

(ORIGINAL COVER)

**The Story of The “Billy Mitchell Group”  
468<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (VH) – From the C.B.I. to the Marianas**



**LAYOUT WORK ON THE FRONT COVER**

**BY  
ANDY JUSCIK**

**WHITING, INDIANA**

**THE SON-IN-LAW OF JOE POKRAKA**

**ANDY HAS BEEN THERE BEFORE**

**HELPING US OUT**



## A

The story of the 468<sup>th</sup> is the story of the B-29 Superfort, its debut and development as the most efficient strategic weapon to be employed by any military organization in the world up to World War II. The chapters of this History tell a story, not only of the lives, the travels and the activities of men drawn from the comfortable surrounding of peacetime life into the turmoil of war, but also of the many problems solved by these men and of their untiring efforts to prove the Superfort as the most powerful weapon of the American Armed Forces during this period.

The B-29 project, launched at a time when a Superfort was still a novelty, and production plans were still being formed, saw complete and gratifying success in two simultaneous accomplishments...the “debugging” of the Superfort and the proving of its power and effectiveness as a combat weapon. At the same time Crews, both ground and air, were learning the whats, ifs, and hows of this new bomber. The bomber itself was participating in the first long-range strikes against strategic targets in the Japanese home Islands, and in other occupied areas of the Empire previously inaccessible to Allied Aircraft.

To accomplish these results Washington picked its men carefully. From all points of the globe, and every theater of war, officers, men and veterans of every type of aerial combat and activity were brought together to form the four Groups of the 58<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing of the XXth Bomber Command; the very first organization that was assigned to the new B-29s for testing, preparation, and training for aerial combat against the Japanese Armed Forces.

The chapters comprising this short History of the 468<sup>th</sup> depict the lives and travels of thousands of men from the date of their activation, through long days of training and voyages to Asia by air, ship and rail. Depicted also is a year of combat from India and China struggling against the enemy, the weather, the terrain and overcoming mechanical failures of a new untested airplane. The History concludes with the closing chapters from Tinian, as the tide turned, and the 468<sup>th</sup> cemented their place in American War History. The B-29 became the Superfort because of the skill applied by the ground and combat men of the 468<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, “The Billy Mitchell Group.”

### China-India Chapters:

Originally Edited by: Stephen Wolfe  
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### Tinian Chapters:

