

We
could
be

The heroes

The Heroes Ultra, a grueling traverse across the savagely beautiful interior of Crete, is a new race with an inspiring wartime history. RW's Tobias Mews summoned his inner hero to tackle an epic adventure



‘You’re almost there, just keep moving’ ...

I say to myself as I hobble along the beach, casting longing glances at the blue waters of the Mediterranean. It’s easier said than done. Over the past 24 hours I’ve run right across the unforgiving interior of Crete and right now I’m feeling every step.

I pause to listen to the waves crashing onto Peristeres Beach and reflect on the events that took place here 72 years ago. This is the inaugural edition of the Heroes Ultra, which retraces the route of a daring Allied operation to abduct a German general during the Second World War; the story is recounted in Christopher McDougall’s recent book, *Natural Born Heroes* (Profile Books). I imagine the relief Special Operations Executive agents Patrick Leigh Fermor and Billy Stanley Moss, and their band of Cretan resistance fighters, must have felt on reaching Peristeres beach, after almost three weeks and 100 miles of escape and evasion in the mountains. But my own journey is not quite finished.

I push on, focusing on one orange course marker after another until they suddenly disappear. I look up and, to my horror, see that the next marker is on a rocky headland, perhaps 15m high. I know the finish lies on the other side, marked by a stone memorial dedicated to the mission. Compared with the miles I’ve already run through the Cretan mountains, it’s nothing, but in my exhausted state it seems as if I’m staring up at Everest.

It’s not often I get an urge to run 100-odd miles. The undertaking demands serious preparation and Herculean mental strength. It can also take a heck of a long time to recover from. But the backstory to the Heroes Ultra is truly captivating. Like many, I’d read of the audacious kidnap of General Heinrich Kreipe by a ‘daring band of misfits’ in McDougall’s book. Over almost 20 days, Major Leigh Fermor and Captain Moss, along with battle-

hardened local resistance fighters, slogged through the mountains under the cover of darkness, dodging German patrols, until they were able to rendezvous with a rescue boat on the southern coast.

As a former British Army officer, I knew that if I’d had suggested Leigh Fermor’s plan to ambush a German general’s chauffeur-driven car, drive through 22 road blocks disguised as German soldiers and then hike 100 miles across Crete, with a severely disgruntled enemy officer in tow, I’d have been laughed out of the room. But it was perhaps because the plan was so audacious, so downright barmy, that it succeeded. Because no one would have believed it possible. The Germans certainly didn’t.

Warm glow

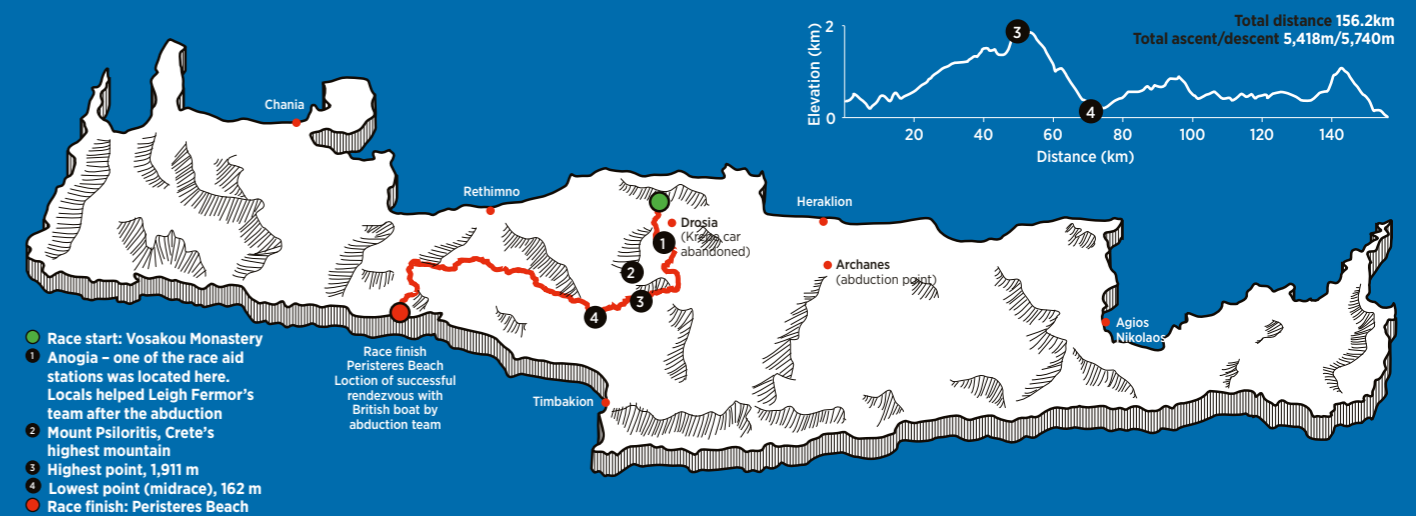
On the morning our race begins there are no enemy roadblocks to negotiate, but our transport takes us to the ancient Vosakou Monastery under the cover of darkness. The organisers had chosen this as the event’s start point rather than the historically accurate but rather unremarkable Drosia, seven miles to the southeast. ‘This is one liberty we

