



## WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

# Lesson 1—William Forbes Belcher and Sullivan Ballou: Two Wartime Letters

by Michael Hutchison

*“You both shall know your father better as you grow and know yourself better. I can never be dead, because you are alive.”*

Major William Forbes Belcher  
Letter to his sons  
February 14, 1945

*“And how hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes and future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and see our boys grown up to honorable manhood around us.”*

Major Sullivan Ballou  
Letter to his wife, Sarah  
July 14, 1861

### Overview/Description

Many soldiers write letters home in wartime. Frequently, those letters are about mundane things—what foods they ate, what they did in their spare time, asking about news from home, etc. Soldiers also wrote home, however, to express their feelings, emotions, and fears to family members.

Two such poignant letters were written in two separate wars by two different men. Each letter, in its own way, symbolizes one of the worst fears of any soldier—the possibility that they might not come home.

This lesson asks students to analyze letters written by Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island Regiment during the Civil War, and by Major William Forbes Belcher of Indianapolis, a U.S. marine who was on active duty at Okinawa in World War II.

### Grade Level

High School

### Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will:

- gain an appreciation for sacrifices made by soldiers in wartime
- understand some of the major battles and campaigns of World War II
- understand that World War II affected and disrupted families and personal lives

### 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 Standards): II Time, Continuity, and Change; IV Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; VIII Science, Technology, and Society; IX Global Connections

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## Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, military, family, Okinawa

### Time required

1 to 2 class periods (approximately 50 to 55 minutes each)

### Materials required

- Study guide for each student
- Copy of the letter from Belcher to his sons Stephen and David, dated February 14, 1945. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: SC2353\_BELCHER (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copy of the transcription of a letter from Sullivan Ballou to his wife Sarah, dated July 14, 1861. Jay Unger and Molly Mason Web site, <http://www.jayandmolly.com/ballouletter.shtml> (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).

### Lesson Procedure

Discuss the major battles of the Pacific Theater in World War II with the class, particularly the Battle of Okinawa, and the importance of this particular battle. The teacher may wish to use a related U.S. or World History text, or use other resources to accompany this lesson. In particular, the teacher may wish to use a map to show the proximity of Okinawa to Japan. Refer to the World War II Lesson Plans “Resources” pages (a separate pdf) for suggested Web sites and other materials. Note: If available, the teacher may wish to have students hear a reading of the Belcher letter, available in PBS’s documentary, *The Perilous Fight: America’s World War II in Color*. The Belcher letter is read at approximately 40 minutes into the final episode of the series, called “Triumph.”

Since the lesson also deals with a Civil War soldier, review the war for a short time, especially the July 1861 Battle of Bull Run, in which Sullivan Ballou fought and was killed. (Note: If desired, the teacher may wish to play the segment that includes the Ballou letter, or locate and have students view the segment including the Ballou letter in the Ken Burns film, *The Civil War*.)

Next, ask students to reflect on the importance soldiers probably put on getting letters from home, and writing letters to their families and friends. Why was mail call so important? Students may surmise that getting letters from home gave soldiers a sense of security, a connection with home, and a respite from the dangers or monotony of war. Students may also note that letters gave the folks at home an outlet to share day-to-day events and news with relatives in the armed forces.

Distribute copies of the two letters to students, or ask students to access the two letters online. Once students have access to the letters, distribute the study guide. Give students adequate time to answer the questions.

When students have completed the questions, the teacher may desire to collect them and evaluate student work, or may wish to have students share and discuss their answers with other students in class.

### Assessment

The teacher can grade student work based on responses to answering the questions, including historical accuracy, grammar and spelling, or other criteria established by the teacher. The teacher should note that many answers to the questions are open ended and may have several different answers.

### Enrichment Activities

Ask students to look at other letters written by servicemen during World War II (from other letters in the World War II Lesson Plans listed in the “Resources” pages or from other resource materials). After viewing representative samples, ask them to research a battle or campaign of interest to them (or assigned by the teacher). As soldiers in the battle, ask them to write a letter home describing the battle or what they saw.

The teacher may also wish to lead a discussion with the class regarding the future of letters home. With the advent of cell phones and e-mail,

will letters home that can be saved and read later be a thing of the past?

### **Study Guide Questions with Suggested Answers**

Many of the questions are open ended, and may have multiple answers. In those instances, the teacher may wish to consider any reasonable answer as acceptable.

#### **1. Who was Sullivan Ballou? Who was William Forbes Belcher? In what battles were they involved?**

Sullivan Ballou was a major in the Second Rhode Island volunteers in 1861. He was killed in the First Battle of Bull Run in July, 1861. William Forbes Belcher was a major in the U. S. Marine Corps who was killed at Okinawa in 1945.

