

Transfer of Wagoner Armory Oklahoma Army National Guard October 22, 2009

Heritage of the Wagoner Armory – Colonel David W. Brown (Retired)

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.

These National Guard units desperately needed buildings 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. Armory construction was approved as a nationwide project in September 1935, and Bryan F. Nolen, an Oklahoma Army National Guard Major and architect, was assigned to the project. This Armory was one of many proposed Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA.

Major Nolen designed the Art Deco armories 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.

Armory construction was determined in large part by the availability of construction material. In some places, this was sandstone; in others it was limestone. Where an abundance of good building stone was not readily available in the nearby vicinity, brick was used. Most of the men working on the WPA construction crews had never cut stone or laid brick before. With the patient instruction of skilled supervisors, these men rapidly learned and built armories that have outlasted much newer buildings.

Oklahoma WPA armories were built by Oklahoma citizens with rock from Oklahoma quarries and brick from Oklahoma clay and steel from Oklahoma foundries. With the WPA limited to the construction of the armory building itself, the interior furnishings were provided by the individual citizens and groups within the Oklahoma community.

By mid-1937, of the 126 National Guard armories had been built nationwide, 51 were built or under construction in the State of Oklahoma. Major Nolen designed standardized one, two, and four unit armories that ranged in size from 10,000 to 20,000 square feet. The Wagoner Armory was completed and opened for business in 1938.

In 1938, it was a different world from what we know today. The nation's unemployment rate was 19%. The minimum hourly wage was 25 cents. The average hourly wage was 40 cents for a 44 hour working week. Orson Wells' dramatization of the "War of the World" radio program caused panic throughout the nation. The very first "Superman" comic was published by Action Comics. Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" was showing in movie theaters. Howard Hughes set a new aviation record by flying around the world in only three days and 19 hours. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia and the cost of gasoline is only 10 cents a gallon.

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. Water was carried on its back and when the Thunderbird tilted favorably over a territory, rain would spill off of its back onto the dry ground below. Because rain is so essential to the dry Southwest, the Thunderbird became a symbol of good luck, and because of its tremendous size and capability to create thunder and lightning, it was regarded with awe. Soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

In 1940, this armory was the home of two units:

Company A First Battalion 180th Infantry Regiment

Service Battery 189th Field Artillery Regiment

Both units trace their historical lineage to the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia which formed in 1890, seventeen years before statehood. This organization served in the Spanish-American War, chased Poncho Villa into Mexico, and also served in the First World War. The Wagoner units were called to Federal active duty on September 15, 1940 for one year of active duty training. As the war in Europe and on the Atlantic became a growing menace to American shores on the Atlantic coast, diplomatic negotiations in the Pacific with the Government of Japan began to deteriorate. 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 Pearl Harbor 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 Wagoner, 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 at Salerno and Anzio, Italy. 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 units based out of this armory faced their greatest challenge at Anzio. German panzers broke through the US lines on 13 September 1943 and were racing for the beaches when they ran head on into the 189th Field Artillery and its sister battalion, the 158th Field Artillery.

These artillery men from Oklahoma were the only troops that stood between the Germans and the sea. 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 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 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 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 Infantry 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 and into Germany.

The 45th Infantry Division swept across France, crossed the Rhine River into Germany, breached the heavily defended Siegfried Line, captured Nuremburg, and liberated the Dachau Concentration Camp. Units from the 180th Infantry Regiment were the first American units to arrive at the concentration camp where they liberated 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.

German Field Marshall Albert Kesselring 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 and the return of the 45th Infantry Division, the division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. A new unit, Company L Third Battalion 279th Infantry Regiment was assigned to the Wagoner Armory. This unit 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.

Training for Korea began at Camp Polk, Louisiana and in March of 1951, the Division shipped out for Hokkaido, Japan to continue their training. The 45th Infantry Division moved to Korea in December of 1951. 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 the 45th Infantry Brigade (Separate) which continues to wear the Thunderbird as its identifying shoulder patch.

The last National Guard unit assigned to the Wagoner Armory was:

Company B 120th Engineer Battalion

This was a heavy construction unit that went everywhere throughout Oklahoma, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Iraq to construct critically needed military facilities and roads. 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.

The soldiers from Wagoner worked with and actively supported the United States Army, the Air Force, the Marines, and even the Navy. In destitute regions of foreign countries, they were America’s best ambassadors. They truly made a difference in the lives of the people in those regions.

The heritage of the National Guard units assigned to the Wagoner Armory is written in the history books of the United States, North Africa, Europe, Korea, South America, Southwest Asia, and the Middle East. This heritage reflects the exemplary actions of Wagoner’s citizen soldiers who answered the call of their community, state and nation with hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and compassion for those in need.

It is more than appropriate, if not fitting, that this Armory, with its heritage for service to the community, be returned to the community, so that it may continued that tradition and history of service.

