PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR

ABDUCTING A GENERAL

The Kreipe Operation and SOE in Crete

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Maps drawn by Rodney Paull

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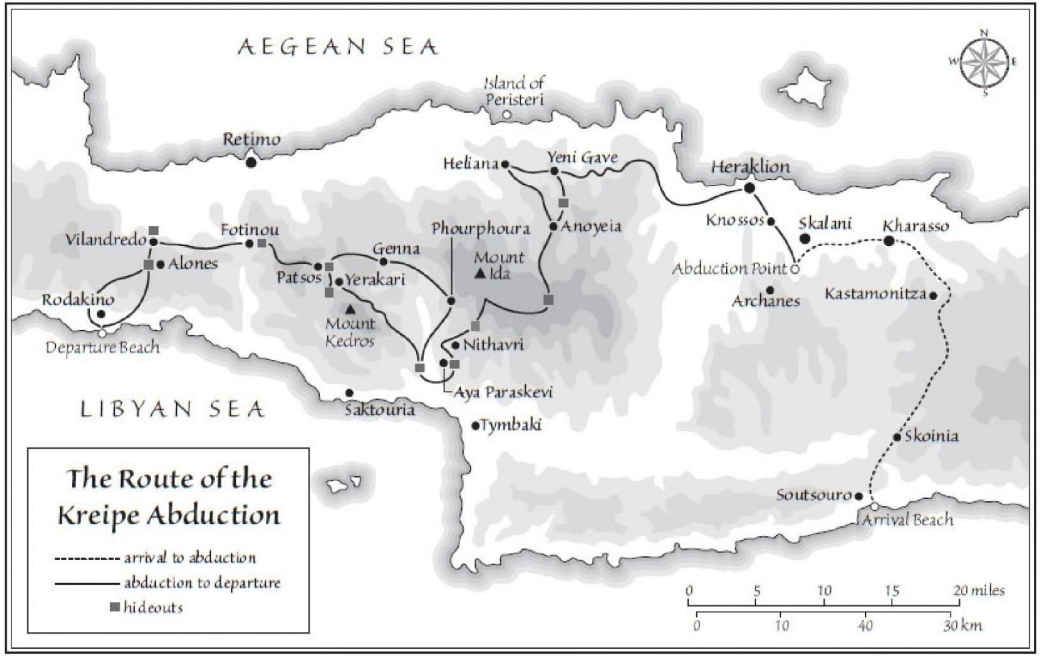

Foreword

Knossos, the largest archaeological site on the Mediterranean island of Crete, was the mythical home of King Minos. It was also home, it is said, to the Labyrinth, the maze-like structure that held the Minotaur. Half man, half bull, this creature, which had been devouring a regular tribute of Athenian youths, was finally killed by the Greek hero Theseus with the aid of Ariadne, Minos' daughter: to help his escape, Ariadne gave Theseus a life-saving thread to play out during his descent and lead him to safety when the deed was done. Today, a stone's throw from Knossos sits a pale-bricked property built in the early 1900s by Sir Arthur Evans, a British archaeologist who had pioneered excavations nearby. Quiet, airy, shadowed by trees and shrubs, the house had been Evans's home. It is still called the Villa Ariadne.

In the spring of 1944, at the height of the Second World War, with Evans long gone and Crete under German occupation, the Villa Ariadne was the requisitioned residence of the commander of the garrison's principal division. The forty-eight-year-old son of a pastor, Generalmajor Heinrich Kreipe was a career soldier who had served in the German Army since 1914. During the First World War he had fought on the Western Front as well as against the Russians, been wounded and won two Iron Crosses. Between the wars he had risen in rank to lieutenant colonel. In 1940 he had fought in France as commander of the 209th Infantry Regiment. The following year he had led his men to the outskirts of Leningrad and won the Knight's Cross, the highest decoration in Nazi Germany for battlefield bravery and leadership. Promotion to general and command of his first infantry division – the 79th – had come in 1943.

