

Transfer of Lawton Army National Guard Armory

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

The history of the Oklahoma National Guard and the City of Lawton actually began with the lessons learned during the United States' involvement in World War I. The Oklahoma National Guard, along with the Texas National Guard, was mobilized and combined in 1917 to form the 36th Infantry Division. Elements of the division reached France in 1918 and participated in heavy fighting during the last few weeks of the war. The United States Army went to war having to use French artillery cannon, British rifles, and British helmets. The Army was woefully unprepared with inadequate planning, manpower, equipment, and training.

To remedy this, Congress passed the National Defense Act of 1920 which established the Army as a three component organization consisting of the Regular Army, the Army Reserve, and the National Guard. The Act also created the 45th Infantry Division by combining of all of the National Guard units in the States of Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona into one Division. In 1923, the 158th Field Artillery Regiment, a unit that would become very important to the City of Lawton, was created to serve as a direct support artillery unit of the 45th Infantry Division. In 1923, all of the units of the 158th Field Artillery Regiment were initially allocated to New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. It took a few years but Oklahoma succeeded in transferring several of the units into Oklahoma.

The first National Guard unit in the City of Lawton was the 158th Field Artillery Regimental Band. There was no armory in Lawton so the band met in an unused and unheated building on Fort Sill. They practiced and trained in Lawton and on Fort Sill. Back then, a National Guard soldier was paid four dollars a month for attending drills and was paid a dollar a day for the two week annual summer camp.

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 45th Infantry Division, the shoulder patch of the 45th Infantry Division was a yellow swastika worn on a square background of red. The swastika was a Native American good luck symbol that represented the strong Native American heritage of the 45th Infantry Division. Each side of the square patch represented one of the four states, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona whose units comprised the 45th Infantry Division. The colors of gold and red represented the Spanish heritage of the four states.

Because of the large population of Native Americans in the four states that comprised the National Guard's 45th Infantry Division, a significant percentage of the Division's soldiers came from the Cherokee, Chickasaw, 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 45th Infantry Division.

When Hitler proclaimed the swastika as the symbol of the Nazi Party in Germany, the 45th 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 emanating from its piercing eyes and thunder was caused by the flapping its wings. Soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

The Lawton unit was mobilized on 16 September 1940 along with the rest of the 45th Infantry Division for what was supposed to be one year of intensive 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 45th Infantry Division's one year of active duty was extended in the fall of 1941. After the Japanese attack on December 7th, 1941 and Germany's declaration of war against the United States on December 11th, 1941, the 45th Infantry Division went to war and did not come home again until December of 1945.

In February 1942, the 158th Field Artillery Regiment is re-organized into the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery which then became part of the 45th Infantry Division's 157th Regimental Combat Team. During World War II, the soldiers from Lawton, as part of the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery, served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh Army. From Sicily, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches in Italy at Salerno and then again at the beaches of Anzio. At Anzio, pinned down on a surrounded beachhead, the 45th Infantry Division became known as the Rock of Anzio, upon which German assaults were shattered.

From Anzio, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches of Southern France in August 1944 as part of Operation Dragoon and once again joined General Patton as part of his Third Army as it raced across Europe and into Germany. The 45th 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 45th Infantry Division crossed the Danube River and captured Munich just before the end of the war in Europe.

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. The great news correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote about them as "Brave Men" in his articles and books. The 45th Infantry Division came home in December 1945, almost five full years after they were first mobilized in September 1940.

After World War II, the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma National Guard Division. Five years later, the soldiers from Lawton went to the Korean War, again as part of the 45th Infantry Division, when the Division was ordered to Federal active duty on September 1, 1950. The Thunderbirds served north of Seoul 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.

The action in Korea was very different from what the Battalion faced in World War II. In Korea, the Battalion would frequently fire more rounds in one day than they did in an entire week during World War II. Many of Oklahoma's Guardsmen began returning to the States in 1952, but the Division, manned by replacement personnel, remained in Korea until the end of the conflict in 1953.

Acutely aware of the need for an armory, the City of Lawton on 24 November 1953, deeded the land we are standing on to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a new armory. Construction began in 1953 and was completed in 1954. It was a different world back in 1954. Dwight D. Eisenhower was President of the United States. The USS Nautilus, the world's first nuclear powered submarine, was launched. Roger Bannister broke the four minute barrier when he ran a mile in three minutes and 59 seconds. In 1954, the first issue of Sports Illustrated magazine was published. The Miss America Pageant is broadcasted on television for the first time. Texas Instruments developed something called the transistor radio. The first Godzilla movie premiered in Tokyo and Godzilla has been eating Tokyo and New York City ever since. The very first Burger King opened in Miami, Florida. Walt Disney's 20,000 Leagues under the Sea and Bing Crosby's White Christmas are showing in the movie theaters. A gallon of gas cost only 29 cents.

In 1968, the Lawton Armory became part of the new 45th Field Artillery Brigade when the 45th Division was reorganized into three separate brigades. Over the years, their primary artillery

weapon has gone from the 105mm howitzer to the eight inch self-propelled howitzer, to the tracked Multiple Launch Rocket System or MLRS.

At 0300 hours on the morning of 15 November 1990, the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery, now headquartered in the Lawton Armory, was alerted for rapid deployment to Saudi Arabia following Iraq's invasion of neighboring Kuwait. This engagement becomes known as Operation Desert Storm. Due to the desperate need for MLRS launchers in theater, units of the 158th Field Artillery are airlifted by giant C-5A aircraft from Altus Air Force Base to Saudi Arabia.

On 16 February 1991, the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery becomes the first National Guard unit in the United States Army to open fire on an enemy force since the Korean War. In one hundred hours of combat operations, the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery out-performs all other Regular Army MLRS battalions, fires over 890 rockets and is cited by both Seventh Corps and CENTCOM commanders for its brilliant performance in Operation Desert Storm.

Since the terrorists attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the citizen-soldiers from this Armory have participated in numerous operations and deployments both within the United States and overseas to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In September of 2005, the Oklahoma National Guard, including many from the Lawton Armory, executed a rapid deployment to New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to provide disaster relief to the citizens of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked in this Armory is now written in the history books of the United States and of the world. For over sixty years, the citizen-soldiers of Lawton have made a difference at home and throughout the entire world. It was 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.

