### INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

#### WORLD WAR II LESSON PLANS

## Lesson 8—Ensign Norman F. Vandivier is Missing In Action

by Michael Hutchison

#### Overview/Description

In this lesson, students analyze letters written by Norman Vandivier's father and one of Norman's roommates in the weeks after Norman's plane crash during the Battle of Midway. In the letters, Mr. Vandivier relates the impact of the news of Norman's plane crash on the family, while a fellow pilot, Tony Schneider, tells the Vandiviers about some of the events that led to Norman's crash.

#### **Grade Level**

High School

#### Learning/Instructional Objectives

Students will be able to:

- gain an appreciation of the fears and concerns faced by family members of U.S. servicemen during World War II
- understand the importance that families and comrades placed on remembrance and thoughts of friendship regarding fellow soldiers lost or missing

#### 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): II Time, Continuity, and Change;
III People, Places, and Environments;
IV Individual Development and Identity;
IX Global Connections

#### Social Studies/Historical Concepts

World War II, home front

#### Time required

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

#### **Materials Required**

- Study guide for each student
- Copies of a letter from Norman Vandivier's father, dated June 29, 1942. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828\_BOX1\_FOLD-ER20\_1942-6-29 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Copies of a letter from Tony Schneider, Norman Vandivier's friend and roommate, dated October 22, 1942. IHS Digital Library, Item ID: M0828\_BOX1\_FOLDER20 (accessed Aug. 8, 2011).
- Student textbook (if desired)

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#### Background/Historical Context

The Battle of Midway was a significant turning point for the United States in the Pacific Theater during World War II. The Japanese Navy, looking for a "knockout blow" against the U.S. Navy, found itself reeling from a major defeat at the hands of the Americans. From that point on, the United States fought an offensive war against the Japanese, eventually earning victory in 1945.

Ensign Norman F. Vandivier had been in the service since 1939, first completing flight training, and eventually being stationed aboard the USS *Enterprise*. In June 1942, his plane was forced down at sea during the Battle of Midway. Neither Vandivier or his plane was ever recovered.

#### Lesson Procedure

Ask students to suggest how families might have been notified of the wounding or death of a loved one in war. Lead a discussion of how a family's concern or anxiety might have increased with news a serviceman was missing in action, and his fate unknown.

Distribute copies of the study guide, as well as copies of the letters written by Vandivier's father and Tony Schneider in 1942. Direct students to answer questions based on information from the letters as well as the students' own background. If needed, students should be allowed use other resources, such 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 to adequately gauge student achievement. This should include evaluation of historical accuracy, spelling, grammar, and ability to interpret information.

#### **Enrichment Activity**

Once students have completed the lesson activity, ask them to review other letters written by Vandivier at various times during his military career. Letters are available online at http://www.indianahistory.org/our-collections/digital-image-collections/military-digital (accessed Aug. 8, 2011). Ask students to assume they are fellow aviators or friends of Vandivier and ask them to write letters to Vandivier's family answering some of the questions Vandivier's father asked in his letter to the squadron commander.

### Study Guide Questions with Suggested Answers

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

1. First, look at the letter written by Mr. Vandivier on June 29, 1942. What did the telegrams he received on June 17 and June 18 note? How did Vandivier relate the effect of this news on himself and his family?

Mr. Vandivier writes that "we received from Washington D.C. on June 17th and 18th two telegrams the first indicating our son, Ensign N. F. Vandivier, had been killed in action on June 4th, the second, correcting the first, indicating that he was missing in action. Your letter confirmed the latter." In the next paragraph Mr. Vandivier notes, "The uncertainty and anxiety of waiting is very distressing. The mother, having a stomach ulcer, has so reacted to this news that she is seriously ill."

## 2. In the fourth paragraph, Mr. Vandivier makes a request of Lieutenant Smith. What does he ask?

He says, "We realize that you cannot change the status of our son, but do hope thru or from your squadron of fine courageous lads to receive some personal information which will help to ease our pain."

## 3. What questions does Mr. Vandivier ask of Lieutenant Smith? Why do you think he would ask the lieutenant these questions?

In the next paragraph, Mr. Vandivier writes, "In so far as censorship will permit tell us of our son as you knew him (he hasn't been home since Xmas 1940). Did he fit in? Was he happy? Did he have ability? Did he have confidence in himself? Does anyone know of his last flight? Did he fly alone? If he doesn't show up within the next few days, what do you think was his most probable fate?"

Some students may feel that the reason Mr. Vandivier asked these questions was because he and the family needed closure. As he stated in the letter, Norman had not been home since Christmas, 1940, and therefore Norman's life had probably significantly changed during his time on board the *Enterprise*. While his son's letters were good narratives of his life aboard ship, the family probably had concerns in regard to his health and safety prior to the Battle of Midway.

In addition, some students may feel that Mr. Vandivier would have taken comfort that his son would have been well liked and respected by his shipmates as well as his commanding officers.

