

Transfer of Cherokee Armory Oklahoma Army National Guard 5 June 2009

Heritage of the Cherokee Armory – Colonel David W. Brown (Retired)

Oklahoma, throughout its history, has a tradition of volunteer militia units, composed of the town citizens, who were dedicated to the defense of their community, state, and nation. During the 1920s and 1930s, most Oklahoma Army National Guard units met in public schools and lodge halls. They rented the upper floors of downtown buildings for the storage of their equipment and trained in the open fields outside of the community. These 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 muster the necessary resources to build any 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. This armory was one of many proposed Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA. On September 30th, 1935, the City of Cherokee sold the land upon which we stand to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory. The sale price for the land was \$1. By mid-1937, 126 National Guard armories had been built nationwide, of which 51 were built or under construction in the State of Oklahoma.

These Art Deco buildings were made to look like military castle battlements by the use of parapets, arched entryways, and false towers at the corners. Inside each armory was a huge central drill hall, a subterranean rifle range under the stage, garages, and administrative offices. The Cherokee Armory was completed in 1936 and officially opened for business on September 12th, 1936.

In 1936, President Roosevelt was elected to his second term in office. Great Britain's King Edward VII abdicated his throne to marry the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. Germany renounced the Treaty of Versailles, which had formally concluded the First World War. Jesse Owens won four Gold Medals at the Summer Olympics in Berlin. The Zippo cigarette lighter was invented and the book, "Gone With the Wind" was published. The average American annual salary was \$1,713 but gas only cost 10 cents a gallon.

The engineers tell me that this building has over 19,700 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 Cherokee and of this Great State, 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 189th Field Artillery Regiment which traces its historical lineage to 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 Cherokee, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh Army. From Sicily, they landed on the beaches at Salerno and Anzio, Italy.

The unit based out of this armory faced its greatest challenge at Anzio. German panzers broke through the US lines on 13 September 1943 and were racing for the beaches when they ran head on into the 189th Field Artillery and its sister battalion, the 158th Field Artillery. These artillery men from Oklahoma were the only troops that stood between the Germans and the sea. The 155mm howitzers of the 45th Division saved the day and quite possibly the battle.

The 155mm howitzer fires a 98 pound round which is hand loaded into the howitzer's breech. General Mark Clark wrote that the fields and woods in which the enemy tanks took cover were pulverized. At the height of the battle, the two battalions were firing eight rounds per minute per gun. That's one round every 7.5 seconds. The gun tubes were so hot that the paint was burnt off. After the war, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, who led the German forces against the 45th Division at Anzio, asked his US captors to see the "automatic cannons of the 45th Infantry Division". General Patton identified the 45th Division as one of the best divisions, if not the best division in the history of the United States Army.

From Anzio, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches of Southern France in August 1944 and once again joined General Patton to be a part of his Third Army as it raced 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.

In 1968, the First Battalion 189th Field Artillery, became part of the new 45th Field Artillery Brigade when the 45th Division was reorganized into three separate brigades.

The soldiers of the 45th Field Artillery Brigade became the first National Guard soldiers in the nation to fire artillery rounds in combat during the opening minutes of Operation Desert Storm. They were among the first to answer the call for help from the Gulf Coast after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Even now, they are serving in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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.