

## **Transfer of Healdton Armory Oklahoma Army National Guard 8 May 2009**

### **Heritage of the Healdton Armory** – COL (Ret) David W. Brown

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, it was impossible for the State of Oklahoma to find 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 the many Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA. Oklahoma's WPA armories are immediately recognizable by their style. Architect and National Guard Major Bryan Nolen used standard plans for one, two, and four-unit armories. These Art Deco armories were designed to look like military castle battlements by the use of parapets and arched entryways. Inside each armory was a huge central drill hall, a subterranean rifle range, garages, and administrative offices.

The land upon which this armory stands was deeded to the Oklahoma National Guard by the City Council of Healdton on September 30th, 1935. Construction began almost immediately and the armory was completed and opened for business in 1936. This armory was built as a one unit armory and it became home to Company B of the 120<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Regiment which was a part of the famous 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The regiment provided supplies, trucks, and transportation to all of the units assigned to the Division.

The Pulitzer Prize winning cartoonist, Bill Mauldin, who created the famous Willie and Joe cartoons during World War II was assigned to the 120<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Regiment. So was a sergeant named Herb Alexander from Wilson, Oklahoma, just south of here.

Herb graduated from Wilson High School in the Spring of 1940. Times were tough and he found no employment in Southern Oklahoma. Herb wanted to work his way through college but war clouds were already forming in Europe. Knowing that the division was going to be mobilized for at least one year of active duty, Herb and several of his friends enlisted. Always hungry, Herb noted in his letters that as a bonus, he got to eat lunch here in the Healdton Armory on the day he enlisted. He didn't know at the time that World War II would break out and that he would stay on active duty for over five years.

Herb Alexander loved to tell the story of how they tossed him the keys to a 1935 Chevrolet Army truck and how he drove the truck in a convoy to a rifle range at Fort Sill. The sergeant, who was in charge, sat in the cab with Herb while the rest of Herb's squad rode in the back of the truck. When they got to the rifle range, Herb looked at the Sergeant and said, "Would you believe that this is the first time in my life that I have ever driven?" The Sergeant turned pale and looked at him in disbelief. Herb noted that he also drove the truck back but that the Sergeant chose to ride somewhere else in the returning convoy.

During World War II, the soldiers from Healdton, Wilson, and other surrounding towns and farms served with the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division 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. General George 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, they landed on the beaches of Southern France and once again joined General Patton as part of his Third Army in its race across Europe and into Germany, contributing to the final defeat of Nazi Germany. Herb Alexander was one of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division soldiers that liberated the Dachau concentration camp and uncovered the horrors of that place of death.

Herb Alexander survived the war and came home with the 120<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Regiment and the rest of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He left military service, earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Tulsa, and went on to accomplish great things in his civilian career.

After the war, the Healdton Armory became home to the 179<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment's Tank Company. As part of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the men of this Armory were called upon to fight again in the Korea War. The men of this Armory fought in places nicknamed Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill, Heartbreak Ridge, and Luke's Castle. The Division saw 429 days of combat and remained in Korea until the end of the conflict in 1953.

In 1968, the 45<sup>th</sup> Division was reorganized into the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, the 45<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade, and the 90<sup>th</sup> Troop Command. The Healdton Armory and the citizen-soldiers assigned here continued to serve throughout the years in places as diverse as Germany, the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Bosnia, Egypt, the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in New Orleans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The heritage of community and national service that surrounds this Armory has always been dedicated, historic, and compassionate. 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.