

Transfer of the Muskogee Army National Guard Armory

661 E. Davis Field Road, Muskogee, Oklahoma 74402
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Heritage of the Muskogee Armory – COL (Ret) David Brown, Executive Director, 45th Infantry Division Museum, 2145 NE 36th Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73111

The citizens of Muskogee, Oklahoma have a long heritage of service to the State and Nation through military service. This heritage began in May 1918 when the Third Oklahoma Infantry Regiment was organized in Muskogee under the command of Colonel Sam E. Morley. The regiment was federally recognized as a National Guard unit on 3 September 1918. Three years later, the Third Oklahoma Infantry Regiment was officially re-designated as the 180th Infantry Regiment, part of the newly formed 45th Infantry Division.

The original Muskogee Armory was one of 51 armories in Oklahoma that were built by the Works Project Administration, or WPA as it came to be known. 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.

By 1940, the Oklahoma Army National Guard had assigned the following units to operate out of the WPA Armory in Muskogee:

- 180th Infantry Regimental Headquarters and Headquarters Company
- 180th Infantry Regimental Service Company
- 180th Infantry Regimental Medical Detachment
- Company I, Third Battalion, 180th Infantry
- Battery E 189th Field Artillery

I Company had an interesting Pre-World War II history. Organized in 1918 along with the rest of the Third Oklahoma Regiment, it officially became I Company on 14 October 1927. On 29 November 1930, all of the unit's enlisted soldiers, except for the Supply Sergeant, Mess Sergeant, and Cooks were transferred to the Regimental Headquarters. The empty positions in the entire company were then recruited from the Native American students at the Bacone Indian School in Muskogee.

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 diamond 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.

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 emanated from its piercing eyes and thunder caused by the flapping of its wings. Soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

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, 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.

All of Muskogee's National Guard 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 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.

During World War II, the soldiers from Muskogee, Oklahoma 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 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. When asked to explain why the 45th 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 45th 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 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 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. Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, commander of German Forces in Italy, called the 45th 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 45th Infantry Division, the division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. The Muskogee units were re-designated as Third Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company for the 279th Infantry and Company K, also from the 279th Infantry. These units mobilized for the Korean War as part of the 45th 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 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 and in a special ceremony conducted at the Oklahoma State Fairground on 25 September 1954, the Division officially returned to Oklahoma.

In 1968, the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into three separate brigades and after 47 years, ceased to exist. These separate brigades, who trace their lineage and history to the 45th Infantry Division are today identified as the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the 45th Fires Brigade, and 90th Troop Command.

By the 1970's, the old WPA Armory no longer met the needs of the Oklahoma Army National Guard, especially for the new units that were going to be assigned to the Muskogee area. In 1976, the City of Muskogee deeded land for a new armory at the new Davis Field Airport. Construction of the new 24,110 square foot armory was completed in 1978.

A lot has changed since 1978. In 1978, Jimmy Carter was President of the United States. The Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel were signed. The first cellular telephone system was introduced by the Illinois Bell Telephone Company. "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" was playing in the movie theaters. The top show on TV was "Happy Days". Pope John Paul II became the first Polish

pope and the first non-Italian pope in over 450 years. The Dow Jones Average was 805. The average cost of gas in 1978 was an outrageous 63 cents a gallon.

There have been a multitude of Oklahoma Army National Guard units assigned to the new armory. They include the 245th Combat Engineer Company, Troop E 145th Cavalry, Headquarters and Service Company 120th Engineer Battalion (Heavy), 2120th Engineer Detachment, and Company A 777th Distribution Battalion.

Since 1978, the National Guard soldiers from Muskogee have deployed to Germany, Honduras, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They were also among the first to answer the call for help from the Gulf Coast after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina when the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, reinforced with many additional units from Oklahoma, executed a rapid deployment into New Orleans. The engineers from the Muskogee Armory deployed throughout the United States for various construction projects on military installations and training sites. They built roads, schools, hospitals, and water-treatment plants in South America and Puerto Rico. They deployed to Iraq and built bases, roads, runways, buildings, and defensive positions for United States and Allied forces. Everywhere they have been, they left vital improvements that have protected and preserved life for US soldiers and greatly improved the quality of life for the impoverished in Third World nations.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked in both of the Muskogee Armories is now written in the history books of the United States, North Africa, Europe, Korea, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. For ninety-four years, the citizen-soldiers of Muskogee 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.