



Abducting a General: The Kreipe Operation and SOE in Crete

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One of the greatest feats in Patrick Leigh Fermor's remarkable life was the kidnapping of General Kreipe, the German commander in Crete, on 26 April 1944. He and Captain Billy Moss hatched a daring plan to abduct the general, while ensuring that no reprisals were taken against the Cretan population.

Dressed as German military police, they stopped and took control of Kreipe's car, drove through twenty-two German checkpoints, then succeeded in hiding from the German army before finally being picked up on a beach in the south of the island and transported to safety in Egypt on 14 May.

Abducting a General is Leigh Fermor's own account of the kidnap, published for the first time. Written in his inimitable prose, and introduced by acclaimed SOE historian Professor Roderick Bailey, it is a glorious first-hand account of one of the great adventures of the Second World War.

Also included in this book are Leigh Fermor's intelligence reports, sent from caves deep within Crete yet still retaining his remarkable prose skills, which bring the immediacy of SOE operations vividly alive, as well as the peril which the SOE and Resistance were operating under; and a guide to the journey that Kreipe was taken on from the abandonment of his car to the embarkation site so that the modern visitor can relive this extraordinary event.

Abducting a General: The Kreipe Operation and SOE in Crete Details

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Patrick Leigh Fermor

From Reader Review Abducting a General: The Kriepe Operation and SOE in Crete for online ebook

GrabAsia says

This is an amazing story of the abduction of a German General in occupied Crete in 1944. I have read a superb account of it in *Ill Met by Moonlight* by William Stanley Moss, and it also figures in *The Cretan Runner* by George Psychoundakis. It was led by a Major in the SOE, Patrick Leigh Fermor, later, a famous travel writer. I wondered why he never wrote about it himself & the introduction explains.

At the end of his first 18 month stay in Crete in September 1943, culminating in the successful spiriting away of the General in command of the Italian garrison after the surrender of Italy, Fermor returns to Egypt. That's when he hatches the plan to abduct the German General responsible for atrocities in Crete and returns in February 1944. Though the butcher General has been replaced, he decides to kidnap the new one anyway. Plans are made swiftly, and had it not been for the late arrival of the rest of the team due to bad weather, the abduction may have happened even before April 28, 1944.

It is truly audacious. Fermor and Moss are to dress up as German traffic police and stop the General's car. They did, and then drove through the German headquarters of Heraklion, past 22 checkposts and made it. Not having access to a working wireless, it is 16 days before they leave for Egypt on May 14. The poor infrastructure they had to survive with is demonstrated by the fact that even for a mission such as this, they couldn't get hands on a proper wireless for days.

The German General, Kriepe, seems resigned to his fate and doesn't give trouble. Fermor is fluent in German and they strike up a sort of friendship, even meeting again in Athens in 1970. Their other common language is Latin, and they have several witty exchanges in that tongue.

Taking General Kriepe through the Cretan resistance strongholds was, as Fermor says, like "taking the Sheriff of Nottingham through Sherwood Forest". After many vicissitudes, they reach the beach on the night of May 14th where they are to be picked up by the Royal Navy. They almost missed the boat as neither Fermor nor Moss knew the Morse code for "B", and were saved by the arrival of another British officer who fortunately did.

The account of the abduction is followed by extracts from Fermor's reports to the SOE while in the field in Crete. They are replete with the tensions of the moment, and a very interesting read.

This is a great book that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Frank Lynam says

If you're looking to peer into the mountains of insurgent Crete during WWII, then you'll be hard pressed to find a better portal than this. I've always loved Paddy Leigh Fermor's style. He's of his age but at the same time, he's approachable.

