



## WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

# Lesson 9—Letters Home: Typical Correspondence During World War II

by Michael Hutchison

### Overview/Description

Frequently, books, television shows, and movies focus on poignant or significant letters sent by soldiers to their families. The Sullivan Ballou letter, featured in PBS's *The Civil War*, and the Major William Forbes Belcher's letter to his sons during World War II, which were analyzed in lesson 1, are examples of letters sent to family members by soldiers concerned that they might not make it home. In addition, because of popular films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, many students might presume that GIs were engaged in physical combat every minute of the day. The real war was not that way. Most letters sent home were about more mundane things, such as army chow, day-to-day routine, guys in the unit that the soldier met, and so on.

Letters sent from family members at home generally included information the writer thought the soldier would want to know—the weather, how high school sports teams were doing, and other typical news from the home front. Frequently, these letter exchanges served not only as a way to keep a soldier stationed overseas informed about what was happening at home, but as a way to keep connected and possibly comfort both the soldier and family at home in a difficult situation.

### Grade Level

High School

### Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about typical letters to and from U.S. service personnel in World War II
- Analyze themes and ideas expressed in these letters
- Appreciate the conditions and typical activities of soldiers as well as their families during World War II

### Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards: USH 5.3, USH 5.6, WH 8.4 and WH 9.2 (as of Oct. 1, 2008)
- National Standards (National Council for Social Studies): II Time, Continuity, and Change; IV Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; VIII Science, Technology, and Society; IX Global Connections

### Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, Casablanca, Operation TORCH (North Africa)

### Time Required

Two class periods (50 to 55 minutes each)

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## Materials Required

- Study Guide (one copy per group)
- Copies of the Summers letter of June 1, 1943. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0272\_BOX1\_FOLDER7\_6-1-1943 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of the letter from Janie Summers to her brother, Frank, from April 23, 1945. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0272\_BOX1\_FOLDER9\_4-23-1945 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of the Summers letter to Janie, dated December 1, 1944. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0272\_BOX1\_FOLDER8\_12-1-1944 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).

## Background/Historical Context

Frank W. Summers of Indianapolis was a prolific letter writer during the war years. Serving with the U.S. Army Air Corps from the spring of 1940 until the end of World War II, he frequently wrote letters to his siblings, Harriett, Janie, and Bill, while he was stationed with the Fourth Troop Carrier of the Twelfth Air Force. During this time, Summers was stationed at various bases in the U.S., as well as England, North Africa, Sicily, and Italy.

In this lesson, student groups will analyze two letters that are representative of the everyday topics that would be discussed by soldiers and their families. There are also interesting historic events discussed as well, such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's trip to a wartime conference at Casablanca and Roosevelt's death in April 1945.

## Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking students what topics they think typical letters home might include. Some students may note that letters would cover topics such as home events, romantic notes to wives at home, information about other family members or children, news from neighbors

and friends who might also be in the service, etc.

Next, divide the class into four groups, with roughly an equal number of students per group. Give each group the packet of letters. Distribute a copy of the study guide to each group. It may be helpful for the teacher to designate one student in each group as a recorder, who will jot down notes regarding the questions on the study guide, as well as another student, who will act as the reporter at the end of the lesson and announce to the class what conclusions the group made.

Allot sufficient time for the student groups to look at the packet and complete the study guide. It is suggested that the teacher mingle among groups and provide assistance for them if needed. At the end of the allotted time, the student reporter should present the results of the group's analysis and be prepared to defend it if other groups have varying opinions.

## Assessment

The teacher may elect to evaluate the completed study guides and assign a grade for each student in the group based on whatever criteria the teacher determines, including soundness of conclusions and analysis, historical accuracy, persuasiveness, etc.

## Enrichment Activity

Using Web sites included in the World War II Lesson Plan "Resources" pages (a separate pdf), or by performing an Internet search, direct students to complete a similar analysis of letters from other U.S. service personnel who fought in other conflicts. Or, ask students to role-play either soldiers or people at on the home front and write letters as they may have been written during World War II.

## Study Guide Questions and Suggested Answers

Note: Some of the questions are open ended and may have several answers. In those instances, the teacher should accept any reasonable answer as correct.

**1. What is the date of the letters? To whom is each letter addressed? Who is the author of each letter?**

The letters in this lesson are dated June 1, 1943, written by Summers to his sister Harriett; December 1, 1944, written by Summers to his sister, Janie; and April 23, 1945, written by Janie to Summers.

**2. What location is the origin of each letter?**

Summers' June 1, 1943, letter originates from North Africa. Summers' December 1, 1944, letter originates from Italy. The letter from his sister, Janie, originates from the United States, probably Indianapolis.

