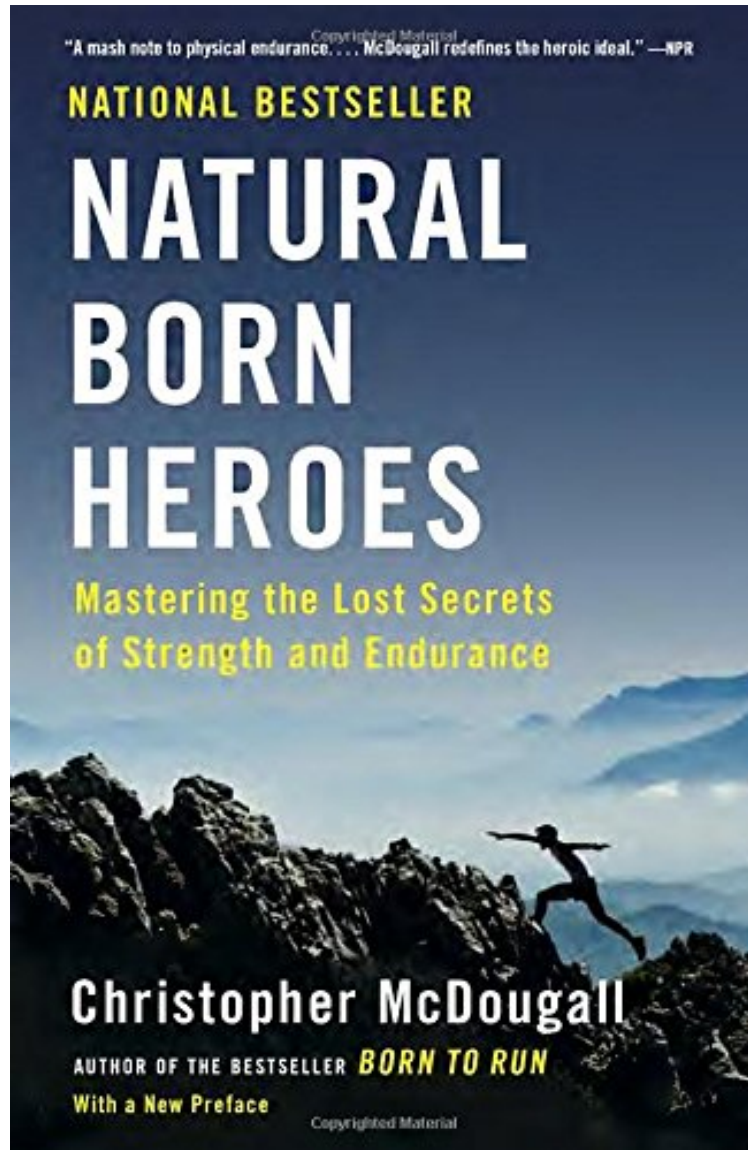


Natural Born Heroes: Mastering the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance

Christopher McDougall

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#19581 in Books McDougall Christopher 2016-04-05 2016-04-05 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.00 x .73 x 5.18l, .81 #File Name: 0307742229352 pages Natural Born Heroes Mastering the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance | File size: 23.Mb

Christopher McDougall : Natural Born Heroes: Mastering the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Natural Born Heroes: Mastering the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. He reset my concept of what 'hero' means and changed my perspective on general fitness disciplines like parkour (sp) By J. Gentry Chris has done it again. Weaving multiple stories into a cohesive tapestry is his forte. It took me a chapter or so to get into it, but after that I was hooked. As with BtR his research has led me into more reading and a deeper understanding. Thanks to his work I have gained a much greater appreciation of the human body and of my own fitness and health. He reset my concept of what 'hero' means and changed my perspective on general fitness disciplines like parkour (sp?) and cross fit. I'm finding his logic reflected in other research and am glad he is using his voice to educate and entertain.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. but as McDougall displayed in another favorite book of mine By Stephen N. Greenleaf What do the following have in common? · LeBron James · Brazil · Arthur Evans · Patrick Leigh Fermor · Tom Myers · Fairbairn Sykes · Shanghai · Pankration (Greek) · George Hebert · Norina Bentzel · Xan Fielding · The Minotaur · Wing Chun · Steve Maxwell · The Arizona desert · John Pendleberry · a glass eye · Fritz Schubert, a/k/a "the Turk" · Erwan Le Corre · Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller · Dr. Phil Maffetone · Dwight Howard · William Banting · Hitler · Churchill · Crete If you had a difficult time discerning connections, don't feel badly about it (although the last three items provide a strong indication of one topic). These topics—among dozens of other possible examples—are tied together in the two books written by Chris McDougall as one book: *Natural Born Heroes: How a Daring Band of Misfits Mastered the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance* (2015). In this book, McDougall examines the German invasion and subsequent resistance movement on Crete during WWII. British Special Operations Executive (SOE) agents aided the Cretans during the occupation. These tales provide the central core of the book. Around this central core—fascinating and cinematic in its own right—McDougall constructs a second book about human performance from ancient Minoan culture to contemporary Parkour. In lesser hands this could have resulted in a mess, but as McDougall displayed in another favorite book of mine, *Born to Run*, he can weave and integrate stories as a master. The end result is a delightfully fun and entertaining book.

