

April 25, 2020

Boalsburg Native a Witness to USS Forrestal Disaster

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Photo of G. Rudy collection items.

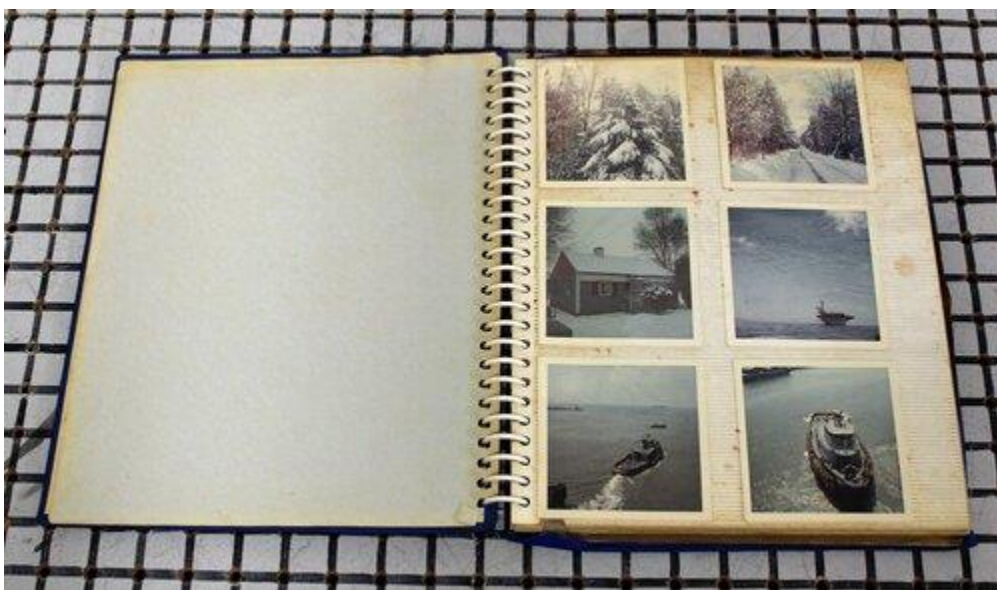


Photo of G. Rudy album interior.

These photographs, album, newsletter, and magazine belonged to Gerald Rudy of Boalsburg, PA. In July 1967, Rudy was serving aboard the USS Forrestal (CVA59), a US Navy aircraft carrier commissioned in 1955 and stationed at Point Yankee, a fixed coordinate in the Gulf of Tonkin approximately 60 miles off the coast of North Vietnam. From this location, the US launched air strikes aimed at North Vietnam.

For four days, aircraft from Attack Carrier Air Wing 17 stationed aboard the USS Forrestal had been carrying out bombing missions against North Vietnamese targets. On July 29th, a Zuni rocket installed on an F-4B Phantom jet suffered an electrical malfunction, misfired, and launched across the deck of the Forrestal. The rocket struck the fuel tank of a fully armed A-4 Skyhawk jet, igniting a massive fire and causing one of the jet's 1,000 pound M65 bombs to fall from the plane and onto the deck of the ship, where it too burst into flames. Shortly after another of the plane's bombs exploded with a ferocity that sent flames and debris nearly 1,000 feet toward the bow of the ship. In all, the initial blast ignited a dozen subsequent explosions.

Crews immediately fought to extinguish the blaze, and within an hour had the flames on deck under control. However, the explosions tore holes in the deck which allowed fuel, water, and foam to seep into the ship's compartments below. There, the fire continued to rage until early the next morning, killing 50 men where they slept.

The disaster aboard the USS Forrestal claimed the lives of 134 sailors and airmen and seriously injured or burned an additional 161. Of the 73 aircraft aboard, fire destroyed 21 and damaged an additional 40.

