"A mash note to physical endurance. . . . McDougall redefines the heroic ideal." —NPR

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

NATURAL BORN HEROES

Mastering the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance

Christopher McDougall

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLER *BORN TO RUN*

With a New Preface

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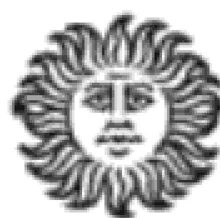

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CHAPTER 1

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-

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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 a few miles inland from 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.

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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.

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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

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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

* Chris's expertise even puts him at odds with Antony Beevor. His research into newly unclassified documents leads him to believe that the Butcher was on the Dodecanese and was only transferred back to Crete after Kreipe was kidnapped, while Beevor notes in *Crete: The Battle and the Resistance* that British intelligence "thought that Müller had been transferred to the Dodecanese when in fact he had replaced General Brauer in Canae as Commander of the Fortress of Crete."

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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

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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.

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."

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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

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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

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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

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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.

Heroes learned how to use their own body fat for fuel instead of relying on bursts of sugar, the way nearly all of us do today. Roughly one-fifth of your body is stored fat; that's all premium caloric energy, ready for ignition and plentiful enough to power you up and down a mountain without a bite of food—*if* you know how to tap into it. Fat as fuel is an all-but-forgotten secret of endurance athletes, but when it's revived, the results are astonishing. Mark Allen, the greatest triathlete in history, made his breakthrough when he discovered a way to burn body fat in place of carbs. It revolutionized his approach to the sport and led to six Ironman titles, a top-three finish in nearly every race of his career, and recognition in 1997 as the "World's Fittest Man."

Heroes also didn't bulk up on muscle; instead they relied on the lean, efficient force of their fascia, the powerful connective tissue that is like your body's rubber band. Bruce Lee was a so-so martial artist until he became fascinated by Wing Chun, the only fighting art created by a woman. Wing Chun relies on fascial *snap* instead of muscular force. Lee became so adept at harnessing the power of his fascia that he perfected a one-inch punch, a blow from a barely moving fist that could send a man twice his size sailing across the room. Fascia power is an egalitarian and almost undepletable resource. It's the reason Masai warriors, in their jumping rituals, can bounce along as high as a man's head, and it's the essence of both Greek pankration and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, two of the most lethal self-defense styles ever created.

Heroes had to be masters of the unpredictable. They trained their amygdalae by practicing "natural movement," which used to be the only kind of movement we knew. Just to survive, humans had to be able to flow across the landscape, bending their bodies over and

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around any obstacle in their path, leaping without fear and landing with precision. Back in the early 1900s, a French naval officer named Georges Hébert dedicated himself to the study of natural movement; he watched the way children play—running and climbing and tussling around—and began to appreciate the importance of spontaneity and improvisation. When Hébert's natural movement disciples were later tested for strength, speed, agility, and endurance, they scored on par with world-class decathletes.

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.

Or maybe not. When a middle school teacher in San Antonio, Texas, named Rick Riordan began thinking about the troublesome kids in his class, he was struck by a topsy-turvy idea. Maybe the wild ones weren't hyperactive; maybe they were misplaced heroes. After all, in another era the same behavior that is now throttled with Ritalin and disciplinary rap sheets would have been the mark of greatness, the early blooming of a true champion. Riordan played with the idea, imagining the what-ifs. What if strong, assertive children were redirected rather than discouraged? What if there were a place for them, an outdoor training camp that felt like a playground, where they could cut loose with all those natural instincts to run, wrestle, climb, swim, and explore? You'd call it Camp Half-Blood, Riordan decided, because that's what we really are—half animal and half higher-being, halfway between each and unsure how to keep them in balance. Riordan began writing, creating a troubled kid from a broken home named Percy Jackson who arrives at a camp in the woods and is transformed when the Olympian he has inside is revealed, honed, and guided.

Riordan's fantasy of a hero school actually does exist—in bits and pieces, scattered across the globe. The skills have been fragmented, but with a little hunting, you can find them all. In a public park in Brooklyn, a former ballerina darts into the bushes and returns with

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a shopping bag full of the same superfoods the ancient Greeks once relied on. In Brazil, a onetime beach huckster is reviving the lost art of natural movement. And in a lonely Arizona dust bowl called Oracle, a quiet genius disappeared into the desert after teaching a few great athletes—and, oddly, Johnny Cash and the Red Hot Chili Peppers—the ancient secret of using body fat as fuel.

But the best learning lab of all was a cave on a mountain behind enemy lines—where, during World War II, a band of Greek shepherds and young British amateurs plotted to take on 100,000 German soldiers. They weren't naturally strong, or professionally trained, or known for their courage. They were wanted men, marked for immediate execution. But on a starvation diet, they thrived. Hunted and hounded, they got stronger. They became such natural born heroes, they decided to follow the lead of the greatest hero of all, Odysseus, and attempt their own version of the Trojan horse.

It was a suicide mission—for anyone, that is, who hadn't mastered a certain ancient art.

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CHAPTER 4

When Hitler came to power Churchill didn't use judgement
but one of his deep insights. . . . *That* was what we needed.

—C. P. SNOW,
scientist and wartime spymaster, in his 1961 Harvard lecture
"Science and Government"

FOUR YEARS EARLIER, England was doomed. That's the reality Winston Churchill faced when he took over as prime minister in 1940.

"We are told that Herr Hitler has a plan for invading the British Isles," Churchill announced. At that very moment, in fact, tank commander Erwin Rommel was bearing down on the Channel with his fabled "Ghost Division," so known because it blasted through enemy territory with such supernatural speed—once thrusting nearly two hundred miles in a single day—that Rommel could be storming into London within twenty-four hours of rumbling up on British shores.

