

ly made it back to the American lines. Fred's eyes stare hollowly back at the camera.

He was at an airbase in what was then Czechoslovakia. "I stayed there for a couple of days and they put us on an airplane and flew us back to France." The war was over, at least in Europe anyway.

They loaded him on a ship that landed in Norfolk June 18, 1945. Fred went home on leave for about a month. He took this opportunity to develop the film in the box camera. At 5'7" he weighed 140. "I lost about 20 pounds." By the time he was discharged his weight was back up to fighting trim: 157.

But he was not immediately discharged. They sent him to Florida instead, then on a troop train all the way across the country to San Francisco. And they put him on Angel Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay, where the fog is as thick as it was on the English Channel for those three days back in July of '44. Only a year had passed, but it seemed a lifetime. Fred Wease was 20 years old.

"When they put me in that boat, I thought, hell I was gone again," he shudders of the prospect of being deployed to the Pacific. Instead, we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, the Japanese surrendered, and Fred Wease was discharged Nov. 6, 1945 at the Presidio.

He made his way home, married, lived in Woodbridge, fathered two children, and worked on building maintenance at Fort Belvoir on (here's a classic military oxymoron for you) "a temporary indefinite appointment." That

appointment became permanent. "I worked on roofs most of the time, and I run the shop; do anything that needed to be done."

Fred's connection to our area is through his second wife, Margaret Mahanes of Shadwell. During the early 1980s, they would come to Orange from Woodbridge to visit her mother when she lived at the President Madison Inn. "I went out riding around and this house was for sale and we wanted to get out of Woodbridge," he explains. Fred and Margaret Wease retired here in 1983.

Then the tragedy of Alzheimer's struck, or as Fred terms it, "Old Timer's." After a 16-month delay, he was finally able to secure a bed for Margaret in the Orange County Nursing home in 1991. She died 18 months later, but by that point the Nursing Home had become Fred's own home away from home. "I just keep going, volunteering my time," he says of his 10 hours a week helping out with all manner of activities. "Adult Volunteer of the Year at the Orange County Nursing Home," reads a plaque from the Virginia Health Care Association.

Fred opens a drawer in his bedroom and takes out what must be a dozen or more medals and commendations. Four battles: Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes and Rhineland; the American Campaign; European-African, Middle Eastern Campaign, Victory, Good Conduct, and Prisoner of War medals; the Presidential Emblem, the Combat Infantry Badge, the Distinguished Unit Badge, the Honorable Service button,



Photos by Phil Audibert

In his spare time, Fred Wease assembles and frames jig saw puzzles. He has completed more than 50, some with as many as 3000 pieces. A true American hero, Fred Wease fought in four battles during World War II, before he was wounded, captured and sent to a German POW camp for six months.



and of course the heavy hitters, the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. "I didn't ask for them; they sent 'em to me," says Fred a little sheepishly.

He produces a way-cool Nazi knife he found and repaired. It has a swastika on it. "I cleaned many a deer with that," he says proudly. He pads through his living room, past the three trophy deer heads on the wall and down the stairs to the basement and his collection of framed jigsaw puzzles. Some have as many as

3,000 pieces. He has completed dozens. His woodworking shop, in fact everywhere, it is neat as a pin around here; everything in its place.

"Nah," he says brusquely as he brushes off a question about loneliness. When he's not volunteering at the Nursing Home, or playing solitaire or piecing together a puzzle, he can always dig out that box camera from the bottom drawer and spend some time with his pictures.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Fred Wease received a dozen or more medals, including the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star (in boxes on right) for service to his country during World War II. Note the German knife and the American entrenching tool in the foreground.



Photo by Fred Wease

German POWs marching down a street.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Fred Wease still has the box camera that he found in a bombed out German drug store after he was released by his captors near the end of World War II.

The box camera

Fred Wease was rummaging through a bombed-out drug store somewhere in Germany when he stumbled across the box camera. He loaded it with film, went out into the rubble-strewn street and started shooting. It was some time late April or early May, 1945; he's not sure.

"You know it's hard to memorize all this stuff; it was 60 some years ago," he apologizes. No apology needed, Fred.

Many of us organize our memories in the form of still pictures and videos that replay themselves endlessly in our minds. Sometimes the pictures are faded; sometimes the movies are missing some frames. That's why we have scrapbooks, like the one that came from that box camera...to fill in the gaps, to rekindle the memories.

Fred admits he barely slept a wink the night before this conversation we're having. He tossed and turned, trying to organize these video clips that date back six-plus decades. Some of them are funny; some of them tragic; some are incomprehensible; some mundane; some exhilarating...some terrifying.

Like the time a German officer was firing his Luger at him, even though his



From Fred Wease's scrapbook

This picture postcard photo of Fred Wease was taken when he was a young teenager in the late 1930's. The sign says, "Going After 'U' Boats."

hands were held high in surrender. "He had that pistol going. Bang! Bang! And them bullets going by me. Zing! Zing!" he says animatedly.

