

## **Transfer of the Alva Army National Guard Armory**

1001 Thunderbird Road, Alva, Oklahoma

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Heritage of the Alva Armory – COL (Ret) David Brown, Executive Director, 45th Infantry Division Museum, 2145 NE 36th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73111

The citizens of Alva, Oklahoma have a long heritage of service to the State and Nation through military service. This heritage began when the 45th Infantry Division Signal Company was organized on 27 April 1923 by Captain Frank S. Wyatt with 126 enlisted men and six officers. The 45th Signal Company made its first encampment at Fort Sill that summer without a single item of signal or communication equipment.

Alva's National Guard company, like many other Oklahoma Army National Guard units, desperately needed a building dedicated to meet their training and equipment storage needs. However, during the Great Depression, local communities and the State of Oklahoma were unable to fund the construction of these armories. Construction of National Guard armories then became a priority for the Federal Government. The Works Projects Administration, or the WPA as it came to be known, was established in 1935 by President Roosevelt, as part of his New Deal, to create work for thousands of unemployed men. Construction on Alva's armory by the WPA began in 1936 and was completed soon after.

The Alva Armory was one of 51 armories in Oklahoma that were built by the WPA. All of them were designed to look like military castle battlements with the use of parapets, arched entryways, and false towers at the corners. Inside each armory was a central drill hall, a subterranean rifle range under the stage, garages, and administrative offices.

In the United States Army, each soldier assigned to an Army division or brigade wears a unique shoulder patch that identifies the division or brigade to which the soldier is assigned. Since the creation of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the shoulder patch of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was a yellow swastika worn on a diamond background of red. The swastika was a Native American good luck symbol that represented the strong Native American heritage of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Each side of the square patch represented one of the four states, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona whose units comprised the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The colors of gold and red represented the Spanish heritage of the four states.

When Hitler proclaimed the swastika as the symbol of the Nazi Party in Germany, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's shoulder patch was changed to a gold Thunderbird on a square red background. According to Native American lore, the Thunderbird was a gigantic creature with lightning emanated from its piercing eyes and thunder caused by the flapping of its wings. Soldiers assigned to the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

Alva's 45th Signal Company, along with the rest of the 45th Infantry Division was called to Federal active duty on 15 September 1940 for what was supposed to be one year of active duty training. As the war in Europe became a growing menace to American interests, diplomatic negotiations in the Pacific with the Government of Japan began to break down. As a result, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's one year of active duty was extended in the fall of 1941. After the Japanese attack on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 and Germany's declaration of war against the United States on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division went to war and did not come home again until December of 1945.

During World War II, the soldiers from Alva, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh Army. From Sicily, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division landed on the beaches in Italy at Salerno and then again at Anzio. At Anzio, pinned down on a surrounded beachhead, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division became known as the Rock of Anzio, upon which German assaults were shattered.

General Patton identified the 45<sup>th</sup> Division as one of the best divisions, if not the best division in the history of the United States Army. In August of 1944, the 45th Division landed on the beaches of Southern France and once again joined General Patton as part of his Third Army in its race across

Europe. The 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division crossed the Rhine River into Germany, breached the heavily defended Siegfried Line, captured Nuremberg, and liberated the Dachau Concentration Camp, freeing over 32,000 starving prisoners. From Dachau, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division crossed the Danube River and captured Munich just before the end of the war in Europe. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, commander of German Forces in Italy, called the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division the “Falcon Division” because of its shoulder patch and declared it to be one of the two finest allied divisions that he had ever faced.

After the end of World War II and the return of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. The 45th Signal Company remained in Idabel and mobilized for the Korean War as part of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division when the division was again ordered to Federal active duty on September 1, 1950.

Following training at Fort Polk, Louisiana and in Japan, the 45th Infantry Division landed at Inchon, Korea and proceeded by rail to an assembly area near Yonchon, preparatory to relieving the 1st Cavalry Division in front line positions near Chorwon. Advance units of the 45th Infantry Division entered combat on 10 December 1951 and by the beginning of 1952, the entire Division was heavily engaged in combat operations. In fierce battles against Chinese and North Korean troops, Oklahoma's 45th Infantry Division made the battlegrounds known as Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill, Heartbreak Ridge, and Luke's Castle famous. In four campaigns throughout the Korean War, the Division completed 429 days of combat operations and in a special ceremony conducted at the Oklahoma State Fairground on 25 September 1954, the Division officially returned to Oklahoma.

In the years after the Korean War, the Alva unit was re-designated as Battery B, First Battalion 189th Field Artillery and was trained to fire the self-propelled 175mm howitzer and then later, the eight inch self-propelled howitzer. The unit's new mission with all of the new equipment quickly made both the Oklahoma National Guard and the City of Alva aware of the outdated age of the WPA armory. The City of Alva deeded the land for a new armory to the Oklahoma National Guard in 1971 and construction of the new 16,000 square foot armory was completed in 1978.

In 1978, Jimmy Carter was President of the United States. The Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel are signed. The first cellular telephone system is introduced by the Illinois Bell Telephone Company. “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” is playing in the movie theaters. The top show on TV is “Happy Days”. Pope John Paul II becomes the first Polish pope and the first non-Italian pope in over 450 years. The Dow Jones Average was only 805. The average cost of gas in 1978 was an outrageous 63 cents a gallon.

The 45th Infantry Division itself no longer existed. In 1968, the Division was reorganized into three separate brigades. These brigades are today identified as the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the 45th Fires Brigade, and 90th Troop Command.

The last unit assigned to the Alva Armory is Company B First Battalion 179th Infantry. The National Guard soldiers from Alva were among the first to answer the call for help from the Gulf Coast after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. They have since deployed to Iraq, Kuwait, and have just returned from Afghanistan earlier this year.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked in both of the Alva Armories is now written in the history books of the United States, North Africa, Europe, Korea, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. For almost ninety years, the citizen-soldiers of Alva have truly made a difference at home and throughout the entire world. It is highly appropriate that this Armory, with its history and heritage for service to the community, be returned to the community, so that it may continue that tradition and history of service.