Clearly, surrender was England's only hope. For every British plane, Hitler had three; for every British soldier, Hitler had two. U-boat wolf packs and magnetic mines had turned the Channel into a death trap, crippling all but eleven of the Royal Navy's forty destroyers. British soldiers were bloodied and barely armed; tens of thousands had been captured or killed, and the survivors had ditched their guns and gear in the rush to escape. German troops, by contrast, were so

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disciplined, ferocious, and euphoric, Hitler actually wanted them to ease up and not overextend themselves by advancing so fast.

"Gentlemen, you have seen for yourself what criminal folly it was to try to defend this city," Hitler said while touring the smoking remains of Warsaw, which had been bombed into a nightmare landscape of rubble and rotting corpses as its mayor was dragged off to Dachau. "I only wish that certain statesmen in other countries who seem to want to turn all of Europe into a second Warsaw could have the opportunity to see, as you have, the real meaning of war."

But Churchill knew the real meaning of Hitler. During the chaotic early months of the Nazi onslaught, few were as quick as Churchill to pierce the Third Reich's gun smoke and pageantry and see into the heart of the man behind it all. *If you think you're dealing with a fellow statesman*, Churchill warned Parliament, *or an empire builder*, *or even a run-of-the-mill megalomaniac, you're making a terrible mistake.* War wasn't Hitler's means to something greater; it was the greatest thing he knew.

"Nazi power," Churchill said, "derives strength and perverted pleasure from persecution." Fear and pain were an erotic thrill for "these most sinister men." By Hitler's own telling, the most wonderful day of his young life was one of the darkest in history: he was "overcome with rapturous enthusiasm" when he heard that World War I had broken out. "I fell to my knees and thanked Heaven from an overflowing heart." As a soldier, Corporal Hitler adored the ghoulish world of frontline fighting; he resisted evacuation from the trenches when his thigh was torn up with shrapnel, and on his first night back after recovering, he was too excited to sleep and stalked around with a flashlight, spearing rats with his bayonet, until someone hit him with a boot and told him to knock it off.

"When we see the originality of malice, the ingenuity of aggression, which our enemy displays," Churchill warned, "we may certainly prepare ourselves for every kind of novel stratagem and every kind of brutal and treacherous maneuver."

So Churchill came up with a novel maneuver of his own. This was a new kind of fight, so Churchill wanted a new kind of fighter: lone phantoms with the inventiveness and self-reliance to test "the unwritten laws of war," as Churchill put it, and execute whatever havoc they could dream up. The British Army was outgunned and outnumbered,

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but maybe this way they could even the odds by tying up entire German regiments in pursuit of a single man. Or a single woman. Or a single woman who, in one recruit's case, was actually a man. Anytime a German soldier tried to close his eyes and sleep, Churchill wanted him plagued—and trailed—by lethal shadows.

He couldn't use seasoned soldiers for an operation like that; anyone fit enough to fight was needed on the battlefield. Instead, Churchill's new operation began recruiting poets, professors, archeologists—anyone who'd traveled a bit and knew his or her way around foreign countries. Two middle-aged professors were so electrified when they got wind of Churchill's scheme that they reversed their conscientious objector status and decided to fight instead. For British academics, this was their fantasy world come to life. The classics were their comic books; they'd grown up on Plutarch's *Lives*—"the bible for heroes," as Emerson declared—and came of age with their heads buried in the adventures of Odysseus and Richard the Lionheart and Sigurd the Dragonslayer. They understood that in ancient Greece, entire wars could pivot on the performance of one or two extraordinary individuals.

Hold on. British high command was appalled. Was Churchill really going to pit these oddballs against the most ruthless killers on the planet? The Nazis had just ripped apart the armies of nine European nations, and Churchill's counterpunch was . . . *this*? They're not commandos, Churchill's general argued; they're calamities. If their fake passports and ludicrous accents don't betray them, the villagers will; as soon as these misfits are dropped behind enemy lines, they'll have to depend for food and hideouts on the very people most likely to give them away. Why *wouldn't* a farmer with a storm trooper's gun in his face trade a British life for his own? Churchill's adventurers will have no escape if pursued and no hope if they're caught: by the code of combat, no uniform means no mercy. They won't be marched into camps and visited by the Red Cross, like other prisoners of war; they'll be beaten and tortured till they scream out every secret they know, then executed on the spot.

But Churchill was undeterred. Few knew that in his early life, Churchill had been one of those calamities himself. He was "hardly the stuff of which gladiators are made," *The Last Lion* biographer William Manchester would note. "Sickly, an uncoordinated weakling

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with the pale fragile hands of a girl, speaking with a lisp and a slight stutter, he had been at the mercy of bullies. They beat him, ridiculed him, and pelted him with cricket balls. Trembling and humiliated, he hid in a nearby woods." Young Winston was so far from rugged, he could only tolerate silk underwear and even in winter had to sleep naked beneath silk sheets. "I am cursed with so feeble a body," he'd complain, "that I can hardly support the fatigues of the day." But over time, Churchill managed to transform himself from that bullied wisp into the dashing war correspondent and army officer who'd become Great Britain's cigar-chomping, bulldog-tough defender of freedom. If he could do it, Churchill was certain, so could his fellow misfits.

And his misfits believed him—because some of them had already seen a real superhero in the flesh. All they had to do was look out the window and wait for Thomas Edward Lawrence—winner of dagger fights, conqueror of evildoers, chieftain of desert bandits—to come roaring across the Dorset countryside on his big Brough Superior motorcycle. Lawrence of Arabia was more than their idol; he was their evolutionary road map, a guide to the transformation he'd followed from *them* into *him*. Back at the start of World War I, T. E. Lawrence had been just as bookish and inept as they were now; as an Oxford scholar with the build of a preteen girl and an aversion to rough sports, let alone brawls, Lawrence was originally assigned to draw maps and military postage stamps and was so out of place on the battlefield that one superior dismissed him as "a bumptious young ass" who "wants a kicking and kicking hard."