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**B**



**JAMES V. EDMUNDSON**

**1942-1943**

**AERIAL COMMANDER  
IN SOUTH PACIFIC  
SANK, DESTROYER  
ON AUG A9TH 1942**

**1943-1944**

**C.O. 792nd SQUADRON  
TRAINING US  
AND WITH US  
FOR THE B-29**

**SALINA, KANSAS**

**1944-1945**

**C.O. 468<sup>TH</sup> BOMB GROUP  
BILLY MITCHELL GROUP**

**CBI AND BACK TO  
THE SOUTH PACIFIC.**

**HE IS NOW A**

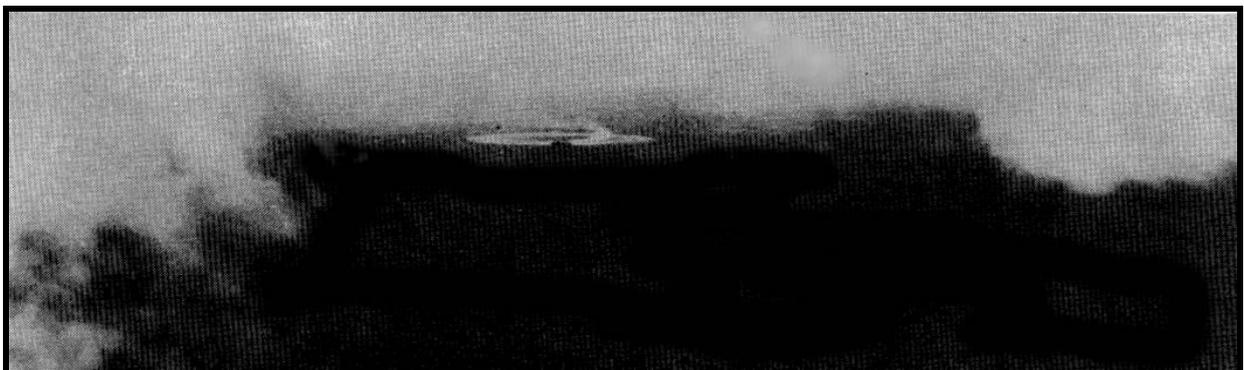
**LT. GENERAL-RETIRED**

**WE WILL ALWAYS**

**FONDLY REMEMBER HIM**

**AS 'COLONEL JIM'.**

**OFF LUNGA POINT ON GUADALCANAL (see next page for details)**





C

See above. Rudder locked in a death whirl, a Japanese destroyer Commander can't stop the evasive action started too late when a lone B-17 swept out of the clouds Aug. 19 off Tulagi, Solomons, and bombed from 7,000 feet. Clouds such as pictured concealed its approach and the destroyer was able to complete one fourth of its circle before being hit. The B-17 pilot, Maj. James V. Edmundson, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. His plane dropped a train of 500-Lb HE bombs; Nos. 2 and 4 bracketed the vessel and No. 3 hit back of the after turret, eventually sinking it. This earned Col. Jim one of the seven Distinguished Flying Cross's he was awarded during his Air Force career, which led him to the position of Deputy Commander in Chief for the United States Readiness Command and subsequent retirement as a Lieutenant General.



Col. Jim and Crew with O'REILLY'S DAUGHTER. A/C 6264. Salina 1944.

Front row – L to R: Capt E. B. Winkler Co-Pilot, 1<sup>ST</sup> Lt C. F. Stelmach Flight Engineer, Lt Col. J.V. Edmundson Pilot, Capt D.G. O'Brien Navigator, 2<sup>ND</sup> Lt F.J. McDonald, Bombardier. REAR ROW: T/Sgt W.W. Alspaugh Radio Operator, T/Sgt J. P. Meehan Left Gunner, T/Sgt H.S. Brissenden Right Gunner, T/Sgt W.A. Beckham Radar Operator, S/Sgt E.J. Brundage Senior Gunner, T/Sgt R.B. Heffernan Tail Gunner.

These men were Col. Jim's original Crew in the States. Over his objections, Brissenden could not stay with his pilot of old because he had been badly injured in a B-17 crack-up. The Docs said "no". He needed more time for recovery.

Talk about loyalty: of special interest, O'Brien, Heffernan and Beckham had also flown with our Leader during those early days of the war. They had many interesting tales to share with us.

Several years after WWI, Billy Mitchell proved his point by sinking 2 German naval ships from the air. About 19 years later, Col. Jim (Major at the time) sank an enemy destroyer from a single B-17 while they were shooting back. No doubt about it, he should be the C.O. of the BILLY MITCHELL GROUP.



D

At the last minute, prior to their flying trek halfway around the world to their new Base of operations in India, Adams replaced Brissenden as Right Gunner on this Crew. Then, after they settled down at the Base near Kharagpur, Colonel Jim, after much consideration, selected Wedel to be his Bombardier. Our aircraft were delivered so late, prior to going overseas, there was very little time spent in bombing practice from a B-29. As the Colonel would be leading us in battle, he would need a Bombardier with experience, and Wedel had more than anyone else in the 792<sup>nd</sup> Squadron.

Second Lieutenant Franklin McDonald showed good potential for the job and was assigned to Captain Ed Parsons Crew to train, as we of the lower ranks all did, during combat in order to follow in the footsteps of our more experienced leaders. It is sad to report; Parsons and Crew were killed on a take-off crash in October. (Story on page 94.) The Colonel and Brundage are the only survivors now of that first crash.



Col. Jim and Crew with A/C No. 6264. Front row – L to R: The Colonel, Pilot, Captain Eddie E Winkler Co-pilot, Captain Donald G O'Brien Navigator, Captain Louis K Wedel, Bombardier, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Casimer (Casey), FO Stelmach, Flight Engineer. Rear row: L to R: S/Sgt James P. Meehan Left gunner, S/Sgt G.L. Adams, Right gunner, S/Sgt Ernest J Brundage Side gunner, T/Sgt Rollin (Red) B Hefferenan, Tail gunner, T/Sgt, Radio, T/Sgt William A Becham, Radar and M/Sgt Alexander Venski, the Ground Crew chief.

This plane was damaged by flak and fighter attack over the Steel Mills at Yawata, Lt. Col. Savoie as Squadron C.O. after Col. Jim moved to Group Headquarters, was flying this bomber with the Crew above. (Story on page 67.) This plane flew on 5 missions and 5 Hump trips.



