



WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

Lesson 3—Carrier Pilot Norman Vandivier Aboard the USS *Enterprise*

by Michael Hutchison

Overview/Description

In this lesson, students read and interpret two 1940 letters written by Navy pilot Norman Vandivier. Vandivier describes his continued training as a pilot aboard the USS *Enterprise*, making landings on the flight deck of the carrier, training in making bomb runs on a towed target, and general observations of the military situation in Europe and the Pacific.

Grade Level

High School

Academic Standards for the Social Studies

- Indiana Standards: USH 5.1, USH 5.2, USH 5.3, USH 5.6, USH 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.

Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- understand the training procedures of naval aviators in World War II

- interpret feelings of concern and patriotism of Americans regarding the worsening conditions in Europe and the Pacific

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, patriotism, military, U.S. Naval aviation

Time Required

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

Materials Required

- Study guide for each student
- Copies of letter from Navy Air Cadet Norman Vandivier to his parents, dated September 5, 1940.
IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER11_9-5-1940 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of letter from Navy Air Cadet Norman Vandivier to his parents, October 14, 1940.
IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER11_10-14 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Student textbook (if needed)

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Background/Historical Context

In the fall of 1940, the aggression of totalitarian dictatorships was at its height. In Europe, Adolf Hitler's blitzkrieg had conquered France in five weeks, nearly forced the surrender of British troops at Dunkirk, and had conquered most of central Europe. In the Pacific, the Japanese were continuing their conquest of China as well as Southeast Asia in their quest for expansion and living space.

Although the U.S. government followed a policy of neutrality, and enforced that policy through law via the Neutrality Acts, many Americans, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt,

supported the Allies and wanted to see them victorious over the Axis Powers. Others, including famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, feared war with Germany and Japan, and actively spoke out against any American involvement.

To some extent, the U.S. armed services trained troops to be prepared for the eventuality of conflict. However, as events at Pearl Harbor would prove, the military was not as prepared as it should have been.

Lesson Procedure

Introduce the lesson by asking students to consider the differences between being a carrier-based pilot and one who might be stationed at a land airfield. Would a pilot who flew from an aircraft carrier need to be more capable as a pilot? How would the military determine the best candidates for that kind of flying?

Distribute copies of the study guide, as well as copies of the letters Vandivier wrote his parents on September 5 and October 14, 1940. 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 and correctly answer questions.

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

Assessment

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

Enrichment Activity

Ask students to research various opinions and views common in the late 1930s and early 1940s about the United States' involvement in the war. Direct them to write "point/counterpoint" editorials explaining both views and why the government should follow that policy.

Study Guide Questions with Suggested Answers

Note: In some cases, several possible responses may answer the question. In those instances, the teacher may wish to accept any reasonable answer as correct, or evaluate answers based on requirements established for that particular lesson or subject area.

1. Look at the letter dated September 5, 1940. After Vandivier apologizes for not writing sooner, what news does he tell his parents? On what kind of ship was he stationed?

He tells his parents that he's now qualified to make carrier landings. From the letter, it is clear that Vandivier is stationed on an aircraft carrier (the USS *Enterprise*).

2. How does Vandivier describe how he feels about this accomplishment? How many pilots were "sent out to qualify"?

He writes that if “this keeps up, I’ll soon be an old hand at it.” He adds that it seems to be a fairly simple job, but he “never before had a thrill like that first one, on my qualification trial.” There were 14 new pilots who qualified.

3. How does Vandivier describe the procedure for a carrier landing?

Vandivier says, “you bring the plane in on full power at a very low speed, about two miles per hour above stalling speed. Then, when the signal officer gives you the cut, you cut the gun and practically fall through the deck. There are nine wires stretched across the deck at 10’ intervals, each about a foot above the deck, and fastened to a hydraulic cylinder, so that they will give when your hook catches. There is a hook about four feet long in the tail of the plane which we let down to catch the wire. It usually catches before any other part of the plane touches the deck and it just stops it in mid-air.”

4. What sort of safety measures did the U.S. Navy have in place as a backup for pilots making a carrier landing? What effect did this backup system have on planes and pilots?