#### **2. To whom did Ballou write his letter? To whom did Belcher write his letter?**

Ballou wrote his letter to his wife, Sarah. Belcher wrote his letter to his sons, Steve and Dave.

#### **3. Why do you think these two soldiers felt they needed to write these letters? How might the tone of these letters be different from the typical letters home you might expect?**

Some students may believe that these soldiers had a premonition of death, and felt a need to write letters in which they expressed their true feelings about their loved ones—things that they felt needed saying, but may not have typically said in normal circumstances. Other students may feel (especially in the case of the Belcher letter, since he specifically says that he wants the boys' mother to keep the letter until the boys are older) that writing letters such as these give a soldier a feeling of immortality, a way to console and guide loved ones even in their absence.

Depending on the number of letters students have read, they may suggest that typically the subject of these letters was much more mundane. Information such as daily activities, other soldiers

they befriended, army food, etc., would be much more common than topics dealing with the possible death of a soldier.

#### **4. List three ways that each of the letters are similar. List three ways each might be different.**

Similarities: Both Ballou and Belcher were majors. Based on the language they used in their letters, it would appear that both had some level of education and could write in a way that the recipient of the letter could understand what they were trying to say. Both letters specifically mention concern and pride in their sons. Both allude to the idea that even though they might no longer physically be alive, their spirit would still be. The letters both mention sons, but Ballou's letter is focused more on his wife, Sarah. Belcher's letter is focused almost totally on his sons.

Differences: The two fought in different wars. In addition, Ballou's letter was written before the start of the first battle of the Civil War, and the Battle of Okinawa was fought in the spring and summer of 1945, toward the end of the war. Most likely Ballou would have not seen action prior to the Battle of Bull Run, while Belcher may have been a veteran of several battles and campaigns prior to Okinawa. Ballou's letter refers frequently to duty to country as important as love of family, while Belcher doesn't mention anything in his letter about duty, but he does mention a great deal about his family.

#### **5. How does Major Belcher explain death to his sons? How does he help his sons understand their place in the world and in nature?**

In his letter, Major Belcher notes, "Death is not an easy thing for anyone to understand but every life shall one day end and should that day come for me before I can return to live with you remember that only the body can be taken and I will still be. Time and accident, illness and weariness may take my body, but already you have given it back to me, younger and more eager than ever."

He also notes “Everything alive is part of each of us and many things which do not move as we move are part of us. The sun, the earth, the skies, the rivers and the oceans are all part of us and you have come here to enjoy them and thank God for them. You are a part of all that you have ever seen or heard.”

**6. What types of advice does Major Belcher give his sons about how to live a good life? What encouragement does he give them? What does he ask them to do for each other?**

Major Belcher advises his sons to take care of their bodies, to not abuse them, and to be strong and active. He also mentions that the cost of fulfilling a desire is high, but if it is worth it, there is nothing the boys cannot do. He also notes that they should learn to stand on their own feet, make the right decisions, and learn to live and enjoy life. He also told his sons that “disappointments and troubles only make you stronger, and to be a mountain climber, you have to climb a mountain.”

Throughout the letter, Major Belcher asks his sons to watch out for each other. He asks Steve, “because you are the older, take care of Dave and help him.” Later in the letter, he says to Dave, “you came to help him [Steve] grow and learn. Help each other, and learn to share.”

**7. What impact does the poem that Major Belcher wrote have on the letter as a whole? Why do you think he might have included it in the letter?**

Some students may note that Belcher wrote the poem perhaps to allow his sons an opportunity to further understand the lessons he wanted the boys to learn. He may have felt that a poem would be easier for them to comprehend at a younger age. He may have also felt that the poem was a good way for him to express his feeling for his sons.

Students may disagree on the impact of the poem. It was probably not typical for soldiers to write poetry, especially to their sons. Because it is a “father-son” interaction, many students

(especially male) may feel that the idea of writing poetry would not be what a father would generally do for his sons. On the other hand, students may find it particularly touching for a parent to write such a poem (and a letter) to their children, especially while in a war zone.

**8. In his letter, what does Major Belcher mention about the boys’ mother? What does Major Ballou mention about his sons in his letter?**

Major Belcher writes that he wants the boys’ mother to save the letter for them “if perchance I never return.” Frequently in the letter, he uses the pronoun we, as in “we searched for you quite aimlessly.” At the end of the letter, he closes with “be good sons of your mother. She loves you and has done far more for you than I.”

Major Ballou writes about his sons, “when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and see our boys grown up to honorable manhood around us.”

