The Lost Secrets of
Strength and Endurance

Christopher McDougall

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CHAPTER 1

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 Sat-

urday, 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, "*GENERALS 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 "Player's" 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 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.

CHAPTER 2

Those brave in killing will be killed.
Those brave in not killing will live.

—LAO-TZU

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 combing 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."

And to make it clear what he meant by *brutalität*, Hitler put the island in the hands of his dream warrior: General Müller, a seventeen-

year veteran with a Knight's Cross for extreme bravery whose ruthlessness soon earned him the nickname "the Butcher of Crete." The Butcher's chief henchman was a Gestapo sergeant named Fritz Schubert, a Middle East–born German better known as "the Turk." With his walnut skin and fluency in Greek and English, the Turk was able to disguise himself as a shepherd and sniff out information by hanging around cafés and village squares. His favorite trick was putting on a British uniform, then pulling a Cretan with a death sentence from the dungeon and offering him freedom if he introduced the Turk around his village as a British commando who'd come to help the Resistance. "They were very skillful, well used to deceiving guileless people," one Cretan survivor would recall.

But maybe the Butcher was the sucker this time. Maybe the kidnappers deliberately overdid it with the rubbish around the general's car because they wanted to toy with the Butcher and make him wonder if the general was still on the island. Then he'd fan out his troops all across those mountains . . . only to wheel around and discover Allied troops were storming the beaches. If so, then bravo—the Butcher had to applaud their cunning.

Crete, that remote little island, was secretly one of Hitler's constant anxieties. "A fear that Greece and Crete would be invaded arose in January 1943," explained Antony Beevor, the British military historian whose father served with wartime intelligence. "The innermost German terror was of a Cretan uprising in the rear." Hitler's forces were already stretched dangerously thin, occupying more than a dozen countries while locked in vicious fighting across Russia and North Africa. A stab in the back in Crete could be a disaster. Either way, the Butcher had to wrap this mess up fast. The longer the general was missing, the more the Butcher looked weak and vulnerable—both to his enemies and to his own men.

So by noon of that first morning, the Butcher came up with a plan to trap the rats. His planes were soon in the air and snowing down leaflets over Heraklion, the coastal city that would become Crete's capital:

> IF THE GENERAL IS NOT RETURNED WITHIN THREE DAYS,
> ALL VILLAGES IN THE HERAKLION DISTRICT WILL BE BURNED
> TO THE GROUND. THE SEVEREST MEASURES OF REPRISAL
> WILL BE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON THE CIVILIAN POPULATION.

• 9 •

The clock was ticking. The Butcher had plenty of brave soldiers; what he needed was frightened civilians. *Let's see how far those bandits get once everyone on the island turns against them.*

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."

CHAPTER 3

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 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.

"The unbelievably strong resistance of the Greeks delayed by two or more vital months the German attack against Russia," General Wilhelm Keitel lamented shortly before he was led out to be hanged. "If we did not have this long delay, the outcome of the war would have been different . . . and others would be sitting here today."

And nowhere in Greece was the Resistance more ingenious, immediate, and enduring than on Crete. So what exactly were they 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