took to enhance the appeal of the course,’ says race director Panos Gonos. ‘From Anogia onwards we adhere very faithfully to the original route, entering all the villages encountered in the mission, coming within metres of hideouts and making the same crossing over Mount Psiloritis.’ Walking through the monastery’s peaceful courtyard in the first glow of the early morning sun, I can understand the decision.

I’m accustomed to the pre-race thousand-yard stares of ultra marathoners, but I see few among the other 26 competitors here. Perhaps it’s the tranquil setting, but while we sip Greek coffee and nibble a light breakfast there are only relaxed smiles, handshakes and introductory chit-chat.

‘How long do you think it will take you?’ an American runner asks as we await the countdown. Strangely, it’s not something I’d thought about. The course will take us up to almost 2,000m, but with a total of 5,418m of ascent spread across 156km, it isn’t as steep as many well-known mountain 100-milers. The Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc, for instance, has almost twice the elevation. And with 30 per cent of the route on asphalt and a decent portion on 4x4 tracks, there should, in theory, be plenty of opportunities to make up time. My hasty mental arithmetic also factors in the 30-hour cut-off point, which compares unfavourably with the more standard 40+ hours for mountain 100s. So I say, ‘24 hours.’ Of course, the wise answer as you step into the unknown of any ultra race is, ‘As long as it takes.’

We leave Vosakou to calls of ‘Good luck’ and ‘See you at the beach.’ A few runners zoom ahead but most of us are content to play it safe with the

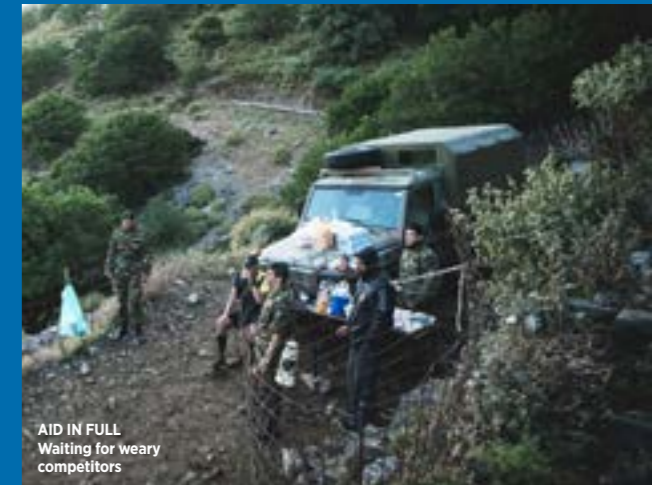




PARTNERS IN CLIMB
Tobias tries to keep pace with Pantelis Kampaxis



ROCK, HARD PLACE
It was by no means all trails and roads



AID IN FULL
Waiting for weary competitors



LOCAL CHARM
Cretans provided fantastic support

The Original 'Race'

Timeline of the abduction of a German general and the escape that followed

26/4/1944
General Kreipe's car is ambushed. After passing 22 roadblocks Moss's team heads off on foot while Leigh Fermor goes on to abandon the car.

30/4/1944
Moss and his men arrive at the cave at Vorini Trypa on the south side of Mount Psiloritis. At night they move to Agia Paraskevi, avoiding enemy patrols.

1-13/4/1944
For the next 13 days, the team moves exclusively by night. During the day they shelter and rest in caves and fissures, and behind rocks.

10/5/1944
After scouting the coastline for a suitable landing spot, Leigh Fermor rejoins the rest of the men near the village of Patsos.

13/5/1944
The team shelters overnight at a rocky fissure on the slopes of Mount Kryoneritis before the night push over the mountain to the coast at Rodakino.

14/5/1944
After hiding in the rocks above Peristeres beach, the men descend at night and board a British motor launch. Mission accomplished.

terrain, the weather and the route, unfamiliar to all but a few of the Cretan competitors, including race favourite Pantelis Kampaxis, a local.

I find myself trotting alongside this gently spoken runner as we slowly make our way up the asphalt road away from the monastery. In an event of this type and distance, and with such a small field, you expect to spend a lot of time on your own, so I savour the companionship. I soon discover the 48-year-old has represented Greece in the Trail Running World Championships for the past decade and set numerous course records in Crete and beyond, and so I am not sure how long our time together will last. For now, he seems content to shuffle alongside me, chatting about the running culture in Crete and pointing out local landmarks. It's like running with my own personal guide as we pass 'mitatos' – the yurt-like stone huts used by shepherds – as well as olive groves and orange trees.

