



WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

Lesson 4—Edging Toward War

by Michael Hutchison

Overview/Description

In this lesson, students will analyze two letters written by Norman Vandivier during his training as a carrier pilot on board the USS *Enterprise*.

In these letters, Vandivier discusses the worsening situation in Europe along with training and family concerns.

Grade Level

High School

Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- understand how increasing tensions in international conflicts affected American servicemen and their concerns about possibly going to war
- understand the technological demands involved in maintaining a carrier-based strike force
- understand how concerns about the home front affected servicemen and women prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor

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; VI Power, Authority, and Governance; and VIII Science, Technology, and Society

Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, airplane, Lend-Lease Act, U.S. Navy Air Corps

Time Required

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

Materials Required

- Study guide for each student
- Copies of letter from pilot Norman Vandivier to his parents, dated February 12, 1941. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER12_2-12-1941 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of letter from pilot Norman Vandivier to his parents, dated March 12, 1941. IHS Digital Library: M0828_BOX1_FOLDER12_3-12-1941 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).

Background/Historical Context

As tensions mounted in Europe and Asia during the early 1940s, Americans tried to remain neutral. However, it was difficult to remain neutral

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in thought as well as deed. Many Americans had relatives in nations at war, and it was difficult for them not to take sides.

Many Americans had family in the peacetime armed forces as well. For military personnel as well as their families, the possibility that the United States would go from being a neutral nation to a belligerent nation was indeed frightening. Still, soldiers and sailors such as Vandivier continued to train and prepare for war.

As Vandivier continued to train as a carrier pilot, he frequently wrote home to his parents, describing life on his ship, his flying experience, and asking how things were on the family farm or inquiring about the health of family members.

Lesson Procedure

Introduce the lesson by having students discuss what factors and events were occurring by mid-1941 that might have convinced many that war was inevitable. The teacher may wish to direct students to specifically discuss the Lend-Lease Act, which provided U.S. military and economic aid to countries fighting the Axis powers in World War II, as well as other conditions and interests that might have influenced U.S. policy regarding involvement in the war.

Distribute copies of the study guides as well as copies of the letters Vandivier wrote to his parents on February 12 and March 12, 1941. Direct students to answer questions based on information from the letters as well as their own background knowledge. If needed, students should be allowed to use other resources, such as their textbook, to answer the 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

Throughout 1941, many became convinced that war would be inevitable, although they did not want to see that come to pass. Have students investigate U.S. policy toward the Axis and Allied nations in 1941, as well as passage of legislation that tended to support one side over the other, such as the Lend-Lease Act. (Although the U.S. proclaimed neutrality in 1941, the passage of this act empowered President Roosevelt to provide assistance to any country whose defense he deemed vital to the defense of the U.S.) Once they have researched the period, students can write newspaper editorials in which they either support or criticize evolving U.S. foreign policy regarding the conflict.

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 which seems correct.

1. From what location is Vandivier writing this letter?

He is “at sea” aboard the USS *Enterprise*.

2. In the opening paragraph of the letter dated February 12, 1941, Vandivier notes that the annual military inspection was suddenly canceled. Why was it canceled? Why was this a surprise to Vandivier?

Students will probably need to look further in the letter to see Vandivier’s remark that the *Enterprise* will be taking on a load of army planes in California, then go to the Navy Yard in Bremerton, Washington, for a six-week overhaul. He notes,

“in the meantime, we get new planes here at San Diego and work on getting the ‘bugs’ out of them.” Vandivier related that it was unusual for the Navy to do something (like cancel the inspection) on the spur of the moment, so he was surprised when the inspection was canceled and the *Enterprise* was ordered back to the U.S. mainland.

3. In this letter, Vandivier mentions noticing a difference in the attitude of all the men, as well as his own attitude. To what does he attribute this change in attitude? Why would this event cause a change in attitude aboard ship?

Vandivier mentions that “you can really see a difference in the attitude of all the men as we get close to the USA. I might even say I that I feel better at the thought of staying here for a couple of months.”

Students may have different views regarding the change. Some may simply feel it was good for the sailors to get back to land after a long time at sea. Others may feel the sailors were homesick. Still others might note that the deteriorating situation in Europe and Asia would concern sailors and soldiers, and they may felt safer being close to American shores.