Then something happened. Lawrence rode into the desert, and someone else rode back out. Gone was the "little silk-shirted man," as Lawrence described himself; in his place was a turbaned warrior with a scimitar on his hip, bullet scars on his chest, and a battered infantry rifle notched with kills slung across his back. No one expected him to still be alive, let alone commanding a band of Arab raiders. Lawrence had managed to marshal these nomadic tribesmen into a camel-mounted attack squad, leading them on hit-and-run raids against the forces of the Ottoman Empire. The Oxford graduate student could now leap astride a fleeing camel, throw burning sticks of dynamite at pursuers, and vanish into a sandstorm, only to reappear a thousand miles away as he galloped from the twisted wreckage of another sabotaged train. The same colonel who'd wanted to boot Lawrence's

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bumptious behind was now amazed by his "gallantry and grit," while Lawrence's enemies paid him an even greater compliment: the Turks put a dead-or-alive bounty on his head of fifteen thousand pounds, the equivalent today of more than half a million dollars.

Out there in the wilderness, Lawrence had learned a secret. He'd gone back in time, to a place where heroes weren't a different breed—they just had different breeding. They were ordinary people who'd mastered extraordinary skills, who'd found that by tapping into a certain body of primal knowledge, they could perform with remarkable amounts of stamina, strength, nerve, and cunning. The ancient Greeks knew this; their entire culture was built on the premise that everyone is tinged with a touch of the godly. To be a hero, you had to learn how to think, run, fight, and talk—even eat, sleep, and crawl—like a hero.

Which was excellent news if you were a one-eyed archeologist like John Pendlebury, or a penniless young artist like Xan Fielding, or a wandering playboy-poet like Patrick Leigh Fermor—three men whose fates would become intertwined on Crete. Churchill might have been offering misfits like them a death sentence—and to many, he was—but he was also offering a new way to live. If Lawrence of Arabia could learn the art of the hero, so could they.

This was their chance.

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CHAPTER 5

The right man in the right place is a devastating weapon.

—MOTTO OF U.S. SPECIAL FORCES

MY LAWRENCE OF ARABIA—the person who first made me realize heroism was a skill, not a virtue—was a middle-aged woman with big round glasses who ran a small elementary school in the Pennsylvania countryside. On February 2, 2001, Norina Bentzel was in her office when a man with a machete went after her kindergartners. It's been ten years since I heard what happened next, and only now am I beginning to understand the answer to one question:

Why didn't she quit?

How does a forty-two-year-old grade school principal who's never been in a fight take on a frenzied Army vet and keep battling him—relentlessly, with her bare hands, at only five foot three—as he's slashing at her with a blade that can cut through a tree branch? It's remarkable that she had the tenacity to confront him, but the real mystery is how she persisted when, very quickly, she must have realized she was doomed to lose. Because that's the ugly truth about heroism: the tests don't start when you're ready or stop when you're tired. You don't get time-outs, warm-ups, or bathroom breaks. You may have a headache or be wearing the wrong pants or find yourself—the

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way Norina did—in a skirt and low heels in a school hallway becoming slick with your own blood.

Michael Stankewicz was a social studies teacher at a Baltimore high school who began simmering with rage and paranoia after his third wife left him. His violent threats got him fired, hospitalized, and eventually jailed. After he was released, he picked up a machete and drove to the school his stepchildren once attended—North Hopewell–Winterstown Elementary, in sleepy, rural York County, Pennsylvania. Just before lunch, Norina Bentzel happened to glance out her window and see someone slip through the front door behind a mother with two children. She went to find out who he was and discovered a stranger peering into the kindergarten.

"Excuse me, sir," Norina said. "Is there someone I can help you find?"

Stankewicz wheeled, yanking the machete out of his left pant leg. He slashed at Norina's throat, missing by a hair and slicing off the plastic ID tag hanging around her neck. A sad and strangely articulate thought ran through her mind: *There is no one in my environment who can help.* She was alone in this. Whatever she did in the next few seconds would determine who made it out of that school alive.

Norina could have screamed and fled. She could have curled up in a ball and begged for mercy, or lunged for Stankewicz's wrist. Instead she crossed her arms in front of her face in an X and backed away. Stankewicz kept chopping and slashing, but Norina rolled with the blows, never taking her eyes off him or allowing him to close the gap and get her on the floor. Norina led Stankewicz away from the classrooms and down the hall toward her office. She managed to slip inside, bolt the door, and hit the lockdown alarm with her gashed and blood-soaked hand.

She was a second too late. Some of the kindergartners were just exiting their classroom as the alarm sounded. Stankewicz went after them. He gashed the teacher's arm, sliced off a girl's ponytail, broke a boy's arm. The children fled toward the office, where Norina once again faced Stankewicz. The machete slashed deep into her hands, severing two of her fingers. Norina looked done for, so Stankewicz turned to seek fresh victims—and that's when Norina leaped. She wrapped him in a bear hug, hanging on with the last of her strength as he thrashed and lunged and—

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Clink.

He dropped the machete. The school nurse grabbed it and ran out to hide it in the hall. Stankewicz staggered to the desk, Norina still clinging to his back. Soon sirens and thundering footsteps were approaching. Norina had lost nearly half her blood but was rushed to the hospital in time to save her life. Stankewicz surrendered.