During the prerace briefing the previous afternoon, Panos had told us not to be surprised if some of the villages provided unofficial aid stations between the 10 or so official stops. Sure enough, after only 40 minutes we come across an elderly lady offering what looks to be orange squash. Ordinarily, I'm one of those people who chooses not to stop so early in a race, but lately I've had a change of mindset, realising that constantly chasing time means I'm not able to appreciate the culture and landscape I'm being exposed to. So I pause to take a slug of squash, only to discover it's actually the juice of freshly squeezed oranges, probably picked that morning from the orange tree right beside me. Further proof, should we need it, that not all of running's rewards are to be found on your Garmin.

As we near the first checkpoint, in Anogia, about 15km into the race, Pantelis tells me his grandmother grew up in the village. From my

research, I'm aware that Anogia was the centre of the Cretan resistance during the war and played an important role in ensuring the success of the mission. I'm also aware that the village, along with a half-dozen others, was burned to the ground in retribution. Seventy two years later, the memories live on, but there's little evidence of the destruction now in this charming place, with its quaint cobbled stone streets, whitewashed houses and vibrant cafe culture.

I can hear the sound of music and laughter as we approach the aid station. Actually, it sounds like a party in full swing. I'd been told of the generosity and welcoming nature of the Cretans, but it still manages to surprise me, as dozens of volunteers, including members of Crete's oldest running club, offer to fill our water bottles and generally fuss over us. 'Do I have everything I need?' 'Do I want a Greek coffee?' Nothing is too much trouble.

If I am to have a chance, I need to push on

While the warmth of the welcome is a pleasant surprise, the course later reveals something not so friendly. For around 45km the terrain has been much as I'd expected – almost entirely uphill, but along a mixture of gentle single track, 4x4 tracks and asphalt. Hard graft, but with a bit of mind over matter, all fairly doable. Now, on the approach to a plateau beneath the summit of Crete's highest mountain – Mt Psiloritis, aka Mt Ida – I find it's almost impossible to run on some of the trails.

Maybe it's the heat of the midday sun taking its toll as I slowly make my way along the rocky path, trying to avoid the prickly bushes that can penetrate a shoe. Or maybe Ida,

said to have been the birthplace of Zeus, is playing tricks on my mind. Whatever it is, as I watch Pantelis bound up the rocky slope with enviable ease, I feel a kinship with Leigh Fermor, who marvelled when one of his Cretan comrades, the tireless George Psychoundakis, took off at night to continue making things unpleasant for the Germans. 'A few minutes later,' Fermor wrote, 'we could see his small figure a mile away moving across the next moonlight fold of the foothills... bound for another 50-mile journey.'

Reaching the summit, after what feels an age, I'm hit by strong gusts of wind. Initially it's a pleasant relief, but it quickly turns to a chill that motivates me to want to get down the mountain as quickly as possible. I'm surprised to find Pantelis, taking his time on the descent. 'What took you so long?' he says with a grin as we fall back into step.

After the slog up, the long descent into the valley below is something to

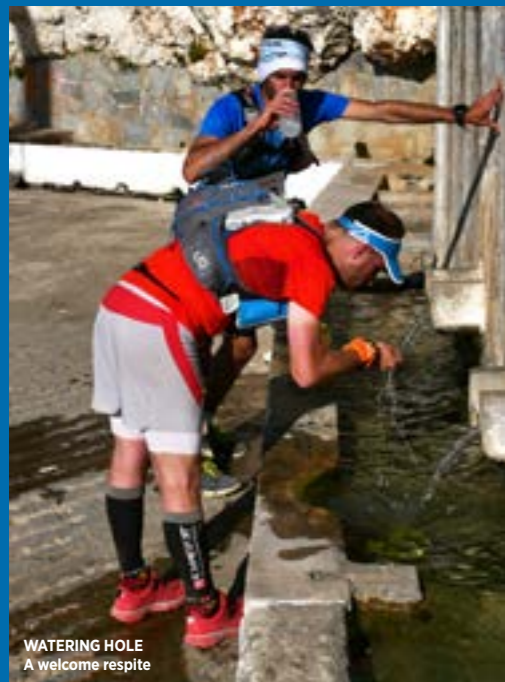
savour. We scan the rocky landscape hoping to catch a glimpse of the cave, the Vorini Trypa, where the team took refuge. Translated as 'North Pit', we agree it doesn't sound too welcoming and, anyway, can see no sign of it in the vast landscape.

Broken bond

Running with someone is far more pleasurable than running alone, but it brings a potential problem: what happens when one of you can't keep up? Pantelis is a 2:30 marathoner, so I was fairly certain I'd be the one to throw this dilemma into our dynamic, but ultra distances are nothing if not unpredictable. 'I'm not feeling well,' he tells me as we slow to a walk. He has a stomach bug. We try to run again, but are soon reduced to a walk once more. 'You go on,' he says, pain and disappointment etched into his face.