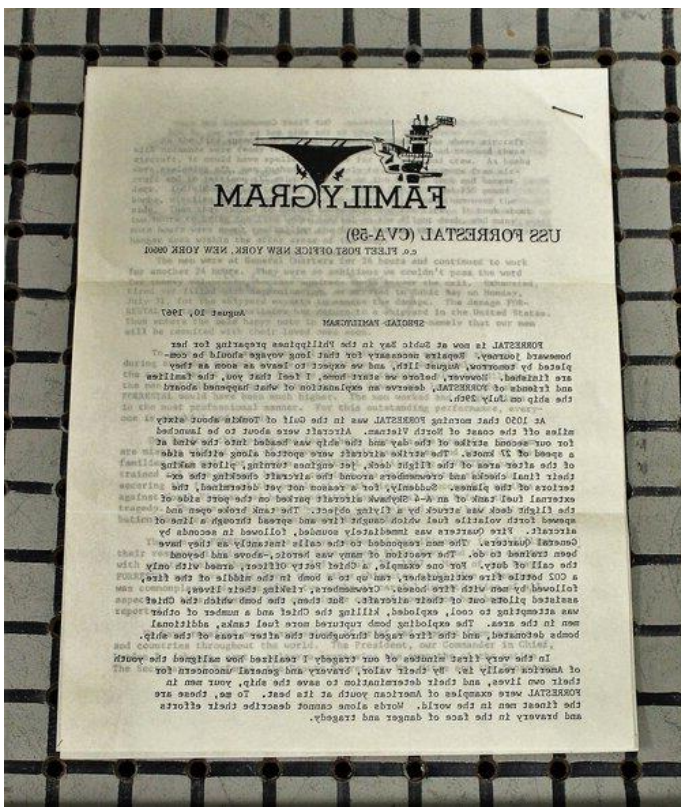


Photo of USS Forrestal Family Gram - Aug. 1967

Following the fire, the Forrestal traveled to Subic Bay in the Philippines. There, crews made emergency repairs to stabilize the crippled vessel so it could safely return to the United States. While in the Philippines, the ship's commanding officer sent the special edition "Familygram" newsletter (shown here) to families of sailors aboard the Forrestal. The newsletter described the tragedy and commended the crew for bravely fighting the fire.



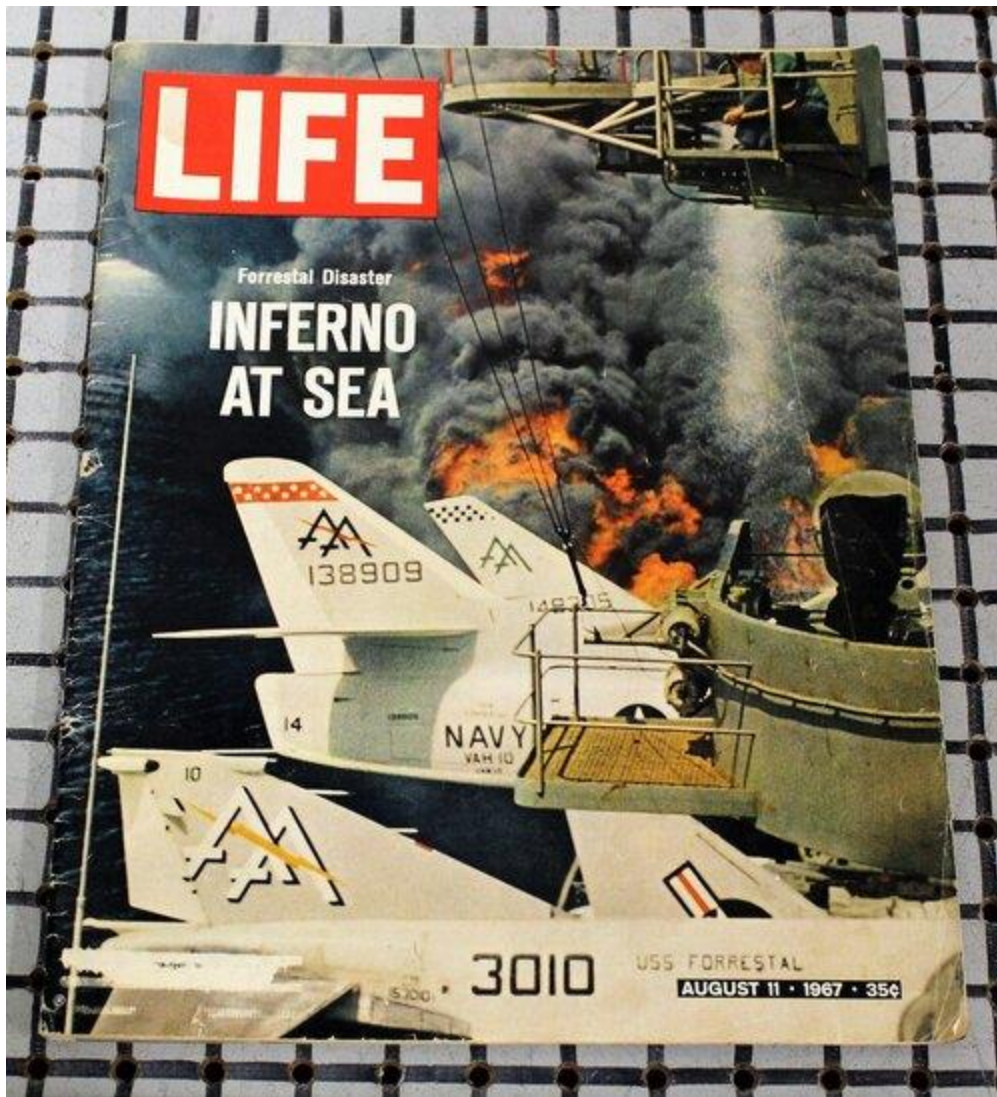


Photo of Life Magazine cover, Forrestal Disaster

On August 11, 1967 the story of the disaster aboard the USS Forrestal reached millions of American homes when Life Magazine featured the harrowing event on its cover.

While the USS Forrestal never made another Vietnam cruise, it did undergo a complete overhaul at the Norfolk Navy Shipyard in Virginia and continued in Navy service until 1993.