

Learning from World War II Special Operations

Reviewed by JR Seeger

The Ariadne Objective: The Underground War to Rescue Crete from the Nazis

Wes Davis (Crown Publishers, 2013), 329 pp., photos, map.

Abducting a General: The Kreipe Operation and SOE in Crete

Patrick Leigh Fermor (New York Review of Books, 2015), 240 pp.

Kidnap in Crete

Rick Stroud (Bloomsbury USA, 2014), 288 pp., photos, maps.

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

Christopher McDougall (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 337 pp., map.

This year, the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, is also the 70th anniversary of the end of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) of the United Kingdom and its US counterpart, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Well documented SOE and OSS activities in the Eastern Mediterranean have provided source material for dozens of books written on operations in Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and the islands off the coast of Turkey. Here, small numbers of special operations men and women collaborated with resistance armies against Nazi occupiers with little or no hope of an eventual invasion by conventional Allied armies. The SOE and the OSS sent a mix of combat and academic specialists into this complex military and political environment with the objective of disrupting Nazi occupation, forcing the Germans to maintain large combat forces throughout the region—forces they should have transferred to more strategic locations. These operations are true adventure stories that rival any fiction written by Ian Fleming, Graham Greene, or Alistair MacLean.^a

In the middle of this combat theater was the island of Crete, occupied by the Nazis in 1941 after a dramatic assault of the island by German airborne forces. German soldiers occupied the island until the end of the war.

a. For current works on OSS and SOE operations in the region, see *The Forgotten 500* (2008) by Gregory Freeman, *The Wildest Province* (2008) by Roderick Bailey, *The Rash Adventurer* (2008) by Imogen Grundon, *Shadow on the Mountain* (2010) by Marcia Kurapovna, *Classical Spies* (2011) by Susan Allen, and *First Seals* (2014) by Patrick O'Donnell.

The island was of strategic value to the Germans during the North African campaign due to its location south of Greece and Yugoslavia and north of Eastern Libya and Western Egypt. After the defeat of the Afrika Corps in North Africa, it remained of military importance in the Eastern Mediterranean as an airbase and port facility, preventing British forces from conducting amphibious operations in Greece or Yugoslavia. Despite the strategic value of the island to the Nazi military machine in the early stages of the war, in hindsight there appears to be no good explanation why the Germans in 1943 had over 70,000 troops on the island—or even over 10,000 troops when the Germans surrendered in Europe in May 1945. That said, the number and types of troops deployed by the Germans on Crete throughout the war is clearly correlated with the fact that, starting in 1941, the Cretan resistance, supported by a small number of SOE operators, was active across the entire island. These resistance fighters conducted regular, small-scale sabotage and ambush attacks across the island, then disappeared into the mountain range that is the spine of the 260-kilometer long island. The Nazi occupiers were never able to stop the resistance, no matter how many troops they added to the island garrison or how extreme their reprisals.

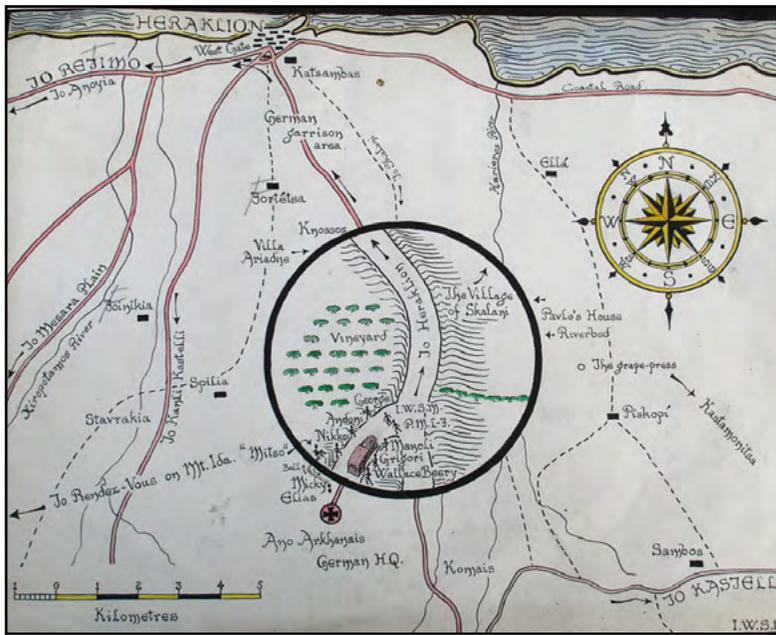
In Crete, SOE operators on the ground managed a very successful program with few resources other than their wits, periodic equipment resupply by air and sea, and the determination of the Cretan resistance forces. The story of Crete from 1941 to 1945 is worth understanding, not for the audacity of the special operations conducted

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during those four years (though they were audacious almost to a fault), but for the fact that a very small number of local resistance fighters and no more than a dozen SOE operators tied down as many as 70,000 German soldiers at a time when they were needed on the Eastern Front.

