

Basic Detail Report

00054798

Title

USS TOWERS lighter

Date

1962

Medium

Aluminium, paint

Dimensions

Overall: 50 × 30 × 10 mm, 39 g

Name

Lighter

History

This commemorative lighter for USS TOWERS was part of collection belonging to Vanessa Roberson. Her story is told here by her grandson, Jeff Allan: "My grandmother spent her last 10 years in a fog of dementia, but I could still squeeze a memory from her, even a cackle, if I mentioned the navy balls of the '50s. They were the brightest spots in her life. She lived in Sydney's King Cross, just minutes away from where the navy - and visiting navies - used to dock their ships at the city's naval base. The excitement and glamour of an incoming fleet brightened an otherwise poverty stricken life. Vanessa Roberson, known as Zena to her family, Van to her friends, grew up in country New South Wales. Born in 1912, she married early and spent her days cooking for the farm workers on her property. She would rise early, collect eggs and milk, prepare breakfast for 20 men and take it out to the back paddocks, returning only in time to begin the process over again for a cooked lunch. The rest of her time was spent washing, cleaning and looking after her only son. Meanwhile, her husband openly slept around town and had little time for her. At some stage, in her late 30's, Vanessa left. She arrived at Sydney's Central station with a son under one arm and a wooden mantle clock under the other. Cleaning out my father's flat recently, I came across an old briefcase among a pile of junk headed for the tip. My father, Vanessa's only son, now 80, was doing a big-out and had no time for "sentimental crap". My brother and I made five trips to the tip that day, and I hoarded anything that looked like it might have belonged to my grandmother, shoving it under the seat of my car. back home that night, I opened the briefcase and found my Nan's life inside: American Zippo lighters from the 1950's and 1960's, some in their original boxes, some not, each engraved with the US Navy ship's insignia, all with small notes listing the captain's name, the ship and the date. (She was an excellent note-keeper. It makes me ponder what our children will find of us? Will we even leave handwritten records? Will a thousand digital photos on a USB contain the same wonder as a single black-and-white photo of my grandmother posing by a train?) A suitcase I managed to salvage contained hundreds of letters, original ship boarding brochures and scallop-edged invitations to the navy ball (God

knows what else my father threw out). Names became real people. There was Rocky, a captain who escorted my grandmother on board the USS ARNEB, while engaged in Operation Deep Freeze, the US Navy's mission to Antarctica. He squired Vanessa around town and gave her several lighters, including a beautiful art deco mother-of-pearl version. He pursued her for marriage but she was never to go into that institution again. She would write to these men long after they had sailed away, and they would write back regularly, in warm letters telling of their voyages, of crime-riddled Chicago or tropical Pago Pago, and they would always enclose a ship's lighter, per her request. Whenever I saw my Nan, even as she faded so far that she didn't know who I was, I could still make her laugh. I only had to mention the Coral Sea Ball. She may have been bed-bound in a nursing home but for Vanessa Roberson, a happy dreamer formerly of Cooma New South Wales, latterly Kings Cross, in her mind it was 1957 and she was dancing with Rocky." Jeff Allan, The Australian Financial Review, 19 December 2015. The preponderance of souvenir cigarette lighters and matches indicate the status of tobacco smoking as an acceptable and even desirable social habit of this period. Many of the lighters are the American Zippo brand which was used as a marketing device and souvenir by many American companies and entities. They are collectable and are considered to significant in the history of US product design.