I'm very reluctant to break the bond we've forged on the trail, but I know if I am to have any chance of





WATERING HOLE
A welcome respite



NO RESISTANCE
The locals were happy to get involved



SOLITARY STATE
You need to enjoy your own company



BROTHERS IN ARMS
Tobias and Eusebio reach the finish

The Original Heroes

The men who inspired the Heroes Ultra

► **Patrick Leigh Fermor:**

The brains behind, and leader of, the operation served with the Special Operations Executive, working behind enemy lines with the Cretan Resistance for several years. After the war, he became a celebrated travel writer and was knighted for his services.

► **William Stanley 'Billy' Moss:**

Leigh Fermor's second-in-command was just 22 when he landed by boat on Crete to join the operation. After the war, he became a successful author, broadcaster and journalist. He kept a journal throughout the mission, which became the basis of the bestselling book *Ill Met by Moonlight*. It was later made into a film.

► **Manolis Paterakis, Giorgos Tyrakis and Stratis Saviolakis:** Cretan resistance fighters and guides on the mission.

Every stone is a huge effort but it's an effort shared

finishing I need to push on – even though it means the daunting prospect of probably running the remaining 100km alone. At the next checkpoint I tell the medics of his situation, hoping they can help. Sadly, I'll later learn that it will be the end of the road for Pantelis.

The big push

The cumulative effect of pounding asphalt sections, pushing up rocky ascents and clinging onto branches while trying to keep my footing on treacherous dried leaves is taking its toll on my body and mind. I struggle for more than an hour to complete one particularly tough section, which can only have been a couple

of kilometres long. My ankle and hip flexor are flaring with the strain of overuse and the aid stations have become more than somewhere to simply restock my supplies – they are now beacons of hope.

They are also an assault on the senses. Breaking the hours of running in silence, each aid station presents a barrage of cheering and offers of wine, fruit, bread, meat and coffee. Even at 3am the locals are so full of good humour that, despite my exhaustion I can't help but fall in love with the place and its people.

The penultimate aid station is nestled at the edge of a tiny village, after a particularly technical and rocky descent. I refill my water, exchange pleasantries and ask how other runners are faring, then grab a handful of nuts and oranges and head off into the darkness.

On the long climb that follows I catch up with another runner and we chat for a while. Eusebio Bochons explains how he'd been leading the

pack but missed a turn, doing an extra 4km downhill before realising his error and having to turn back up the hill. No wonder he's suffering. And there are more problems heading my way, too.

Panos had warned us the final climb, 20km from the finish, would be hard, but I'm still unprepared for the brutal reality. As I struggle with every step I see the headtorches of other runners in the distance, the flickering lights growing ever closer. At least they're not German patrols, I remind myself.

With my foot and hip flexor issues having reduced me to a hobble, I turn to look at the sunrise and see the silhouette of a runner closing in. He passes me with a slap on the shoulder and a look that, I imagine, translates as, 'Well done mate, but it's over now'. Except it isn't – there are still 14km and 1,000m of descent between me and the coast.

That descent is a multitude of off-road switchbacks tumbling

towards the coastline. In the light of the new day I can see the runner who recently passed me, speeding down with casual agility. My gait is rather less graceful and though I try to let gravity help me down, by the time I reach sea level I'm a wreck. My quads, hip flexor and ankle are stiffer than one of the many olive tree stumps I've passed en route. I hear footsteps behind me and two more runners speed past. Any competitive edge has been well and truly blunted, though. All I want now is for it to be over.

'At least it's flat', I tell myself as I shuffle along the coast road. It's not yet 8am, but I can already feel the heat of the sun on my skin. And then, just a few hundred metres from the finish I see the rocky monstrosity that lies between me and the finish. It's almost enough to add tears to the sweat stinging my eyes.

'Estás bien?' I turn to see Eusebio hobbling behind me, looking in almost as much pain as I am. I'd

asked him the same question ('Are you OK?') when I'd overtaken him four hours earlier and if I had the energy I would chuckle at the reversal. The look on my face answers his question: 'Te ayudare!' he calls: 'I'll help you'. He gestures for me to lean on him as we attempt to make our way up the rocky outcrop. Every stone is a enormous effort, but it's an effort shared.

With an arm wrapped around his shoulders, one foot after the other, we edge towards the finishing stone like two wounded soldiers returning from battle, until finally, hands held high, we touch it together.

Our journey finished, we're led away to be tended to by the medics. We began as strangers, but as we lie on loungers wrapped in space blankets, I realise that without Eusebio I might not have made it. This epic journey has not only forged a friendship, it has added another name to its list of heroes. I turn to him and say, 'Gracias, amigo!'