

Transfer of the Walters Army National Guard Armory

5 June 2014

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

There is a long narrative of events that began 124 years ago that leads directly to where we stand today. I want to take a few minutes today to walk you through these 124 years of incredible service by Oklahoma's National Guard soldiers. The First Infantry Regiment of the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia was created on 2 May 1890 by the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature. Comprised of numerous small units scattered in towns throughout the Oklahoma Territory, these early citizen-soldiers had to supply their own uniforms and their own weapons.

With the start of the Spanish-American War in 1898, over 200 citizen-soldiers were authorized to resign from the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia and traveled to San Antonio, Texas in order to join the newly formed First United States Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. This unit became known as the Rough Riders and under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, won fame for their heroism in the taking of the San Juan Heights outside of Santiago, Cuba.

Reorganized in late 1899, the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia became commonly known as the Oklahoma National Guard. The town of Walters itself was organized on 6 August 1901 when the Kiowa-Comanche lands were opened for settlement. Although it would be many years before Walters had its own National Guard Armory, many of its citizens became National Guard soldiers and served in units located in neighboring towns. After statehood in 1907, the quality of training and support to the Oklahoma National Guard gradually improved. In response to numerous bank robberies and border incursions from Mexico by Poncho Villa and other bandits, the Federal government mobilized the Oklahoma National Guard along with the National Guard units of several other states in the summer of 1916 to guard and defend the United States' border with Mexico.

The Oklahoma National Guard came home on 1 March 1917 only to be mobilized again on 31 March 1917 because of the First World War. The Oklahoma National Guard was combined with the Texas National Guard to form the 36th Division. After intensive training, elements of the Division, including many of Walters' citizen-soldiers, saw combat on the front lines in the last months of World War I.

The United States was poorly prepared for World War I and after the war, took aggressive steps to improve its military and especially its National Guard units. In 1921, the 45th Infantry Division was created by combining the National Guard units of Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona into one cohesive unit with its Headquarters in Oklahoma City. 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 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. Ever since, soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

By 1940, the world situation was deteriorating with Europe engulfed in war since 1939 and Japan engaged in war with China since 1937. Consequently, on 16 September 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt mobilized the 45th Infantry Division for what was supposed to be one year of intensive training. With the growing menace to the United States in both Europe and in the Pacific, 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.

The 45th Infantry Division deployed to North Africa and then began combat operations when they landed in Sicily. 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. General George 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, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches of Southern France and began 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.

After the end of World War II and the return of the 45th Infantry Division in December 1945, the division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma division. Walters was selected to become one of the communities to receive a new National Guard unit. The new Armory was completed in 1949. The 10,000 square foot Armory had a central drill hall, class rooms, arms vault, and administrative offices. Company E, or Easy Company, of the 179th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division was the first National Guard unit assigned to the Walters Armory.

1949 was an interesting year. Harry S. Truman was President of the United States. RCA was the first to perfect a system for broadcasting color television. The first Polaroid Camera was sold in 1949 for \$90. The NBA, otherwise known as the National Basketball Association, was organized and began playing games. Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly were starring as sailors on leave in the movie "On the Town". Bruce Springsteen, Meryl Streep, and Sigourney Weaver were all born in 1949. The minimum wage was .70 cents an hour and a gallon of gas cost only .17 cents.

Walters' citizen-soldiers were in their Armory for only a year when the 45th Infantry Division became only one of two National Guard divisions to be mobilized 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 four campaigns throughout the Korean War, the Division completed 429 days of combat operation.

In the years since the Korean War, a variety of infantry, military police, anti-armor, and field artillery units from the 45th Infantry Division were assigned at different times to the Walters Armory. In 1968, the 45th Infantry Division ceased to exist when it was reorganized by the United States Army into three separate brigades. These brigades are today identified as the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, the 45th Fires Brigade, and 90th Troop Command.

During Desert Shield, the citizen-soldiers of Walters deployed as part of the First Battalion 158th Field Artillery to Saudi Arabia with their new Multiple Launch Rocket System weapons which devastated Iraqi units during the 100 hour war of Desert Storm. Since 11 September 2001, the citizen-soldiers from Walters deployed multiple times for Homeland Security within the United States and overseas to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In September of 2005, the Oklahoma National Guard, including many from the Walters Armory, executed a rapid deployment to New Orleans following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to provide disaster relief to the citizens of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked on the floors of this Armory is now written in the history books of the United States and of the world. For over a hundred years, the citizen-soldiers of Walters have made a difference at home and throughout the entire world. It was 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.