Kreipe had been posted to Crete, to command the Wehrmacht's 22nd Airlanding Infantry Division, in early 1944. He

had been on the island a matter of weeks when, late one April evening, he left his headquarters in the hillside village of Archanes and, sitting in his chauffeured staff car, began the short, unescorted drive back to Knossos and the Villa Ariadne. A few minutes into the journey, at a lonely junction on the road ahead, red lamps loomed suddenly out of the dark. Kreipe's car was waved to a halt. Lit by the headlights, two figures in German uniform approached …

What happened next – and the relentless drama of subsequent days – was later immortalised on screen in *Ill Met By Moonlight*, a 1957 war film produced by Emeric Pressburger and Michael Powell. The film was based on a book of the same name by William Stanley Moss.[1] In 1944, 'Billy' Moss – as friends knew him – had been one of a pair of British army officers working clandestinely in Crete who, with a small party of Cretan guerrillas, carried out Kreipe's abduction. *Time* magazine, reviewing Moss's fast-paced account of the action, called it one of the most 'audacious' of the war.[2]

Moss, twenty-two years old in 1944, had been the junior of the two British officers. A captain in the Coldstream Guards, he had been put ashore on Crete less than a fortnight before. Though hardened by front-line fighting in North Africa, he had never, until that moment, set foot on enemy territory. He knew little of Crete or Cretans. He spoke no Greek. But the skills and experience of Moss's friend and colleague – whose role in the film would be taken by the actor Dirk Bogarde – were quite different.

This officer, a major in the Intelligence Corps, twenty-nine at the time of the kidnapping, had spent the best part of eighteen months on the island, hiding with the locals, speaking their language, disguising himself as Cretan townsman or shepherd, dedicating himself to intelligence-gathering, sabotage and the preparation of resistance. Attached, like Moss, to Britain's Special Operations Executive, a top-secret set-up tasked with causing trouble in enemy territory, he had already been rewarded with an OBE. The name of this young officer was Patrick Leigh Fermor.

The tale that follows this Introduction is Leigh Fermor's own account of the abduction of General Kreipe. It is published here,

in its entirety, for the first time. When he wrote it, in 1966–7, Leigh Fermor was already on the path to great acclaim as a writer. *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water,* the classic chronicles of his journeys as a young man traversing pre-war Europe, were still some years away, but in 1950 he had published *The Traveller's Tree*, an award-winning account of his recent travels in the Caribbean, and, three years after that, *A Time to Keep Silence,* an impression of monasteries and monastic life in England, France and Turkey. *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* appeared in 1958 and *Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece* in 1966. A novel, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*, was published in 1953.

It may seem strange that a man of Leigh Fermor's experience and literary flair should not have written sooner about the kidnap. But he and Moss were friends and seem to have agreed early that the latter – who, unlike Leigh Fermor, had kept a diary of the operation – should tell the story first. Back in England in early 1945, Leigh Fermor had actually acted on Moss's behalf during an initial search for a publisher (a search that the War Office terminated on security grounds when it emerged that many of Moss's cast of British officers, mentioned by name in his text, were still engaged in behind-the-lines warfare).[3] It is certainly likely that Leigh Fermor had no desire to steal his friend's thunder; and it may be significant that he finally put pen to paper only after Moss's early death in 1965.

Leigh Fermor began writing his version at the request of Barrie Pitt, editor of *Purnell's History of the Second World War*, a mass-market anthology published in weekly editions in co-operation with London's Imperial War Museum. The idea behind the series, which was overseen by the military historian Basil Liddell Hart, was to produce rounded and respected studies of different aspects of the conflict that would add something significant to the historical record. Contributors ranged from modern historians to soldiers who had taken part. Articles were feature-length.

When giving Leigh Fermor the commission in the spring of 1966, Pitt had asked for 5,000 words deliverable by November. Not a man who always made editors' lives easy, Leigh Fermor penned over 30,000 and submitted them in instalments. The last

of these reached Pitt nearly eleven months late. Pitt was pleased with neither the delay nor the length. Constrained by his own deadlines and a strict word limit, he brought on board a journalist to cut the text down to the requisite size. The reduced version that duly appeared in *Purnell's History of the Second World War* was, as a consequence, dramatically shorter: 25,000 words had gone. Much of the style and colour had been stripped away, too, replaced by a businesslike prose. In a brief editor's note, Pitt introduced Leigh Fermor as 'that most talented and charming of poets', commented that 'the Gilbert and Sullivan strain still runs strongly in the British ethos', and, quoting Kreipe, called it the story of the 'Hussar stunt' in Crete.[4] Leigh Fermor is said to have been unhappy with the changes. There was little he could have done to prevent them.