The story of the invasion of Crete and the Cretan resistance probably isn't well known among Americans, but it includes some incredible tales. Certainly the most astonishing feat—anywhere—involved successfully kidnapping of a German general. The heist was conducted by British agents, led by Patrick Leigh Fermor, and Cretan resistance-fighters (and a largely sympathetic populace). Some may recognize Fermor as among the best English prose stylists of the 20th century. His books include an account of his walk across Europe starting in 1933 (as a teenager) as well as accounts of Greece, monastic life, and the Caribbean. But one topic that he did not write at length about (other than in official reports) was his part in successfully kidnapping the German general and getting the general off the island of Crete on to Egypt. (If you think that this begs for a movie, it spawned one long ago: "I'll Meet By Moonlight" (or "Night Ambush"), starring Dirk Bogarde as Fermor. Bogarde, by the way, was a dashing British film star of his era. Billy Moss, one of Fermor's accomplices in the exploit, wrote the book.) But McDougall wanted to write a book about human performance, also. And so in recounting this tale of adventure—with lots of James Bond-like suave from the Brits—he also dives into the issue of how these men, Cretans and Britons, could have mastered such as harsh terrain while alluding capture by the forces of "The Butcher", the other German general on the island. This tale of extraordinary human performance allows McDougall to tell about Brits learning to survive in the harsh Shanghai underworld of the early 20th century; about how the Frenchman George Hebert developed and trained people to survive and thrive using nature as a training ground; about how Erwan Le Corre resurrected Hebert's genius and brought it into the 21st century; about how Tom Myers revealed that the fascia (connective tissue) provides the architecture and elastic energy that powers the human body; and about how Parkour demonstrates practical application of Myers's insights about the elastic energy of the fascia. McDougall also hunted down the reclusive Phil Maffetone to learn about how he revolutionized diet and training techniques for distance runners like Stu Mittleman along lines that Paleo/Primal adherents will recognize as kindred thinking. And McDougall relates how distance running guru Dr. Timothy Noakes, the high priest of high-carb for distance runners, underwent a conversion of Pauline-like intensity to embrace a low-carb, high-fat "Banting" diet. ("I was quite wrong. Sorry, everyone.")

I could go on at great length about this book because it contains so many different angles, so many intriguing side-stories. But I will stop here to and sum it all up by saying that I found the book great fun. It provided well-told stories about fascinating stuff (WWII history and human performance are among my favorite topics), but even if you don't share my predilections; I believe that most readers would enjoy this book. Side note: Because I didn't read *Born to Run* but listened to it twice, I decide to listen to *Natural Born Heroes*. Alas, the listening experience was not as good. Mostly because the reader attempted—rather poorly—too many accents: British, Greek, American, French, and so on. He mastered none. Perhaps you'd have to get Meryl Streep or resurrect Olivier to do it right. In addition, because there was so much information, so much learning, I bought the book for my Kindle for my second and later readings.