Or Christmas morning 1944, when the blazing sun was blotted out by the German planes flying over their prisoner barracks, only to be driven back by a swarm of P-51s to the ecstatic cheers of these poor POWs on the ground.

He remembers the shell casings falling out of the sky, clattering all about them like metal hail.

Or how about when he staged his own little work slowdown in a steel factory in Dresden; doing his part, no matter how minor, to win the war.

Or the time the Russians gunned down the innocent shopkeeper in the street....

So many pictures lurking in that box camera of his mind.

Does it bother him? "Sometimes you think of different things and you get

wrought up; sometimes it doesn't even cross your mind," he says haltingly. Did he just brush away a tear? Maybe not. Fred's tough. Asked what it's like to have shots fired at you in anger, he half chuckles and snorts, "It ain't funny." Only other vets, from the Ardennes to Anwar Province, can relate to that experience.

Fred Wease is a true American hero. He has been shot at; he has been wounded; and he has been a prisoner of war all in the defense of his country. He has a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star and four campaign ribbons. He has suffered cold, hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, pain and terror, and yet, he has done nothing...nothing to call attention to himself, to toot his own horn, to brag or self promote.

Quietly living alone with his memories in a modest brick rancher just outside the Town of Orange, he spends his time playing solitaire, piecing together huge jig saw puzzles, and volunteering his time at Dogwood Village. Despite a tremor in his right hand and ongoing bouts with skin cancer, he seems in pretty good health despite his 84 years. His arms and shoulders are still toned and powerful; he still goes deer hunting in the fall.

Let's pick up the story aboard a fogbound troop transport ship in the middle of the English Channel 66 years ago. "Going over from England to Normandy, oh man, that fog was on the Channel, it was so thick, we like to ram the ship. We were only supposed to be on it for one day,

but we were on it for three," he shudders.

Drafted into the army at the age of 18, Fred had already undergone basic training in Mississippi. He had partied hearty on leave in New Orleans, although "I still couldn't drink, because you had to be 21. I was only 18. A couple of them other boys was 21 or better, (but) soda is all I could be drinking."

His rank was private first class. He had been trained to operate a 30-caliber machine gun, in the Second Infantry Division that landed on the beaches of Normandy to relieve the beleaguered troops that took that beachhead a month prior.

By this time, the fighting was leapfrogging from hedgerow to hedgerow, just a few miles inland from those infamous beaches. "Man, you could hear those bullets buzzing and...you could still hear that artillery going." Eight of them

were sent in to relieve men, killed and wounded the day before. All night they fought and all the next day. "And the next day, when the next day was over, there were only three of us (of the eight) left, just fighting from hedgerow to hedgerow."

They were ordered to take the French town of Brest. It took them six weeks instead of two, but they did it. "Lord knows how many thousands of Germans were killed there and taken prisoner...We wound up in St. Lo. Man that night, I'll never forget it, like those pine trees there," he points out the kitchen window to a row of white pines in his back yard, "them artillery shells busting up into them; you're laying on the ground and see that flash when the shell would hit the pine trees..." There is no pause button on this video.

And then it was into Belgium, and across the German border, and bitter winter, and the Battle of the Bulge. Fred is telling this story in his shirtsleeves during that cold snap we experienced a couple of weeks ago. He shivers involuntarily. "Yeah, there was snow on the ground and it was cold. We didn't sleep no place inside. It was outside all the time, layin' on the ground."

And then the Germans launched their infamous counterattack on Dec. 16. "They cut us off. They come in from behind you and all around." He and two others dug in and hid within sight of a busy road. "The Germans kept coming; marching with them tanks, and we were layin' on the

ground. You had to keep quiet, there was two or three of us laying' there side by side. We done dug a hole, got back and dug down, and there was an American tank knocked out right in front of us... During the night we couldn't sleep. Man, daylight come, they called us to get up with your hands up like that in the air, and I saw this booger still shooting at me."

Luckily, the officer with the Luger was a lousy shot.

They were taken prisoner and marched back up the road, through the advancing German tanks and troops. They picked up a wounded American, put him in a blanket and carried him heaven knows how far. A phosphorus shell exploded nearby, burning Wease on the arm. His sleeve caught fire. He had to put out the blaze by slapping himself with handfuls of mud and snow.

"And we got him back, going through the forest, the tanks were jus' lined up in the snow. I had a pair of galosh-



Photo by Fred Wease

This is the bombed out drug store where Fred Wease found the box camera and film. It is the first picture he took with it.

es on, and the Germans took the galoshes off my feet. But, I still had my shoes. We carried him on back and they took us to a great big barn. There was 150 of us in that barn, and they said if we burned it down, they would shoot 50 of us."

The prisoners spent three days in that barn with no

food...in the middle of winter... with only the clothes on their backs to keep warm. "The first thing they did give us was two or three days later, some potatoes, a bowl of potatoes." And then, more terror. "One day they took a bunch of us to a cemetery and we had to dig graves. Well you didn't know if you were going to dig that grave for you or somebody else."

