

NOTES

MUSEUM STORY

06/13/11

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Not too long ago I told John Critzas a little about the long long trail awinding that led to our Hellcat Memorial Museum of today. (Actally it began almost twenty-two and a half years ago.) John said I should put that story on paper, perhaps for the Museum newsletter. Well here goes.

Beginning at Abilene

The initial step triggered many maneuvers and dealings that finally arrived at the Museum we have today. It was started back in 1989. I had just retired from General Dynamics and had new freedom. It was a chance to stir memories of days of a more youthful time. Jacque and I began planning a short trip - - to go back in time, by driving over to the old Camp Barkeley site outside Abilene.

Well we wanted company so we got good wartime ASTP buddy Ray Collier A-17 and his Dorothy. Ray had retired from U. Minn. and he and Dorothy moved to East Texas. It was the first time in 67 years for Ray and me to breath that dry West Texas air.

Via contact with the Texas Historical Commision we were advised that anything about Abilene's historical activities could be found by contacting the Taylor County Historical Commission. Mrs. Anita Lane was Chairman. Mrs. Lane invited me to meet with her in Buffalo Gap to talk about Ray's and my planned visit to see old Barkeley. She directed me to Sgt. Smith the Abilene U.S. Army representative working with the local National Guard and Reserve. I called the sergeant and said we wanted to see the old camp. He said, "Come on out!"

The Colliers and Hatts drove west on U.S. Interstate 20 to Abilene environs and followed the road eight miles toward San Angelo. We were at the old Camp entrance. Driving inside we meandered through 12th Armored's living area. Then went 2-3 miles more over the railroad to a locked gate of what is currently called "Camp Barkeley". The sergeant got us in. We drove in and up the steep hill. Thus we were able to re-tread Hellcats' 1944 living and training grounds.

On the way back out to the San Angelo highway we spied and inspected an existing Texas Historical marker for World War II

Camp Barkeley. The marker was on the side of U.S. Highway 377 amongst a bunch of cactus and johnson grass. (This inspection tweaked a desire that maybe later we could do something about a better marker for the 12th Armored somewhere near the Camp's area.) So shortly after returning home from Abilene a self-identified committee of 12th vets was formed --- Raymond Collier, Maurice Glover HQ-494th, Marvin Drum A-17, John King Sv-494th, Bill Leftwich F-92, and Hatt.

The Committee went to work on a "12th Armored Division Camp Barkely Memorial" design. Over a period of time and with great help from Hellcat's in our Association they Managed to get financing done and to get the Memorial made and installed. The doing had to be independent from the Association's Executive Council except for moral support. (They allowed us to put info in the Hellcat News.)

This is how it went. On September 8th or 9th at the 1989 San Antonio Reunion the committee asked the Association President Ed Buscavage to allow a short period at the morning Council meeting for the Committee to make a presentation. The Committee wanted to tell about an idea to install a 12th AD memorial on a highway near Camp Barkeley. The Council kindly agreed to hear it.

So at the Council meeting Hatt quickly told them about the current State Historical Marker located at the camp's entry off the Abilene to San Angelo U.S. Hwy 277. Then he briefly described the committee's work on a potential idea. It would be for a better memorial design and its construction and installation.

After a short question and answer discussion, Hatt said the committee had no thought to ask for Association money but hoped to get permission to advise the Hellcat members about the committee's work and plans via the Hellcat News.

President Buscavage closed the discussion. They seemed to imply OK via their nod --- but no promises!

The Historical Commissions of Taylor County and State of Texas (Austin) were primary for giving approval of placing Memorials on Texas highway rights of way in Taylor County.

With considerable cajoling they approved the memorial for installatipon on Arnold Blvd on the Camp Barkeley side of Abilene. This site was considered secure because it was in view of the Dyess AFB entry gate guards.

On November 7, 1992 a marvelous unveiling and dedication was conducted at the new Memorial with 300 Hellcats witnesses on a very windy day. All our unit flags and 12th Armored Division Colors were flying. The Texas National Guard 36th Infantry Division Band marched and played and the Dyess Air Force Base's Honor Guard presented their Colors. Valuable help had come from Dyess AFB, Abilene Convention & Visitors Bureau, and Taylor County Veterans Service Office. Hellcat veteran Congressman Sonny Montgomery CCA was on hand to speak.

The Division Historian and Archives Collection

Time went by. The Association Executive Council became concerned about the Association Historian reports that a much larger and permanent location was needed for the Division's archives. The Council wanted the Historian to scour the country for an institution that would accept and care for the archives, and also to utilize them to the benefit of our veterans and their families. Historian Ken Bradstreet did what the Council ordered.

Now this became a new ballgame to the Camp Barkeley Memorial Committee. They got the word from Historian Ken Bradstreet at the Midcontinent Picnics in the 1990's.

Somewhere around this time Abilene Christian University history professor Dr. Vernon Williams was made aware of the 12th Armored Division archive collection situation.

A minor number of replies came back answering Historian Bradstreet's survey. Some requests for proposals were not replied to. Historian Bradstreet presented the survey's results to the Council. Only one surveyed organization made a good proposal. That was a joint proposal combining Taylor County Historical Commission, the Museums of Abilene at Grace Cultural Center, and Department of History at Abilene Christian University. It was called "Acquisition of the 12th Armored Division Historical Collection"
The Council indicated the joint Abilene proposal was acceptable.