"Luck" and "courage" were mentioned often in the days following the attack, but of all the factors involved, luck and courage were the least significant. Courage gets you into predicaments; it doesn't necessarily get you back out. And unless he slips and falls, there's nothing lucky about outfighting a man coming at you with a machete. Norina Bentzel survived because she made a series of decisions, instantly and under extraordinary pressure, and her success rate was the difference between life and death.

When she crossed her arms and retreated, she instinctively seized on exactly the posture recommended in pankration, the ancient Greek art of no-rules fighting, later adopted in World War II by the "Heavenly Twins"—Bill Sykes and William Fairbairn—whose close-combat technique is still used by Special Forces today. Norina didn't stumble frantically or bolt into a dead end, but maneuvered backwards with purpose. If she'd allowed her adrenaline to redline, she'd have burned through her energy and been left helpless. Instead it was Stankewicz who ran out of gas, allowing Norina to wait for her opportunity and seize it.

When it came to strength, bulk, and savagery, Norina was hopelessly outmatched. So instead of going muscle-to-muscle, she found a better solution. She relied on her fascia, the fibrous connective tissue that encases our bodies beneath the skin. Your upper body has a belt of fascia running across your chest from one hand to the other. By wrapping her arms around Stankewicz, Norina closed the fascia loop; she turned herself into a human lasso, essentially banding Stankewicz's arms with a thick rubber cable and neutralizing his force.

But for any of that to happen, Norina first had to master her amygdala: the fear-conditioning portion of the brain. The amygdala accesses your long-term memory, scanning whether anything you've done in the past resembles something you're about to attempt

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in the present. If it hits a match, you're good to go: your muscles will relax, your heart rate will stabilize, your doubts will vanish. But if the amygdala finds no evidence that you've ever, say, climbed down a tall tree, it will lobby your nervous system to shut down the operation. The amygdala is what causes people to burn to death instead of stepping onto a firefighter's ladder, or drown by refusing to release their grip on a lifeguard's neck. It's also what makes riding a bike so hard when you're five, yet so easy after a five-year break; once learned, your amygdala recognizes the behavior and gives the go-ahead. Your amygdala doesn't reason; it only responds. It can't be tricked, only trained.

For most of us, no matter how strong or brave, the bizarreness of a machete attack would overwhelm our amygdala and freeze us in our tracks. Norina's genius was finding a strategy that suited her skills: she wasn't a fighter, but she was a hugger. Wrapping her arms around someone was a movement so familiar, her sensory system didn't object. Norina managed that hug because she'd had a flash of insight: she couldn't conquer Stankewicz's rage, but maybe she could calm it.

"I put my arms around you," she would tell Michael Stankewicz from the witness stand on the day he was sentenced. "To *comfort* you."

Stankewicz stared at her. Then he silently mouthed "Thank you" and was led off to serve a 264-year term in prison.

So how do you prepare for an attack by a maniac with a machete?

The question feels stupid coming out of my mouth and almost indecent, given the circumstances. I'm at Norina's school, and it's been barely a year since the attack. But privately, Norina has been wondering the same thing herself.

"Let's talk outside," she suggests. She's gracious and good-humored, and so charmed by children that after seventeen years as an educator she still likes spending her breaks watching the kids tear around at recess. Her arms are now covered with lightning-bolt scars. After four reconstructive surgeries, her hands have recovered a good bit of function, but they don't feel like her hands anymore; they're so cold and numb all the time that even on this warm autumn afternoon, she's clutching heat packs. But she can hold hands with her husband and children again and play her alto sax at Penn State Blue Band reunions

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and tousle the hair of the schoolkids who come charging up as soon as they see us on the playground.

Strange as it sounds, Norina says, she was ready that day. She must have been. She was calm, rational, strong. She wasn't panicking or preparing to die; she was running through her options and planning her next move. Her reactions weren't random; they were natural and deliberate. So deliberate, in fact, she felt "guided from above." But for practical purposes, she was guided from within: she knew what to do, and her body knew how to do it.

"If you want to call me a hero because I treasure these children, that's fine, but I do that every day in my job," Norina says. It's an interesting clue. Was she poised because she's a lifelong teacher who's trained herself to stay cool when things get hot? Did she hold eye contact because she deals with tantrumy children and agitated parents that way every day? Was it a coincidence that her hands came up in the same position she'd practiced for decades as a saxophonist, and she likewise had the ambidexterity to deflect and defend with both arms?

All it takes is a few minutes with her on the playground to understand why she'd fight to the death for these kids. What's still baffling—to Norina most of all—is why she won.

"What I find fascinating is how rare it is today for even a hero to understand his own heroism," says Earl Babbie, Ph.D., a professor emeritus in behavioral sciences at Orange County's Chapman University whose research focuses on heroics. "I'll bet you won't find a single example of a person who says, 'Yes, I'm a hero.' A few years back, a hijacker on a plane pointed a gun at a passenger. The flight attendant got between the gun and the passenger and said, 'You'll have to kill me first.' Afterward, the flight attendant said, 'No, no, I'm no hero.'

"And I thought, *For Christ's sake!* If that doesn't qualify, what does?" Babbie continues. "I don't think it's modesty. I think it's bewilderment."

Babbie has a dream experiment he'd love to perform. "I wish it were possible to interview heroes the day before they risk their lives for someone else," he says. "I bet you won't find anyone who can tell you

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Those are judgments of intent, not descriptions of behavior. Carnegie and Darwin were wondering about thoughts and feelings—the *why?*—when they should have been focusing on action, on the cold, hard facts of *how?* Detectives don't begin a case by worrying about motive, an infinite onion you can peel forever and still end up with nothing. First pin down what someone did, and maybe then you'll discover why they did it.

