

# **History of the Minco Armory Oklahoma Army National Guard 25 March 2011**

## **History of the Minco Armory – Colonel (Retired) 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. The National Guard soldiers of Minco operated out of an abandoned garage.

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.

The land this armory stands on has its own history and heritage. Over 180 years ago, this land was originally deeded to the Chickasaw Nation on 15 September 1830. The Chickasaw Nation, in turn, deeded the land to Meta Chestnut on 10 April 1907 for the purchase price of \$196.91. The family deeded the land to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of building a National Guard Armory on 11 September 1935 for the token sum of \$1.00. Construction by the WPA on the 19,700 square foot armory was begun almost immediately. Built to house an artillery battery, the armory's construction cost \$50,000, in 1936 dollars. In today's dollars, the amount would be just under \$800,000.

The Minco Armory was formally dedicated by the citizens of Minco and Grady County on 15 December 1936. 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 with a spacious stage located one end. A state of the art modern rifle and pistol target range was built under the stage with bullet-proof side chambers provided for scorers and observers. Supply rooms, motor pools, and administrative offices completed the armory. Armories were open for all civic gatherings and almost every armory became the town's community center complete with high school basketball, roller skating, and Saturday evening dances.

The world was quite different in 1936 when this armory was opened for business. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt has just been elected to his second term in office. Great Britain's King Edward VIII 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 novel, "Gone with the Wind" was published. The average American annual salary was \$1,713, but gas only cost 10 cents a gallon. In the 1936, National Guard privates were paid twelve dollars every three months plus a dollar a day for the two week long summer camp. Sergeants and officers were paid a little more.

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 in 1923, the shoulder patch of the 45<sup>th</sup> 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 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 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, 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 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

The Army National Guard's 45th Infantry Division originally assigned the Service Battery of the 189th Field Artillery Regiment to the Minco Armory. A year later, during a Division realignment, the Minco unit became the Headquarters Battery of the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery Regiment. This was the unit from Minco that was called to Federal active duty on 15 September, 1940 for 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 Minco, 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 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 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 beach 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 literally, the only troops that stood between the Germans and complete annihilation of the American beachhead. The 155mm howitzers of the 45<sup>th</sup> 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 later that the fields and woods in which the enemy panzer 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 and the gun barrels glowed bright red.

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, 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. 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 war, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, commander of German Forces at Anzio, 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. He also asked his US captors to see the "automatic cannons of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division". In other words, he wanted to meet the men from Minco.

Five years later, the soldiers of the Minco Armory went to the Korean War, again as part of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, when the Division was 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.

In 1968, the First Battalion 158<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery became part of the new 45<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade when the 45<sup>th</sup> Division was reorganized into three separate brigades. In 1991, the soldiers of Oklahoma's First Battalion 158th Field Artillery became the first National Guard soldiers since the Korean War to fire artillery rounds in combat during the opening minutes of Operation Desert Storm. They were also among the first to answer the call for help from the Gulf Coast after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

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, North Africa, Europe, Korea, Southwest Asia, and the Middle East. It was 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 continued that tradition and history of service.