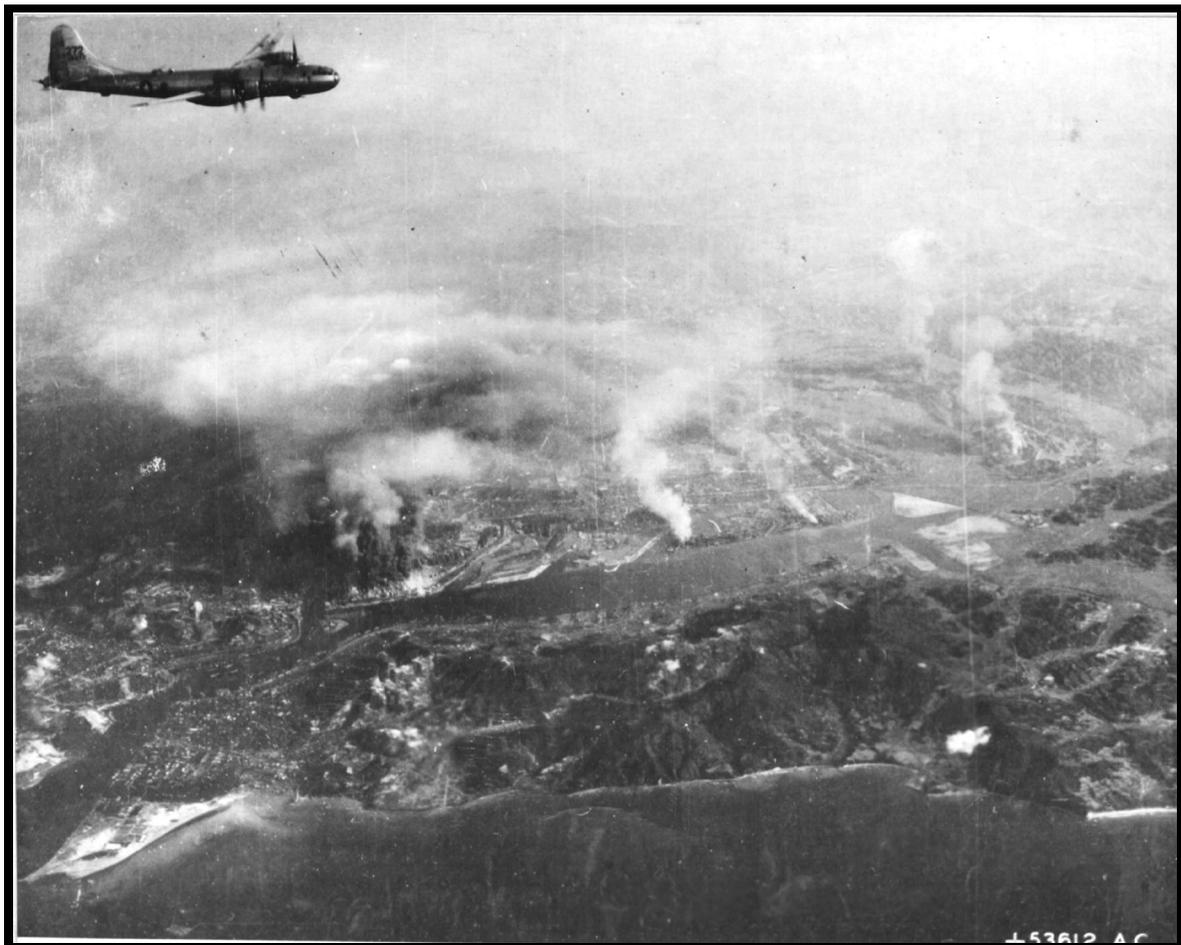
E

Colonel Jim, as always, trying to give credit where credit is due, comments “My Bombardier who sank the Jap vessel was decorated along with me for the mission. He was Albert Thom whom I got into the B-29 program along with my Navigator, Bill Adams.”

Bill wound up in another Group of the 58<sup>th</sup> Wing, but Al was Squadron Bombardier in the 793<sup>rd</sup> Squadron and flew on John East’s Crew. When I took over the Group, Major Al became Group Bombardier.

Then our good Colonel added another thought: “The Crew Chiefs really were part of the Crew. M/Sgt. Venski flew from Salina to India with us. Crew Chiefs always flew with us over the Hump with their aircraft and Crews to take care of the planes in China.”