**3. Next, look at Summers' letter dated June 1, 1943. How does he describe the types of food he has there (what he calls his "first taste of Field Ration C")? How does Summers describe his "daily dutys"? What conclusion can your group make about risks or dangers that Summers has in his daily routine? Do you think this lifestyle was typical of the average American GI in World War II? What is the opinion of your group regarding this?**

Students should note that Summers describes the food as "4 different types [of] meat & vegetable stew, meat & vegetable hash, meat and beans, and not least a can containing 5 GI dog biscuits, 1 can [for one cup] soluble coffee, and 3 or four pieces of hard candy."

He lists his "dutys" as 8 to 10, arise and eat breakfast; 10 to 12 loaf & read (if you could find anything), 12 to 13 eat dinner; 13 to 19 go to town or loaf; 17 to 18 supper for those who wanted it; 19 to 20 to bed."

Based on the information that Summers provides in this the letter, students will probably conclude that Summers' duties in North Africa were probably fairly light, and did not require him to be exposed to any sort of risk. Most students might conclude that this was not typical of the average GI, especially if they have read other

letters and correspondence from troops during the period.

**4. In page three of Summers' letter from December 1, 1944, he describes an event that happened on New Year's Eve. What happened? As a group, summarize Summers' description of this event. At the end of his letter, who does Summers mention that he gets a "distant glimps[e]" of at Casablanca?**

Summers describes an air raid. He noted "it was butyful," as it looked like Butler Bowl on the Fourth of July night. During the air raid, he said that he was getting used to the noise of various sorties, and was about asleep (he had "just reached the border of the land of Nod," according to his account), when suddenly he heard a "schrill whistle" of a bomb on descent, then "the thud but no explosion." He noted the bomb was a dud, but added that if it had exploded "some of us wouldn't be here now."

In one of the final paragraphs of his letter, he reports that there was a "rumor" that the president was in town, although he added that "nobody credited it much though till someone in the Sgdn [Squadron] saw him & Co. [company]. Summers adds that he did "get a distant glimps[e] of him, surrounded by MPs."

**5. Next, look at the letter from Janie to her brother. She notes sending him a package. What was in the package? Later, she mentions something about the *Reader's Digest*. What does she say? With your group, what conclusions can you make about Summers' duties by this point in the war? Can you make any conclusion about Summers' interests by the contents of the package?**

Janie mentions that she has sent him a book called *Lee's Lieutenants*. She also notes that "the other book has mailed." Janie also tells him that she subscribed "Frankie" to the *Reader's Digest*.

Based on the statements made here some students might conclude that Summers' may have had significant time to read in addition to whatever

duties he had. Other students may feel that since the date of the letter was relatively late in the war (the date of the letter is April 23, 1945, and the war would end in approximately three weeks), the amount of duty that Summers had to do was relatively light compared to what it might have been during other phases of the war.

While there is no significant evidence to identify any specific “interests” from the package’s contents, most students would probably infer that Summers enjoyed reading and had an interest in history, based on the fact that Janie sent him a copy of *Lee’s Lieutenants*, a book dealing with Robert E. Lee and the Civil War. Later in the letter, Janie asks Summers if he’s received his copy of humorist [James] Thurber’s *Carnival*, which may indicate that Summers also had an interest in the popular literature of the period.

**6. On the second page of her letter, Janie mentions President Roosevelt. What does she say about him? She also notes other U.S. presidents in this paragraph. In what context does she discuss them? What other person does she mention in the paragraph? Why do you think she mentions this person’s name? What conclusions can you and your group make about Janie’s feelings toward these people?**

Janie’s letter is dated slightly more than a week after Roosevelt’s death by a cerebral hemorrhage. The group will probably note that the president’s sudden death was probably a shock for many of Janie’s age, as well as the whole nation. Since Roosevelt had been president for nearly 13 years at the time of his death, he may have been the only president Janie and many Americans could remember.

Janie notes other presidents who died or experienced a tragic event at the moment of victory. Lincoln was assassinated a few days after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House; Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke while trying to convince the U.S. Senate to sign the Treaty of Versailles and join the

League of Nations; and Roosevelt died just a few weeks before the Allied victory in Europe.

The other person she notes was Ernie Pyle, a war journalist from Indiana who was well known to newspaper readers across the country. Pyle had been killed by Japanese fire a few days earlier during the Battle of Okinawa on the island of Ie Shima. It is not evident from the letters whether Summers or his family knew anyone personally who was killed in action during World War II, but the deaths of prominent people, either because of the stress of war or because of action in the war, and especially close to the end of the European war, would have hit people hard.

