

Transfer of Weatherford Army National Guard Armory 24 June 2014

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

From the fall of 1920 to the Spring of 1924, the Weatherford Chamber of Commerce and other patriotic citizen groups worked with the Adjutant General of Oklahoma to obtain an Oklahoma Army National Guard Field Artillery unit. In May 1924, the Oklahoma Army National Guard succeeded in obtaining Battery D of the 158th Field Artillery from the Arizona Army National Guard. Two weeks later, all of the unit's horse-drawn artillery and equipment, to include 32 horses, arrived by train from Arizona. The unit was officially established on 2 June 1924 became part of the new 45th Infantry Division which was comprised of National Guard units from Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

The Weatherford unit, like many other 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. Their horses were stabled in rented nearby barns. The Weatherford unit desperately needed a building 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. This armory was one of many proposed Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA.

The City of Weatherford deeded the land that we are standing to the State of Oklahoma on 10 September 1935 for the purpose of building a National Guard Armory. The Weatherford Armory was one of 51 armories in Oklahoma that were built by the WPA. All of them were designed to look like military castle battlements with the use of parapets, arched entryways, and false towers at the corners. Inside was a huge central drill hall with a spacious stage located one end. A state of the art modern rifle and pistol target range was built under the stage with bullet-proof side chambers provided for scorers and observers. Supply rooms, motor pools, and administrative offices completed the armory. In addition to its military use, the Armory was also open for all civic gatherings and almost every armory in Oklahoma became the town's community center complete with high school basketball, roller skating, and Saturday evening dances. Construction on the new Weatherford Armory was completed in 1938.

It was a different world back then in 1938. Unemployment in the United States was averaging 19%. The minimum hourly wage for a 44 hour work week was only 40 cents. The very first Superman comic book came out that year. Walt Disney's "Snow White and Seven Dwarfs" and Spencer Tracy's "Boys Town" were showing in the movie theaters throughout the nation. Overseas, oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia. Howard Hughes set a new world's record for flying around the world in only three days and 19 hours. A gallon of gas cost only 10 cents. 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.

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, Chickasaw, 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.

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 emanating from its piercing eyes and thunder was caused by the flapping its wings. Soldiers assigned to the 45th Infantry Division became known as "Thunderbirds".

The Weatherford unit was mobilized on 16 September 1940 along with the rest of the 45th Infantry Division for what was supposed to be one year of intensive 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 Weatherford, Oklahoma, as part of the 158th Field Artillery Battalion, 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 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.

The unit based out of this armory faced its 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 158th Field Artillery and its sister battalion, the 189th Field Artillery. These artillery men from Weatherford, Oklahoma, and their brothers from other Oklahoma communities were the only troops that stood between the Germans and the sea. Using their howitzers in rapid-fire, direct-fire mode against the German tanks, these two battalions of the 45th Division saved the day and quite possibly the war.

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 howitzers became so hot that the paint on the gun barrels were burned off. 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.*"

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". Kesselring called the 45th Infantry Division the "Falcon Division" because of its shoulder patch and he declared it to be one of the two finest allied divisions that he had ever faced.

From Anzio, the 45th Infantry Division landed on the beaches of Southern France in August 1944 as part of Operation Dragoon and once again joined General Patton as part of his Third Army as it raced across Europe and into Germany. 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.

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. The great news correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote about them as "Brave Men" in his articles and books. The 45th Infantry Division came home in December 1945, almost five full years after they were first mobilized in September 1940.

After World War II, the 45th Infantry Division was reorganized into an all Oklahoma National Guard Division. Five years later, the soldiers of the Weatherford Armory went to the Korean War, again 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.

In 1968, the Weatherford Armory became part of the new 45th Field Artillery Brigade when the 45th Division was reorganized into three separate brigades. Over the years, their primary artillery weapon has gone from the 105mm howitzer to the eight inch self-propelled howitzer, to the tracked Multiple Launch Rocket System, to the current High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, also known as the HIMARS system.

Since 11 September 2001, the citizen-soldiers from Weatherford 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 Weatherford 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.

This Armory has supported the Oklahoma Army National Guard for over seventy-five years. Think about this. The legacy of the soldiers who walked in this Armory is now written in the history books of the United States and of the world. For over seventy-five years, the citizen-soldiers of Weatherford 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.

