

History of the Pawnee Armory Oklahoma Army National Guard

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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 buildings, rented space for the storage of their equipment, and trained in the open fields outside of the community.

These National Guard units desperately needed buildings dedicated to meet their training and equipment storage needs. However, during the Great Depression, it was financially impossible for local communities and the State to build armories.

The Works Projects Administration, or the WPA as it came to be known, was established in 1935 by President Roosevelt, to create work for thousands of unemployed men. The Pawnee Armory was one of many proposed Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA.

On October 24th, 1935, Mr. and Mrs. John Rogers deeded the land upon which the Pawnee Armory stands to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory. WPA armories were built 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, motor pool, supply rooms, weapon range, and administrative offices. With over 22,000 square feet, the Pawnee Armory was completed and opened for business in 1937.

In 1937, it was a different world from what we know today. The nation's unemployment rate had dropped from 21% to 14%. The average annual wage was \$1,780. A loaf of bread cost 9 cents and gasoline was only 10 cents a gallon. The German zeppelin Hindenburg caught fire and crashed in Lakehurst, New Jersey on May 6th, 1937. On July 2nd, Amelia Earhart, along with her navigator, Fred Noonan, vanished in the Pacific while attempting to fly around the world. On December 11th, King George the VI became King of Great Britain after King Edward VIII abdicated the throne in order to marry American divorcée, Wallis Simpson.

Jackie Collins, Anthony Hopkins, Loretta Swit, Madeleine Albright, Warren Beatty, Bill Cosby, Jane Fonda, Morgan Freeman, Dustin Hoffman, Jack Nicholson, and Colin Powell were all born in 1937. On December 12th, 1937, the Japanese military forces sank the USS Panay, a U. S. Navy gunboat, along with three American oil tankers on the Yangtze River in China outside of the encircled city of Nanking. All four vessels were crowded with American and European nationals fleeing the onslaught of the Japanese Army, which had invaded China.

In the 1937, 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 45th Infantry Division in 1923, 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. 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 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.

The Army National Guard's 45th Infantry Division assigned the following units to the Pawnee Armory:

Regimental Headquarters, 179th Infantry Regiment
Company B, First Battalion 179th Infantry Regiment
Service Company 179th Infantry Regiment
Headquarters Detachment, Third Battalion 120th Quartermaster Regiment

These were the units that were called to Federal active duty on September 15, 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 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 Pawnee, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh Army.

The famed war correspondent, Ernie Pyle, first met the 45th Infantry Division in Sicily while recovering from illness in a 45th Infantry Division front line aid station. On August 9th, 1943, he wrote, *"You don't realize how different certain parts of our country are from others until you see their men set off in a frame, as it were, in some strange faraway place like this. The men of Oklahoma are drawling and soft-spoken. They are not smart-alecks. Something of the purity of the soil seems to be in them. Even their cussing is simpler and more profound than the torrential obscenities of Eastern city men. An Oklahoman of the plains is straight and direct. He is slow to criticize and hard to anger, but once he is convinced of the wrong of something, brother, watch out."*

"These wounded men of Oklahoma have gotten madder about the war than anybody I have seen on this side of the ocean. They weren't so mad before they got into action, but now to them, the Germans across the hill are all "sonsabitches". And these quiet men of the 45th, the newest division over here, have already fought so well they have drawn the high praise of the commanding general of the corps of which the division is a part."

As an example, Ernie Pyle wrote about an Oklahoman infantryman who had flesh wounds on his face and the back of his neck.

"He had a patch on his upper lip which prevented him from moving it, and made him talk in a grave, straight-faced manner that was comical. I've never seen anybody so mad in my life. He went from one doctor to another trying to get someone to sign his card returning him to duty. The doctors explained patiently that if he returned to the front, his wounds could become infected and he would be a burden to his company instead of a help. They tried to entice him by telling him that there would be nurses back at the hospital. But in his peaceful Oklahoma drawl he retorted, "To hell with the nurses, I want to get back to the fighting!"

From Sicily, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches in Italy at Salerno and then 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, 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.

Second Lieutenant Robert Barnhart joined Pawnee's Company B 179th Infantry Regiment during the last week of September 1944 as platoon leader for the Third Platoon. The company was then in a rest area preparing to return to the frontlines. He wrote that B Company had initially been an all-Native American company from Pawnee, Oklahoma. When he was introduced to his platoon, he was surprised to learn that his Platoon Sergeant, Lew Eaves, was the only remaining soldier of all of the soldiers that left Pawnee, Oklahoma in 1940.

Lieutenant Barnhart wrote, *"Lew was a person who guarded words as though they were dollars. When he did talk, what he had to say was important. I never understood Lew's reluctance to participate in idle chatter. It may have been due to his upbringing or it may have been due to the many battles he had participated in. It was probably a combination of both. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to become well acquainted with Lew."* Platoon Sergeant Eaves was killed in action during the platoon's first fire fight after they left the rest area.

The 45th Infantry Division crossed the Rhine River into Germany, breached the heavily defended Siegfried Line, captured Nuremberg, 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 and Company B, First Battalion, 179th Infantry Regiment became the sole unit assigned to the Pawnee Armory.

Company B went to the Korean War as part of the 45th 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. The majority of Oklahoma's Guardsmen began returning to the States in the spring of 1952, but the Division, manned by replacement personnel, remained in Korea until the end of the conflict in 1953.

In 1968, the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into what is known today as the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team which continues to wear the Thunderbird as its identifying shoulder patch. The 179th Infantry Regiment went from being a Regiment of three battalions to a single infantry battalion which retained the Regiment's lineage and honors.

The last unit assigned to the Pawnee Armory was Detachment Two, Support Company, First Battalion 179th Infantry.

This Armory has supported the Oklahoma Army National Guard for over seventy years. Soldiers from Pawnee have deployed with the 45th Infantry Brigade in 2004 as part of Task Force Phoenix

in Afghanistan. In September of 2005, the entire Brigade 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 45th Infantry Brigade, including soldiers from Pawnee, mobilized, deployed to Iraq, and returned a year later. Today, the Brigade is preparing for deployment next year to Afghanistan.

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.