



WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

Lesson 7—Ensign Norman F. Vandivier's Last Letter

by Michael Hutchison

Overview/Description

By the summer of 1942, the USS *Enterprise* and Ensign Norman F. Vandivier engaged the Japanese in the Battle of Midway. In what would be his final letter to his parents, Vandivier discusses the death of a fellow pilot as well as his own insights into the deepening Pacific war. Within days of writing, Vandivier did not return from his mission and his family received a letter from his squadron commander describing the facts of their son's plane crash.

Grade Level

High School

Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- understand the continuing conditions and dangers that U.S. military pilots faced in the first months of the Pacific war
- synthesize and understand the feelings and concerns of U.S. flyers in World War II
- analyze the issues and thoughts of servicemen in relation to the dangers they faced as well as the thoughts and concerns of their families at home

Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards: USH 5.2, USH 5.3, USH 5.6 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; IX Global Connections

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, air power, military, and the Battle of Midway

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 of May 27, 1942. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER15_5-27-1942 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of a letter from Lieutenant L. A. Smith, U.S. Navy, commander of VB Squadron Six, dated June 18, 1942. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER20_1942-6-18 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Student textbook (if desired)

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Background/Historical Context

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Pacific Fleet was reeling, and the Japanese looked for a knockout blow that would force the U.S. government to negotiate for peace. The American military, however, had a major advantage against its opponents—it had broken most of the Japanese military code and was aware of the Japanese plan to force the American fleet into the open and destroy it.

In the fierce Battle of Midway, the U.S. Navy sunk four Japanese carriers, as well as a heavy cruiser, and destroyed 322 aircraft; in addition, the Japanese lost 3,500 sailors and hundreds of pilots. Not only did the U.S. Pacific Fleet deliver a knockout blow against the Japanese, but also saved the Hawaiian Islands and U.S. West Coast from imminent invasion. As a result of the Battle of Midway, Japan suffered a military blow from which it could not recover, and from that point forward, the U.S. Navy fought an offensive war against the Japanese.

Lesson Procedure

Introduce the lesson with a discussion of the early days of the Pacific war, including American response to the attack on Pearl Harbor, as well as other battles, including Guadalcanal. Ask the class how U.S. military personnel might have maintained morale in the months after the Japanese attack in Hawaii.

Distribute copies of the study guide, as well as the letter Vandivier wrote to his parents on May 27, 1942, and the letter written by Lieutenant Smith on June 18, 1942. 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 questions.

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

Assessment

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

Enrichment Activity

Ask students to research the military situation in late 1941 and early 1942. Have them assume that they are soldiers in other battles during the early days of the war, and write letters home regarding experiences they think they would undergo if they were actually fighting.

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. Look at Vandivier’s letter from May 27, 1942. In the first paragraph, what does he report to his parents about coming home? How does he describe the weather? Why do you think Vandivier would not be allowed to discuss the weather?

Vandivier writes that, “It’s beginning to look like we are going to have to finish this war before I get to come home,” adding, “that might not be so bad if I hadn’t been out here for a year before the war started.” In general he describes the weather as “wonderful.”

There may be several reasons why Vandivier was not allowed to discuss the weather. Students may write that the Japanese might be able to track the *Enterprise’s* movements by tracking weather patterns. Other students may feel that by following weather patterns, the enemy might know information about whether the *Enterprise* planned to launch planes against Japanese targets.

2. In the next paragraph, he compares the weather in the Pacific theater with that in the European theater (he specifically mentions the Germans and the Russians). Where does Vandivier write that he would rather fight? Why? What problems and issues would he face in the Pacific theater compared to fighting in Europe?

Vandivier mentions the cold weather on what probably was the Russian Front. Hitler had reneged on his nonaggression treaty with the Soviets and was pushing toward Leningrad and Stalingrad. In bitter fighting and extreme cold, however, the Nazi forces made a disastrous retreat. In the South Pacific, the weather was usually warm, although strong storms may have been a constant threat.

Although Vandivier was stationed on an aircraft carrier, students will probably note that oppressive heat would be a constant problem. In addition, students who have studied the Pacific war may have noted that insects and illnesses such as malaria were a constant problem. Also, students who studied the land battles of the Pacific theater (Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa) may have discussed the area's difficult terrain (usually volcanic caves or jungles) compared to fighting in forests or cities, as soldiers in Europe generally did. Students may also note that the Japanese tended to fight more ferociously than the Italians or Germans, and were generally less likely to treat captured soldiers humanely.

