

Transfer of Perry Army National Guard Armory

16 November 2011

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

In 1926, the Adjutant General of Oklahoma succeeded in transferring a horse-drawn artillery battery from Pueblo, Colorado to the Oklahoma Army National Guard. Many Oklahoma cities were competing for Field Artillery units but it was determined that Perry, Oklahoma would become the home base for the new unit. On 14 January 1927, 65 Perry citizen-soldiers met in an empty store facing the Courthouse Square to receive official federal recognition for their unit which was now identified as Battery C, First Battalion, 158th Field Artillery Regiment. The Perry unit was part of the new 45th Infantry Division which was comprised of National Guard units from Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

It is recorded that an unintended highlight of that ceremony was occasioned by the fact that for days before the ceremony, the soldiers had practiced for the execution of their first command which was supposed to be, "Open ranks, March!" So it came as a pretty severe shock to the Inspecting Officer, who unfortunately, gave the command, "Dress right, Dress!" only to see the 65 soldiers execute a flawless open ranks maneuver.

The Perry unit, like many other Oklahoma Army National Guard units, 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 fund the construction of these 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.

This land was part of the Cherokee Strip Land Rush of 16 September 1893 which opened over five million acres of the Oklahoma Territory for settlement. Perry was an "instant city" which came into existence by sunset of that first day. The first deed for the land upon we stand was granted by President William McKinley to the Town-site Board of Noble County on 29 November 1898. The land was sold a month later to a private citizen for \$1.75. On 13 September 1935, the City of Perry purchased the land for \$300 for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory. Five days later, the City of Cherokee sold the land to the State of Oklahoma for the token sum of \$1.

The Perry 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 each armory was a central drill hall, a subterranean rifle range under the stage, garages, and administrative offices. The 22,000 square-foot Perry Armory was built in 1936 with Battery C moving into their new facility soon thereafter.

1936 was an eventful year. President Roosevelt was elected to his second term in office. Great Britain's King Edward VII abdicated his throne to marry the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. Germany renounced the Treaty of Versailles, which had formally concluded the First World War. Jesse Owens won four Gold Medals at the Summer Olympics in Berlin. The Zippo cigarette lighter was invented and the book, "Gone With the Wind" was published. The average American annual salary was \$1,713 but gas only cost 10 cents a gallon. In 1936, 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.

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".

Originally, Battery C was equipped with World War I vintage horse-drawn 75mm cannons which fired a shell weighing 15 pounds. The horses were replaced by trucks in the 1930's and in early 1940, the unit was re-equipped with 105mm howitzers pulled by trucks. These howitzers fired a 50 pound shell that could hit targets up to seven miles away.

Battery C 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 Perry, 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 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 Perry, 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 battle.

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 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". 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 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. 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 and many units within Oklahoma were reassigned to new locations. The Perry Armory became home to Company I, Second Battalion 179th Infantry Regiment.

On September 1, 1950, the 45th Infantry Division, including its Perry unit, was again called to active duty. Following training at Fort Polk and in Japan, the Division deployed into Korea. 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 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 179th Infantry Regiment went from being a Regiment of three battalions to a single infantry battalion which retained the Regiment's lineage and honors.

Since then, the 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team has deployed to Bosnia, the Sinai, Afghanistan, Iraq, and New Orleans, following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Today, most of the Brigade has returned to Afghanistan where its soldiers are currently engaged in combat operations. The rest of the Brigade is currently in Kuwait where its soldiers maintain regional security.

For 84 years, since that first formation by 65 citizen-soldiers of Perry, Oklahoma in 1927, this armory and its community has always answered the call of their community, their state and their nation in operations around the world. It is more than appropriate, if not fitting, that this Armory, with its heritage of service, be returned to the community, so that it may continue that tradition of service.

