



## WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

# Lesson 5—Vandivier Crash and “Vacation”

by *Michael Hutchison*

### Overview/Description

As the United States moved closer and closer to involvement in World War II, Ensign Norman Vandivier wrote letters to his parents discussing his further training as a pilot, as well as a plane crash in which he escaped serious injury.

### Grade Level

High School

### Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- understand conditions and dangers faced by carrier pilots during training prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor
- synthesize and speculate as to how the military trained and protected pilots
- appreciate the concern of service personnel to spare family members details of possible dangers as America prepared for war

### Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards: USH 5.2, 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): III People, Places, and Environments; IV Individual Development and Identity; VIII Science, Technology, and Society; IX Global Connections

### Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, U.S. Navy Air Corps, military, air power

### Time required

One to two class periods (approximately 50 to 55 minutes each)

### Materials Required

- Study guide for each student
- Copies of Vandivier’s letter from May 22, 1941.  
IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828\_BOX1\_FOLDER13\_5-22-1941 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of Vandivier’s letter from June 2, 1941.  
IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828\_BOX1\_FOLDER13\_6-2-1941 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Student textbook (if desired)

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## Background/Historical Context

By the middle of 1941, many Americans believed that United States involvement in the war was inevitable. While many Americans were concerned about the German blitzkrieg and the relative ease in which Adolf Hitler conquered central Europe, events in the Pacific also commanded attention.

During the spring and summer of 1941, events seemed to be spiraling out of control. In May, a German submarine sunk a U.S. merchant ship, the *Robin Moor*, in international waters. In June, Congress passed a bill freezing German and Italian assets in the United States. By July, U.S. Marines had been deployed to Iceland to protect that country, and Congress narrowly passed a bill extending military draft periods from one year to thirty months. After the Japanese attacked Indochina, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered Japanese assets frozen as well. By the end of the summer, Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met off the coast of Newfoundland and agreed on the principles that eventually became the Atlantic Charter.

On board the USS *Enterprise*, pilots, including Norman Vandivier, continued training in case it was necessary to put the carrier into action. Pilots drilled in carrier takeoffs, landings, and bombing maneuvers. By fall 1941, the Japanese had begun planning an attack on the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor.

## Lesson Procedure

The teacher should introduce the lesson with a discussion of how international tensions continued to increase during the middle of 1941. Ask the class what sorts of preparations would they think would be needed if war came?

Distribute copies of the study guide, as well as copies of the Vandivier letters from May 22 and June 2, 1941. Direct students to answer the questions based on information from the letters as well as their own background and knowledge of the period. If needed, students should be

allowed to use other resources, such as their textbook, to completely answer the questions.

Allow sufficient time for students to complete the study guide. After completion, the teacher should evaluate answers based on the grading scale or criteria that the teacher has established for the lesson.

## Assessment

The teacher should develop their own rubric to adequately gauge student achievement. The rubric should include evaluation of historical accuracy, spelling, grammar, and ability to interpret information.

## Enrichment Activity

Using information from the letters as well as other sources, ask students to write editorials either supporting the increased United States involvement in the European and Pacific Theaters, or opposing Roosevelt's policies as an act of war.

## Study Guide Questions with Suggested Answers

Note: In several cases, there are many possible responses that will answer the question. In those cases, the teacher may wish to accept any reasonable answer as correct.

### 1. Where does Vandivier say he is in his letter of May 22, 1941? Where does he expect the *Enterprise* will soon go?

He is "at sea, off Oahu" (The *Enterprise* was stationed at Pearl Harbor.) He said, "I think we will leave here for an extended cruise soon."

### 2. Early in the May 22 letter, Vandivier notes he had a "rather interesting experience last Tuesday." Describe what happened to him based on information in his letter. He later calls this "a rather embarrassing predicament." Why do you think he would use these terms to discuss what happened?

Vandivier’s “interesting experience” occurred while he was on approach to land on the carrier deck. As he approached, his plane’s engine cut out completely, and the plane went into the water. The plane sank in about three minutes.

Vandivier noted that he received a black eye (his right), and a “little cut above it.”

Vandivier may have elected to use the terms he did for any number of reasons. Since he was writing his parents, he may have been minimizing the danger in regard to the plane crash. Also, possibly, since Vandivier had frequently described the reliability of the aircraft in earlier letters, he might have simply been considering this failure as a minor incident.

Other students may note, based on other films they may have seen about pilots, such as *Top Gun*, or *The Right Stuff*, that pilots simply accepted danger as a fact of life and had learned to presume that an occasional mechanical failure was just part of the job of being a pilot.

**3. How much does Vandivier note he cost the government? What does he tell his parents about the “two groups” of pilots?**

He tells his parents he “cost the gov’t. [government] the price of a new plane,” which he estimates at \$30,000. He tells the folks, “Here, they put the pilots into two categories, those who have crashed their planes, and those who are going to. I just transferred to the more select group.”