By Christmas morning, 1944, they had been crammed into some barracks somewhere. And that's when the sun rose full and bright and magnificent, and they saw the P-51's chase the Germans back. "Oh yeah, we was cheering," says Fred proudly, "cause they come back across the log barracks where we was at, and them cartridges, the shell casings dropped on us."

They were loaded into box cars and clickety-clacked for days at a time with no idea where they were going or what the future would bring. They were even strafed by their own fighters trying to knock out the locomotive. The Germans had hooked the POW boxcars right behind the engine as a way of... protecting it.

The prisoners eventually arrived at Stalag 4-B, a huge POW camp of Americans, British, French and Russians. They were sent to work at a sugar beet factory, but when they arrived, "there was no sugar beet factory there; the Americans had done bombed it. So then it was a day or two back, still on a boxcar, taking you back to Stalag 4-B." The video rewinds and replays in his head.

"We stayed there for three or four more days, and it had gone on into January. Then they took a bunch of us again, there were 75 of us I think it was, they took us to Dresden, Germany. You were locked up in a box car till you got there."

And that's where he was put to work cutting one foot lengths of galvanized pipe. With a bemused gleam in his eye, Fred remembers the German guard telling him what to do. "When I was running that saw, he'd set my saw on 5 and when he'd go away, I'd move it back sometimes to 3. Thataway, my pipe wasn't being cut so fast. This other guy, he was cutting the same kind of pipe, he might be cutting two to my one." Fred was doing his part to slow the Nazi war machine.

Then he got caught! So, they gave him a different job: toting long lengths of pipe. Fred countered by carrying the pipe the long way round. "The guard went looking for me, and when I see him coming, I'd pick up a pipe and look like I was working," he chuckles. They finally put him to



Photo by Fred Wease

A burned out German half track.

work at the blast furnace. "Well I liked that because that was nice and warm."

The Americans started to bomb Dresden. "We could hear them planes at nighttime come over. Sometime they'd take us to an air raid shelter, and sometimes you just stayed right there in the barracks." Eventually they were moved to a mountaintop camp near the Elbe River

where they were set to work shoveling dirt and gravel onto small rail cars. "They worked you 10 hours a day, and fed you once every 24 hours, potato soup or cabbage or sugar beets. If there was any meat in it, it was horse meat." Asked if he was physically mistreated by the Germans he responds, "I wasn't treated bad by 'em. They didn't beat on you or nothing like that."

By now, it was late spring 1945. One morning, "They took us out of there and started marching us and the next thing we know, we didn't see no guards. The guards were gone. So we were left on our own." Three of them, he doesn't remember the others' names, "broke away and we went behind a barn and laid there and slept overnight. The next morning we got started looking for something to eat. We come into a little town like say Orange or Gordonsville, and we started looking in houses to find something to eat." A n d that's when he stumbled onto the box camera in the bombed out drug store. He riffls through a dog-eared scrap book, and says, "All these pictures, I took with that camera."

He and his buddies lived in an abandoned house for three days. One of them, a city slicker, found some chickens, but made a mess of it when it came time to steal one, arousing squawks of protest from both chicken and hausfrau alike. Fred, an experienced country boy, had better luck. Soon he had boiled water, scalded the feathers off, gutted and cut the chickens up and boiled them in a pot with some rice. They sat down at the table for their first decent meal in six months.

And their liberators, the Russians, burst in the door! "This damn officer, he was going to shoot us because we didn't jump up and salute him," says Fred, eyes flashing in anger. "Well, hell, I didn't know he was an officer...and the boy with him, he could interpret... so finally he let us go, and we went on back to eating."

They moved on to a bigger town, about the size of Culpeper. "And we were marching in and the Russians were already in the town, and as we were marching by, this German woman was at the door, she waved for us to

come, and she begged us to come in. There were three of us, and we stayed there with her for three or four days. And she cooked for us." She was no dummy; she knew she was better off with Americans than Russians. Besides, she feared for her daughter's safety, when she came to visit Sundays.

Fred was playing solitaire that Sunday morning, when "two or three Russians busted in that house and went right up the steps. You see, if they go in somewhere, when they come out, every damn thing went with them; they'd take it...We seen 'em when they come in and ... this boy hollered we're 'Americanetz'...So they turned round and went on back out of the house. If her daughter had been there, hell they probably would've raped her or killed her."

It was here that Fred witnessed the Russians gunning down a German shoe store owner in cold blood in the



From Fred Wease's scrapbook

Fred Wease (left) poses with an unidentified fellow POW shortly after being liberated, in this picture, taken in Czechoslovakia with his box camera.

middle of the street. And that was not the only atrocity. "In that first place I was telling you about, a woman had a car and she had a baby in the car. They took the damn car and child and the woman was standing in the street hollering and they'd gone on, with the kid and everything."

Fred tells these stories in a passionless monotone. He flips through his scrapbook collection of photographs taken with the box camera: stark images of columns of German prisoners marching down a muddy street; a burned out German half track; a picture of himself and an unidentified fellow American POW taken when they final-