Above, left: John Freeman died Aug. 3, 1944, in France of wounds he had suffered the previous day. He was buried in an American military cemetery in France, but after the war, his body was brought home for burial in Sweeton Pond Cemetery near Dora. ***Flyer in center:*** This poster promotes the two-day celebration to be held June 22-23 in the small town of St. Pierre Eglise in Normandy, France, to commemorate the day American soldiers, including Dora native John Freeman, rolled into the village, ending the Germans' four-year occupation. ***Photos at far right:*** Former British investigative reporter Mike Hind is gathering personal information about John Freeman for a website and book he is developing to honor Freeman and the 131 other men in the 24th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized. One of the few people he has found who remembers Freeman is former Dora-area resident Wanda Driskell Cowan, shown in these two photos, taken several decades apart. Now 97, Wanda told Hind she and Freeman sat and talked one evening at Wanda's sister's house in the Blanche community near Dora. Because he was much older than Wanda, her parents disapproved, and that was their only "date."

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Officially, Freeman's second, fatal injury on Aug. 2 was the result of a "road traffic accident," but Hind suspects landmines were involved. "There were certainly several casualties and fatalities from mines throughout the whole campaign," he said in an email to the *Times*.

Information like this has convinced Hind that the 24th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron did more than search out enemy information as a typical reconnaissance squad might do. Instead, he says, it was a "full-spectrum combat unit whose actions went far beyond the pre-war doctrinal beliefs of what a reconnaissance unit was for."

Thanks to online sources and the help of other volunteer researchers, Hind has been able to put together a pretty clear outline of Troop A's military achievements. But he wants to do more than tell Troop A's combat history. He also wants to tell each Troop A soldier's personal history – 132 life stories that reveal who these men were before they became heroes.

On a Facebook page, Hind has already assembled an interesting array of personal photos and histories about Freeman and several of his fellow soldiers. He has also launched an appeal at gofundme.com asking for financial support from those who share his gratitude toward these intrepid men. And he has also created a podcast: "D-Day and after, for rookies."

For more information, or to help, visit Facebook.com, patreon.com or gofundme.com and search for "24th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized - 1943-1945". Hind asks anyone with personal knowledge about Cpl. John Freeman to contact him directly by email at ww2researcher@outlook.fr.

'Another unsung hero among thousands'

When he was researching John Freeman, Hind reached out to the *Ozark County Times*, explaining his goal of honoring the American soldiers who liberated the village where he now lives. John Freeman, Hind said, is "just another unsung hero among thousands. He deserves more, and I hope eventually to preserve his name as a real person, not just another casualty."

Freeman wasn't married, so there are no direct descendants; but he was part of a large Ozark County family: his parents, Henry Wake and Rena Hall Freeman, raised six sons and two daughters, so there could be several second- and third-generation nieces, nephews and cousins who may have heard his story. But so far, Hind hasn't found any relatives who can share information about him.

We suggested that he post his appeal for information on the Ozark County Historium's Facebook page, which has more than 9,000 "followers" who are interested in the history of Ozark County and its people. Through Facebook, Hind connected with the daughter of a woman who has one sweet memory of John Freeman. Clever resident Sherry Richards saw the post and mentioned it to her mother, 97-year-old Wanda Driskell Cowan, who also lives in Clever now.

Wanda met John when she attended Dora High School with his youngest siblings, twins Harry and Hazel. A member of the DHS class of 1944, Wanda remembers the evening John came to court her when she was about 15 years old. Freeman, seven years older, would have been 21 or 22.

Her parents weren't comfortable with the age difference, so Wanda and John's courtship was limited to one "date" that consisted of them sitting together one evening at Wanda's sister's house. "We just sat in a car in the driveway," Wanda told the *Times* in a recent telephone conversation. She thinks John may have borrowed the car from one of his sisters.

Freeman's military registration card says he had brown hair and gray eyes, stood 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighed 148 pounds. To Hind, Wanda described him as "a sweetie – very good looking and a perfect gentleman."

Four brothers

Wanda, who will celebrate her 98th birthday on June 12, has just that one memory of John Freeman, and she can't remember what they talked about that night. But if their one and only date was in 1941, when she was 15, John might have told Wanda that he was planning to join the Army.

