

15TH AAF IN ITALY - Lt. Col. Leroy L. Stefonowicz, of Wildrese, N. Dak., a veteran of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal where he "broke in" to serial combat with 35 missions against the Japs, took command of the veteran 451st B-24 Liberator group Wednesday on his return from mission 51, his first flying as lead bomber over a German target.

It had been an attack on the Venzone Viaduct, Italy, one of his few milk runs in a flak-and-fighter-full combat career from June 1942 to August 1943, "where it was more dangerous on the ground than in the air."

Now a veteran of 16 missions over Europe, including trips to Munich, Blechhammer, and Belgrade, he will command a Liberator group that holds two Presidential Citations and which has flown more than 170 combat missions.

Colonel Stefonowicz landed on Guadalcanal with the second air group to take over Henderson Field.

"The Japs shelled us all day and bombed us all night," said the 27-year-old, soft-spoken colonel. "We slept in mud holes, often didn't eat for two days, and bathed in a river loaded with crocodiles and dead Japs."

He's seen the Jap Zero in action over Bougainville, the German ME-109 over Munich, the flak at Munich, Blechhammer, Germany, and the Pacific counterpart at Munda.

"We lost 12 bombers to German fighters one day near Blechhammer, and they're tougher than the Japanese," said Colonel Stefonowicz. They're better armed and they use their 20-mm cannon from far away. The Japs of '42, at least, would come in close where we could get them first."

The flak, he described as worse over New Georgia, though probably because of the lower altitude. He was in medium bombardment then.

Colonel Stefonowicz was credited with sinking a Japanese destroyer off Guadalcanal in a night, lone-wolf attack from an altitude of 200 feet. The crew of his bomber accounted for four Zero fighters over Bougainville.

That was the mission that Brig. Gen Laverne T. Saunders, now in command of China-based B-29s, was shot down.

Holder of the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with one bronze cluster, Colonel Stefonowicz returned to the States in August 1943. Within three months he was on his way to Italy after volunteering, "because things were too quiet back home."

His first mission with the 15th Air Force was over the Anzio bridgehead, as operations officer of a Liberator wing. He became deputy commander of his present group nine months later.

Colonel Stefonowicz's plans are to complete a tour from Italy, then return to re-settle an old score in the Pacific.

His relaxation, between combat missions, is piano playing, which he says, "is purely for my own amusement."

Colonel Stefonowicz entered the Air Corps on Oct. 15, 1937, a student from University of North Dakota. He received his wings at Kelly Field, Tex., on Oct. 8, 1938.

His wife, the former Eleanor Lephardt, lives at 9349 214th Pl., Queens Village, N.Y., and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. F. E. Stefonowicz, live in Wildrese.