**9. In both letters, the writers make some references to immortality. What do they say?**

In the Ballou letter, he makes reference to this in the paragraph, “But, O Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they love, I shall always be with you, in the brightest day and the darkest night. . . always, always. And when the soft breeze fans your cheek, or the cool air your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for me, for we shall meet again.”

In the Belcher letter, he writes “only the body can be taken, and I will still be.” He notes, “I can never be dead, because you are alive. Time and accident, illness and weariness may take my body, but already you have given it back to me, younger and more eager than ever. I know you will remember this—that nothing good ever ends.”

**10. In your view, why have these two letters been so endearing and meaningful? (Both letters have been donated to historical collections and have been featured on nationally televised documentaries.) What is it about them that made them well-known? Do you think soldiers today would write letters such as these to their spouses or children? Why or why not?**

Many students may look at the poignancy of the letters as the reason that they have withstood the test of time. In the case of the Ballou letter, Ken Burns carried a copy of it with him for years because it touched him so greatly.

In the case of both letters, one reason that they may be so endearing is because the letters infer to relationships and lives lost. In the Ballou letter, the lost relationship between husband and wife is the focus of the letter. In the Belcher letter, it is the lost relationship between father and sons.

In each letter, the reader tends to consider the cost of war, and the loss that families feel in conflicts such as the Civil War and World War II. While many service personnel today, because of the ability to immediately interact with loved ones via videoconferencing, e-mail, or cell phones, may not have the ability to write the same things Ballou or Belcher may have, they still would feel the same sadness at missing important events such as children's birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and so on. Some soldiers on active duty, however, may have written similar letters before being sent overseas, and entrusted them to be delivered by family members or friends in case the soldier would be killed or missing in action.

## “William Forbes Belcher and Sullivan Ballou” Student Study Guide

Many soldiers write letters home in wartime. Frequently, those letters are about mundane things—what foods they ate, what they did in their spare time, asking about the news from home, etc. Soldiers also wrote home, however, expressing their feelings, emotions, and fears to family members.

Two such poignant letters were written in two separate wars by two different men. Each letter, in its own way, symbolizes one of the worst fears of any soldier—the possibility that they might not come home to family and loved ones.

You’ll have a chance to read each of these letters and then make some conclusions about the meaning and purpose of each letter.

### About the men:

**Sullivan Ballou** was a major in the Second Rhode Island Volunteers during the Civil War. Stationed in Washington, D.C., a few weeks before the first Battle of Bull Run, he wrote a letter to his wife, Sarah, who lived in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

**William Forbes Belcher** was a major in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II and was a native of Indianapolis. He was killed during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. A few weeks before the battle, he wrote a letter to his sons, Steve and Dave.

### About the battles:

**The first Battle of Bull Run** was the beginning of the shooting phase of the Civil War. Fought on July 21, 1861, it ended in a major defeat for Union forces, with more than 800 total dead. Both sides realized that the war would not be a short conflict, and the war did not end until April 1865.

**The Battle of Okinawa** in 1945 was the bloodiest battle of the Pacific Theater during World War II. Okinawa was technically part of the Japanese Home Islands. More than 50,000 American service personnel were killed or wounded in the battle. Only a few of the more than 100,000 Japanese soldiers in the battle survived. The battle provided yet another base for U.S. bombers to hit targets on the main Japanese islands, and would have been the staging area for the invasion of the Japanese mainland, scheduled for the fall of 1945.

### Directions:

Look at each letter carefully. Then, answer the questions.

1. **Who was Sullivan Ballou? Who was William Forbes Belcher? In what battles were they involved?**

2. To whom did Ballou write his letter? To whom did Belcher write his letter?

3. Why do you think these two soldiers felt they needed to write these letters? How might the tone of these letters be different from the typical letters home you might expect?

4. List three ways that each of the letters are similar. List three ways each might be different.

5. How does Major Belcher explain death to his sons? How does he help his sons understand their place in the world and in nature?

6. What types of advice does Major Belcher give his sons about how to live a good life? What encouragement does he give them? What does he ask them to do for each other?

**7. What impact does the poem that Major Belcher wrote have on the letter as a whole? Why do you think he might have included it in the letter?**

**8. In his letter, what does Major Belcher mention about the boys' mother? What does Major Ballou mention about his sons in his letter?**

**9. In both letters, the writers make some references to immortality. What do they say?**

**10. In your view, why have these two letters been so endearing and meaningful? (Both letters have been donated to historical collections and have been featured on nationally televised documentaries.) What is it about them that made them well-known? Do you think soldiers today would write letters such as these to their spouses or children? Why or why not?**