114 of 125 people found the following review helpful. The amazing story of Patrick Leigh Fermor, Nazi resistance in occupied Crete, and idiosyncratic reflections on sport science By Jojobe Natural Born Heroes, by Christopher McDougall, is a book with a dual purpose. First and foremost, McDougall retells the improbable, World War II tale of Patrick 'Paddy' Leigh Fermor and his rag-tag band of irregulars, who masterfully and audaciously abducted General Heinrich Kriepe from a heavily guarded section of Axis occupied Crete and took the general on a 19-day trek across the island. Fromer and the team had to hide Kriep in plan site, dodge Nazi patrols, and survive harsh terrain in order to bring Kriepe to a British

boat that would take the captured general to Allied occupied Egypt. McDougall uses Leigh Fermor's cloak-and-dagger tale as a frame story to highlight his personal research on 'the lost secrets of strength and endurance.' The book is a page turner and is quite successful in recounting Leigh Fermor's story, but is somewhat more idiosyncratic--yet still amazingly interesting and readable--when discussing the secrets of strength and endurance of its subtitle. In any book that shifts back from one story line to another, there is always the danger that an author might lose the reader. This is especially true when the second topic is more esoteric and technical in nature, as it is here. Nevertheless, McDougall kept me hooked from start to finish. The Leigh Fermor story is one of those true-life stories that is so outrageous that it reads like fiction. McDougall's enthusiasm for the secrets of strength and endurance is so infectious that I was swept away by that part too. Two other aspects of the writing also help: 1) McDougall is able to hit on both story lines when he relates his own trip to Crete where he retraces Leigh Fermor's journey under the guidance of amateur historian Chris White; and 2) McDougall avoids being overly technical when discussing training methods, focusing as much on the personal histories and personalities of the sport experts that he interviews as he does on the science. McDougall excels in telling the story of Paddy Leigh Fermor and his merry band of outlaws. We get gripping drama combined with fascinating profiles of the major figures both British and Greek. The characters of this story are truly larger than life and the mettle of the people of Crete in the face of Nazi occupation is truly astounding. The story is a winner and McDougall's retelling of it is artful, gripping, and incredibly readable. That said, this is not exactly a how-to book for the budding martial artist or endurance athlete. Nor is it a truly objective guide to the science of sport. McDougall takes a distinctly Gladwellian approach to sport science: he amasses a great deal of information, comes to his own conclusions, and then only selects anecdotes and data that support his conclusions. The conclusions are then presented as facts. No matter how plausible or attractive, this sometimes leads to some real zingers. Here are a few examples: 1) Modern martial arts and boxing are mere sport; Pankration is the best: McDougall decries modern martial arts and boxing as mere sport rather than actual combat and backs this up with historical anecdotes. He then goes on to discuss Wing Chun--to which he attributes Bruce Lee's success as a martial artist--as the ideal martial art, only to burst the Wing Chun bubble, declaring--via a speculative but plausible theory--that Wing Chun is actually a descendent of the superior, Greek martial art Pankration. This leads one to ask why Bruce Lee went on to develop his own hybrid martial art, Jeet Kune Do, rather than become a Pankration devotee. So, what exactly IS the most deadly martial art for street fighting? It's absolutely Muay Thai. Unless, of course you are on the Krav Maga website. Or are an expert in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Or a Systema devotee. Or into Keysi. Or whatever... My guess is that even run-of-the-mill, mixed-martial-art, mall-style Karate will give you the leg up in a scuffle if your attacker isn't all that savvy. But even if your attacker has some street fighting experience, some preparation is still better than no preparation at all. How well you do, though, may depend more on how ready/skilled you are in comparison to your opponent rather than your actual style of combat. Declarations of which is the best-ever martial art style for street fighting is a testosterone laden shouting match that I really don't want to contribute to. 2) Size/Muscle mass doesn't matter: Do size and muscle mass matter in a fight? You bet they do. Longer reach in any fight is a major advantage. Can you make up for reach with skill? Sure, but unless you really outclass your opponent in the skill department, reach counts big time. Strength/muscle mass also help. Not the kind of muscle mass that is so grotesquely huge that it limits practical muscle movement, but real, usable strength. You can't escape Newton's second law of motion which clearly states that mass x acceleration = force. The more mass you have and the faster you can accelerate it (so long as you can do this accurately), the more force you will have. And deadly force = damage. It goes without saying that the fighter that absorbs the greater amount of damage generally loses the fight... Sure, at 5'6" and 145 lb, Jet Li could easily kick my butt. But if Jet Li fought a 6'5 and 198 lb, similarly-proportioned version of himself, he would come up a little short. (Sorry, couldn't help it.) 3) Fascia is more powerful than muscle: McDougall states that fascia is a greater source of power than muscle, which reads really well but doesn't make any sense the way McDougall describes it. Comparing fascia to muscle this way is a non-sequitur. It's kind of like saying that the reinforced concrete that holds up a building can withstand more force than the elevator in that same building can lift. The statement is true, but I still can't use the foundation to get to the 11th floor. Fascia could easily transmit and possibly concentrate muscular strength but it isn't the source of that strength. Fascia can also resist pulling. That said, the power source of Bruce Lee's one-inch punch likely came from the muscles in his hips down to his toes. Fascia may be a part of the transmission of the power, but was not the source of the power. And don't forget, there are other body structures (e.g. bones and muscles etc.) that also contribute to the transmission of the power. Mythbusters did a great episode on this, showing that a conventional punch delivered 325 pounds of force whereas a one-inch punch delivered only 153 pounds of force. This shows that the one-inch punch is awesome, still, but in terms of raw power, you get more than twice as much bang for the buck using a conventional punch. It also makes sense when you look at YouTube footage of Lee delivering a one-inch punch and then a six-inch punch to a person sitting in a chair. The one-inch punch seems impossibly powerful, but six-inch punch still delivers more force, pushing Lee's 'victim' who is sitting in a chair back much farther. I think it's also plausible that fascia may contribute to the 'bounce' that is exhibited in Parkour, but there is a major component of bounce from other body structures (muscle, bones, joints, etc) that also needs to be taken into account. (For those who are interested, there's a nice rundown on the science behind the one-inch punch on the Popular Mechanics website written in May 2014. Quick

