

**Transfer of Atoka Armory
Oklahoma Army National Guard
16 June 2008**

Heritage of the Atoka Armory – COL Brown

The City of Atoka sold the land upon which this armory was built to the State of Oklahoma for \$10 in 1978. This area used to be called the “The Old Rodeo Arena”. Construction on the armory began in 1982 and was completed in May 1983 at a cost of just over \$790,000.

In 1983, Ronald Reagan was President and the movie “Gandhi” won the Academy Award for Best Picture. The final episode of the TV show “MASH” was broadcasted to an estimated 125 million viewers. Sally Ride became the first American woman in space. A First Class Postage Stamp cost 20 cents and the price of gasoline was only \$1.15 a gallon.

The engineers tell me that this building has almost 10,000 square feet of space and they can provide volumes of details about its construction. But this building is more than the simple sum of concrete, mortar, blocks, and wood. It has a heritage that I would like to review with everyone here today.

To the citizens of Atoka and the surrounding area, this Armory represents much more. To the soldiers who were assigned here, this building was their home base. From here, National Guard soldiers went forth in times of flood, tornados, and other natural disasters to answer the cry for help from the citizens of Oklahoma.

Countless lives have been saved throughout Oklahoma because of the actions of the soldiers based in this Armory. Individuals and families in desperate straits have been rescued. Those in need of food and water have been fed and taken to shelter. Lost children have been found and returned to their loved ones. Homes and businesses have been guarded and protected following natural disasters until their owners could safely return.

This armory belonged to the First Battalion 180th Infantry Regiment. This Regiment traces its historical lineage to the First Infantry Regiment of the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia which formed in 1890, seventeen years before statehood. This organization served in the Spanish-American War, chased Poncho Villa into Mexico, and also served in the First World War.

In 1921, it became part of the famous 45th Infantry Division. During World War II, the soldiers from Atoka, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton’s Seventh Army. General Patton identified the 45th Division as one the best, if not the best division in the history of American arms.

One of Atoka’s very own was a part of that division. James McLeroy enlisted into the Atoka unit in 1936 while still a high school student. He was the valedictorian of his high school and a four-sport letterman. He mobilized with the division in 1940 and by 1943, he had been promoted through the ranks to become the unit’s First Sergeant.

First Sergeant McLeroy received the Silver Star, three Bronze Stars for Valor, the Purple Heart, and the Oklahoma Distinguished Service Medal for his acts of heroism during the Sicily Campaign. He was a true representative of America’s Greatest Generation. He was killed in action in late 1943.

The 45th Division re-joined General Patton as part of his Third Army in its race across Europe and into Germany. After the end of World War II, the Division returned home to Oklahoma only to be called upon again to fight in Korea during the Korean Conflict.

The soldiers from this armory went to Europe in REFORGER training exercises, kept the peace as United Nations Observers on the Israeli-Egyptian Border, and were among the first National Guard troops to see combat in Iraq. They have served in Afghanistan and even now, many are now serving in Iraq as part of

the Oklahoma National Guard's 45th Infantry Brigade, the present day descendant of the 45th Infantry Division.

The heritage of community service that surrounds this facility is the result of the exemplary actions of these citizen soldiers who answered their community's, their state's and their nation's call with hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and compassion for those in need.

It is more than appropriate, if not fitting, that this Armory, with its heritage for service to the community, be returned to the community, so that it may continued that tradition and history of service.