After a long wait Historian Ken Bradstreet was unsuccessful in getting the Council to deliver the collection to ACU. So with help of Emporia friends Historian Bradstreet and his wife loaded up the collection. Ken and Ruth themselves delivered everything to ACU in Abilene. It was a very big load! The archives collection was growing every week with additional

stuff coming in from Hellcat members. The collection needed to leave Bradstreet's basement!

In the meantime ACU professor Dr. Williams had been made a member of the Taylor County Historical Commission. Soon he was elected Chairman of the Commission. He began reviewing the Commission's mail file. It was here that he learned about the old committee of Hellcats that had been active in Abilene (that is the working committee that made and installed the 12th Armored Camp Barkeley Memorial on Arnold Blvd).

Dr. Williams wrote to members of the old committee inviting them to a Taylor County Historical Commission meeting. It became clear he was trying to do something with the collection. This is where the Association President of that time, Maurice Glover, turned his thoughts toward establishing an avenue of information between ACU/Abilene (with the collection) and the Association Executive Council (representing the 12th Armored). He directed that a Policy and Liaison Committee in the Association be formed and assigned members to it. They included some of those from the old memorial committee plus new Hellcats, not the least of which were Bill Hardin of Division Headquarters, Association Historian Marian Miller Co-Chmn, and Past Association Historian Ken Bradstreet.

The Association's Executive Council was briefed on the work at ACU by the Liaison Committee and Dr. Williams. The Council approved an order to furnish \$5,000 financial assistance to ACU for their "12th Armored Division Historical Project". One or two other such donations were made by the Association and then discontinued.

Members of the Liaison Committee made a lot of trips to Abilene to see what ACU was doing with the 12th archives such as organizing and storing records, communication papers, and hardware items. A building referred to as the "History Lab" held a large amount. These were transferred later to a safer space located in the University Administration Building. Other ACU activities and their history students were setting up a Hellcat display within a room in Abilene's Grace Museum. Other groups were assembling traveling displays for 12th Armored Reunions and west Texas area public schools.

What About a Museum?

It wasn't long before I asked Glover, Drum, Collier (and new member Lou Lapinski B-493) what they thought about perhaps a

separate Museum for the 12th Armored. Possibly it could be a better means to conserve, display, and utilize all of the archive items for the public. The Committee was receptive so we brought it to the attention of Dr. Williams. He had in mind a Memorial Museum Project at the University. It wasn't long before he and ACU had gotten Abilene's approval to use the old, empty historical Matera Building near downtown for a museum. The city had bought the Matera and offered it to ACU for 99 years at one dollar per year.

Right away the Fort Worth/Dallas members of the Liaison Committee members volunteered and pitched in to clean up the Matera and its grounds. But conversion of the Matera looked enormous (maybe a \$3 million project). The size became a little disconcerting.

ACU and the Committee did not remain disconcerted very long because the city suddenly took back their offer on the Matera. Abilene's change of mind put Dr. Williams back on the street searching for a replacement building. After a few weeks he came upon the empty Lone Star Gas Building in the downtown historical district. Fate was on our side. It resulted in a realistic place in good shape with 21,000 square feet. The building was for sale for a cost that appeared to be negotiable.

Immediately the Fort Worth/Dallas Hellcats began demolishing internal walls that Dr. Williams said needed to be removed.

Association member's concerns were growing about ACU's slow response to donors who donated money and archival materials. The Liaison Committee arranged for a "President's Meeting" between the Association's and ACU's presidents in 1998 (Ted Blostein and Dr. Mony). This was in attempt to iron out how we could work together and how to raise money.

As time marched on, a change to a more independent business-like management became apparent. Bob Hoeweler C-66 and John Critzas A-714 got on board. The Museum needed to be set up in a foundation separate of Abilene Christian University and the Association per se. (This separation did not mean that Museum active persons could not hold any office in the Association. Or vice versa.) The Museum business would be conducted by a board of directors of the foundation. They would be managed in accordance with the foundation's bylaws and the laws of the State of Texas. The initial Board of Directors' slate of officers were three persons from ACU, three in the 12th AD Association, and one independent citizen of Abilene. These

first persons were defined within the Articles of Incorporation which was provided by Texas Secretary of State. Later directors and officers have been elected by the sitting active directors and drawn from Association members, ACU persons, and Abilene citizens.

All of the above was originally laid out by ACU's attorney Gaston Welborn Jr. and signed by him as incorporator on October 8th, 1999. This corporation arrangement has functioned well since then.

Over the next ten years many projects were addressed and many achieved. Starting on March 7, 2011 the Museum Board of Directors contained four 12th AD veterans, five 12th AD Legacy Members, three Abilene citizens, one Abilene Christian University member, one curator, one curator assistant, and numerous volunteers from Abilene.

The Board of Directors have concentrated especially on display and distant educational capabilities. Armored vehicles and two websites are functional now with a great deal of information available for World War II historical research.

All who are involved feel the excitement of the future of this Museum.

F. George Hatt, Jr. A-17
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