heads up: nothing about fascia; lots about complex muscle coordination and concentration...4) Slow heart training/aerobic metabolism is superior to fast heart training/anaerobic metabolism:McDougall does a similar treatment of slow-heart-rate training. Granted, in endurance training this is almost certainly the way to go and McDougall's writing keeps this fascinating. And slow-heart training should probably be a component of training for most athletes. But sprinters, for example, not only need to run at their max, they end up maxing their heart rate as well. The idea that aerobic metabolism is good but anaerobic metabolism is bad is oversimplified. Then McDougall plays the ancient-ancestor card... Sure, if Glunga wants to chase down a heard of antelope to bag one for dinner, he needs endurance. But when running away from a fast predator, ancient man did not strap on his heart rate monitor to make sure that his heart rate stayed below 180-age, he needed to go all out or die.5) Modern health recommendations are the cause of increased obesity and heart disease/the paleo diet is #1:And then there's the paleo diet. I agree with McDougall's expert Tim Noakes that 'paleo' is a misnomer. Scientists like Aina Sistiaga, Marlene Zuk, and Christina Warinner have actually looked at what ancient man might have eaten, by studying things like fossilized dental plaques and feces, and have found evidence of grain and legume consumption in Paleolithic humans and Neanderthals (that is, before the invention of agriculture). Of course, we don't know the exact proportions of the diet, but it clearly varied with location and our ancient ancestors were distinctly omnivorous. Warinner has an interesting TED talk on this, actually.The idea that modern public health recommendations have contributed to increased obesity and atherosclerosis is possible. But given that very few people actually adhere to any specific diet--let alone the one prescribed by their doctor or the government--makes this less plausible. I don't know that K-rations, blanket recommendations, and cardiologists urging us to eliminate saturated fats are as much to blame as is the industrialization of our food supply, supersizing, and the post-WWII, sheer availability of cheap, poor food choices.Sugar in small quantities may not be so evil and the jury is still out as to whether high fructose corn syrup is really worse than conventional refined sugar, but the fact that the average US citizen consumes 150-170 pounds of sugar per year (about 1/2 pound of the stuff per day and that's only the average) is likely more of a problem than the type of sugar consumed. In a similar vein, I'm less concerned about the kind of fat in a food product than the sheer amount of fat consumed period in otherwise nutritionally bereft, mass-produced products. For the record, government recommendations--imperfect as they may be--still frown on eating mass quantities of Twinkies and sugared sodas. But that doesn't mean that we actually listen.None of this, of course, means that the paleo diet is wrong or unsuccessful. I happen to use a variation of it and it's worked well for me. But that doesn't mean that all of us will be successful with the paleo diet or that other diets are inherently inferior.CONCLUSION:But man, can this guy write. He kept me interested and glued to the book from start to finish and the book was a blast to read. Take the science with an ounce of skepticism, but enjoy the book for the ripping tale that it is. Recommended.