The restored manuscript, reproduced here, is important. Leigh Fermor had been asked to write an account of Kreipe's abduction. That was what was commissioned and, once the cutting was done, that was what was printed. But what he had produced – the original text – had been much more than that. As his biographer has written, the story he told in 'Abducting a General', the title he gave his piece, was 'not so much an adventure as a confession, a tribute, a plea for understanding … above all, a paean of praise to Crete and the Cretans'.[5] To explain that, it is necessary to acknowledge the strength of his connection to the Cretan people and place the kidnapping against the backdrop of his wider experiences on the island. It is essential, too, to recognise the link – direct or not – between the abduction of General Kreipe and the barbaric murder, months later, of hundreds of Cretan villagers at the hands of the German garrison.

In December 1933, aged eighteen, Patrick Leigh Fermor had left London to walk to Constantinople. It took him over a year to reach it. By then, the Continent had become more or less his home. During the next four years he spent only a scattering of months in England. Charismatic and well connected, he eked out his existence with some inherited money here, some translation work there, making friends easily, staying with them frequently, and travelling widely. In 1939, when news reached

him that Britain had declared war on Nazi Germany, he was living in Romania. He returned directly to join up.

At first Leigh Fermor was accepted as a candidate for a commission in the Irish Guards. Sudden illness stalled the process, leading to a long and boring sojourn at the Guards Depot at Caterham. Then the Intelligence Corps stepped in. Impressed by his languages – his pre-war wanderings had honed his French, German, Romanian and Greek – it offered a fresh path to a commission and the likelihood of a quicker route into action. With Axis pressure threatening to spread the war to South-east Europe, where he had so recently lived and travelled, Leigh Fermor shared the assessment that he might prove useful.

Officer training followed, then courses in military intelligence and interrogation, which he completed just in time to be dispatched to the Mediterranean as a member of the British Military Mission sent to help the Greeks, whose country the Italians, in October 1940, had invaded. Lieutenant Leigh Fermor was attached as a liaison officer to the Greek Third Army Corps. That contact did not last long. In April 1941, a savage German blitzkrieg swept through the Balkans, knocking Greece out of the war and driving the last British troops from mainland Europe. Remnants of the latter managed to scramble their way to Crete, the largest of Greece's islands, and bolster the British garrison there. Among them was Leigh Fermor.

Crete, too, was soon under attack, as the Germans, seeking to press their advantage, launched a major airborne assault. The fighting lasted days, the defenders included Cretan men, women and children, but the likely outcome was never much in doubt. Leigh Fermor, who had been attached as an intelligence officer to the British infantry brigade positioned around the capital, Heraklion, was one of the survivors whom the Royal Navy managed to evacuate to Egypt before Crete finally fell.

It was in Egypt that Leigh Fermor joined the Special Operations Executive, the unorthodox organisation whose task was to encourage resistance and carry out sabotage behind enemy lines. It is not difficult to see why he appealed as a recruit. Worldly, well travelled, confident and independent – 'Leigh Fermor does not submit willingly to discipline,' a staff

officer would write of him stuffily, ‘and I think requires firm handling’ – he was just the type who seemed suited to SOE’s irregular line of work.[6] His first job was as an instructor at a training school in Palestine, teaching students bound for enemy territory how to handle weapons. Then, in the spring of 1942, fresh orders came through: he was to return to Crete to work clandestinely as an SOE agent.

By 1942, to be sure of holding the island against any Allied attempt to wrest it back, a strong Axis force was in occupation: tens of thousands of troops, rising to a peak of 75,000 in 1943, overlording a local population of just 400,000. Not without reason, the Germans came to call it *Festung Kreta*: Fortress Crete. In the mountains, a few guerrilla bands were active. So were a scattered handful of British officers sent in to lend support, gather intelligence, spread propaganda, harass the garrison and attempt, under the enemy’s noses, to round up and evacuate Allied stragglers left stranded when Crete was captured. Landed, covertly, by a British-crewed Greek fishing boat, Leigh Fermor joined them in June 1942. He was to remain on the island for the next fifteen months.

During that period, the tide of war in the Mediterranean turned decisively in the Allies’ favour. In North Africa, the victory at El Alamein and major landings in Morocco and Algeria were the catalyst for advances that, by the spring of 1943, had seen the Allies secure the Mediterranean’s southern shores. That summer, Allied armies overran Sicily. In September, when a war-weary Italy surrendered, major landings in southern Italy saw the Allies return in force to mainland Europe for the first time in two and a half years. But in Crete not a great deal changed. The island remained firmly in the enemy’s grip. The population stayed mostly compliant, hating the occupation but incapable of doing much to throw it off. Hopes of Allied landings ebbed and flowed but no liberation came.