**7. In several paragraphs of her letter, Janie makes reference to more ordinary things, such as medical and dental problems she is having, along with mentioning that Bill (Summers’ brother) has fixed a record player, and that her radio is “too puny.” Why do you think she spends time discussing these issues? Would the members of your group enjoy getting a letter with these details? Why or why not?**

In her letter, Janie mentions having a cyst removed, and the related post-procedure problems, as well as having two teeth pulled. She also talks about a record player and the family radio. While these news bits seem rather mundane, they are probably more in line with what family members would discuss if they were in face-to-face conversation. Perhaps Janie also felt that by keeping her brother informed as to everyday news happening to the family, it also helped him from being homesick or depressed. Summers also tended to discuss common themes in his letters, daily routine, food, living conditions, and so on, and those may have been themes that the family members simply felt their siblings might have an interest in knowing too.

**8. In Janie’s letter, she mentions several items that her brother has sent home (a lamp that hasn’t been received as of yet, flags, buttons, and other items Summers has sent to his sister Harriett to keep for him). Why might it be important for him to collect and save war souvenirs? Poll the members of your group to make a conclusion.**

Some student groups may note that Summers may have kept souvenirs in order to have mementoes of his experiences in the service. Others may believe that Summers may consider giving them to family members or putting them up for sale after his return. Other students may have a different view. In several of his books, author Stephen Ambrose noted that several soldiers mentioned to him during research for his books that collecting souvenirs was one way that they could have a reason to survive the battles as well as the day-to-day hardships of the war.

**9. During the war, Summers was stationed in England, North Africa, and Italy. Yet, he rarely wrote about significant events such as battles. Why do you think he may have done this? (Refer to the Study Guide’s introduction for some possible clues.)**

Summers was stationed in various locations during the war years, but served in a troop carrier squadron. Because of the duty he had, he simply may not have had the battle experience that combat infantry troops may have had. Some students may feel that if Summers did have intense battle experiences, he may not have wanted to relive those experiences or worry his family with stories about battles, seeing casualties, and destruction.

**10. Assume that you and the members of your group are part of a commission creating a museum exhibit on experiences of soldiers in World War II. Would you recommend including these letters in the exhibit? Come up with a consensus with your group as to whether these letters should be included. Be ready to explain your rationale for this decision to the class.**

Answers will vary. Some groups may feel that the letters are appropriate for a collection because they describe the day-to-day life of the average soldier, and do contain some significant historical information (such as Summers seeing Roosevelt at Casablanca, his experience during the air raid, and Janie’s feelings on the death of Roosevelt). Other groups may disagree. Although Summers was stationed in different locations during the war and saw many cities and areas where military campaigns had occurred, he doesn’t describe much in the way of military action. Instead he focuses on ordinary events in his day-to-day life.

## **“Letters Home” Study Guide**

### **Introduction**

Frequently, books, television shows, and movies focus on poignant or significant letters sent by soldiers to their families. Some sent letters to family members expressed a concern that they might not make it home.

Letters sent from family members at home generally included information the writer thought the soldier would want to know—the weather, how high school sports teams were doing, and other typical news from the home front. Frequently, these letter exchanges served not only as a way to keep a soldier stationed overseas informed about what was happening at home, but a way to keep connected and possibly comfort both the soldier and family at home in a difficult situation.

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Your teacher will divide your class into groups to analyze two typical letters, one from Summers to his sister, Harriett, and another from Summers’ sister, Janie, to him. As a group, answer the questions on the study guide. Designate one member of your group to be the recorder to write your group’s reactions and opinions. Designate another to be the reporter to present your group’s answers to the rest of the class. Be ready to defend some of the answers you develop, and be ready to disagree with other groups’ opinions if you have different answers.

When you finish this lesson, you’ll have a better idea of the everyday life of soldiers in World War II.

### **Directions**

As a group, analyze the two letters. In some instances, you will need to create a consensus—a conclusion that all members should be able to live with. In those instances, be sure to include and respect opinions of all group members.

#### **Names of the members of this group:**

**1. What is the date of the letters? To whom is each letter addressed? Who is the author of each letter?**

**2. What location is the origin of each letter?**

3. Next, look at Summers' letter dated June 1, 1943. How does he describe the types of food he has there (what he calls his "first taste of Field Ration C")? How does Summers describe his "daily duties"? What conclusion can your group make about risks or dangers that Summers has in his daily routine? Do you think this lifestyle was typical of the average American GI in World War II? What is the opinion of your group regarding this?

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8. In Janie's letter, she mentions several items that her brother has sent home (a lamp that hasn't been received as of yet, flags, buttons, and other items Summers has sent to his sister Harriett to keep for him). Why might it be important for him to collect and save war souvenirs? Poll the members of your group to make a conclusion

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