Christopher McDougall's journey begins with a story of remarkable athletic prowess: On the treacherous mountains of Crete, a motley band of World War II Resistance fighters—an artist, a shepherd, and a poet—abducted a German commander from the heart of the Axis occupation. To understand how, McDougall retraces their steps across the island that birthed Herakles and Odysseus, and discovers ancient techniques for endurance, sustenance, and natural movement that have been preserved in unique communities around the world. His search takes us scrambling over rooftops with a Parkour crew in London, foraging for greens with a ballerina in Brooklyn, tossing heavy pieces of driftwood on a Brazilian beach with the creator of MovNat—and, finally, to our own backyards. *Natural Born Heroes* will inspire readers to unleash the extraordinary potential of the human body and climb, swim, skip, throw, and jump their way to heroic feats.

“A mash note to physical endurance. . . . McDougall redefines the heroic ideal, establishing heroism as a skill set rather than a virtue. . . . [And] schools the reader in the art of the champion. . . . The essential narrative here, the twisty tale of a kidnapping that incredibly goes right, is exciting. It is balanced out with the journalistic account of McDougall's entry into the world of the hero. His personal quest to 'rewild the psyche' might seem an awkward fit with war storytelling. But under McDougall's sure hand the combination improbably works. Kind of like kidnapping a German general on an island swarming with Nazi troops.” —NPR Books“*Natural Born Heroes* provides a blueprint of the essential ideas of how to move, what to eat, and the spirit in which to approach our everyday lives. I connected with this book on a primal, emotional, and intellectual level, and have been profoundly inspired by McDougall's work.” —Laird Hamilton“Fascinating. . . . Show[s] that heroism not only can be taught—it can be mastered.” —New York Post“A fast-paced, enlightening tale of everyday heroes. . . . A victory lap for McDougall.” —Deseret News (Salt Lake City)“McDougall traveled to Crete to examine the physical and mental capacity of Greek war heroes [and] studied natural movement, endurance, and nutrition to understand how regular people are capable of extraordinary athletic feats. . . . We can all adapt the tools of the athletes featured in McDougall's new book.” —Real Simple“McDougall sets his rediscovery of fitness concepts against the backdrop of a great tale of espionage, kidnapping, and harrowing escapes. . . . The fascinating story provides anecdotal proof for the theories and, perhaps, the encouragement you need to try them in your life.” —Women's Running “A heady confection that encompasses,

among other subjects, military history, archaeology, Greek mythology, neat ways to kill a man and ideas on health and fitness that might just change your life. . . . [McDougall] constructs a fascinating edifice of ideas . . . and eventually finds a modern-day hero of his own. But the pleasures of the book are as much to do with the fascinating panoply of characters, war heroes all, British, Commonwealth and Cretan, whose exploits contributed so much to Hitler's downfall." —The Independent (London) "In the thoroughly absorbing *Natural Born Heroes*, which tracks heroism from the times of Zeus and Odysseus to the World War II bravery of a motley crew of fighters, Christopher McDougall makes it clear that . . . heroes, both ancient and modern, are not somehow supernaturally endowed after all. Indeed, they may come by their skills quite naturally. . . . His extensive knowledge of fitness training, nutrition and physiology winds artfully around a tale of superhuman resistance during the Nazi occupation of the Greek island of Crete. . . . [McDougall] solves this mystery with a witty eye for every detail, inspiring his own captive audience along the way." —BookPage "Compelling . . . engaging . . . provocative . . . with inquiries into the nature of heroism. . . . True heroism, as the ancients understood, isn't about strength or boldness or even courage. It's about compassion." —Kirkus "Riveting. . . . A well-done recounting of a truly heroic episode of WWII. . . . In absorbing detail, McDougall describes how . . . 'ordinary' men who were far from stereotypically tough, battle-hardened warriors . . . trekked across tortuous mountain terrain while avoiding a massive German dragnet." —Booklist