The most audacious SOE operation during the Nazi occupation of Crete was a successful capture and exfiltration of General Heinrich Kreipe in April 1944, an operation conducted by two SOE operators, Patrick Fermor and W. Stanley Moss and a dozen members of the Cretan resistance. The story was first detailed in 1950 in a memoir titled *Ill Met by Moonlight*, written by one of the two SOE operators involved, Moss. In 1955, a member of the Cretan resistance, George Psychoundakis published his memoir, *The Cretan Runner*. *Ill Met by Moonlight* was made into a black-and-white war movie in 1957, starring Dirk Bogarde.

Moss and another SOE operator, Xan Fielding, published additional works on their efforts in Crete in the early 1950s.^a The next time the story was described in detail was in a history of the headquarters of Minoan archaeology built for the British archaeological team. Dilys Powell published the book *Villa Ariadne* in 1973, capturing both the history of pre-war Minoan archeology and the Cretan resistance during the war. Powell focused much greater attention in her book on the lives and fortunes of Cretan



This map, showing the location of German General Heinrich Kreipe's capture appeared in SOE operator W. Stanley Moss's book *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1950 edition, 108). Image: Wiki Commons.

civilians who had worked for the British archeologists and faced Nazi occupation, including the use of the Villa Ariadne as a Nazi headquarters. Following this publication, the story of the capture of the Nazi general was subsumed in works focusing on special operations in World War II, but otherwise generally forgotten by writers and publishers for 40 years.

In part, the story was forgotten because the operation, though daring, had little strategic impact on overall allied operations in the

Eastern Mediterranean. General Kreipe was a relatively new arrival to the island. He was a traditional Wehrmacht officer who had served in World War I and in France and the USSR during the first few years of World War II. He was part of the Nazi war machine, but he was not linked to a larger cadre of trusted Nazi officers and thus was not privy to the overall strategic views of Hitler and his military leaders. Kreipe's capture was certainly a coup and there is evidence that it was successful in boosting Cretan morale as well as in undermining German soldier morale, but it had little effect on the actual balance of power on the island. The Nazis continued to occupy Crete and to violently suppress the resistance.

The Cretan resistance continued to conduct harassment operations against the German garrison until the Germans finally surrendered to British conventional forces in 1945. Though chronicled by Moss and Psychoundakis, in general the heroism of the intrepid resistance and their SOE colleagues throughout the war was forgotten as historians of the Eastern Mediterranean in the 20th century focused on the strategic challenges in the Balkans, including the subsequent Greek civil war, the rise of communist leaders in Yugoslavia and Albania, and, eventually, the part the

a. The works discussed in this paragraph include *The Stronghold: An Account of the Four Seasons in the White Mountains of Crete*, and *Hide and Seek: The Story of a War-time Agent*, Xan Fielding (1953 and 1954, respectively); *Ill Met by Moonlight* and *A War of Shadows*, W. Stanley Moss (1950 and 1952, respectively); *The Cretan Runner*, George Psychoundakis (1955), and *The Villa Ariadne*, Dilys Powell (1973).

Balkans played at the end of the Cold War and the splintering of Yugoslavia.

More recently, and in the year marking the 70th anniversary of the SOE and OSS, a number of new works have retold the story of Cretan resistance and specifically the events associated with the kidnap of General Kreipe. In the past two years, four books have revived this story. Wes Davis' book, *The Ariadne Objective* appeared in 2013 and Patrick Fermor's own memoir of the operation, *Abducting a General*, came out in the UK in 2014. (Fermor's work was published in the United States later, in 2015.) In early 2015, *Kidnap in Crete* by Rick Stroud was published in the United States after being released in the UK in 2014. Also in 2015, Christopher McDougall's work *Natural Born Heroes* was released.

While each of these works spotlights the capture of General Kreipe as a high point of resistance operations on the island, they are very different in structure, style, and the questions they address. Stroud is an accomplished military historian and his work focuses on the question, "What happened?" Davis asks similar questions, but he and Fermor attempt to answer the question, "How did it happen?" Finally McDougall (and again Davis) addresses the question, "Who made it happen?"

Davis and Stroud detail the tactics and intricacies of the SOE operations in Crete based on information derived from primary sources such as war records as well as the memoirs of all the British participants. Stroud is the best military historian of the four authors, providing the greatest amount of detail of the entire campaign. He focuses considerable attention on the German airborne assault on 20 May 1941 that was titled *Operation Mercury* and addresses the strategic significance of the invasion and the early days of combat operations before the withdrawal of all conventional British forces at the end of May. His descriptions are matched to an excellent map of the island marking German drop zones and the deployment of British forces during the Nazi occupation. Stroud then goes on to detail the creation of the Cretan resistance from the perspective of the residents themselves and from the perspective of the SOE operators. As with all of the books being reviewed, Stroud finally turns his attention to a nearly hour-by-hour description of the kidnap of General Kreipe and his exfiltration to Cairo.