Eric says

Fitzroy Maclean, SAS, Yugoslavia, in *Eastern Approaches*:

"With a jerk my parachute opened and I found myself dangling, as it were at the end of a string, high above a silent mountain valley, greenish-grey and misty in the light of the moon. It looked, I thought, invitingly cool and refreshing after the sand and glare of North Africa. Somewhere above me the aircraft, having completed its mission, was headed for home. The noise of its engines grew gradually fainter in the distance. A long way below me and some distance away I could see a number of fires burning. I hoped they were the right ones, for the Germans also lit fires at night at different points in the Balkans in the hope of diverting supplies and parachutists from their proper destinations. As I swung lower, I could hear a faint noise of shouting coming from the direction of the fires. I could still not see the ground immediately beneath me. We must, I reflected, have been dropped from a considerable height to take so long coming down. Then, without further warning, there was a jolt and I was lying in a field of wet grass. There was no one in sight."

Patrick Leigh Fermor, SOE, Crete, in *Abducting a General*:

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

Maclean's passage is an old favorite, but he yields the palm of eloquence.

Abducting a General consists of three parts, progressively arcane: his ninety-page account of the abduction and getaway, written in 1965 and here published in full for the first time; a selection of his official reports for SOE Cairo, jaunty and humorous little pieces penned by torchlight in various hideouts, over a span of two years; and a guide to western Crete written by two current climbers, for the true cultists who might wish to hike the abduction route.

Jim says

During the Second World War, one Patrick Leigh Fermor, a member of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), abducted the general in command of the Nazi forces on Crete and, with the help of Cretan rebels, spirited him over the mountains to a rendezvous with a British vessel, and from thence on to Cairo.

Abducting a General is Fermor's own description of the operation -- written some twenty years after its was over. Before then, his associate on Crete, W. Stanley Moss, wrote his own book on the subject entitled **III Met by Moonlight**, which I have also read.

In addition to this reportage on one of the most surprising events of the War, Fermor was the author of a series of travel classics about Greece and about his walking trip in the 1930s between Holland and Istanbul. So far, everything I have read by Fermor, and I have read everything except his book about the Caribbean, has been worth it.

Nick says

There's a question that sometimes gets asked in interviews: who in history would you most like to meet (or hang out with, or have a drink with, or the like)? For me, once you get past Shakespeare, Dickens, Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, Prime Minister Churchill, and probably a few other immortals, the answer has to be Patrick Leigh Fermor. His story of his walk to Constantinople in the years before WWII is one of the great travel adventures of all time, written with a verve and charm that make you understand why Fermor made friends everywhere and was at home everywhere he went. Along the way, he fell in love with a Countess and lived in a lighthouse with her until WWII broke out. And then he joined the war effort. He was posted to Crete as an undercover agent provocateur, assigned to giving the Germans occupying Crete as hard a time as he could. He took to it as if born to the task, and covered himself with glory virtually the entire time. His best exploit was kidnapping the general who presided over Crete and delivering him after a tough climb in the Cretan mountains to a naval vessel along the coast and thence to Egypt. It's a great story, and well worth reading. The book contains a number of additions and extras, including photographs and reproductions of Fermor's original war reports, and those are great fun to read. A slice of history that holds the attention by one of the 20th century's most delightful characters, even if the operation in the end didn't hold any great significance for the war effort.

Spiros says

Patrick Leigh Fermor's harebrained scheme, to kidnap the commanding German general of occupied Crete and spirit him away to Cairo, made marginally more sense when it had been mooted, in 1943, than when it was finally executed, in early 1944. But by the time Leigh Fermor parachuted back into Crete (joined, due to inclement weather, weeks later by the rest of his team), the War had changed: the Allies controlled much of the Mediterranean, and the brutal General Muller had been replaced by General Kreipe, a career soldier who was looking to end his war in the relative peace of the Aegean after years on the Russian Front. Still, the plan went forward, damn the consequences, and what a plan it was: everything had to go more or less according to plan, or the enterprise was doomed. In the event, the exact number of things that could go wrong without causing disaster did go wrong (broken or lost wireless sets, the General falling off his mule, the driver not being healthy enough to reach the rendezvous and having to be disposed of), causing our heroes to have to improvise furiously and trace a dizzying path across the island. All of which makes for splendid reading. Really, the whole thing has the feel of a Boy's Own adventure, or an "Asterix and Obelix" comic: the boys had the General, on his word of honor, promise not to try to escape or draw German attention to their presence, and left a note declaring that the operation had been conducted without Cretan aid, while ingenuously scattering clues (an Agatha Christie novel, Player's cigarette butts, a British commando beret) inside the General's abandoned vehicle.

