

Transfer of the Stilwell Army National Guard Armory

421 West Pine, Stilwell, Oklahoma 74960

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

One of the first actions taken by the Oklahoma Territorial Council when it convened in August 1890 was the creation of the Territorial Militia. Although the formation of two infantry regiments, two cavalry battalions, and one artillery battery was allowed, little funding was provided, and in 1895, the militia was reorganized as the Oklahoma National Guard, twelve years before statehood. Militia soldiers volunteered not only their time but were also expected to provide their own uniforms, food, and weapons.

The Oklahoma National Guard was not federalized during the Spanish-American War, but with the permission of the Oklahoma National Guard leadership, numerous officers and enlisted men left to serve with the First United States Volunteer Cavalry under the command of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. The unit was more commonly known as Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and became famous on 1 July 1898 when they stormed first Kettle Hill and then the San Juan Heights, capturing the strategic heights from the Spanish troops in hand-to-hand combat.

In 1899, the Oklahoma National Guard was reorganized as the First Oklahoma Infantry Regiment. With statehood in 1907, the units were shifted from western Oklahoma, formerly known as the Oklahoma Territory, to eastern Oklahoma, formerly known as the Indian Territory. In June 1916, the Oklahoma National Guard was called into federal service to protect the United States border from raids out of Mexico by Poncho Villa and other Mexican revolutionaries. The Oklahoma Guardsmen returned to Oklahoma and were mustered out in March 1917 only to be mobilized weeks later for service in World War I. At Camp Bowie, Texas, the First Oklahoma Infantry Regiment was combined with the Seventh Texas Infantry Regiment to form the 142nd Regiment of the Thirty-sixth Infantry Division. Ninety-five years ago, Oklahoma Guardsmen arrived in France and served on the frontlines in northeast France on Blanc Mont Ridge and in the Ferme Forest. After the Armistice on 11 November 1918, the Oklahoma Guardsmen returned to Oklahoma in July 1919.

Under the provisions of the National Defense Act of 1920, the 45th Infantry Division was created in 1923 from the combined National Guard units of Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. 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.

The 45th Infantry Division was 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 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.

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 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. 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.

After the end of World War II and the return of the 45th Infantry Division, the division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. In addition to many of the Division's World War II legacy units, the Division received the newly created 279th Infantry Regiment which required unit assignments into several Oklahoma towns.

Stilwell, which did not have a National Guard unit to call its own, was selected to become the home of Company I Third Battalion 279th Infantry Regiment. Operating out of rented temporary facilities, the citizens of Stilwell filled the ranks of the new unit and trained to achieve the proficiency necessary to survive and succeed on the battlefield. In another part of the world, the army of North Korea, backed by Communist China, poured across the border into South Korea on 25 June 1950, triggering the entry of the United States into the Korean War.

On 1 September 1950, the entire 45th Infantry Division, including the men from Stilwell, was called for service in the Korean War. Following training at Fort Polk, Louisiana and in Japan, the 45th Infantry Division landed at Inchon, Korea and entered combat on 10 December 1951. 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.

Fighting became so heavy during the month of June 1952, that the Division's artillery fired 163,000 artillery rounds in support of its infantry units. During the peak of the fighting, the Division's artillery batteries fired 43,000 artillery rounds in 48 hours at a rate of 15 rounds per minute for every minute of the entire 48 hour period. In four campaigns throughout the Korean War, the Division completed 429 days of combat operations. 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.

The City of Stilwell knew that they needed an armory to replace the inadequate temporary offices that were used before their citizen soldiers deployed for Korea. On 10 September 1953, the City of Stilwell deeded the land for a new armory to the Oklahoma National Guard. Construction soon began on the 11,216 square-foot Stilwell Armory with a central drill hall, class rooms, arms vault, and administrative offices. The Armory was completed in 1954.

It was a different world in 1954. Dwight D. Eisenhower was President of the United States and Richard Nixon was Vice President. Marilyn Monroe married the great baseball player, Joe DiMaggio. Sports Illustrated published its first issue. Oprah Winfrey, Christie Brinkley, Ron Howard, and Condoleezza Rice

were all born in 1954. For all of us who grew up watching Godzilla movies, the very first "Godzilla" movie premiered in Tokyo, Japan in 1954. And for those of you who pay attention to such things, 11 April 1954 was officially designated as the Most Boring Day in the 20th Century.

In one form or another, the Stilwell unit remained an Infantry unit until 1 February 1968 when the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into three separate brigades and after 45 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.

It was a radical reorganization for the Infantry Company at Stilwell which became, with the stroke of a pen, Company A of the 120th Engineer Battalion. Virtually untrained in their new jobs, the soldiers of Stilwell were tasked to re-activate and renovate nearby Camp Gruber in Braggs, Oklahoma which had been closed since the end of World War II. Life during the unit's first summer camp in August of 1968 at Camp Gruber was officially described as miserable. Heavy rains drenched eastern Oklahoma and Camp Gruber was unofficially re-named Camp Mudpie. Company A rebuilt overgrown World War II rifle ranges into new state of the art weapon ranges and began to build concrete pads for a new tent city.

Since that first summer in 1968, the Engineers from Stilwell have actively supported the United States Army, the Air Force, the Marines, and even the Navy. They have deployed all over the world. In regions too poor to afford the cost of construction, they built roads and bridges for the local populations, schools for children, and medical clinics for the sick. They were America's best ambassadors who truly made a difference in the lives of the people in those regions

They have 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. Many of these Oklahoma National Guard Engineers are currently serving in Afghanistan and we pray for their safety and continued success.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers from Stilwell is now written in the history books of the United States, Korea, South America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. For over sixty years, the citizen-soldiers of Stilwell 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.