On the rare occasions when British raiding parties went ashore to attack the island’s airfields, terrible reprisals wreaked by German troops were graphic reminders of the risks of resisting. Two attacks by British special forces, the first in June 1942, the second in July 1943, led the Germans, on both occasions, to execute fifty Cretan hostages in response. Many

more were murdered in September 1943 after one guerrilla leader, Manoli Bandouvas, who had been encouraged by news of the Italian surrender to believe that the Allies might finally invade, decided suddenly to fight the Germans in the open. His men killed several before he saw his mistake and pulled back. German retaliation was swift and brutal. Seven villages south-east of Heraklion were burned to the ground and over five hundred Cretans, including women and children, shot. Generalmajor Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller, Kreipe's predecessor as commander of the 22nd Airlanding Infantry Division, was the officer who issued the orders. His actions earned him the nickname, 'The Butcher of Crete'.

SOE personnel at large on the island were well aware of the perils of working clandestinely. They also appreciated the extent to which their own presence and activities put the Cretans, too, in danger. The Germans knew that the British had men on Crete engaged in subversive warfare. From time to time, drives were launched into the mountains to catch them. Homes were burned. Local helpers and couriers were run to ground and killed. But though SOE, too, suffered casualties (among them Leigh Fermor's wireless operator, a young Greek from the Dodecanese, who, in late 1942, was captured, tortured and shot), most emerged unscathed. Their survival, they knew, was due in no small part to the selfless protection and assistance they received from the Cretan population. Inevitably, strong and lasting bonds of mutual respect and affection developed.

'For purposes of movement he adopted simple disguise, dying [*sic*] his hair, growing a beard and wearing Cretan dress,' reads a no-nonsense debriefing report of Leigh Fermor's experiences. Declassified only after his death in 2011, it provides a bracingly matter-of-fact glimpse of some of the risks he had run:

> He spoke to no-one except his trusted staff as his accent would have given him away at once. He had numerous false identity cards, and if stopped by the Germans he would have claimed to be a Cretan from the village named on the card. Had he met a German patrol with an anti-British interpreter this cover would not have held … Had he been taken back to the village by a German

> patrol, there would have been no hope of his cover withstanding enquiry.[7]

Most British personnel faced such dangers. But as one SOE colleague remembered, Leigh Fermor had fitted Crete well. 'His pre-war experience of Greece combined with an instinctive philhellenism gave him an immediate grasp of local problems even though he had just arrived.'[8] His manner, too, was right. Warm, caring and courageous, a lover of language, dance and song, fascinated by other cultures, he forged life-long friendships with the Cretans, winning their trust and keeping it. 'He is still in Crete,' wrote the officer who recommended him for the Distinguished Service Order (he received an OBE) in April 1943, 'where his determination, devotion to duty and steadfastness of purpose have been invaluable in helping the local population to retain their faith in their allies. He is constantly hunted by the occupying troops.'[9]

'On looking back,' Leigh Fermor wrote that month, 'my [first] six months seem to have been one long string of [wireless set] battery troubles, faulty [wireless] sets, difficulties about transport, rain, arrests, hide and seek with the Huns, lack of cash, flights at a moment's notice, false alarms, wicked treks over the mountains, laden like a mule, fright among one's collaborators, treachery, and friends getting shot.'[10] The quotation comes from one of several reports for SOE headquarters in Cairo that Leigh Fermor penned while on the island. Most were drawn up in mountain hideouts, then couriered to the coast, to be sent out aboard small British boats and submarines that came quietly at night to drop off fresh men and supplies and embark evacuees. Original copies survive among Leigh Fermor's private papers. Providing hitherto hidden flashes of his characteristic writing style, they are markedly unmilitary in composition. A selection of extracts are reprinted here, after the text of 'Abducting a General', to underline the gruelling range of his experiences in Crete and the fact that they went far beyond kidnapping. They include his deeply personal account of what was undoubtedly one of the worst moments of his life: the tragic death of his guide and great friend, Yanni Tsangarakis, killed accidentally by Leigh Fermor's own hand.