3. Next, look that the paragraph where Vandivier writes about "Mrs. Thompson's second letter." Why do you suppose Vandivier would not want to divulge the name of the pilot? Based on the information, what was Tommy's duty aboard the plane?

Some students may feel that the navy may not want him to divulge that information because it could possibly lead to some sort of security breach. However, it is more likely that Vandivier does not want Tommy's mother to write the pilot,

causing more mental anguish. He writes to his parents, "The poor kid was all broken up over the crash, but still he had to go on and continue flying. He seems to be getting back to normal now, and I hate to see the thing reopened."

Planes such as the one Vandivier flew had two-man crews; the pilot, and a second crew person who acted as a copilot. Since Vandivier mentions "Tommy's pilot," it can be presumed that Tommy acted as the plane's copilot.

4. Vandivier noted, "but still he [Tommy's pilot] had to go on and continue flying." Why do you think he had to continue? What dangers or issues might this cause for pilot safety or for the war effort?

Students may theorize a number of reasons for this. It could be possible that because there was a shortage of experienced pilots, it was a necessity for him to continue to fly for the war effort. Other students may feel that the pilot may have been so emotionally distraught that he could not effectively fly a mission or function in combat.

5. What is Vandivier's theory about how Tommy died and what kind of death that would be? Why do you think he feels that way? Why do you think he ends the paragraph the way he does?

Vandivier tells his parents that he believed Tommy probably realized he was going to crash just before he hit the water, but that he "must have been killed instantly when the plane hit."

He also notes, "when the time comes, I really think that is the best way to go." Vandivier probably felt that dying in this manner would be quick and painless.

At the end of the paragraph, Vandivier jokes about "dying from overeating," adding that he might if he could "get close to Mother's cooking again." He probably added this statement because he was trying to minimize the fear that he had (or that his parents may have had) about the possibility that he could be killed in combat.

6. Next, look at the June 18, 1942 letter from the USS *Enterprise*. What information does Mr. Vandivier receive in the first paragraph of the letter?

The letter reports that (Norman) Vandivier was reported “missing in action” as a result of operations against the enemy on June 4, 1942.

7. According to the second paragraph of the letter, what happened to Norman Vandivier?

The letter reported that “it seems probable that your son was not lost in combat, was forced down at sea.”

8. What information in the letter might lead Norman’s parents to believe Norman may yet be found alive?

Lieutenant Smith tells Mr. Vandivier that his son was forced down at sea. Smith notes that Vandivier would “no doubt have been able to embark in the rubber boat provided.” Smith also notes that there was a good chance that Vandivier might have reached “friendly islands” or have been “picked up by our forces.” Smith concludes by saying, “As able and experienced as your son is, I feel that we have some good reason to hope for his safety. Until we hear further we can only ask that you carry on in that hope, and with the faith that all of us share in your son.”

9. What financial considerations or benefits were continued while Vandivier was listed as missing in action? Why do you think the navy would continue these benefits?

Smith says that “his [Vandivier’s] allotment and insurance will be continued in effect.”

The government traditionally continued pay and benefits for service personnel who were listed as missing, possibly to allay financial fears of family members as well to maintain the hope of possibility that their family member might be found alive.

10. In your view, how difficult was it for Lieutenant Smith to write the letter to the Vandiviers? Do you think the letter held out hope to the Vandiviers that might have been unwarranted? How might you have reworded the letter to the Vandiviers?

Students may feel that by 1942, U.S. military officers would use form letters to inform family members about the loss of loved ones. In this case, it might be more difficult to prove that, especially based on the amount of detail Lieutenant Smith includes regarding the circumstances of Vandivier’s plane crash and the possibility he may have survived.

Some students may also feel that based on the lack of specific evidence that Vandivier attempted to escape the plane after it crashed, and the amount of time that had passed between the Battle of Midway and the writing of the letter by Lieutenant Smith, that the letter may have held out false hope about Vandivier’s fate. Without the plane itself or Vandivier’s body being recovered, Smith may have felt that to write anything other than what he did would have been heartless. Vandivier’s body and plane were never recovered, and he eventually was presumed killed in action.

5. What is Vandivier's theory about how Tommy died and what kind of death that would be? Why do you think he feels that way? Why do you think he ends the paragraph the way he does?

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