



Natural Born Heroes: How a Daring Band of Misfits Mastered the Lost Secrets of Strength and Endurance

By Christopher McDougall

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The best-selling author of *Born to Run* now travels to the Mediterranean, where he discovers that the secrets of ancient Greek heroes are still alive and well on the island of Crete, and ready to be unleashed in the muscles and minds of casual athletes and aspiring heroes everywhere.

After running an ultramarathon through the Copper Canyons of Mexico, Christopher McDougall finds his next great adventure on the razor-sharp mountains of Crete, where a band of Resistance fighters in World War II plotted the daring abduction of a German general from the heart of the Nazi occupation. How did a penniless artist, a young shepherd, and a playboy poet believe they could carry out such a remarkable feat of strength and endurance, smuggling the general past thousands of Nazi pursuers, with little more than their own wits and courage to guide them?

McDougall makes his way to the island to find the answer and retrace their steps, experiencing firsthand the extreme physical challenges the Resistance fighters and their local allies faced. On Crete, the birthplace of the classical Greek heroism that spawned the likes of Herakles and Odysseus, McDougall discovers the tools of the hero—natural movement, extraordinary endurance, and efficient nutrition. All of these skills, McDougall learns, are still practiced in far-flung pockets throughout the world today.

More than a mystery of remarkable people and cunning schemes, *Natural Born Heroes* is a fascinating investigation into the lost art of the hero, taking us from the streets of London at midnight to the beaches of Brazil at dawn, from the mountains of Colorado to McDougall's own backyard in Pennsylvania, all places where modern-day athletes are honing ancient skills so they're ready for anything.

Just as *Born to Run* inspired readers to get off the treadmill, out of their shoes, and into the natural world, *Natural Born Heroes* will inspire them to leave the gym and take their fitness routine to nature—to climb, swim, skip, throw, and

jump their way to their own heroic feats.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A mash note to physical endurance. . . . McDougall redefines the heroic ideal, establishing heroism as a skill set rather than a virtue. . . . [And] schools the reader in the art of the champion. . . . The essential narrative here, the twisty tale of a kidnapping that incredibly goes right, is exciting. It is balanced out with the journalistic account of McDougall’s entry into the world of the hero. His personal quest to ‘rewild the psyche’ might seem an awkward fit with war storytelling. But under McDougall’s sure hand the combination improbably works. Kind of like kidnapping a German general on an island swarming with Nazi troops.”

—*NPR Books*

“A heady confection that encompasses, among other subjects, military history, archaeology, Greek mythology, neat ways to kill a man and ideas on health and fitness that might just change your life. . . . [McDougall] constructs a fascinating edifice of ideas . . . and eventually finds a modern-day hero of his own. But the pleasures of the book are as much to do with the fascinating panoply of characters, war heroes all, British, Commonwealth and Cretan, whose exploits contributed so much to Hitler’s downfall.” —*The Independent* (London)

“In the thoroughly absorbing *Natural Born Heroes*, which tracks heroism from the times of Zeus and Odysseus to the World War II bravery of a motley crew of fighters, Christopher McDougall makes it clear that . . . heroes, both ancient and modern, are not somehow supernaturally endowed after all. Indeed, they may come by their skills quite naturally. . . . His extensive knowledge of fitness training, nutrition and physiology winds artfully around a tale of superhuman resistance during the Nazi occupation of the Greek island of Crete. . . . [McDougall] solves this mystery with a witty eye for every detail, inspiring his own captive audience along the way.” —*BookPage* (The Top Pick of the Month: Nonfiction)

“Compelling . . . engaging . . . provocative . . . with inquiries into the nature of heroism. . . . True heroism, as the ancients understood, isn’t about strength or boldness or even courage. It’s about compassion.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Riveting. . . . A well-done recounting of a truly heroic episode of WWII. . . . In absorbing detail, McDougall describes how . . . ‘ordinary’ men who were far from stereotypically tough, battle-hardened warriors . . . trekked across tortuous mountain terrain while avoiding a massive German dragnet.” —*Booklist*

About the Author

Christopher McDougall is the author of *Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen*. He began his career as an overseas correspondent for the Associated Press, covering wars in Rwanda and Angola. He now lives and writes (and runs, swims, climbs, and bear-crawls) among the Amish farms around his home in rural Pennsylvania.

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You’ve got to put yourself in the Butcher’s shoes.

You’re General Friedrich-Wilhelm Müller, one of two German commanders on the Greek island of Crete. Hitler is worried that something terrible is about to happen right under your nose, something that

could severely damage the German offensive, but you've got it all under control. The island is small and your manpower is huge. You've got 100,000 seasoned troops, with search planes prowling the mountains and patrol boats monitoring the beaches. You've got the Gestapo at your service, and you're scary enough to be called the Butcher. No one is going to mess with you.