While Davis's focus is less on the larger issues of the military history of the Cretan resistance, his work does

answer the question of how the SOE fostered, supported, and guided the resistance. Each author focuses on one British officer who was "curator" of the resistance network during 1940–41. John Pendlebury was an archaeologist and adventurer who understood early in 1940 that the residents of Crete could serve as a resistance force once the Germans attacked. Under cover at the British consulate in Crete, he established a small intelligence and support network that survived his death during initial days of the German invasion. This network was the backbone of the SOE network that conducted operations in Crete until the end of the war. Davis explains how the network allowed the British special operators to move throughout the island—even inside the garrison headquarters of Heraklion. He also goes into detail on the background of the various SOE operators and the Cretan resistance leaders. Davis's description of the interaction among these players provides the best atmospherics of resistance operations as he describes how the resistance worked and subsequently was able to successfully kidnap of General Kreipe.

Fermor, one of the best-respected nonfiction writers of the 20th century, was famous for capturing the emotional feeling around a place or event in his work. There is some debate about when Fermor wrote this memoir and why. Fermor did not write a memoir immediately after the war but did pen a foreword to George Psychoundakis's memoir, *The Cretan Runner*, which he translated into English. Nearly 50 years later he also wrote a foreword to Grundon's biography of John Pendlebury. Fermor wrote his own version of the story of the kidnapping of General Kreipe, a year after his colleague Moss died in 1965. The book was not published until after Fermor himself died. Written from the perspective of one of the participants in the kidnapping, of all the work reviewed here Fermor provides the best understanding of what it was like to serve in the mountains with the Cretan resistance—often working entirely alone, with only periodic contact with other SOE operators. Fermor admits early in this memoir that he did not keep many of his notebooks and thus the work is in part an exercise in recalling events of two decades before. Still, Fermor's writing style and his insight into the men and women who made up the resistance provides a detailed and brilliant depiction of what it takes to work behind enemy lines for months at a time.

Natural Born Heroes also addresses what it takes to work behind lines, but where Fermor and Davis talk about the individual personalities and interactions, McDougall

focuses much more on the physical challenges the SOE operators and Cretan resistance fighters faced. McDougall weaves the story of the SOE operations in 1944 into his attempt to retrace the footsteps of the British agents, taking us through his training regimen as he prepares for this modern recreation of Moss and Fermor's escape after capturing the general. There are chapters on the physiology, exercise, and mental capacity required to handle adversity. McDougall spends as much time focusing on the science as he does on the story of what he calls the "natural born heroes" of Crete and the group of eccentrics that became the SOE operator network on the island.

While his discussions are well written and interesting, they are often far afield from the story of SOE in Crete or even McDougall's effort to trace their actual path 70 years later. In essence, McDougall's book is an essay on the members of the SOE in Crete—who they were and how they survived mentally and physically. McDougall is adept at describing the mix of military amateurs and academics that worked for the SOE in the Eastern Mediterranean and he provides a useful study of how the SOE found, trained, and managed these eccentrics. After 70 years of professional development in the CIA and the US special operations community that has defined what the intelligence or special operations professional looks like, it is also an interesting discussion of what might be missing in the US community of carefully selected and highly trained professionals.

Common to all four works is a consistent description of the SOE operators involved in this resistance movement, operators who shared traits that should be considered essential for any unconventional warfare or intelligence operator.

- First, all of the SOE personnel on the island were creative. In fact, they were so creative that at the beginning of the war the British Army did not think that most of these men could be of real use to the war effort. While as amateurs their creativity was not structured in any way consistent with Army doctrine, it proved itself in the audacious plan and intrepid execution of the kidnapping and exfiltration of General Kreipe.

- Second, with only one exception (Moss), the SOE operators in Crete were exceptional linguists. Most had been involved in archaeological excavations of one sort or another in the Eastern Mediterranean before the war and had worked for years with Greek excavation crews. Fermor was also a linguist, but his language skills were acquired during his travels in Greece before the war and his initial assignment in Greece in 1940. As with T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt, their understanding of the language and the culture of Crete meant that they knew how to grow and support a resistance movement that was unique to the culture.

- Finally, the SOE operators were both physically and mentally resilient. They lived on an island when the ability to escape from the Nazis meant multi-day evasion along mountain trails with little or no food or shelter. These men were not athletes when they arrived on the island, but they were capable of withstanding long, hard movements on the mountain paths that were the home of their Cretan partners. SOE operations on the island were divided into several areas of responsibility and SOE operators covered an area of responsibility alone or, at best, with one British partner. As a result, they had to address the challenges of local rivalries alone and without counsel. Fermor is especially clear on the mental as well as the physical challenges.

Each of the books reviewed here offers a different perspective on how a small number of SOE personnel and Cretan fighters kept so many German soldiers bottled up on a very small island. OSS and SOE operations in the European and the China, Burma, and India theaters of World War II were never intended to create strategic or even operational victories. Rather, they were designed to harass the enemy, acquire intelligence, and, if appropriate, support larger strategic or operational objectives conducted by conventional forces. Crete was a perfect example of how a small number of SOE operators and a few hundred local fighters coupled with a determined population forced the Nazis to squander time, treasure, and manpower at the expense of more important battlefields. This is a perfect definition of the value of unconventional war. These four books provide the details needed to understand how this was possible.

