

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

2001 Industrial Parkway, Idabel, Oklahoma

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

The citizens of Idabel, Oklahoma have a long heritage of service to the State and Nation through military service. This heritage began when Company G, Third Infantry Regiment was organized in the fall of 1918 by Captain Louis Ledbetter. When the Adjutant General of Oklahoma saw how many Idabel men had turned out to become part of the new unit, he remarked that he had intended for only a company to be formed, not an entire regiment. Later, the unit became known as Company G, 180th Infantry Regiment.

Temporary offices were established downtown. Drills were conducted on the streets in downtown Idabel. In 1921, the Idabel unit became part of the newly formed 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The unit's temporary offices moved from place to place until they were finally established in the American Legion Hut. In 1924, a second National Guard unit was organized in Idabel and this new unit became Company B 120th Engineer Regiment. Both units shared offices in the American Legion Hut until all military equipment and records were destroyed in a fire in 1935. Temporary offices were then set up in the Idabel High School gymnasium.

Desperately needing an armory for their National Guard units, the City of Idabel deeded land to the State of Oklahoma on 8 November 1935 for the purpose of building a National Guard armory. The armory in was built in 1936 by the Works Projects Administration, also known as the WPA and construction was completed late that year. The new armory became to official home for both units.

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".

Because of the large population of Native Americans in the four states that comprised the National Guard's 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, a significant percentage of the Division's soldiers came from the Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Apache, Sioux, Kiowa, Pawnee, Comanche, Osage, Creek, and Navajo tribes, to name but a few of the over fifty Native American tribes represented in the Division. No other Division, before or after the Second World War had more Native Americans in its ranks than the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

Both of Idabel's National Guard companies, 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 Idabel, 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. When asked to explain why the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had succeeded at Anzio in the face of overwhelming odds, one soldier said, "*There was heaven above us and hell below us and the sea behind us and the Germans in front of us. There wasn't but one way for us to move.*"

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 45<sup>th</sup> 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 Nuremburg, 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. Company B 120th Engineers was moved to another Oklahoma town and Company G 180th Infantry remained in Idabel. Company G went to 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. The Thunderbirds served in the Yonchon-Chowon area and in fierce battles against Chinese and North Korean troops, made the battlegrounds known as Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill, Heartbreak Ridge, and Luke's Castle famous. Idabel's Company G received the US Army's Distinguished Unit Citation for their actions at Tummyong-dong where they took and held a strategically vital ridgeline in fierce hand-to-hand combat.

In 1968, the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division ceased to exist when it 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. Company G was reorganized and became Company B, First Battalion 180th Infantry. Needing a new armory to replace their now obsolete WPA armory, the City of Idabel deeded the land on which we stand to the Oklahoma National Guard in 1983 for the purpose of building a new armory. Construction began in 1984 and was finished on 1 November 1985.

In 1985, Ronald Reagan was President of the United States. Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and leader of the Soviet Union. The movie "Back to the Future" opened in theaters and the wreck of the Titanic was found in 12,000 feet of water. Microsoft Corporation released its computer software program, Windows (Version 1). Actress Keira Knightley was born. Actors Rock Hudson and Yul Brynner died. A first class postage stamp costs only 22 cents and a gallon of gas costs only \$1.09.

The last unit assigned to the Idabel Armory was Detachment 1, Company B First Battalion 180th Infantry. In September of 2000, elements of the Battalion deployed to Bosnia as part of NATO's Stabilization Force. In 2002, the Battalion deployed to Afghanistan. In September of 2005, the Battalion, along with the entire 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team executed a rapid deployment to New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to provide disaster relief to the citizens of Louisiana and Mississippi. In October of 2007, major components of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, including the First Battalion 180<sup>th</sup> Infantry, mobilized, deployed to Iraq, and returned a year later. The Battalion is currently concluding combat operations in Afghanistan and is scheduled to return home within the next thirty days.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked in both of the Idabel Armories is now written in the history books of the United States, North Africa, Europe, Korea, and Southwest Asia. For almost a hundred years, the citizen-soldiers of Idabel 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 continued that tradition and history of service.

