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Air Ministry News Service

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"LOST ON ELBA"

Hiding in the mountains of Elba, the pilot and observer of an R.A.F. Beaufighter watched the Germans evacuating troops, tanks, and motor transport to the island from Bastia, in Corsica. The airmen are now back with their squadron, who had given them up for lost.

The men are P/O. Harry Deacon, of Chadwell Heath, Essex, the pilot and his observer F/O. Lee Heide of Vancouver. They were forced to ditch their aircraft after a combat in which they shot down a German Ju.52 troop-carrier. After four days in their dinghy, they landed on Elba, where they hid from German patrols, and with five Italians rowed and sailed the 45 miles to Corsica and safety.

"I was leading our formation of four Beaufighters", said Deacon, "when we sighted eight Ju.52s flying low along the coast of Elba. We attacked and had shot down one of the troop-carriers and damaged another, when we were hit in the port oil tank.

"With oil gushing out we turned away, but the engine packed up and I had to put down in the sea. We made a perfect ditching, our dinghy came out well, and we piled in just as the aircraft went under. All the aircraft, both our own and the German, had completely disappeared, but we could see Elba in the distance some 25 miles away. We rigged a sail out of the dinghy cover and tried to reach the island.

"We did eventually, but the journey took us four days. There were rations and water aboard so we did not starve, but it was a miserable journey, bitterly cold at night and rough. Still, we always had land in sight and felt confident we should get away. Once we were only half a mile off the island of Pianosa, but a strong wind blew up and we drifted again.

"Twice during the raid German planes circled us. They were so close we could see the wireless operators sending out messages, but the Hun made no effort to send a boat out for us.

"When we reached Elba we should not have got ashore but for the help of some Italians. Our dinghy was twice dashed against the rocks and swept out to sea, and without assistance we might have been pounded to pieces."

F/O Heide said that one island was swarming with Germans. "They knew we had landed," he said, "but we were very lucky, because we had struck the mountainous tip of Elba where there were few patrols.

"We hid for four days in various places in the mountains, including a deep cave. German patrols searched for us unsuccessfully."

While they were on the island, the airmen said they could plainly see the Germans carrying on their evacuation from Bastia to Elba. They counted barges, and estimated the number of men, tanks and motor trucks on board them. "After we had been on Elba two days", added F/O Heide, "we made friends with some Italians who wanted to get to Corsica to escape from the Germans, and had found a plan for the crossing. Altogether there were seven in the party,

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including two R.A.F. men. They had a small rowing-boat with a rough and ready sail made of sacking. The 45-mile trip took us fourteen and a half hours, and we arrived undetected on a barren stretch of coast miles from anywhere.

"For the next day or two we travelled, sometimes on foot and sometimes by donkey, making our way into central Corsica. Our clothes were falling off and we were suffering from hunger and exposure, but we were in the best of spirits. The first Frenchman we met took charge of us and obtained fresh clothes for us and sent us back.

"The Italians on Elba were 100 per cent pro-ally. Conditions there seemed pretty grim, there being only potatoes and grapes to eat, with wine to drink."

F/O Deacon worked as a heating and ventilating designer in London before he joined the Royal Air Force. Heide belongs to the Royal Canadian Air Force.

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