4. What does Vandivier mean by getting the “bugs” out of the new planes? What evidence does he give to support his statement that “we [the *Enterprise*] had a very rough crossing this time”?

Vandivier notes that “any new type of plane always has a lot of little changes that have to be made before they can stand up under service and carrier operation.”

Evidence that supports Vandivier’s claim that the crossing was rough includes his mention of having to “use that board to keep from rolling out of our bunks. Even then it isn’t very relaxing to try to sleep while hanging onto the bunk with both hands to keep from hitting the wall so hard.”

5. Vandivier mentions on page 2 and 3 of his letter that he had a firsthand view of “the most spectacular crash that I can imagine.” Who was involved in the crash? How does Vandivier describe what happened? What happened to the pilot? What does Vandivier say about the quality of the airplane? Why do you think he mentions this?

The pilot involved in the crash was Fred Weber, “a Chicago boy & member of my squadron.” Vandivier notes that Weber’s plane took off, rolled over on its back and went straight down into the water from an altitude of about 80 feet.”

Vandivier noted that Weber told him that all he got out of it was “a stiff neck, a sprained wrist and a scratch on the chin.”

Vandivier compliments the plane, noting that while the plane sank in about 30 seconds, “it is really wonderful what those planes will take and still protect the occupant.” He may have written this simply to commend the construction of the plane, or he may have written this to assure his parents that he was safe while flying the plane and practicing bombing maneuvers.

6. Next, look at the letter dated March 12, 1941. Vandivier notes that “the only trouble is that I can’t do this job at home.” To what job is he referring? Why is he glad that it isn’t going on “around our home”? What do you think Vandivier is talking about when he mentions “sticking our necks out”? What conclusions can you make about Vandivier’s view?

Vandivier means that there is “no bombing and gunnery going on around our home.” He adds that “if we get good enough maybe we can scare them so there will never be any danger of it.”

Vandivier mentions, “It seems to me that we came pretty close to sticking our necks out when they passed that bill.” While he doesn’t specifically mention the subject of “the bill,” he may be referring to the Lend-Lease Act that Congress passed the day before Vandivier wrote this letter.

Students may note that Vandivier may have felt that Lend-Lease legislation allowing U.S. military and economic aid to countries fighting the Axis powers would do exactly what President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted, which was to get around the Neutrality Acts by lending ships and supplies to Britain that would be returned after the war. Vandivier may have believed that Lend-Lease would bring Americans into the war.

7. Vandivier compares his training at this point to what he underwent while stationed at Pensacola, Florida. How does he compare his training and the planes between Pensacola and carrier training?

He notes that the planes he is flying “are heavy and not so acrobatic, therefore they are not so easy to handle as the ones we trained in at Pensacola.” He also mentioned, “we also use more difficult approaches here than we did there.”

8. Vandivier writes about the “new planes” being assigned to the *Enterprise*, noting that there are problems with them. What problem did these planes have? What was the result of these problems on the planes? How did they plan to fix this?

The planes had problems with an engine spacer breaking up. This caused several engine failures and forced landings. Vandivier noted that they had to pull the engines out of all of the planes and send them back to the factory for a change.

9. Based on what you have read in the two letters, how much interest do you think Vandivier has in world and political affairs? Why do you think he would have an interest?

Vandivier seems to have a substantial interest in political and world affairs. His reference to the Lend-Lease Act as well as several instances where he mentions what is happening on the war front or in England, are examples of his background, knowledge, and interest. Based on his educational background, as well as the possibility that he could be fighting in the war in the near future, he may also have developed a heightened interest.

10. What sort of advice does Vandivier give his mother at the end of the March 12 letter? Why do you think he might be telling his mother this? What conclusions can you make about Vandivier based on this?

Some students may feel that Vandivier’s mother may be concerned about her son’s safety, which would probably be accurate. Some students may believe Vandivier’s mother could have suffered from some sort of heart condition or nervous system problem (in fact, she had an ulcer). Most students would note that Vandivier was a caring son and wished he could be home to help his parents around the farm.

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