And then you wake up on the morning of April 24, 1944, to discover the other you is gone. Your fellow commander, General Heinrich Kreipe, has disappeared. There's no hint of foul play: no shots fired, no bloodshed, no signs of a scuffle. Stranger yet, the general vanished from somewhere around the capital, the most heavily guarded corner of the island. Whatever happened, it happened right in front of the general's own men. Kreipe was no toy soldier, either; he was a serious hard case, a Great War survivor with an Iron Cross who'd battled his way up through the ranks and just transferred in from the Russian front. He had a personal security force and an armed driver and a villa surrounded by attack dogs, razor wire, and machine-gun posts.

So where was he?

All the Butcher knew was this: shortly after 9 p.m., General Kreipe left his command base and drove into the center of town. It was Saturday, so foot traffic was thicker than usual. Troops from outlying garrisons had been bused in for a movie, and the streets were jammed with strolling soldiers. The movie had just let out; the Butcher knew this because hundreds of soldiers had seen the black sedan with the general's flags on the bumper inching its way through the streets. General Kreipe's driver had to honk them out of the way, even rolling down his window at one point to holler, "GENERAL'S WAGEN!" Kreipe was right there in the front passenger seat, nodding his head and returning salutes. Every road in every direction at every half-mile was guarded by checkpoints. The general's car passed Gestapo headquarters and funneled through the last checkpoint, the narrow opening at the Canae Gate. "Gute Nacht," the general's driver called. The sedan slid beneath the crossbar and exited the city.

Early the next morning, the general's car was discovered on a scruff of beach just outside the city. The general and his driver were gone, as were the eagle flags from the front bumper. Around the car was a weird scattering of rubbish: an Agatha Christie novel, Cadbury milk chocolate wrappers, a bunch of English "Players" cigarette butts, and a green British commando beret. On the dashboard was a letter. It was addressed to "The German authorities on Crete" and said that Kreipe had been captured by a British raiding force and taken off the island. The letter was ceremonially sealed with red wax and signet rings, and included a jaunty postscript:

We are very sorry to have to leave this beautiful motor car behind.

Something didn't add up. The general must have been grabbed after he left the city, but his car was found only a twenty-minute drive away. So within that brief window, these mystery men had executed an ambush, disarmed and subdued two prisoners, smoked a pack of cigarettes, shared some snacks, lost a hat, melted wax, and what else—browsed a paperback? Was this an abduction or a family vacation? Plus that stretch of coast was floodlit by klieg lights and patrolled by planes. Why would seasoned commandos choose the most exposed part of the island as their extraction point? From that beach, their escape boat would have had to head north into hundreds of miles of German-occupied waters, making them sitting ducks as soon as the sun came up.

Whoever did this was trying very hard to look very British, very cool and under control. But the Butcher wasn't buying it. He was in the midst of his second World War and to his knowledge, no general had ever been kidnapped before. There was no precedent for this sort of thing, no tactics, so they had to be making it up as they went along. Which meant that sooner or later, they'd make a blunder and fall right into his hands. Already, they'd made a big mistake: they'd badly underestimated their opponent. Because the Butcher had seen through their feints and realized two things:

They were still on his island, and they were running for their lives.

On a spring morning in 2012, I stood where the general's car was found, wondering the same thing as

the Butcher: where could they possibly go?

At my back is the Aegean Sea. In front, there's nothing but a snarl of chest-high brambles leading to a sheer cliff. In the far distance and cutting the island in half like a giant border fence is the craggy range of snowy Mount Ida, the highest climb in Greece. The only possible escape is the southern coast, but the only way to get there is up and over that eight-thousand-foot peak. The trek alone would be a challenge, but pulling it off with a belligerent prisoner in tow and a massive manhunt hot on your heels? Impossible.

"Ah!" There's a shout from somewhere inside the brambles, then a hand jerks up like it's hailing a cab. "Come toward me."

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

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

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

Chris White parted the brambles and pointed. In the dirt, a thin scuff led to a low tunnel through the brush. It wasn't much of a scuff, but it was the best we'd seen all morning.

"They went this way," Chris said. "Let's go."

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

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

around, we had to be gaining altitude. Imperceptibly, we were wormholing our way up the cliff.

“Doesn’t it take your breath away?” said Chris. “Before we came, it’s possible no one had walked through here since the German occupation. It’s like going into an ancient tomb.”

Soon Chris and I were beetling along at a steady clip. Well, Chris beetled and I followed. He broke the trail and ranged ahead while I was focused on just keeping pace. I’m ten years younger than Chris and I thought in much better shape, so it was humbling to face the fact that this sixty-year-old social-services administrator who never works out and looks like he’s best suited for a comfy chair and a Sunday paper could shame me with his endurance and uphill agility.

“It must come naturally,” Chris shrugged.

Did it? That’s what I was on Crete to find out.

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

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

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

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

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

So what exactly were the Cretans tapping into? There was a time when that question wouldn’t be a

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

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

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

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Miller:

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