

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

301 North 6th Street, Kingfisher, Oklahoma

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Heritage of the Kingfisher Armory – COL (Ret) David Brown, Executive Director, 45th Infantry Division Museum, 2145 NE 36th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73111. Telephone (405) 424-5313.

The citizens of Kingfisher, Oklahoma have a long heritage of service to the State and Nation through military service. This heritage began in 1921 when the Headquarters Detachment and Combat Train, of the First Battalion 160th Field Artillery Regiment was formally organized with a total strength of two lieutenants and fifty-two enlisted soldiers. By 1923, the unit had grown to over eighty men and was re-organized into two National Guard units.

The first unit was Battery F 158th Field Artillery, which consisted of horse-drawn artillery cannons, and apparently also had a pretty decent social schedule. I found a menu from Battery F's Banquet and Military Ball which was held on 13 February 1926 at the Kingfisher Hotel. Over a hundred soldiers, wives, and girlfriends attended that formal occasion. It's interesting to note that the menu that evening consisted of creamed chicken on toast, snowflake potatoes, green peas, pimento cream slaw, paradise pudding, rolls, and coconut cream pie.

The second unit was Headquarters Battery and Combat Train, First Battalion 158th Field Artillery which consisted of horse-drawn supply wagons. In their spare time, the soldiers of this unit organized several polo teams and apparently several of the soldiers became extremely proficient in the sport. Technology arrived in the early 1930's when the horses were replaced with trucks and a station wagon.

A National Guard soldier recalled that in 1938, he was paid four dollars a month for attending drills and was paid a dollar a day for the two week annual summer camp. He also made the following statement: "It was like a club. Everybody who got in really loved it. People were from all walks of life. There were no promotions and no money, but everyone had a good time."

Both of Kingfisher's National Guard units, like many other Oklahoma Army National Guard units at the time, 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.

On 5 August 1935, Mr. D. Cochrane deeded the land we now stand on to the City of Kingfisher. Kingfisher, in turn, deeded the land for the sum of \$1 to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory.

The Kingfisher 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. Construction of this 22,000 square-foot Armory began in 1937 and completed on 6 November 1938 for the sum of \$47,594. I ran that figure through my computer's inflation calculator and in today's dollars, that is the equivalent of \$774,303.

In 1938, it was a different world from what we know today. The nation's unemployment rate was 19%. The minimum hourly wage was 25 cents. The average hourly wage was 40 cents for a 44 hour working week. Orson Wells' dramatization of the "War of the World" radio program story caused panic throughout the nation. Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was showing in movie theaters. Howard Hughes set a new aviation record by flying around the world in only three days and 19 hours. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia and the cost of gasoline is only 10 cents a gallon.

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.

By 1940, there were three National Guard units assigned to the Kingfisher Armory. The units were Headquarters Battery, First Battalion 158th Field Artillery; Headquarters Battery, Second Battalion 158th Field Artillery; and Service Battery 158th Field Artillery. These units, along with the rest of the 45th Infantry Division, were 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 Kingfisher, 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.

The units based out of this armory faced their 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 158<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery and its sister battalion, the 189<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery. These artillery men from Oklahoma were the only troops that stood between the Germans and the sea. The 155mm howitzers of the 45<sup>th</sup> Division saved the day, the battle, and the entire Allied beachhead.

The 155mm howitzer fires a 98 pound round which is hand loaded into the howitzer's breech. 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. General Mark Clark wrote that the fields and woods in which the enemy tanks took cover were pulverized. After the war, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, who led the German forces against the 45<sup>th</sup> Division at Anzio, asked his US captors to see the "automatic cannons of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division". 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.

After Anzio, 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 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.

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 Kingfisher Armory became the new home of Company M 179th Infantry or "Mike" Company as it was often referred to. "Mike" Company 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.

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 before returning home.

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. Over the years, the Kingfisher Armory was home to elements of the First Battalion 189th Field Artillery, Company B Second Battalion 180th Infantry, a Military Police platoon, and detachments of the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team's Headquarters and Headquarters Company.

Since 1990, National Guard soldiers from Kingfisher have deployed to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Bosnia, the Egyptian Sinai, Afghanistan, New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and back again to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Think about this. This Armory has supported the Oklahoma Army National Guard for over seventy years. The heritage of the soldiers who walked in this Armory is written in the history books of the United States, Europe, North Africa, Korea, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. It is highly appropriate that this Armory, with its long history and heritage for service to the community, be returned to the community, so that it may continue to serve the community.