Leigh Fermor's first mission to Crete ended in September 1943. He had started out in the western part of the island, working in the mountains where the principal guerrillas lurked. From February 1943 he had had charge of Heraklion, further east, where his role became more political: here, communists with complicated post-war ambitions were among the Cretans with whom he needed to deal. But it was not all politics. In the days after Italy's surrender, Leigh Fermor was able to help spirit to safety an Italian general before the Germans could get their hands on him. This was General Angelo Carta, the commanding officer of a division of 30,000 Italian soldiers. Leigh Fermor had not intended to leave the island with him. While assisting the Royal Navy with Carta's clandestine escape, however, he found himself stranded aboard a motor launch by a worsening sea and, as a result, was withdrawn to Egypt too.

It was back among his SOE compatriots in Cairo that Leigh Fermor tabled the plan for him to return to Crete with a hand-picked fellow officer – the choice fell eventually on Billy Moss – and kidnap a German general. Later, and, indeed, in the story he tells in these pages, he would trace his idea's inspiration to the autumn of 1943 and the successful evacuation, if not the abduction, of General Carta. In fact, the germ of a plan had been in place much earlier than that. Declassified SOE documents show that British officers had considered the wisdom and possibility of capturing a senior German officer as early as November 1942, when Xan Fielding, a close colleague of Leigh Fermor's in Crete, had had the idea of abducting General Alexander Andrae, *Festung Kreta*'s commander-in-chief. That plan was short-lived: Andrae was posted away. By the following summer, Fielding was thinking about seizing his successor, General Bruno Bräuer, while Tom Dunbabin, the senior SOE officer on the island, was wondering about kidnapping Generalmajor Müller in a coordinated operation. The latter, it was thought, might be especially vulnerable in or around his Cretan home: the Villa Ariadne. 'It should be easy to kidnap Muller,' Dunbabin wrote at the time. 'One of our agents is on good terms with his chauffeur, and he might be abducted on the road. Alternatively it sounds easy to break into the Villa Ariadne with a strength of about 20.'[11]

When Leigh Fermor drew up his plan, Generalmajor Müller was his intended target, too. By then, following the atrocities he had ordered in September 1943, 'The Butcher of Crete' was especially hated. Seizing him, so the reasoning went, was intended to deal a blow to German morale, while encouraging British missions on the island and the Cretan population to believe, at a time of fading hopes of liberation, that Crete's resistance remained effective. But the care that Leigh Fermor takes in 'Abducting a General' to explain the grounds for the planned kidnap, stressing, too, the steps taken to obviate the risk of enemy reprisals, is significant. By the time he came to write his account, he knew very well that the operation – which in the end saw Kreipe seized, not Müller – had been linked to a terrible event that occurred in Crete some weeks afterwards.

In August 1944, German troops swept through the Amari valley in the mountains of western Crete, burned a series of villages to the ground and killed over 450 people. '[C]omplete surprise was achieved,' recorded Tom Dunbabin, a helpless witness to the aftermath.

The inhabitants of the raided villages were caught in their beds and a given number of hostages was taken in each village. These were selected either because of their relationship to some known person on the wanted list or because they looked sturdy fellows who would make good guerrillas. They were shot two by two and their bodies thrown into a building which was then blown up. One man escaped wounded from Kardaki to tell their story. The more attractive young women and a few men who were wanted by name were taken to Rethymno – the men succeeded in escaping en route. The remainder of the population were allowed to take one sheep or goat and as much as they could carry and were given two hours to get out. Much unnecessary suffering was caused – for instance one man of 73 had to carry his mother on his back for over three miles and pregnant women with a string of young children are [now] a common feature of the countryside. The enemy then began to plunder and loaded up everything in the village

> – sheep and cattle, food (the year's harvest had just been gathered in), furniture and clothes. As each house was gutted it was blown up or set on fire. This work is still going on and I can see the fires and hear the explosions as I write.[12]

Some inhabitants of the Amari, according to German communiqués, had invited that punishment for the assistance they were known to have given to General Kreipe's kidnappers four months before.

Dunbabin, who knew the Amari well, felt that the 'actual reasons' were more to do with a recent flare-up on the island of guerrilla fighting and British raiding, which had left dozens of German soldiers dead, coupled with a consequent German desire to retaliate and prevent further attacks, and the fact that the Amari valley had been known for years as a hotbed of support for the resistance.[13] Later, from Cretan friends, a distraught Leigh Fermor would hear similar explanations. Whether he ever accepted them is hard to know. 'These were consoling words,' he writes here; 'never a syllable of blame was uttered. I listened to them eagerly then, and set them down eagerly now.'