**4. As he did in earlier letters, Vandivier refers to “having a nice vacation.” Why would he use this phrase? What kind of inference can you make based on this statement?**

Since Vandivier’s plane sank, he was waiting on crews to get a plane out of storage and readying it for him to fly. Since he did not have a plane to fly, there probably wasn’t much to do, other than “enjoying the watching of flight operations.”

This may also relate to a common occurrence with soldiers and sailors on duty, which might include long periods of boredom between periods of action. Some students may infer that Vandivier is stating this sarcastically.

**5. Look at the last paragraph in the letter. What tone do you think Vandivier uses in this paragraph? Why do you think he wrote in this manner?**

Vandivier seems to be relatively reassuring in the paragraph, noting to his parents that he is “feeling fine and enjoying the watching of flight operations.” He also tells his parents that there have been other “crack-ups” as well.

Possibly, Vandivier might have been trying to minimize concern his parents may have had over his plane crash by telling them that it happened several times to other pilots during the same time frame. He might also have tried to allay their fears for his safety by mentioning to the folks that “everything sure is interesting.”

**6. Next, look at the letter dated June 2, 1941. At what location does Vandivier write this letter? Where does he say they (the *Enterprise* and its crew) went? How does he feel about returning to flight? Why do you think he felt that way?**

The letter was written at the Naval Air Station, Pearl Harbor (Territory of Hawaii). He also notes that they went down to the Johnston Islands.

He notes in the letter that they (possibly the flight surgeons) wouldn’t let him return to flying until the scratch over his eye healed up. He added that he returned to flying the last two days of the trip, and “was really glad to get back in the harness again.” Throughout his letters, Vandivier consistently wrote about his love of flying and how much he enjoyed being in the cockpit, so it is likely he missed flying his plane.

**7. According to Vandivier, what did the schedule say regarding how long the *Enterprise* would be in port? How did Vandivier feel about this? Why do you think he felt that way?**

Vandivier noted that the schedule said that they would be there until the end of September. He added, “which doesn’t make me feel too good.” He says that he doesn’t believe they will be there that long, but that’s “what the higher-ups have planned if nothing happens.”

While the attack on Pearl Harbor was still another six months away, many servicemen, including Vandivier, probably felt war was inevitable, although many felt Nazi Germany was probably a greater threat, and if war did come to the Pacific, it most likely would be closer to the Japanese mainland, or the *Enterprise* would be deployed “where the action was.” While Vandivier may have been concerned about going to war, he was probably resigned to the possibility of seeing active duty.

**8. In the letter, Vandivier goes into more detail about the “interesting experience” he mentions in the May 22 letter. What details does he add in this letter?**

In the letter, Vandivier is more descriptive about his plane crash, describing his landing procedures when the motor “quit cold.” He wrote that “under the circumstances, I couldn’t do much to get it running again before it hit the water.”

He also noted he stopped about 10 feet after he hit the water, and the wheels tripped the plane and made it stop quite suddenly.

He added that the plane floated for two minutes while he and the “mech” (the mechanic) were getting out “our little rubber boat” and inflating it. While the mechanic got out of the plane and into the raft, the plane sank, so Vandivier had to inflate his life jacket and swim. He noted the water was “quite warm.” He also added that the plane went down in 1,920 feet of water, so “they didn’t try to salvage anything.”

**9. Vandivier mentions “there is a chance that I could be transferred.” Why? Why does this not make much difference to him?**

Vandivier mentions that the captain of his squadron (Lieutenant Commander Gavin) was being

detached in order to help fit out a new carrier, the *Hornet*. Vandivier also noted that the *Enterprise*’s squadrons were to be broken up to “provide skeletons for the new ones.” It appeared that Vandivier may have thought he was going to be transferred to the *Hornet*.

In his letter, he tells his parents that “it really doesn’t make much difference to me,” adding, “I think the *Enterprise* is the best ship to be on, but she sometimes gets some raw deals.”

**10. Based on what you can conclude from these letters, how do you think Vandivier’s morale was? Give examples that support your view.**

Many students may feel Vandivier’s morale was high. He still enjoys flying, frequently refers to his duty as a “vacation,” and writes that everything is “interesting,” and that he feels fine.

Other students might feel his morale was low. He frequently mentions that he wishes he was back helping on the farm, and worries about the work his parents have to do. He also mentions that he is looking forward to finding some letters (from the family) that might indicate pangs of homesickness.



6. Next, look at the letter dated June 2, 1941. At what location does Vandivier write this letter? Where does he say they (the *Enterprise* and its crew) went? How does he feel about returning to flight? Why do you think he felt that way?
7. According to Vandivier, what did the schedule say regarding how long the *Enterprise* would be in port? How did Vandivier feel about this? Why do you think he felt that way?
8. In the letter, Vandivier goes into more detail about the “interesting experience” he mentions in the May 22 letter. What details does he add in this letter?
9. Vandivier mentions “there is a chance that I could be transferred.” Why? Why does this not make much difference to him?
10. Based on what you can conclude from these letters, how do you think Vandivier’s morale was? Give examples that support your view.