# 4. Why do you think Mr. Vandivier might have asked Lieutenant Smith to "delegate the writing of the letter" to Norman's best friends? What comment does Mr. Vandivier make about Norman in this paragraph? Why do you think he would say this?

Mr. Vandivier may have felt that a letter of this nature might have best been answered by those shipmates closest to Norman, and who would have known him best. Mr. Vandivier might have also felt that Norman's friends could have given him insight into Norman's character and his ability as a pilot. In addition, since they were in action with Norman, perhaps Mr. Vandivier may have felt that his friends could have given him information about Norman's fate.

Mr. Vandivier noted that he believed that

"Norman would have done so much for their parents" (referring to his request to have Norman's friends write the family). He probably felt that Norman would have exhibited traits of loyalty and honor towards his fallen friends by writing their families about their abilities and personalities.

### 5. How does Mr. Vandivier close his letter to Lieutenant Smith? Why do you think he uses these words to close the letter?

In the final paragraph, he thanks Lieutenant Smith for the courtesy already extended to the Vandevier family, and "hoping we are not asking too much of your fine group of boys for whom we wish a speedy ending of this hell on earth."

Some students may feel that Mr. Vandivier was simply being polite and expressing gratitude to Lieutenant Smith. Other students may note that Mr. Vandivier was demonstrating that he had pride that his son would have been associated with the caliber of men who were pilots on the *Enterprise*.

## 6. Look at the letter from Tony Schneider dated October 22, 1942. What does Schneider include in the letter? Why do you think he would add this to the letter? What do you think this meant to the family?

Schneider enclosed eight dollars that he said he owed Norman prior to June 4th. Some students may feel that Schneider gave the family the money because it was the fair thing to do, especially since Schneider borrowed the money. Other students, noting the value of a dollar in 1942, may feel that since the Vandiviers' son was missing in action, Schneider may have felt they would have needed the money, since eight dollars would have been nearly an average person's daily wage in 1942.

Following the same theme as those feeling Schneider might have wanted to help the Vandiviers financially, Schneider may have simply made up the story about owing the money in order to help them.

# 7. How does Schneider describe what happened to Norman and his flight prior to his crash? Do you feel this information would have provided any comfort to the Vandiviers? Why or why not?

Schneider notes that "Norman completed the first attack on the Jap fleet June 4th and was heading in the direction of his own forces in company with three or four other planes. They had been attacked savagely by Jap fighter planes and as a consequence I don't know how badly his plane was damaged. While he was still some distance from friendly forces he was forced down at sea. He was seen to land in the ocean. Whether he was seen to get into his life raft I do not know. But from that time on there has been no word so far as I know. I checked every day for the first several weeks hoping for news."

The Vandiviers may have taken a great deal of comfort in Schneider's note that it appeared that Norman's plane "landed in the ocean" rather than crashed. While Schneider couldn't give particulars as to seeing Norman actually exit the plane or get into the life raft, his statement inferred that Norman may have survived the downing.

## 8. How does Schneider note his feelings about Norman's fate? What might Norman's parents have surmised from this statement?

Schneider stated that "Norman was my best friend and room mate on our ship and I share your grief over his loss." The Vandiviers probably would have taken comfort that someone their son had known and worked with on the *Enterprise* would have considered him a good friend and someone they liked and respected.

## 9. What does Schneider mention about his own experience during the battle? Why might he include this? What impact do you think this might have had on him in relationship to the probable fate of Norman?

Schneider notes that he was forced down at sea on the same date as Norman, although he notes, "I was fortunate enough to be rescued on the third day." He may have included this information in order to give the Vandiviers hope; if he could survive his plane being downed, perhaps it was possible Norman could have survived as well.

Some students may feel that Schneider would have felt lucky that he was able to survive the downing while others were not as lucky. Other students may speculate that Schneider may have felt guilty that he survived while his friend was unable to do the same.

10. Would you say that Schneider's letter to the Vandiviers would have helped them "ease their mental anguish" as he mentions in the last paragraph of the letter? If so, how does the letter do this? If not, how could Schneider written the letter to help the Vandiviers emotionally?

Students who felt the letter was a help in easing the family's anguish might point to Schneider's description of Norman's plane crash as a way to help the family reach closure over the death of their son. In addition, Schneider's note about the friendship that he and Norman had might have made the family feel proud of their son and the influence he had on his fellow pilots and shipmates.

Students who felt the letter didn't go far enough might have noted that Schneider could have gone into more detail as to their son's ability and leadership while on the *Enterprise*. In addition, they may note that he might have gone into more detail as to what happened to Norman on June 4, or perhaps suggested to the Vandiviers that there were other crew members that might have been more likely to know of Norman's fate.

#### "Ensign Norman F. Vandivier is Missing In Action" Study Guide

#### **Directions**

Read the letters written by Fred Vandivier, Norman's father, and Tony Schneider, who served with Norman Vandivier on the USS *Enterprise*. After you have read each letter, answer the following questions. You may refer back to the letters to refresh your memory or for more information.

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