About the Author Christopher McDougall is the author of *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. He began his career as an overseas correspondent for the Associated Press, covering wars in Rwanda and Angola. He now lives and writes (and runs, swims, climbs, and bear-crawls) among the Amish farms around his home in rural Pennsylvania. Christopher McDougall is available for select speaking engagements. To inquire about a possible appearance, please contact Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau at speakers@penguinrandomhouse.com or visit www.prhspeakers.com www.chrismcdougall.com

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. You've got to put yourself in the Butcher's shoes. You're General Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller, one of two German commanders on the Greek island of Crete. Hitler is worried that something terrible is about to happen right under your nose, something that could severely damage the German offensive, but you've got it all under control. The island is small and your manpower is huge. You've got 100,000 seasoned troops, with search planes prowling the mountains and patrol boats monitoring the beaches. You've got the Gestapo at your service, and you're scary enough to be called the Butcher. No one is going to mess with you. And then you wake up on the morning of April 24, 1944, to discover the other you is gone. Your fellow commander, General Heinrich Kreipe, has disappeared. There's no hint of foul play: no shots fired, no bloodshed, no signs of a scuffle. Stranger yet, the general vanished from somewhere around the capital, the most heavily guarded corner of the island. Whatever happened, it happened right in front of the general's own men. Kreipe was no toy soldier, either; he was a serious hard case, a Great War survivor with an Iron Cross who'd battled his way up through the ranks and just transferred in from the Russian front. He had a personal security force and an armed driver and a villa surrounded by attack dogs, razor wire, and machine-gun posts. So where was he? All the Butcher knew was this: shortly after 9 p.m., General Kreipe left his command base and drove into the center of town. It was Saturday, so foot traffic was thicker than usual. Troops from outlying garrisons had been bused in for a movie, and the streets were jammed with strolling soldiers. The movie had just let out; the Butcher knew this because hundreds of soldiers had seen the black sedan with the general's flags on the bumper inching its way through the streets. General Kreipe's driver had to honk them out of the way, even rolling down his window at one point to holler, "GENERAL'S WAGEN!" Kreipe was right there in the front passenger seat, nodding his head and returning salutes. Every road in every direction at every half-mile was guarded by checkpoints. The general's car passed Gestapo headquarters and funneled through the last checkpoint, the narrow opening at the Canae Gate. "Gute Nacht," the general's driver called. The sedan slid beneath the crossbar and exited the city. Early the next morning, the general's car was discovered on a scruff of beach just outside the city. The general and his driver were gone, as were the eagle flags from the front bumper. Around the car was a weird scattering of rubbish: an Agatha Christie novel, Cadbury milk chocolate wrappers, a bunch of English "Players" cigarette butts, and a green British commando beret. On the dashboard was a letter. It was addressed to "The German authorities on Crete" and said that Kreipe had been captured by a British raiding force and taken off the island. The letter was ceremonially sealed with red wax and signet rings, and included a jaunty postscript: We are very sorry to have to leave this beautiful motor car behind. Something didn't add up. The general must have been grabbed after he left the city, but his car was found only a twenty-minute drive away. So within that brief window, these mystery men had executed an ambush, disarmed and subdued two prisoners, smoked a pack of cigarettes, shared some snacks, lost a hat, melted wax, and what else—browsed a paperback? Was this an abduction or a family vacation? Plus that stretch of coast was floodlit by klieg lights and patrolled by planes. Why would seasoned commandos choose the most exposed part of the island as their extraction point? From that beach, their escape boat would have had to head north into hundreds of miles of German-occupied waters, making them sitting ducks as soon as the sun came up. Whoever did this was trying very hard to look very British, very cool and under control. But the Butcher wasn't buying it. He was in the midst of his second World War and to his knowledge, no general had ever been kidnapped before. There was no precedent for

this sort of thing, no tactics, so they had to be making it up as they went along. Which meant that sooner or later, they'd make a blunder and fall right into his hands. Already, they'd made a big mistake: they'd badly underestimated their opponent. Because the Butcher had seen through their feints and realized two things: They were still on his island, and they were running for their lives.

On a spring morning in 2012, I stood where the general's car was found, wondering the same thing as the Butcher: where could they possibly go? At my back is the Aegean Sea. In front, there's nothing but a snarl of chest-high brambles leading to a sheer cliff. In the far distance and cutting the island in half like a giant border fence is the craggy range of snowy Mount Ida, the highest climb in Greece. The only possible escape is the southern coast, but the only way to get there is up and over that eight-thousand-foot peak. The trek alone would be a challenge, but pulling it off with a belligerent prisoner in tow and a massive manhunt hot on your heels? Impossible.