He had registered with the Ozark County Draft Board on Oct. 16, 1940, and Hind's research reveals that he enlisted on July 15, 1941, a little less than five months before America was officially pulled into World War II by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Freeman's draft registration card shows that he was working for the Civilian Conservation Corps. (CCC) in Bradleyville. On that card, he provided his dad's name in the blank that asked for the "name of person who will always know your address," and he gave his address as "RFD No. 2, Dora." In the blank that asked for a telephone number, he wrote "None."

John was one of four Freeman brothers who would fight in World War II. His brother Robert, two years older, served three and a half years in the European theater. His oldest brother, Benjamin, served four and a half years in the South Pacific, and his youngest brother, Harry, served 22 months in the Pacific. The Freeman parents and siblings must have felt tremendous fear and anxiety every day those four brothers were gone.

The *Ozark County Times* apparently had no Dora-area correspondent at that time, and we've been unable to find any mention in our pages of John's death in 1944. However, in its Aug. 31, 1944, edition, the *Douglas County Herald*, published in Ava, carried a small page 1 item that said, "Mrs. John Landers of Rockbridge received word last week that her brother, Corporal John L. Freeman, had been seriously wounded in action in France."

By the time that announcement was published, John Freeman had been dead four weeks.

Knowing that the family had no telephone, we can only wonder who showed up at the Freemans' remote farm that day in 1944 with the grim news that their son and brother had been wounded. And we can only imagine how their hearts broke when a solemn messenger returned a short time later to say he had died.

Fortunately, the other three Freeman brothers survived the war, married and lived out their lives. Benjamin died in 1973 at age 58 and is buried in the Springfield National Cemetery, Robert died in 2000 at age 84 and is buried in California, and Harry died in 2018 at age 94 and is buried in the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell.

John Freeman was buried in an American military cemetery in France, and then, four years later, his body was brought home to Ozark County. An item in the Feb. 5, 1948, edition of the *Times* announced that "the body of one of the first overseas veterans to be returned to Ozark County will arrive at Mansfield, Missouri, at 4:30 p.m., on February 9th. . . . The veteran was Corporal John L. Freeman, who was killed in action while serving with American Forces during the last war in France."

His body was being returned to the States, "in accordance with his parents' wishes," the announcement said. It continued," Corporal Freeman was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Wake Freeman of Dora, Missouri, and was widely known in this county." The body probably arrived in Mansfield by train.

It's believed a large crowd attended Freeman's graveside service in Sweeton Pond Cemetery north of Dora. The Rev. Zim Sims preached, and music was provided by "a quartet and a double quartet," according to an obituary published in the Feb. 19, 1948, edition of the *Douglas County Herald*. The service itself was conducted by members of Ozark County Post 4179 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars – men who had survived the war and would soon go on to become elected county officials and community leaders: Clyde Rogers, service commander; Walter Wilson, chaplain; George A. Rose Sr., officer of the day; Lee Wallace Sr. and Frank "Skeeter" Stevens Jr., vice-commanders. The honor guard firing squad was commanded by Gene Upton "with Linnie Epps as trumpeter."

Celebrating freedom

In contrast to the solemn service that marked the homecoming of John Freeman's body, next month a little town in France will host a joyful celebration of the courageous feat Freeman and his fellow soldiers achieved there 80 years ago. On June 22 and 23, the town of St. Pierre Eglise will commemorate the day Freeman and his fellow soldiers arrived to end the village's German occupation.

The celebration will include two days of music, patriotic ceremonies, programs recounting the liberation, a parade of World War II era military vehicles, tours of historic sites, and even a Franco-American soccer game. Those attending are encouraged to dress in period clothing and costume, according to a promotional poster shared by Mike Hind.

Here in the States, we're also preparing for an upcoming commemoration. This Monday, Memorial Day, we will honor Freeman and the 50 other known Ozark Countians whose names are engraved on the war memorial that stands on the courthouse lawn. We remember them gratefully along with the thousands of other Americans who have died in combat defending freedom during the last 248 years – ordinary men and women, from ordinary places, who did extraordinary things.