

Structure of the XXI Bombardment Command

At the outset of the Pacific air war in 1944, the Twentieth Air Force consisted of a single Bomber Command, the XX Bomber Command, operating from fields in the CBI Theater (China, Burma, and India). It was formed prior to the occupation of the Marianas Islands, when the only way to field air power in Asia was to fly from friendly fields in CBI to bomb Japanese airfields in China, Korea, and Japan.

The XX Bomber Command's main field was at Chengdu in Sichuan Province, China. CBI operations were very expensive—planes based in China could get fuel, parts, and provisions only from India via transport flights using C-47s and, sometimes, B-29s; these were the famously dangerous “Over the Hump” flights across the Himalayas. The payoff for all the cost and danger was only a limited ability to reach Japan: China-based B-29s could only hit targets on Kyushu and Shikoku, Japan's southern islands, making the XX Bomber Command little more than a gnat in the enemy's side.

Just as a B-29's number of missions and of enemy aircraft destroyed were marked by bombs and Japanese flags painted on the nose, so flights over the hump were designated by camels painted on the nose (each camel representing one flight). There is one wonderful photo of a B-29 with Japanese flags, bombs, camels—and eight telephone poles—painted on the nose. The latter represented eight poles knocked down when the plane came in too low for a landing while training in the States.

After the Marianas were taken in late 1944, the XX Bomber Command's assets were transferred to the newly formed XXI Bomber Command headquartered on Guam, which was also the site of the 314th and 315th Bombardment Wings.

XXI BOMBER COMMAND
Headquarters: Guam, Marianas Islands

Unit	First Combat Mission
58th Bombardment Wing (Tinian-West Field) 40 th Bombardment Group 444 th Bombardment Group 462 nd Bombardment Group 468 th Bombardment Group	Mar '44 – CBI Dec '44 – Tinian
73rd Bombardment Wing (Saipan-Isley Field) 497 th Bombardment Group 498 th Bombardment Group 499 th Bombardment Group 500 th Bombardment Group	Nov '44 – Saipan
313th Bombardment Wing (Tinian-North Field) 6 th Bombardment Group 9 th Bombardment Group 504 th Bombardment Group 505 th Bombardment Group 509 th Composite Group (Silverplates)	Feb '45 – Tinian
314th Bombardment Wing (Guam-North Field) 19 th Bombardment Group 29 th Bombardment Group 39 th Bombardment Group 330 th Bombardment Group	Feb '45 – Guam
315th Bombardment Wing (Guam-Northwest Field) 16 th Bombardment Group 501 st Bombardment Group 331 st Bombardment Group 502 nd Bombardment Group	June '45 – Guam

The 58th Bomb Wing was initially attached to the XX Bomber Command. The 73rd Bomb Wing had originally been scheduled to join the 58th Bomb Wing in China, but when the Marianas were taken it was redirected to Saipan and the 58th Wing was transferred to Tinian, both as part of the new XXI Bomber Command. The XX Bomber Command was then disbanded.

In addition to the XXI Bomber Command's combat capability of twenty bomb squadrons, each Bomb Group had a Headquarters unit, several Air Service Squadrons for routine maintenance and other tasks, and an Air Service Group responsible for major maintenance and repairs. For example, the 6th Bomb Group consisted of the 24th, 39th, and 40th Bomb Squadrons plus the 72nd Air Service Group and 6th Bomb Group Headquarters.

The 6th Bomb Group was typical of other Very Heavy Bombardment Groups. On August 31, 1945, the group had forty-six B-29s, about fifteen per combat squadron, plus a few Heavies and smaller planes for local flights. It was staffed by 2,207 men, of which 459 were officers and the remaining 1,748 were enlisted men. Extending these numbers to each of the twenty bomb groups gives a crude estimate of the combat strength of the XXI Bomber Command's twenty bomb groups at about 920 B-29s, 9,000 officers, and 35,000 enlisted men.¹ Additional planes and men were assigned to overhead units, such as XXI Bomber Command headquarters, Wing Headquarters, and Air Service Groups.

In July of 1945 an extra group joined the 313th Bomb Wing. The 509th Composite Group was a small collection of "Silverplate Edition" planes tasked with dropping atomic

¹ This rough calculation fits well with the data in the 1946 *AAF Statistical Digest*: in July of 1945 there were 979 B-29s "on hand" in the Pacific Area. The largest fleet ever sent aloft on a single mission—a show-of-force over Tokyo to celebrate Army Air Forces Day on August 1—was 825 B-29s, a remarkably high proportion of the aircraft available.

bombs on Japanese cities: Hiroshima by *Enola Gay*, on August 6; Nagasaki by *Bocks Car*, on August 9. Other 509th CG planes (such as *The Great Artiste* and *Some Punkins*) were used as observation planes and as back up.

The Silverplates were B-29Bs with no armaments and with the usual double bomb bays replaced by a single bomb bay modified to deliver one large and heavy bomb. They also had reversible-pitch propellers to allow reverse thrust in the event a takeoff had to be aborted; this was to mitigate the chances of a crash on takeoff with an armed atom bomb aboard.²

The Japanese had seen these planes with a strange configuration, each with the 509th CG's tail marking of a circle containing a forward-pointing arrow. Their curiosity was naturally aroused and they devoted intelligence assets to determining the unit assignment and purpose of 509th CG planes. To help mask the identity of the Silverplates, the 509th Composite Group's normal markings were replaced by the 6th Bomb Group's Circle R markings. Thus, for the remainder of the war the Silverplates were marked as 6th Bomb Group planes. After the war they reverted to their original tail codes, though *Enola Gay* is displayed at the Smithsonian Institution with the 6th Bomb Group's Circle R that it wore on the Hiroshima mission.

² The original plan had been to arm "Little Boy," the Hiroshima bomb, before takeoff. At the last moment the Navy Captain responsible for arming the bomb decided to do mid-air arming to avoid the catastrophic consequences of a bad takeoff.