If a plane’s hook missed the wires, two barriers of steel cables stopped the pilot from crashing into parked planes. Vandivier wrote his parents that “the barriers don’t hurt you, but they are pretty hard on planes.”

5. How does Vandivier describe what happened during his first attempt at a carrier landing?

He wrote, “I made a fairly good approach, got the cut, and started to settle toward the deck without any idea of what was going to happen next. I was a little too high, and got a cross wind which drifted me across the deck straight towards the tower. All I could see was that tower about 40’ away and me going 70 mi/per hr. straight toward it. Suddenly, my hook caught, and really jerked me to a stop. Boy! What a relief.”

6. Next, look at the letter dated October 14, 1940. After Vandivier writes about the mail delivery, he mentions about the *Enterprise* going out to sea. Why did the carrier go out? Describe Vandivier’s “interesting problem” regarding the steps needed to have a bomb hit the raft.

The carrier was going out to sea to engage in gunnery practice. Vandivier states that “you have to allow for the trail of the bomb, depending on the steepness of the dive and the altitude at which you release.” He also describes allowing for distance that the raft travels after the bomb is released, and how the direction of the wind affects the path of the bomb.

7. At what speed and altitude does Vandivier begin his dive? When does he pull up? Vandivier calls his runs “fun.” Why do you think he believes this?

Vandivier writes that the “bomb run” starts at 10,000 feet and [the plane] pulls out at 1,000 feet. He also wrote that “you travel down at 300 miles per hour.”

Some students may believe that Vandivier enjoyed the speed of the dive or possibly the challenge of hitting the target successfully. Other students may note that the enjoyment Vandivier felt was because he was successful in completing the task. In addition, if students have read other letters written by Vandivier, they may note that Vandivier frequently referred to his flight training as “fun” as well, and they may note that Vandivier loved flying.

8. What do you think Vandivier means when he says, “Things look rather rough right now.” What opinion does he have of the Japanese? Why do you think he feels this way?

Students may note that Vandivier may be referring to conditions in regard to the widening war, particularly in Europe, but also in the Pacific. By September 1940, France had fallen to the Germans, the British had been forced to evacuate their army at Dunkirk, the London Blitz was

in progress, and the Royal Air Force had just defeated the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Many Americans were far from certain of an Allied victory in either theater.

Many students may be somewhat surprised at Vandivier's reference to the Japanese as "Japs," based on what is considered "politically correct" in twenty-first century America. The teacher may wish to remind students that use of the word "Jap" was more accepted over a half century ago. By 1940 the Japanese had already made significant conquests in China and Southeast Asia, mostly in search of resources and land for their growing population, and that may have led Vandivier to his comment that they were "scavengers." Since China and other conquered nations were generally unstable politically, and could be easily overrun by the Japanese, the "scavenger" label may have been easy for Vandivier to justify.

9. How does Vandivier rate American aviators' chances in a European war? What reason does he give for this?

He writes his parents, "As for us, we would be out of luck trying to compete with any of the modern planes being used in Europe with the planes we have." He notes, "The US has sold all its modern planes to England, and let the Navy use planes from four to ten years old."

10. In September 1940, most Americans were opposed to this country's involvement in the war, although some believed the United States should be more involved in assisting the Allies. Do you think Vandivier's letters support the view of the isolationists or the view of the interventionists? Give examples from the letters that support your opinion.

Students who feel that the letters support the isolationist view might point to Vandivier's comments about "things being rough," and the Navy's planes being somewhat obsolete (four to ten years old) compared to planes that the United States had sold the British. On the other hand, students who believe the letters support the interventionist view is supported

might look at the intensive training that Vandivier received in regard to carrier-based landings as well as training in bombing runs as evidence that the military was greatly involved in training pilots for what many might consider an inevitable war with the Germans or the Japanese.

5. How does Vandivier describe what happened during his first attempt at a carrier landing?

6. Next, look at the letter dated October 14, 1940. After Vandivier writes about the mail delivery, he mentions about the *Enterprise* going out to sea. Why did the carrier go out? Describe the “interesting problem” regarding the steps needed to have a bomb hit the raft.

7. What speed and altitude does Vandivier begin his dive at? When does he pull up? Vandivier calls his runs “fun.” Why do you think he believes this?

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