for his family and his wishes to keep up with all that was happening in his home town and in the Port Washington Fire Department. Photographs include images of the USS *Forrestal*, family photographs, and Fire Department events.

The collection also contains material collected by William C. Zwerlein after his son's death. Correspondence includes letters to the Zwerlein family after Robert's death, letters from the Department of the Navy, and a copy of a letter from John McCain (who was on board the *Forrestal*). One letter from Bill McCarthy (a witness to the *Forrestal* disaster) to his parents was presented to the Zwerleins by Bill's parents. McCarthy, a Port Washington resident and friend of Robert Zwerlein, was serving aboard the USS *Oriskany* in the Gulf of Tonkin on July 29, 1967. In the letter he wrote to his parents on the night of the tragedy, he describes the horror that he witnessed and his concern for his friend aboard the *Forrestal*. Clippings about Robert, material about the USS *Forrestal* disaster, and information on the Robert L. Zwerlein Memorial Fund are also included.

ROBERT L. ZWERLEIN COLLECTION

BOX LIST:

Box 1

<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>
1	Clippings Re: R.L. Zwerlein & family, ca. 1967-2005
	Correspondence
2-3	Letters from Robert L. Zwerlein to his family, 1966-1967
4	Bill McCarthy letter, July 29, 1967
5	Letters to the Zwerleins from the Navy and Lyndon Johnson, 1967-1968
6	Letters to the Zwerleins – General, 1967-2008
7	Letters from Gregory Freeman re: Book on the USS Forrestal, 2000-2002
8	Memorabilia, Awards, Diploma, etc., ca. 1961-1967
9	Memorials and Services – Programs & Misc., ca. 1967-2007
	Photographs
10	Zwerlein Family, ca. 1960s
11	U.S. Navy, 1967
12	Tributes, Memorials, ca. 1967-2001
13	Miscellaneous – Fire Department events, 1965; 1967
14	Protection Engine Co. – Membership Certificate & Correspondence, 1964
15	USS Forrestal – Clippings, 1967-2001
16	USS Forrestal – Miscellaneous, 1967 & undated

Box 2 – Oversized Material and Artifacts

Varsity letters from Port Washington High School (5 items)

Medals:

Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm
Republic of Vietnam Service

USS Forrestal Memorial Book, 1967