

**Transfers of the Sulphur Armory
City of Sulphur
Oklahoma Army National Guard
1300 Hours 24 June 2010**

History of the Sulphur Armory – COL (Ret) David 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. The very first Sulphur National Guard unit was organized by Captain Charles Hardin and was federally recognized on May 8th, 1923. Yesterday, we found the original roster of that first unit not far from here in Ada, Oklahoma. This is what you see before you now. The Sulphur unit was a horse-drawn artillery battery in 1923 that converted to trucks in 1933.

Captain Hardin's unit, as well as other Oklahoma National Guard units needed armories dedicated to meet their training and equipment storage needs. Building these armories became a priority for the Federal Government.

Beginning on September 7th, 1935, and on three later dates in 1936, the Sulphur Board of City Commissioners deeded several lots of land upon which the Sulphur Armory stands today to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory. The armory was built by the Works Projects Administration, or the WPA as it came to be known. WPA-built armories were designed 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 drill floor, motor pool, supply room, weapon range, and administrative offices.

The Sulphur Armory was built as a one-unit armory for the Headquarters Battery of the 158th Field Artillery Regiment assigned to the 45th Infantry Division. The Armory was officially opened for business on May 27th, 1938 with dedication ceremonies that were broadcasted live throughout the state of Oklahoma on radio.

In 1938, it was a different world from what we know today. The nation's unemployment rate was 19%. The average wage was 40 cents an hour. National Guard privates were paid \$48 a year for drills plus a \$1 a day for the two week summer camp.

Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was showing in movie theaters. Orson Wells' dramatization of the "War of the World" radio program caused panic throughout the nation. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia and the cost of gasoline is only 10 cents a gallon.

Each soldier assigned to a US Army division or brigade wears a unique shoulder patch that identifies the division or brigade to which the soldier is assigned. The original 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 symbol of good luck, and because of its tremendous size and ability to create thunder and lightning, it was regarded with awe. Soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

The 45th Infantry Division, along with the unit assigned to the Sulphur Armory, was called to Federal active duty on September 15, 1940 for one year of active duty training. This year of training was extended in the fall of 1941 because of the deteriorating world situation. After the Japanese attack on December 7th, 1941 and Germany's declaration of war against the United States on December 11th, 1941, the Thunderbirds went to war and did not come home again until December of 1945.

During World War II, the soldiers from Sulphur, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh Army. From Sicily, they landed on the beaches in Italy at Salerno and then 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.

The unit based out of this armory faced its greatest challenge at Anzio. German panzer tanks broke through the US lines on 13 September 1943 and were racing for the beaches when they ran head on into the 158th Field Artillery and its sister battalion, the 189th Field Artillery. These artillery men from Oklahoma were the only troops that stood between the Germans and the beach. The 155mm howitzers of the 45th 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 later wrote that the fields and woods in which the enemy 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 on the gun barrels was burnt off. After the war, Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, who led the

German forces against the 45th Division at Anzio, asked his US captors to see the “automatic cannons of the 45th Infantry Division”.

When asked to explain why the 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.”

In August of 1944, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches of Southern France and joined General Patton as part of his Third Army. The Thunderbirds swept across France, crossed the Rhine River into Germany, breached the heavily defended Siegfried Line, captured Nuremburg, and liberated the Dachau Concentration Camp. From Dachau, the Thunderbirds 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. 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. The great news correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote about them as “Brave Men” in his articles and books.

After the end of World War II, the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. On September 1, 1950, the Division returned to active duty for the Korean War. In fierce battles against Chinese and North Korean troops, the Thunderbirds made the battlegrounds known as Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill, Heartbreak Ridge, and Luke’s Castle famous.

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 Sulphur Armory became the new home for the 1120th Maintenance Company, assigned to 90th Troop Command, a direct descendent of the 45th Infantry Division. The National Guard soldiers from Sulphur, Oklahoma continued their service to the nation throughout Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the Hurricane Katrina Disaster Relief Operation, and in on-going worldwide operations today.

You have so much to be proud of today. The heritage of your citizen soldiers is written in the headlines and the history books of the United States, North Africa, Europe, Korea, Southwest Asia, and the Middle East. It is a heritage, not only of the Oklahoma National Guard, but of Sulphur and its surrounding communities.