That said, there is no denying that Leigh Fermor could write like an angel:

"But, tormenting as our journey was, the dazzle of the moon and, when it set, of a blaze of stars that was

nearly as bright, undermined this commotion of rock and then, by a planetary device in collusion with the optical tricks of which, at some moments, Crete seems to be composed - involving manipulated reflection and focus, levitation, geometrical shifts and a dissolving of solids balanced by a solidification of shadow - filled the hollow, the porous and finally transparent island under foot with lunar and stellar properties and, while hoisting it several leagues in the air, simultaneously, with moves as quiet as an opening gambit followed by those advances of knights and bishops, fast and stealthy as grandmother's steps, which lead to penultimate castling and a sudden luminous checkmate, regrouped all the mountain tops of Crete within touching distance. The valleys and foothills had dropped away from this floe of triangles; they drifted in the windless cold starlight with the pallor, varying with their distance, of ice or ivory."

And, as he was readying to take victorious leave of Crete:

"The cliffs below were a descending jungle of thyme, rockrose, heather, myrtle, arbutus and verbena, oleanders marked the pebble and boulder strewn torrent beds and the air was loaded with the smell of herbs. Who would exchange all this, and nightingales and the sounds of goatfolds and herdsmen calling across the gulfs of air, and the echo of shots among empty gorges, for the tram bells, jacarandas, carrion crows and muezzins?"

(I'm not sure, but I think "rockrose" may have just supplanted "penumbra" as my favorite word in the English language)

Appended to this are several field reports Leigh Fermor smuggled off the island, which I'm guessing are far breezier and informal than those the Intelligence officers were used to reading. But this is what happens when you send romantics like T.E. Lawrence and Patrick Leigh Fermor off to fight your wars.

Andrew says

This piece offers an excellent introduction to Leigh Fermor's unique prose. It also provides a rare insight into the methods of the SOE in Crete. Included, are Leigh Fermor's war reports for British Intelligence in Cairo, produced in a uniquely informal style, often while on the run from the Germans. The edition concludes with a guide to the abduction route, designed for anyone keen to retrace Leigh Fermor's odyssey.

Nooilforpacifists says

Major Patrick Leigh Fermor's subordinate, Captain Stanley Moss, wrote the first book about the extraordinary British Special Operations abduction of the top Nazi General from Crete. It's called "I'll Met By Moonlight," and I gave it only three stars. (Moss's book was the basis for the 1957 film of the same name, staring Dirk Bogarde.) But, in addition to speaking no Greek, and knowing little of Crete, Moss was not a writer of the quality of Leigh Fermor--few are.

Fermor waited until Moss's death before publishing his version. And the short work (50,000 words) is vastly more rewarding. The poetry of his prose; his unbidden love for the Cretan people; his fear of capture; his terror of reprisals to natives of Crete, whether partisans or not. Even after reading the story twice, I'm anxious to see the movie.

Surely the most astounding moment (I don't recall Moss mentioning it) is when the German General -- being spirited from one mountain hiding hole to another, barely ahead of the pursuing Nazis -- morosely, quietly, under his breath, begins to declaim Horace's Ode to Thaliarchus on Mount Kedros [Mount Kedros is on Crete]. Leigh Fermor picks up at the second line and completes it--both of them in Latin of course. The General looks up and, after a pause, says, "Ach so, Herr Major." Leigh Fermor writes, "For five minutes the war had evaporated without a trace." Yet the deeper epiphany, I think, was the General's: his captor was no beast, but an educated (and thus presumably honorable) man.