Considering the possible cost, it may also be wondered if Leigh Fermor was always convinced that the abduction was worth it. If he had doubts, he has not been alone. Concerns about the wisdom of kidnapping any German general were seemingly expressed at SOE headquarters even before Leigh Fermor's plan received the green light. Bickham Sweet-Escott, a senior and respected staff officer in Cairo at the time, would write in his own memoirs that he had considered the risk of German reprisals far too great to make an attempted abduction worthwhile, even with the hated Generalmajor Müller as the proposed target. 'I was asked whether I thought we should let this operation go ahead,' Sweet-Escott would recall.

> I made myself exceedingly unpopular by recommending as strongly as I could that we should not. I thought that if it succeeded, the only contribution to the war effort would be a fillip to Cretan morale, but that the price

ABDUCTING A GENERAL

1

The sierras of occupied Crete, familiar from nearly two years of clandestine sojourn and hundreds of exacting marches, looked quite different through the aperture in the converted bomber's floor and the gaps in the clouds below: a chaos of snow-covered, aloof and enormous spikes glittering as white as a glacier in the February moonlight. There, suddenly, on a tiny plateau among the peaks, were the three signal fires twinkling. A few moments later they began expanding fast: freed at last from the noise inside the Liberator the parachute sailed gently down towards the heart of the triangle. Small figures were running in the firelight and in another few moments, snow muffled the impact of landing. There was a scrum of whiskery embracing, a score of Cretan voices, one English one. A perfect landing!

The Katharo plateau was too small for all four of the passengers to drop in a stick: each jump needed a fresh run-in. So, once safely down, I was to signal the all-clear with a torch. But the gap I had dripped through closed; our luck, for the moment, had run out. We took turns to signal towards the returning boom of the intermittently visible plane just the other side of the rushing clouds until the noise died away and we knew the plane had turned back to Brindisi. Our spirits sank. We were anxious lest the noise should have alerted the German garrison in Kritza; dawn, too, might overtake us on the way down.

Scattering the fires, whacking the loadless pack mules into action and hoping for a snowfall to muffle our tracks, we began the long downhill scramble. Tauntingly a bright moon lit us all the way. At last we plunged wearily through the ilex and the arbutus into the home-cave as the dawn of 6th February 1944 was breaking.

As it turned out, I stayed with Sandy Rendel[1] in his cave for over

a month. It was perched near a handy spring in the Lasithi mountains above the village of Tapais in Eastern Crete. Smoky, draughty and damp, but snug with strewn brushwood under the stalactites, it was typical of several lairs dotted about the island, each sheltering a signal sergeant, a small retinue of Cretan helpers and one each of a scattered handful of heavily disguised British Liaison Officers.

None of these BLOs were regulars. The only thing they had in common was at least a smattering of Ancient Greek from school. They all had a strong feeling for Greece and Crete and were deeply involved not only in the military grandeurs and miseries of the island, but, as the occupation lengthened, in every aspect of its life: the evacuation of our own stragglers, and (for training and re-entry) of resistance people on the run; in trying to help the bereaved, gathering information about the enemy, assisting commando raids and the dropping of arms and supplies, the organising of resistance and the composing of discord between leaders.

We became, as it were, part of the family. Our cave-sojourns were often brief. They were a cruel danger to the villages that supplied us with runners and with food and look-outs and we were often dislodged by enemy hunts in force. It was a game of hide-and-seek usually ending in a disorderly bunk to a new refuge in the next range. We could not have lasted a day without the islanders' passionate support: a sentiment which the terrible hardships of the occupation, the execution of the hostages, the razing and massacre of villages, only strengthened.

A time of bitter weather ensued: postponements, cancellations and false starts. Night after night Sandy and I set out with our party for the plateau; again and again we heard the plane circling over the clouds; always in vain. Sergeant Dilley was permanently crouched over his set, tapping out, or receiving messages from SOE Headquarters in Cairo. (How far away it seemed!) We filled our long leisure lying round the fire, singing and story-telling with the Cretans, keeping the cold out with raki and wine. There were endless paper-games and talk and plenty of time, it soon turned out, to grow one of the moustaches that all Cretan mountaineers wear, and to get back the feel of mountain clothes: breeches, high black boots, a twisted

mulberry silk sash with an ivory-hilted dagger in a long silver scabbard, black shirt, blue embroidered waistcoat and tight black-fringed turban; augmented, when on the move, with a white hooded cloak of home-spun goat's hair, a tall twisted stick, a bandolier and a slung gun, the apt epitome of a long and reckless tradition of mountain feud, guerrilla, and armed revolt against the Turks. There was time, above all, to think about the scheme on hand.