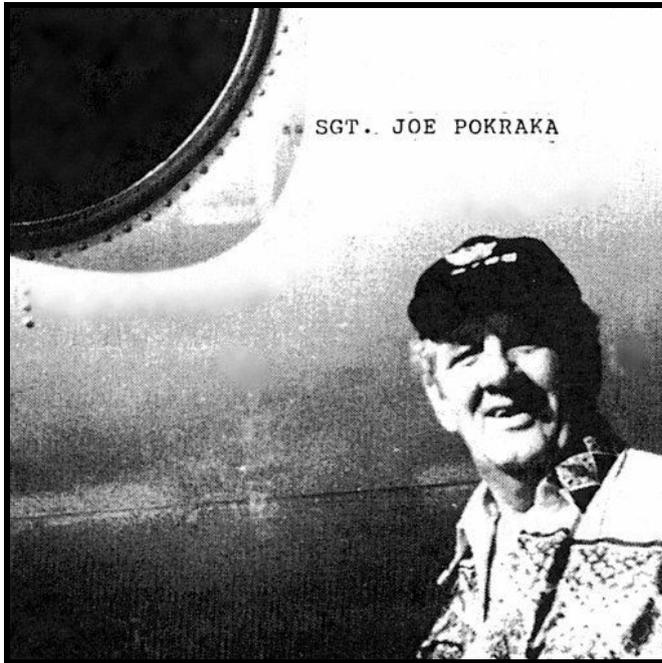
Speaking of Colonel Jim, there he is again flying A/C 272 over Yawata on August 20<sup>th</sup> 1944 with Doc Schonlau’s Crew and Doc acting as Co-pilot. He was up at Group Headquarters now and flying with each of the four Squadrons. John C. Sullivan, Flight Engineer, furnished this picture.



YAWATA STEEL MILLS, Japan, August 20<sup>th</sup> 1944. See Citation on page 66.  
A/C 272 – Old Campaigner (National Archives photo)



F



**HE SERVED US WELL.**

Let us remember him, WELL.

He died October 31, 1991.

He was with the 793<sup>rd</sup> Sqdn.

as a Left Gunner on the

**BENGAL LANCER, 1944-1945.**

Flown by Capt. Robert A. Berman

and later by Maj. James L. Pattillo.

After the war Joe Pokraka

had a dream: **WE MUST BRING**

**OUR GUYS TOGETHER AGAIN.**

**A LEFT GUNNER'S SPOT IN FIFI**

It turned into a burning desire as time went by. After living together, fighting the foe together, and rehashing each mission with one another, shouldn't we have some reunions to rehash all over again?

How would one go about it? He just started working at it in 1955, and in 1957 there was a first reunion of the 468<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in Chicago, Illinois. With the help of those at the reunion, the Group grew until we are having the reunions you witness each time you are present.

Joe had served his Country well during that Second World War. He was now serving us in the best way possible. We are together again once a year with very dear friends, with an attachment gained no other way than fighting our Country's enemies side by side.

He worked unselfishly, without ever a thought of monetary gain. His only thought: "One of my greatest pleasures in life is during the time I am working for my Old Buddies."

This HISTORY of the BILLY MITCHELL GROUP is dedicated to the memory of two men who our influenced our lives: LT. GEN JAMES V. EDMUNDSON, and JOSEPH E. POKRAKA.

**"COLONEL JIM LED US IN BATTLE  
JOE BROUGHT US TOGETHER AGAIN IN TIME OF PEACE"**



G

Col. Edmundson’s Distinguished Flying Cross citation:

James V. Edmundson, Major, United States Air Force.

On August 3, 1942 Major Edmundson, as the flight leader of a flight of three heavy bombardment airplanes, was ordered to bomb enemy installations in the Solomon Islands area. Nearing the target area, his flight was closely and aggressively attacked by seven float type zeros. The three zeros were destroyed on the initial attack of the Japanese and one of Major Edmundson's planes was lost, along with the Crew, when an enemy aircraft, out of control and on fire, crashed into it. Having disorganized the Japanese attack, Major Edmundson took advantage of their confusion and gave chase to one of the fighters, shooting it down. He then continued on his bombing run, despite attacks by the three remaining fighters, and succeeded in bombing his objective.

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS to MAJOR JAMES V. EDMUNDSON, UNITED STATES ARMY for service as set forth in the following CITATION: “For heroic and extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight as pilot of a B-17 Flying Fortress in action against enemy Japanese forces in the vicinity of Tulagi, Solomon Islands on August 19, 1942. Flying at perilously low altitude through a bursting hail of anti-aircraft fire, Major Edmundson, with cool courage and utter disregard for his own personal safety, scored a 500-pound-bomb hit just abaft the after turret of a Japanese cruiser, setting up a series of violent explosions aboard the vessel and leaving her in a rage of flames. His superb airmanship and loyal devotion to the accomplishment of a highly important objective contributed materially to the success of our forces in the campaign of the Solomon Islands” For the President, Secretary of the Navy.