John Jr. says

Patrick Leigh Fermor, asked in the mid-60s to provide a 5,000-word account of a daring World War II operation in Crete, turned in 30,000 words instead. His text was whittled down and published as part of an ongoing popular history of the war. The original was consigned to his personal collection and is only now being published in the United States, following its release last year in Great Britain.

These things are hard to judge, but I have the impression that Leigh Fermor, who died in 2011, is better known in England and among Anglophiles than to Americans. If this new book finds a ready audience here, some credit may be due to Anthony Lane, who wrote a fine appreciation of Leigh Fermor's multifarious life and adventures in *The New Yorker* in 2006. Lane's article included a summary of how Leigh Fermor, joined by a younger member of Britain's Special Operations Executive and a number of local guerrillas, had in 1944 kidnapped the German general commanding the occupying forces on Crete. But there's nothing like having Leigh Fermor's own prose, which is vivid, occasionally hasty—as if, 20 years later, he were still caught up in the anxieties of the moment—often lyrical, and as attuned to landscape as to people and events. Quite simply, his writing has dash. "Improbable exploits in foreign places," a term used in an *Economist* review of a volume of Leigh Fermor's early memoirs, conveys the major substance, but the full range of flavors, while it's suggested by some of the quotations I posted as updates, is best grasped from a direct encounter.

The present volume includes a foreword by SOE historian Roderick Bailey, which provides some necessary details about British operations in occupied Crete and also fills in the background of this tale, which had previously been told by Leigh Fermor's partner on the mission and even filmed. The book also contains edited extracts of nine war reports that Leigh Fermor wrote from Crete, which occupy nearly half the book and which sketch the context. The heart of the book, though, is the kidnapping, in which grabbing the general proved to be the easy part. Creeping from hideout to hideout, trying to respect the general's rank under trying conditions, sometimes freezing and often managing to consume considerable quantities of wine: it is indeed an improbable tale.

Anthony Lane's farewell to Leigh Fermor, posted at the *New Yorker* site in 2011, includes a link to his full article, which I believe is accessible to non-subscribers.

Katrina says

This account of the abduction of a German general on Crete was an interesting read but nowhere near as good as Fermor's pre war travel books. The whole plan was a daft waste of time and trouble, I'm fairly sure that General Kreipe had no important information to impart to the allies, and the Cretans paid for the

escapade through Nazi retribution.

Nigeyb says

This is the third time I have read an account of the kidnap of General Heinrich Kreipe, the commander of a German division on the island of Crete during the German occupation of World War 2. The first was in the excellent biography of Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure* by Artemis Cooper, the second in *The Cretan Runner* by George Psychoundakis (which Patrick Leigh Fermor translated into English), and now this version.

Patrick Leigh Fermor wrote his version in 1966-67 just after the death of W Stanley "Billy" Moss. He wanted Billy Moss to be allowed to write his account first. Moss's book was written in 1945 and published in 1950 and is called *Ill Met By Moonlight*. This book was later made into a film with the same title starring Dirk Bogarde by the British writer-director-producer team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.

Abducting a General: The Kreipe Operation and SOE in Crete is split into two parts: the first is about the kidnap of General Kreipe and the main focus of this is on getting him across the island and off Crete to Cairo, the second part contains nine of Patrick Leigh Fermor's contemporaneous war reports written whilst he was part of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) on Crete - these hurriedly written reports give a wonderful insight into Paddy's day to day life as an SOE operative on Crete.

This is the third book by Patrick Leigh Fermor I have read. The other two are the first two parts of the trilogy (*A Time of Gifts*, *Between the Woods and the Water*, and *The Broken Road*) in which he describes his walk from the hook of Holland to Constantinople as a teenager. Whether it was familiarity with the story, or whether it was that this book is not as coherent and well written as the other two, I did not connect with this book in the same way. I suspect I would have enjoyed it more had I come to it with less prior knowledge. That said, it is a short, well written and interesting account and worth reading for anyone interested in Crete during WW2, or for those who, like me, have fallen under Paddy's spell.