That's how the Ancient Greeks went about it. They put heroes at the center of their theology, which for all its tales of godly feuds and magical transformations still stands alone as the most pragmatic of world religions. Instead of bowing down to saints and miracles, the Greeks worshipped problem solvers and hard how-to. They understood the difference between heroism and impulse, and they devised an easy, two-step test for telling them apart:

1. Would you do it again?
2. And could you?

Hercules didn't have one Labor; he had twelve, plus plenty of mini-labors on the side. Odysseus's to-do list was relentless: he not only came up with a way to win the Trojan War, but he battled his way home afterwards by outsmarting, outfighting, and outrunning typhoons, warriors, enchantresses, a Cyclops, the powers of the underworld, and the charms of a sex goddess. Atalanta, one of the Greeks' rare female heroes, showed the boys she could beat up a pair of degenerate Centaurs, defeat a legendary wrestler, help Jason recover the Golden Fleece, and hunt down the monstrous Calydonian Boar. Perseus, who was "skilled in all manner of things, from the craft of the fisherman to the use of the sword," had to brainstorm a plan for cutting off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, then rescue a chained and naked princess from a sea monster.

Luckily, one man appeared who could turn all that crazy drama into a hard, clear code of conduct: Plutarch, the great Greek umpire of all things heroic. Plutarch was fascinated by heroism the way nuclear scientists are fascinated by uranium: he saw it as a fantastic natural superfuel, powerful and abundant and just waiting to be harnessed. Plutarch spent his life analyzing heroes and threw his net wide: he believed even fantasy has its roots in real-life experiences, so he stud-

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ied true stories and tall tales, Roman history and Greek myths. By the time he was ready to write his epic work, *Parallel Lives*, he'd heard it all, so you couldn't dazzle him; even the most beloved heroes got a blasting from Plutarch if they stepped out of line.

He reconstructed the lives of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; he exposed the shortcomings of Pericles—a brilliant tactician who nonetheless blundered Athens into the Peloponnesian War—and the fatal flaw of Pyrrhus, "the fool of hope" who took awful losses whenever his imagination outstripped his might. Plutarch admired Romulus, the wolf-suckled founder of Rome, for remaining true to his humble birth and kind to his eight hundred mistresses. But he blistered Theseus, who defeated the Minotaur in the Labyrinth; just because you kill monsters and thwart tyrants, you don't get a free pass for sex crimes. "The faults committed in the rapes of women admit of no plausible excuse in Theseus," Plutarch scolded. "It is to be suspected these things were done out of wantonness and lust."

Plutarch did such a remarkable job, *Parallel Lives* became the handbook for modern history's heroes. "It has been like my conscience," Henry IV of France commented, "and has whispered in my ear many good suggestions and maxims for my conduct and the government of my affairs." Abraham Lincoln was a devoted reader, as were Teddy Roosevelt, George Patton, and John Quincy Adams. When England was rebuilding after the Great War, the hero's bible was its guide. "Plutarch's *Lives* built the heroic ideal of the Elizabethan age," C. S. Lewis acknowledged.

And what Plutarch taught them is this: Heroes care. True heroism, as the ancients understood, isn't about strength, or boldness, or even courage. It's about compassion.

When the Greeks created the heroic ideal, they didn't choose a word that meant "Dies Trying" or "Massacres Bad Guys." They went with *ἥρως* (or *hērōs*)—"protector." Heroes aren't perfect; with a god as one parent and a mortal as the other, they're perpetually teetering between two destinies. What tips them toward greatness is a sidekick, a human connection who helps turn the spigot on the power of compassion. Empathy, the Greeks believed, was a source of strength, not softness; the more you recognized yourself in others and connected with their distress, the more endurance, wisdom, cunning, and determination you could tap into.

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The nearly indestructible Achilles had his loyal friend Patroclus. Odysseus fought his greatest battle with two loyal herdsmen by his side. Even Superman, who wasn't human at all, kept Jimmy Olsen hanging around. Hercules had his twin brother and adoring nephew, and when things were darkest, his best bud, Theseus, was always there. And of course, brainy boy detective Encyclopedia Brown had two-fisted Sally Kimball. A sidekick is a hero's way of looking into his soul, of drawing strength from his *weakest* side, not his strongest. He has to remember that even though he shares the blood of a god, he's still human at heart. He's not a Titan who will swallow a baby to get out of a jam, or a god who will never die. He has one shot at immortality, and it's in the memories and stories of the grateful and inspired.

He has to care so much for what's human, it brings out what's godly.

You can hope an impulse or "noble nature" will spontaneously create those kinds of heroic skills. Or you can follow the lead of the Spartans, who went right to the source: Crete. Sparta's founding father, Lycurgus, traveled to the island to soak up ideas and was so impressed he smuggled a Cretan back with him in disguise, pretending he was a poet while secretly relying on him as Sparta's most influential lawmaker. Sparta's social code "is, in a very great measure, a copy of the Cretan," Aristotle points out in *Politics*, and its defining spirit would become the foundation of both Greek theology and Western democracy: the notion that ordinary citizens should always be ready for extraordinary action.

The Greek myths are really the same performance parable, over and over; they're showcases for underdogs using the art of the hero to deal with danger. Need to tame a savage bull? Wait for it to take a drink, then wrestle it down by the horns. Ordered to clean a toxic stable? Flood it. Up against a giant man-bull, a three-headed hellhound, or a lion with an impenetrable pelt? Get behind them and choke 'em out. These techniques weren't just mythical make-believe; some were so spot-on, they're still used today in the Greek fighting art of pankration. If you're ever up against a guy who can tear your head off, take a lesson from Odysseus: "Odysseus knew a trick or two," Homer notes in the *Iliad*. "He kicked Ajax hard in the back of his knee and toppled him backwards, falling on his chest."