The idea of capturing the German commander had begun to take shape the autumn before. At the time of the Italian armistice, General Carta, commanding the Siena Division which occupied the easternmost of Crete's four provinces, hated and resented his Allies. It had not been hard, abetted by his counter-espionage chief, with whom I had long been in touch, to persuade him at a midnight meeting in his HQ at Neapolis to leave for Cairo with his ADC and several staff officers and the plans of the defence of Eastern Crete. His conspicuously pennanted car was sent north-east and abandoned as a false scent while we set off on foot south-west. (The Germans moved in next day.) There had been a hue and cry, searches, observation planes, dropped leaflets offering rewards; but we had got them through and embarked them in a timely MTB[2] in a little creek near Soutsouro. We were in Mersa Matruh next afternoon and Cairo next morning. (I had been in the island nearly two years.)

I put forward to the powers in SOE the suggestion of kidnapping General Müller. He commanded the 22nd Bremen ('Sebastopol') Panzergrenadier division based on Herakleion. It was the sort of action we all needed in Crete, I urged. The General was universally hated and feared – even more perhaps, than General Bräuer in Canea[3] – for the appalling harshness of his rule: the dragooning of the population in labour-gangs for the aerodromes, mass shooting of hostages, reprisal destruction of villages and their populations, the tortures and the executions of the Gestapo. The moral damage to the German forces in Crete would be great; a severe blow to their self-confidence and prestige. It would have its effect on us, too: our correct but uninspiring task – trying to restrain random action in preparation

for the mass uprising we all hoped for – was an arduous, rather thankless one. Above all, it would have a tonic effect among the Cretans; our spirits, after reverses in the Viannos mountains at the time of the Italian armistice, were low; and one important guerrilla band – that of Manoli Bandouvas – was in temporary dissolution. The deed would be a triumph for the resistance movement which had kept the island so effectively and improbably united; and it would be a setback for the emissaries of the mainland left-wing movement who – fortunately too late – were trying to spread the same discord in Crete as that which was already tearing the mainland apart. The suggested action would be, above all, an Anglo-Cretan affair, a symbol and epitome of the bond which had been formed during the Battle [of Crete in 1941] and the thirty months which had followed. It could be done, I urged, with stealth and timing in such a way that both bloodshed, and thus reprisals, would be avoided. (I had only a vague idea how.) To my amazement, the idea was accepted.

There was no need to look for the first recruit. Manoli Paterakis from Koustoyérako in Selino in the far west had been my guide for over a year. A goat-herd and ex-gendarme, he had fought fiercely against the parachutists during the Battle. A year or two older than me, tireless, unshakeable as granite, wiry as a Red Indian, a crack shot and as fast over the mountains as the ibexes he often hunted, he was (still is) the finest type of Cretan mountaineer (there will be many such in this account). Completely unselfish, he was in the mountains purely from patriotism, and his mixture of sense, conviviality, stoicism, irony and humour, linked with his other qualities, made him more valuable than ten ordinary mortals. We had been companions on hundreds of marches and in many scrapes; had even, last summer, made an abortive joint attempt to sink a German tanker with limpets in Herakleion harbour. Neither of us had meant to leave Crete with the Italians – Manoli had been present at all the recent doings at Italian GHQ – but rough weather had hastened the vessel's departure, and, when we realised the anchor had been weighed, we were too far from shore to swim back in the dark. So, luckily, here he was in Cairo.

Finding another officer to take over during reconnaissances

was that he had commanded divisions on the Leningrad and Kuban sectors and was decorated with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

At last, at the beginning of April, Sandy, John Stanley – another old hand – and I, and a number of people for evacuation, were lying up in the mountainous prohibited zone above the south coast, not far from Soutsouro. We had a narrow shave a few miles inland, at the Monastery of the Holy Apostles: a heavily armed German foraging party arrived when we were in the middle of a feast. The Archimandrite Theophylaktos just had time to smuggle us into the cellar before they stamped in and insisted on a large meal. We crouched below listening to them among the Arabian Nights oil-jars until, heavily plied with wine by the Archimandrite, they reeled off singing.