4/5

Nathan Lee says

Sporting moustaches and Cretan clothes and with our Ancient Greek from public school, we English fitted in perfectly with the simple locals. We had a whizzing idea to capture a general. We were not put off by the human rights abuser general muller being replaced with a general himself disillusioned with the war, nor that the war was now going firmly against the Hun.

While spending many a night with raki, wine and roasted sheep, exploiting the hospitality of the locals for whom we were to cause so much trouble, we cooked up a boys own plan to whisk our General away. Not for the last time we fooled the simple locals by singing German songs. Thank god we were there to keep the communists away from infiltrating the island's resistance movement.

Dressed in completely unconvincing German uniforms we put our plan into action. The Cretans we knew would never be blamed if we left a letter saying it was completely down to the British. After all, we were

men of honour. We were also to do no harm to anybody part from hitting the driver over the head and then later killing him as he was too much of a burden.

Wearing German uniforms we found the local Cretans no longer recognised us as British. How easily fooled they were. We looked after the general, taking him across the mountains with nothing more than a bang to his leg and a couple of falls off the donkey, dislocating his shoulder. We got on famously.

The damn Germans ignored our letter and raised several villages to the ground. All this just improved the morale of the locals and strengthened their resolve. None of them ever blamed us and we continued to put them in danger and lived off their hospitality as we fumbled our way to escaping.

Apart from a few mishaps, such as not knowing the morse code for M, we eventually escaped and left the Cretans to their fate at the hands of the returned general muller. We had pulled it off and so what if our general had no intelligence or military worth whatsoever.

Digested read digested: ripping yarn.

4triplezed says

Patrick Leigh Fermor is such a great writer that he makes this a seamless story. The abduction is fairly well known having had previous books written about and a film made. Anyone that has an interest in the Cretan events of WW2 will find this a more than useful addiction to their reading. Though the main story is short, only 91 pages in my copy, there is plenty more that the publishers have added to keep interest. Nine of the authors wartime reports make fascinating reading and there is a very good guide to the abduction route that has to be more than useful for anyone who would like to take that in while visiting Crete. Very good.

Tony says

The lengthy foreword was more informative; lots of padding at the end with all the various contemporary reports.

Paul says

Patrick Leigh Fermor has been described as one of our nation's finest travel writers, and I would agree with that. His walk across Europe from Holland to Istanbul before World War II is well worth reading. After the war he then wrote about Greece and the Caribbean, but up until recently there was very little about his exploits during the war.

This book changes that. His illustrious military career started with the Irish guards, but with his language skills he was soon seconded into the Special Operations Executive (SOE) where he was despatched to Crete and mainland Greece several times to work behind German lines and help with the local resistance. The pinnacle of his success there though was the moment that he and his team succeeded in kidnapping General Kreipe, the German commander in Crete. This audacious plan was developed between him and Captain Billy Moss, and took place on the 26th April 1944. Not only did they abduct him with almost no violence, they

took the General through 22 German checkpoints without being stopped before dumping the car and taking Kreipe into hiding. The SBS then collected Fermor and the General from a beach in the south of the island around two weeks later.

This book is Fermor's own account of his exploits in Crete and the details behind the abduction. Written in his distinctive style, also included are the secret reports that he sent to his commanders in Egypt, bringing the actual events of that time vividly alive. It is not a long book as it is mostly about that event, but it conveys just how dangerous it was to be behind enemy lines and the number of close calls that he had, for example being in the cellar of a house with German soldiers just above him or being asked for papers and managing to convince the soldier that he was a native. Thankfully his papers were declassified after his death otherwise we would not have this firsthand account. It is not his best piece of writing, but you have to remember that this was written whilst under cover or in challenging circumstances, and allowances should be made. It is a must read for any fans of Fermor, and for fans of World War II books.