Because the way the Greeks looked at it, you have a choice: you can either hope a Norina Bentzel comes to the rescue when your kids are

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in danger, or you can guarantee it. Daredevils aren't the answer; spinal rehab wards are full of daredevils. Fearlessness doesn't really help, either: when your car breaks down, you don't want the mechanic to say, "I've never done this before, but I'm willing to die trying." What you want to hear is "Don't worry. This is right up my alley." Heroism isn't some mysterious inner virtue, the Greeks believed; it's a collection of skills that every man and woman can master so that in a pinch, they can become a Protector.

And for a long time, they were great at it. For centuries, the art of the hero thrived. But as the Greek empire faded, so did its influence, closing in on itself and disappearing. . . .

Until the last place the art of the hero remained intact was the wild mountains of Crete, where a band of British Army rejects arrived during World War II for a crash course in wisdom from the past.

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CHAPTER 6

Until now, we would say that the Greeks fight like heroes.
From now on, we will say that heroes fight like Greeks.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1941

SECRETLY, HITLER was dealing with a problem of his own. He was about to risk everything on Operation Barbarossa, his master plan to conquer the Soviet Union. If he miscalculated, Germany was doomed. But if Hitler played it right and brought the Russian Bear to its knees, no power on earth could defy him.

Once Germany grabbed control of Russia's oil fields, plus all those Soviet farms, tanks, and Red Army soldiers, the Third Reich would have the biggest, fastest, best-equipped fighting force the world had ever seen. Ponder *that*, America. Franklin D. Roosevelt would have to gulp hard before coming to Britain's aid. Hitler didn't necessarily intend to invade the United States—he'd be content for the present with all of continental Europe—but if pushed, he could make life in the United States very ugly, very fast. South American friends were standing by; Brazil and Argentina were already pro-fascist, and bringing Mexico on board was just a matter of promising the return of California, New Mexico, and Arizona and the easing of America's economic bootheel. The Imperial Japanese Navy and German

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a half-century. He didn't even bother trying to stop British troops from coming to Greece's aid. He waited till the weather warmed, on April 6, and then he gave Russia a look at its future.

"When it comes to hundreds of dive bombers at you and you can't hit back at the swine, by god it's nerving dear," one Australian corporal wrote from Greece to his wife after the German invasion. "It makes the strongest man feel helpless as a baby." German armored vehicles smashed through the mountain passes, while Luftwaffe planes machine-gunned and carpet-bombed anything that moved. The Greeks dug in courageously—so courageously, in fact, that after one garrison finally ran out of ammunition, the Germans spontaneously stood and saluted—but the long winter's war had left them exhausted. The Greeks were soon forced to surrender, while some fifty thousand British Commonwealth troops scrambled aboard ships to escape to Crete, throwing aside their heavy weapons as they had at Dunkirk.

In just twenty-four days, Hitler mopped up Greece and captured Yugoslavia at the same time. Now for the finale: Crete.

This would take some finesse. Thanks to Mussolini's bungling, the whole Greek adventure had put Operation Barbarossa behind schedule, but storming straight into Crete could be trouble. If Hitler invaded with a big ground force, he'd tie up troops that were already supposed to be on their way to Russia. But if he went in shorthanded, those mountain men could cause him the same headaches they'd just given Mussolini. Hitler assembled his generals and spelled out his dilemma.

That's no dilemma, argued General Kurt Student, commander of the elite XI Air Corps. *That's the opportunity of a lifetime.*

Of *Student's* lifetime, at least. Student had grown up poor and clawed his way up through the ranks by taking jobs that were supposed to kill him. He started as a trench fighter in World War I, then was trained to fly and volunteered for dead man's duty as a dogfight pilot over the Russian front. He became a legend for shooting down a notoriously elusive French plane, then bolting a German machine gun to its nose and taking it right back into combat. As one of the few German fliers to survive the war, he was recruited into an underground brotherhood that, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, was secretly rebuilding the German air force. Airborne shock and awe was Germany's greatest weapon, Student was convinced, and he was

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willing to prove it with his own battered body; even though he was a fifty-year-old senior officer at the start of World War II and never learned to skydive, he personally commanded the invasion of Holland by slicing through shrapnel fire to arrive by seaplane. He was accidentally shot in the forehead by one of his own soldiers, but not even that stopped him; when Hitler was vexed by Crete, Student had recovered and was strong enough to step forward with a spectacular solution.

Crete was Hitler's opportunity to launch the biggest airborne invasion in history. He could awe the world with the Third Reich's newest and most terrifying innovation: a flying army. No military had ever attempted to swarm a major target by dropping in entirely from above, arriving from the clouds without the support of ground troops or sea reinforcements. Germany's big Junkers were powerful enough to tow gliders holding a force of ten Storm Regiment commandos. Cut the gliders loose and they're silent; steer them out of the blinding sunrise and they're invisible. It was the ultimate sneak attack: a fighting force that could suddenly appear right over your head—anywhere, anytime—without a moment's warning.

Hitler heard him out . . . then said no. Dangling that many men over the enemy's guns? Far too risky.

But they weren't talking about men, Student insisted; they were talking about the *Fallschirmjäger*, an elite corps of paratroopers known as "Hunters from the Sky." You had to be extraordinarily ferocious, tough, ingenious, and athletic to even apply to be a Hunter, and even then, two of every three candidates flunked out. To earn the badge of the attacking eagle, you had to run an obstacle course under live fire; jump by night into forests; fire a submachine gun with accuracy while falling through the air at thirty-five miles per hour; survive for days on only the gear in the forty-seven pockets of your jumpsuit; and be able to disarm an enemy with your bare hands and use his own weapon against him. The Hunters could hit the ground, by day or by darkness, and come up fighting before a stunned enemy could react. A force of only eighty *Fallschirmjäger* had forced the surrender of fifteen hundred Belgian soldiers. Plus the Hunters relied on one of the Nazis' secret weapons: before jumping, they were issued tablets of Pervitin, an early version of crystal meth.