"Ah!" There's a shout from somewhere inside the brambles, then a hand jerks up like it's hailing a cab. "Come toward me." Chris White remains rooted in place, his arm high so I can find him and his eyes pinned on whatever he's spotted. I heave my backpack over my shoulders and begin fighting my way toward him, thorns tearing at my clothes. No one alive knows more about what happened to General Kreipe than Chris White, which is odd, because there's no reason Chris White should know anything about what happened to General Kreipe. Chris isn't a scholar or a military historian. He doesn't speak Greek or German, and as a lifelong pacifist he has no real taste for war stories. By day, Chris is a social worker who manages care for the elderly and the mentally disabled in the quiet English city of Oxford. But at night and on weekends, he's buried in a stack of topographical maps and out-of-print books in a little wooden shack behind his country cottage. In the great tradition of British amateur obsessives, Chris has spent the past ten years piecing together the mystery the Butcher faced on the morning of April 24, 1944: how do you make a German general disappear on an island swarming with German troops?

It was a magical idea. That's what Chris White loved about it. The scheme was so perfectly, defiantly un-Nazi: instead of force and brutality, the plan was to trip Hitler up with ingenuity and finesse. There would be no bullets, no blood, no civilians in the middle. Killing the general would have made him just another casualty of war, but not killing him would flip the tables and inflict a touch of fear in the men who were terrorizing Europe. The sheer mystery would make the Nazis crazy and plant an itch of doubt in every soldier's mind: if these phantoms could get the most protected man on a fortified island, then who was safe?

But getting him was only the beginning. The Butcher would throw everything he had into the manhunt, and what he had was a lot. He'd have troops swarming the woods, attack dogs searching for scent, recon planes buzzing the mountains and clicking photos of goat trails for ground scouts to later follow on foot. The Gestapo would offer bribes and rewards and activate its network of local traitors. The Butcher had more than one soldier for every four civilians, giving him a tighter security ratio than you'd find in a maximum-security prison. And that's what Crete had become: a prison fenced in by the sea. Crete had never been an ordinary island in the first place, at least not in Hitler's eyes. The Führer counted on Crete as a crucial transit point for German troops and supplies heading to the Russian front, and he intended to keep it safe as a bank vault. The slightest hint of any Cretan resistance, Hitler had ordered, should be crushed with eine gewisse Brutalität—"a good bit of brutality."

Chris White parted the brambles and pointed. In the dirt, a thin scuff led to a low tunnel through the brush. It wasn't much of a scuff, but it was the best we'd seen all morning. "They went this way," Chris said. "Let's go."

Chris took point. Brambles twined across the trail like netting and the footing was a loose jumble of scrabbly stone. The scuff kept twisting places it shouldn't—veering back on itself, disappearing into overgrown gullies—but Chris was unstoppable. Whenever the trail seemed to die for good, Chris would disappear in the mess until eventually, his hand shot back up: "AH!"

No, my gut kept telling me. This is all wrong. Why would anyone blaze a trail that runs smack into a boulder? Or in and out of a gully instead of alongside it? I had to remind myself we were steering by goat logic; on Crete, goats break the trail and goatherds follow, adapting themselves to the animals' feel for the landscape. And once I stopped doubting the goat logic, I noticed the slickness of the stones and remembered something else: water only travels in one direction. No matter how weirdly these washouts twisted us around, we had to be gaining altitude. Imperceptibly, we were wormholing our way up the cliff.

"Doesn't it take your breath away?" said Chris. "Before we came, it's possible no one had walked through here since the German occupation. It's like going into an ancient tomb." Soon Chris and I were beetling along at a steady clip. Well, Chris beetled and I followed. He broke the trail and ranged ahead while I was focused on just keeping pace. I'm ten years younger than Chris and I thought in much better shape, so it was humbling to face the fact that this sixty-year-old social-services administrator who never works out and looks like he's best suited for a comfy chair and a Sunday paper could shame me with his endurance and uphill agility. "It must come naturally," Chris shrugged.

