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# 49th Armored Division Reunion set for Oct. 14 and 15 in Mercedes

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

MERCEDES — October 2011 will mark 50 years since the National Guard's 49th Armored Division was activated and ordered to Fort Polk, La.

Rio Grande Valley units of the 4th Armored Rifle Battalion/144th Infantry and 4th Medium Tank Battalion/112 Armored reported to Fort Polk for training and eventual movement to Germany.

The activation was brought about by what was termed the Berlin Crisis, which was caused when Russian Premier Nikita



Khrushchev threatened to sign a treaty with Germany to deny American, British and French access to West Berlin. At the time, West Berlin was shared by those three nations plus Russia. In October 1962, the Divi-

sion was notified that the crisis had been resolved and it was ordered to return home.

Company D, Mercedes, will host a reunion for all members from these units Friday and Saturday, Oct. 14 and 15, in Mercedes. There will be entertainment and a barbecue Oct. 14 and entertainment/dinner Oct. 15. The dinner will be at the Frances E. Cooper Event Center at the Rio Grande Valley Livestock Showgrounds.

Members wishing to attend should contact Mario Cavazos at 956-821-2256 or e-mail: mcavazos@sc2000.net.

## **Mobilization for the Berlin Crisis, October, 1961**

An uneasy world situation kept the 49th Armored Division at a high state of readiness in 1960 and 1961. The actual mobilization of the Division in 1961 was preceded by the crisis atmosphere of the events around Berlin in the months of July and August 1961. The Soviet-dominated government of East Germany began to build a wall along the western borders of that county - and around the American, British and French 'zones' of Berlin, entirely surrounded by East Germany.

The fear was that all sources of supply to the city of Berlin would be interrupted in an attempt to impose East German - and thus, Russian - rule over the city. Tensions ran very high and there was a real fear that an "incident" would lead to war with the Warsaw Pact Nations.

On September 6, 1961, the Division was authorized by Department of the Army to "recruit to full strength" and to add two extra armory drills per month. And then, on September 19, 1961, announcement was made to the civilian news media that the 49th Armored Division was being alerted for an order to active federal duty effective 15 October.

Because of "communications lag" - as it was referred to in the Division's "After Action" report for the mobilization - no responsible commander or other person in the Division was able to officially confirm, deny or intelligently comment on the flood of radio, television and newspaper information which soon swamped the home, shop, and office of every Guardsman in the Division. But soon, Division leaders including General West provided clear media guidance and the mobilization raced onward.

On October 15, 1962, the Division entered federal service at armories scattered across the state. On the 18th, a substantial advanced party proceeded to Fort Polk, Louisiana, moving entirely by organic (unit) transportation, carrying the unit equipment needed at Fort Polk. Then on the 24th, by chartered bus and motor convoy, thousands of Texas Guardsmen went on "extended active duty" at the pine-covered Fort

Polk training center in western Louisiana. This was as close to "war" as the Division would move in its fifty-seven year history.

At this time the organization of the division was quite different from the earlier World War II organization. The infantry battalions were now units of the 144th Infantry, one of the 36th Infantry Division regiments in World War I and during the 1920s and 1930s. Armored units were now part of the 112th Cavalry, which had previously been a Separate Armored Cavalry Regiment. A third Combat Command - CCC - was added, giving the Division an authorized strength of 10,372 personnel.

Although the Division and on-post personnel struggled valiantly, the fact remains that Fort Polk was not fully operational as a military installation when the Division arrived. Housekeeping and facility matters kept the Division Engineer, Quartermaster, Signal and other support units very busy during the early weeks of the mobilization.

The main battle tank for the Division at that time was the M48 with 90 mm. gun. Armored infantry used the M-75 personnel carrier, although the M113 family of carriers was being introduced. Armored Field Artillery units were being supplied with modern weapons including the M-108 self propelled gun, replacing World War II era M-7 self-propelled 105 mm. guns.

The first five weeks of training at Fort Polk included orientation and refresher training to prepare for the eight-week ICTP (Intensified Combat Training Program) which would follow. The benefit of the first five weeks was that it permitted the Division to absorb 4600 "filler personnel" assigned from the U. S. Army Reserves to augment the manpower of the Division. Of these 4600 persons, 680 were subsequently separated from the military because of disability, hardship or "unsuitability for active duty service".

The Division trained for ten months in Louisiana, but never deployed overseas. During this time of training, however, the 49th made National Guard history. In May, 1962, the Texans staged a massive

15-day, division-wide field maneuver - code named "Iron Dragoon" - which is still remembered as a classic National Guard armor exercise. During that time, the 3d Battalion, 132d Field Artillery - a component unit of the 49th - was the first National Guard unit to fire the "Honest John" ballistic battlefield missile.

Hundreds of billboards greeted the 49th AD convoys as troops returned to home stations in August, 1962. "Welcome home, 49th, Thanks for a job well done!" they read.

Mustering-out ceremonies on August 9th and 10th in more than 100 Texas cities formally ended the service of the troops.

The commander, MG Harley West, complimented the soldiers of the 49th as they returned to civilian life:

*"There were many firsts:*

- 1. The calling of civilian component troops in the absence of a shooting war.*
- 2. The reopening of a closed Class One Army post and its operation entirely by civilian component personnel.*
- 3. An armored division deployable overseas at the end of 13 weeks.*
- 4. Designation as a STRAC Division (Strategic Army Corps) after 4 months.*
- 5. Support of other major combat units of the 4th Army area during their two weeks summer training."*

*"And now you come home - MISSION ACCOMPLISHED! You helped win a war it was not necessary to fight! You come home with pride in a job well done; confidence as a result of a professional military performance; gratification at a reception such as that we have received by our home folks; sharpness*

*both mentally and physically; and satisfaction - the real satisfaction the hearts of each of you because you did respond to your country's call . . . I have been proud to be your commander." ("Texas 49er", August, 1962.)*