Hitler started coming around. Despite his misgivings, he loved the Wagnerian overkill of Student's plan: no clanking tanks or common foot soldiers, just wave after wave of Germany's fiercest commandos

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raining down from the sky like apocalyptic demons. It was more than warfare; it was biblical doom. Hitler found the theatrics so tantalizing, he insisted they feature Germany's greatest star, Max Schmeling, the world heavyweight boxing champion who'd knocked out Joe Louis. Having a celebrity like Max Schmeling leap out of a plane behind enemy lines was an astonishing command, but it neatly served two purposes.

Privately, it settled a personal grudge between the Führer and the famous fighter, who refused to join the Nazi Party and, it was rumored, had saved the lives of his Jewish trainer's two sons by hiding them in his hotel room and smuggling them to safety in the United States. Publicly, it added another chilling image to the Nazis' gallery of terror. A photo of the muscular German colossus as his big boots thumped down on the dust of Crete would send an unmistakable message: *Our giants are coming, and they can't be stopped.* For a Third Reich so enraptured by death's-head skulls, blood-red flags, and the raw rape symbolism of the swastika, with its two interlocked bodies representing, as Hitler put it, "the struggle for the victory of the Aryan man," the sight of Germany's two-fisted champion striding across the ancient world was irresistible. Crete was the birthplace of the modern world, the origin of every great achievement in civilization, and Hitler would show he could snatch it up in a matter of hours.

Besides, wasn't it time the Nazis were greeted as heroes for a change? German troops weren't really invading Crete, General Student pointed out; they were *liberating* it. The Cretan islanders were so sick of being ruled by the Greek king, Hitler would become their idol as soon as they realized the arrival of the Germans meant the end of the monarchy. In fact, Student had it on good authority that a super-secret underground of Cretan rebels was eager to greet its new German friends and had already worked out a pass code. "Top Dog!" the Germans were supposed to call out. "Big Buck!" the Cretan underground would reply, and the celebration would begin.

Hitler relented. He dubbed Student's plan Operation Mercury, after the Roman god of thievery and lightning speed, and set the go date for May 20. It took twenty-four days to capture the mainland; Hitler would allow twenty-four hours for Crete.

One day. Then it was on to Russia.

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May 20, 1941, dawned beautifully, so Colonel Howard Kippenberger of the New Zealand 10th Brigade grabbed a plate of porridge and went outside to enjoy the sun rising over the Aegean. *Weird*, he thought as he settled in under a plane tree. *What happened to the sun?* A minute earlier, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but now all of a sudden he's sitting in shadows. *Wait* . . . He jerked his head up, stunned.

Overhead, German gliders were silently soaring in, so many they darkened the sky. Kippenberger grabbed for his rifle, but he'd left it in his room. Kippenberger had never seen anything like it. There had to be hundreds of commandos inside those gliders. Hard behind was a sea of transport planes, with wave after wave of elite *Fallschirmjäger* paratroopers pouring out the jump doors.

"STAND TO YOUR ARMS!" Kippenberger shouted, praying that not too many of his troops were splashing naked in the sea at that moment. By the time he got his rifle, Germans were on the ground and scrambling for position. Bullets splintered the olive trees; snipers had already nested, with sight lines toward the little house serving as Kippenberger's headquarters. Above, the sky was so hectic with men and machines that one stunned soldier felt he was witnessing the Martian occupation of Earth from H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds.*

Many of Kippenberger's men were mechanics and drivers, not frontline soldiers. They backed up, firing desperately and uncertainly, while Kippenberger hurried to the top of a hill to get a clear view of how much trouble they were in.

Lots, it turned out.

When it came to troops, Crete was an island of castaways. Nearly every soldier there was a refugee from the fighting on the Greek mainland—a hodgepodge of Australians, New Zealanders, Brits, and Greeks. As ordered, they'd chucked their heavy weapons when they were ferried to Crete, where they'd hunkered down to await one of two things: either massive reinforcement or a speedy retreat. Anything else would be a massacre. One battalion didn't even have boots; their ship had been torpedoed on the way to Crete, so they'd dumped their rifles and shoes to swim for it.

"Forces at my disposal are totally inadequate to meet the attack envisaged," concluded Major General Bernard Freyberg of New Zealand after he arrived on Crete to take command. Was Freyberg seriously expected to defend one of the most strategically important

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islands in the Mediterranean with, as he put it, "gunners who had lost their guns, sappers who had lost their tools, and R.S.A.C. drivers who had lost their cars"? He wasn't sure what Hitler had in mind, but if it was even a fraction of the firepower unleashed on the mainland, the Brits were doomed.

Coming from a wild man like Freyberg, gloom like that had to be taken seriously. Churchill loved Freyberg and had nicknamed him the Salamander, after the myth that salamanders are created by fire. Freyberg had left New Zealand as a young man to join Pancho Villa's rebels in Mexico, so hungry for action that he'd traveled across the globe to plunge into a war he only dimly comprehended, in a language he didn't speak. When World War I broke out, young Freyberg jumped into a series of swimming races in Los Angeles and won enough prize money to pay for passage to England. He enlisted and quickly made his mark by stripping naked for a suicide mission: to distract Turkish forces during the invasion at Gallipoli, he smeared his body with grease, dived off of a troop ship, and swam two miles through the bone-chilling Gulf of Saros to light diversionary flares on a beach behind enemy lines. He became England's youngest general at twenty-eight and was wounded so many times that one of Churchill's party tricks was to get Freyberg to peel off his shirt so other guests could count his twenty-seven battle scars.