Did it? That's what I was on Crete to find out. The ancients called Crete "the Sliver," and when your plane is coming in for a landing with no hint of land below, you'll know why. Right when you think you're about to plunge into the sea, the pilot banks and the island bursts into view, frothy around the edges as if it just popped up from the deep. Looming in the harbor behind the airport is a gloomy stone fortress, a sixteenth-century Venetian relic that only adds to the sensation that you're punching through a portal in time and about to enter a world summoned back from the past.

Crete has another nickname—"the Island of Heroes"—which I'd only discovered by accident. I was researching Pheidippides, the ancient Greek messenger who inspired the

modern marathon, when I came across an odd reference to a modern-day Pheidippides named George Psychoundakis, better known as “the Clown.” The Clown was awe-inspiring. When Hitler’s forces invaded Crete, he transformed himself overnight from a sheep farmer into a mountain-running messenger for the Resistance. Somehow, George was able to master challenges that would stagger an Olympic athlete: he could scramble snowy cliffs with a sixty-pound pack on his back, run fifty-plus miles through the night on a starvation diet of boiled hay, and outfox a Gestapo death squad that had him cornered. George wasn’t even a trained soldier; he was a shepherd living a sleepy, peaceful life until the day German parachutes popped open over his home.

Until then, I’d thought the secrets of ancient heroes like Pheidippides were either half myth or lost to antiquity, but here was a normal man pulling off the same feats 2,500 years later. And he wasn’t alone: George himself told the story of a fellow shepherd who singlehandedly saved a villageful of women and children from a German massacre. The Germans had come to search for weapons and became suspicious when they realized all the men were missing and none of the women were talking. The German commander had the women lined up for execution. Just as he was about to say “Fire!” his skull exploded. A shepherd named Costi Paterakis had raced to the rescue through the woods, arriving just in time to take aim from a quarter-mile away. The rest of the Germans scattered for cover—and fell right into the crosshairs of Resistance fighters who arrived on Costi’s heels.

“It still seems to me one of the most spectacular moments of the war,” said a British Resistance operative whose own life was saved by the silence of those brave women. The story is so stirring, it’s easy to forget what it really required. Costi had to ignore self-preservation and propel his body toward danger; he had to cover miles of cross-country terrain at top speed without a stumble; he had to quickly master rage, panic, and exhaustion as he slowed his pounding heart to steady his gun. It wasn’t just an act of courage—it was a triumph of natural heroism and physical self-mastery.

The more I looked into Crete during the Resistance, the more stories like that I found. Was there really an American high school student fighting alongside the rebels behind German lines? Who was the starving prisoner who escaped a POW camp and turned himself into a master of retaliation known as the Lion? And most of all: what really happened when a band of misfits tried to sneak the German commander off the island? Even the Nazis realized that when they landed on Crete, they’d entered an entirely different kind of fight. On the day he was sentenced to death for war crimes, Hitler’s chief of staff didn’t blame the Nuremberg judges for his fate. He didn’t blame his troops for losing, or even the Führer for letting him down. He blamed the Island of Heroes.

So what exactly were the Cretans tapping into? There was a time when that question wouldn’t be a mystery. For much of human history, the art of the hero wasn’t left up to chance; it was a multidisciplinary endeavor devoted to optimal nutrition, physical self-mastery, and mental conditioning. The hero’s skills were studied, practiced, and perfected, then passed along from parent to child and teacher to student. The art of the hero wasn’t about being brave; it was about being so competent that bravery wasn’t an issue. You weren’t supposed to go down for a good cause; the goal was to figure out a way not to go down at all. Achilles and Odysseus and the rest of the classical heroes hated the thought of dying and scratched for every second of life. A hero’s one crack at immortality was to be remembered as a champion, and champions don’t die dumb. It all hinged on the ability to unleash the tremendous resources of strength, endurance, and agility that many people don’t realize they already have.

That’s why the Greeks didn’t wait for heroes to appear; they built their own instead. They perfected a hero’s diet, which curbs hunger, boosts power, and converts body fat into performance fuel. They developed techniques for controlling fear and adrenaline surges, and they learned to tap into the remarkable hidden strength of the body’s elastic tissue, which is far more powerful and effective than muscle. More than two thousand years ago, they got serious about the business of releasing the hero inside us all. And then they were gone.

Except on one small island, where a certain ancient art endured.