



WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

Lesson 2—Cadet Norman F. Vandivier Learns to Fly

by *Michael Hutchison*

Overview/Description

In this lesson, students analyze two letters written by Norman Vandivier while he was a naval air cadet in Michigan. Vandivier was from Franklin, Indiana. He was a 1934 graduate of Franklin High School. After graduating from Franklin College in 1938, Vandivier joined the U.S. Navy on July 6, 1939. In these letters, Vandivier describes his early training and flying experiences to his parents.

Grade Level

High School

Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- appreciate training that Americans underwent in preparation for service and possible war
- understand the importance that World War II—era service men and women placed on correspondence with family and describing the day-to-day conditions and events they witnessed during their military service

Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards: USH 5.1, USH 5.3, USH 5.6, WH 8.5 and WH 9.2 (as of Oct. 1, 2008)

- National Standards (National Council for Social Studies): IV Individual Development and Identity; VIII Science, Technology, and Society; IX Global Connections

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

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

Time Required

One class period (approximately 50 to 55 minutes)

Materials Required

- Study guide for each student
- Copies of letter from Navy Air Cadet Norman Vandivier to his parents, dated July 18, 1939. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_7-18-39 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of letter from Navy Air Cadet Norman Vandivier to his parents, dated July 23, 1939. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX_1_7-23-39 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Student textbook (if desired)

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Background/Historical Context

Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany during the early 1930s signaled the first steps toward world war. Hitler, first as chancellor, and later as the Fuhrer consistently violated the Versailles Treaty that ended World War I, as well as violating the civil liberties of many Germans, in particular, the rights of Jews.

While many in the United States were alarmed by Hitler's tactics and beliefs, Americans generally supported neutrality, wishing to avoid war. However, an increasing number of United States citizens believed that the country would have some sort of involvement in the war, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who sought ways to get around the Neutrality Acts in order to provide support for nations wishing to resist fascism. By the summer of 1940, Roosevelt had signed into law the first peacetime draft in American history. However, many young men and women in the United States had already enlisted in order to select a desired branch of the armed forces, or simply to help maintain American security. In 1938 Norman Vandivier was recommended for nomination as a cadet to the U.S. Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Florida. His letters frequently described his experiences in the military and flight training.

Lesson Procedure

Introduce the lesson by asking students to speculate as to why some American men might have elected to enlist for military service rather than wait for war or wait to be drafted. Why might aviation have been especially attractive for many?

Distribute copies of the study guide, as well as copies of the letters Vandivier wrote to his parents dated July 18 and July 23, 1939. Direct students to answer questions based on information from the letters as well as their own background. If needed, students should be allowed to use other resources, such as their textbook, to completely answer questions.

Allow sufficient time for students to complete the study guide. After completion, students should be prepared to share their responses as directed with other students in the class.

Assessment

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

Enrichment Activity

Once students have read the letters and have a basic idea about Vandivier's early flying experience, have them research online or through traditional means for information about how military pilots today would be trained for their job. The students should write essays comparing and contrasting Vandivier's training to today's methods for training pilots.

Study Guide Questions with Suggested Answers

Note: In some instances, several possible responses may answer the question. In those cases, the teacher may wish to accept any reasonable answer as correct.

1. Look at the letter dated July 18, 1939. To whom is he writing this letter? From what location is he writing? Why would he be stationed here?

Vandivier is writing to his parents from a base in Grosse Ile, Michigan, which apparently was a training facility or flight school.

2. At the time of this letter, how many times had Vandivier been up in a plane? Do you think he likes flying? Write two phrases or sentences that support your view.

According to his letter, he is writing on the first day he went up in a plane. He makes reference to flying and his duty assignment as a "vacation." He also notes, "Boy, that sure is fine." He also

refers to the stunts he goes through during the flight, saying “Those stunts sure are fun.”

3. In the letter Vandivier describes various events in the flight. Where did he fly? What sorts of conditions did he encounter during the flight?

Vandivier writes that on the flight they went over Ann Arbor and Adrian, Michigan. He also notes that at 3,200 feet (altitude), the air was very rough, but at 4,500 feet, “the air was as smooth as a floor.”

4. Why do you think Mr. Cady (the flight instructor) put the plane through a “bunch of stunts”? What sort of stunts do you think the instructor might do with the plane?

Students will probably note, as Vandivier does, that Mr. Cady put the plane through stunts “to see if I would scare out, but I guess that I didn’t.” This is most likely true. Other students may feel that Cady may either have been giving Vandivier a feel for what sorts of conditions he may have actually experienced in flying, or possibly to give Vandivier an idea of the plane’s capabilities.

5. Other than flying, what other duties or jobs does Vandivier have while stationed at Gross Ile?

He notes that he had a “class in radio sending and receiving.” The cadets also had to wipe down all of the planes after they have been up, using gasoline to take off the oil and bug spots. They also had to go on watch every third night from six o’clock to ten o’clock, staying and answering the telephone “if it rings” at the hangar.

6. In this letter what two things does Vandivier specifically mention to his mother?

Vandivier mentions that his mother doesn’t have to worry about his eating, because “they have some very good cooks here and I’m afraid that I’m not going to reduce any after all.” He also notes that he seemed to have everything that he

needed, and didn’t forget anything. Vandivier adds that the rooms are fine and the weather is very cool.

7. Next, look at the letter from July 23, 1939. As in the other letter, Vandivier describes a “vacation.” What do you think he means by this? Give two examples of how this might be a vacation in Vandivier’s eyes.

He tells his parents that he’s on duty at the seaplane hangar, “where absolutely nothing ever happens.” All he has to do is answer the telephone, which isn’t often. He notes that all he does is read and sleep, and he writes, “there’s a bed here handy.”

8. In the letter, he also describes his flying experiences. At this point, how much instructional time has Vandivier had? How does he describe his flying experience up to this point?

At the time of the letter, Vandivier told his parents that he’s had about three hours of instruction. He adds, “and I am getting good.” He wrote, “I believe I could take one [plane] up and land it by myself, although I haven’t done it yet.” He also wrote that he’s had all of the controls, with only a little help from the instructor. Vandivier wrote his parents that he didn’t think he’d have any trouble, and “I sure do like this flying. I can’t hardly wait till they tell me to take her up by myself.”

9. What does Vandivier ask his parents about activities at home? What did he think was happening there? What was he doing at the airfield that seemed similar to what he might do at home?

He says that he thought they (the family) were done with the threshing, “and that there’s nothing to do.” He also wrote to “tell Lowrey that they had me changing ledger plates on a mower . . . that they use on the landing field.”

10. If you were Vandivier's parents, how do you think you would feel about the types of duties their son described? Write a paragraph explaining your view of how Vandivier's parents would feel about their son's duties.

Student answers will vary. Some students may note that Vandivier's parents probably felt relieved and happy because their son seemed to be enjoying what he was doing, and was not over-worked. Other students may feel that Vandivier's parents may have not have been happy because their son was not available to help with chores at home on the farm because he was in the military. Still others may note that while the United States remained neutral, the news about what was happening in Europe and in Asia was becoming increasingly worse and that war was inevitable. While they would be proud of their son's success, they might be fearful of his safety as well.

6. In this letter, what two things does Vandivier specifically mention to his mother?

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