But even for the Salamander, Crete was too much—or, rather, too little. Freyberg should have at least had some local troops who knew the terrain, but he'd been robbed of even that slim advantage: the Cretan division was still stranded back on the mainland.

The drug-enhanced Hunters were on the ground and moving fast, wriggling free of their harnesses and breaking open the weapon crates thumping down nearby. In minutes, the *Fallschirmjäger* were better equipped than the British. Besides motorcycles and surgical equipment, the crates also had specially designed field guns powerful enough to blow a hole through a tank. Quickly, the Germans grouped into attack formation and began advancing, cutting telephone lines to British headquarters as they moved.

But hold on a moment. Up on his hill, Kippenberger noticed one German squad was going the wrong way. Instead of advancing,

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CHAPTER 7

FRANCE FELL IN FIVE DAYS,
WHY IS CRETE STILL RESISTING?

—ADOLF HITLER, in a message to General Kurt Student

TOO LATE, General Student was discovering that on Crete heroes aren't an accident.

For more than a thousand years, in both fact and fable, the island has been a battleground between tyrants and rebels, gods and monsters. Crete was the birthplace of Zeus, the home of the Minotaur, the launch site of Daedalus and Icarus, and the homeland of canny backwoodsmen who, for generations, refused to bow to Turkish or Venetian warlords. From those myths and struggles emerged not only the heroic ideal but the means to achieve it—a folk science of mind and body that's ancient, alive, and very teachable.

"They are good archers, every one with his bowe and arrowes, a sword and dagger, with long haire and bootes that reach up to their grine, and a shirt of male," noted a British trader in the 1500s, who was just as intimidated by the festivals as the fighting: "They would drink wine out of all measure."

Jack Smith-Hughes learned firsthand about the Cretan art of the hero during the German invasion, and it kept him breathing long

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after he should have been dead. Jack had pink cheeks and a bit of a belly—no surprise, since his greatest contribution for much of the war was running a field bakery and supplying bread to the front lines. Jack didn't want to lose his supply trucks to enemy ambush, so he decided to reroute by water—and it was then, while dispatching a boatload of food to troops farther up the coast, that he found himself standing next to the Allied commander.

General Freyberg had gotten word that an Australian detachment was under fire without a working radio, so he'd sent a messenger by boat with orders to retreat. Instead of pivoting to other emergencies, Freyberg began pacing the waterfront. It was as if the fighting that raged elsewhere across the island had melted away and the only thing that mattered was one small pocket of beleaguered Australians. The baker wasn't sure what to do and found himself pacing the jetty alongside his brooding commander. Was Freyberg cracking under the pressure? He was famous for keeping his cool during Gallipoli and the Somme, two of the most horrific bloodbaths of World War I, but now that he was on the verge of a stunning victory, he looked distracted and defeated.

We're about to defeat Hitler's best fighters, Jack thought. *Aren't we?*

Freyberg's underdog troops had rallied magnificently once the shock of the air attack had worn off. Many of the New Zealanders were country boys, and their confidence grew as they realized this was their kind of fight. A Hunter dropping from the sky wasn't much different from a wild boar blasting from the bush back home in Kaikoura, so Kippenberger's Petrol Company quickly adjusted their fire to the paratroopers' four-meters-per-second drop speed, aiming for their feet to make kill shots to the chest.

So sharp was their marksmanship, one *Fallschirmjäger* battalion was convinced it had dropped into a den of supersoldiers. "It was particularly noticeable that a very large proportion of our casualties had been shot in the head," a *Fallschirmjäger* sergeant-major would report. "The controlled fire and discipline of the enemy led us to believe that we were up against a specialist force of picked snipers." Two of the New Zealanders held down the entire western side of a hill on their own—*for six days.*

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Springtime on Crete is hot and dry, and German uniforms were wool. So it wasn't long before the Cretan shepherds faded from the fray, settling in behind stone walls with sight lines on cool springs. "The only well where we could get water," paratrooper Sebastian Krug would recall, "was being shot at all the time." The New Zealanders caught onto the idea and set ambushes of their own, lying in wait near the paratroopers' supply boxes. From the olive groves, the same cry began to ring out over and over:

"GOT THE BASTARD!"

This isn't warfare. This is ritual suicide. Long past midnight, General Student was still at a table in his command room, stubbing cigarettes into an overflowing ashtray as he read the battle dispatches. His Luger remained ready by his hand.

Because of him, the Third Reich's finest fighters were being slaughtered by shepherds and pig hunters. More than half of Student's ten-thousand-man invasion force was dead, wounded, or captured. Many of the rest were lost or hiding for their lives. All three Blücher brothers, from the fabled fighting family whose patriarch led the Prussian army against Napoleon, were gone. Max Schmeling's photo op nearly did him in; he'd parachuted through machine-gun fire, passed out after landing hard and injuring his back, then hid till nightfall and eventually crawled back to his unit. If there was a way out of this fiasco, Student didn't see it.

Then something caught his eye. Amid the bad news, one thing should have been worse. Why hadn't the Brits blown up Maleme, the small airfield on Crete's northwest coast? That's the first thing Student would have done if he were defending Crete: he'd have packed Maleme with dynamite and blasted it into a moon crater the second he saw a parachute pop open.

Crete is basically a rectangle, with two good-sized airfields along its northern coast. Master the airfields and you master the island. The Brits could get in and out by sea, thanks to its Royal Navy, but the Germans weren't as strong in the water. With no place to land their planes, the Hunters would be stranded.

The airfield was well defended at Heraklion, in the center, but Maleme, in the west, was a different story. That's where Student had

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