

HOW TO AMPUTATE A LEG

**AND OTHER WAYS
TO STAY OUT OF TROUBLE**

NATHAN MULLINS


ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2009

Copyright © Nathan Mullins 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The *Australian Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone (61 2) 84 25 01 00

Fax (61 2) 99 06 22 18

Email info@allenandunwin.com

Web www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Mullins, Nathan, 1972-

How to amputate a leg : and other ways to stay out of trouble

ISBN: 978 1 74237 037 8 (pbk.)

1. Mullins, Nathan

2. Adventure and adventurers—Anecdotes.

3. Adventure and adventurers—Biography.

920.71

Cover and text design by Bruno Herfst

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Helen

*Your strength, passion, love, friendship,
unwavering support, bravery and the way you live life
have always thrilled and empowered me.
I have done nothing without you.*

CONTAINS

INTRODUCTION

There are a few things you should know 1

CHAPTER 1

Captive to experience 11

2

Mental illness 25

3

How to amputate a leg 41

4

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.
That, and white-tailed spiders. 61

5

You can't judge a book by
its multiple rows of flesh-ripping teeth 79

6

29-year-old teenager 95

7

Laugh, and the whole world laughs with you,
but then crying will make you look sensitive to women 116

8

Practise critical observation 133

9

Battle inoculation 150

10

Cultural differences 172

11

There is no such thing as bad conditions,
only bad equipment 199

12

You got this far, now the easy bit 211

THAT'S IT

Really, you can't go further 223

INTRODUCTION

There are a few things you should know



This is not a medical textbook

If you bought this book as a guide for amputating a leg, I'm sorry, go and return it. On the other hand, if you're the sort of person who thinks that is a skill you may need to employ sometime, then read on, I may have a few pearls for you anyway.

Thanks for reading this book. I should start by saying that I don't feel particularly qualified to write a book, but don't let that put you off. Also, I don't feel sufficiently aged to be in a position to pass on my accumulated knowledge. I always feel like 80-year-olds have that right, and few others. At 36 I have a fair way to go.

I will be upfront and say that I don't have a particularly auspicious academic record, no masters degrees, or, in fact, any type of degree, and I have not accumulated any massive amount of wealth which entitles me to call myself successful. I am an unremarkable athlete. I am an ordinary guy with a family and a house and all the regular commitments.

What I do have is experience.

I have been places and seen things. I have seen amazing human triumph, and terrible disasters, sometimes at the same place and time. I have been in danger and, if I'm honest, put other people in danger too. I have been lucky.

CHARITY WORK

I grew up in suburban Melbourne, in a normal family. I have a sense of social justice that has pushed me into certain fields. When I left school I started to work for a large trade union. That gave me a good look at sections of our community that I had never seen before, and an idea of what is fair. The people who worked at the union were really committed to social justice, and inspired me with their high ideals. I also got an amazing insight into state and federal politics, and was thoroughly enthralled and sometimes repulsed at the same time. I will always feel very fortunate for this grounding in social responsibility and intense snapshot of politics.

After a while I just wanted more. I didn't really know what, but more. I started to look towards the army for adventure and a sort of community service. I was not attracted to charity work in any way, though my family has a long tradition of this, but I wanted somehow to do my bit.

I joined the army and went straight to 2 Commando Company, 1st Commando Regiment. This was the Australian Army's reserve special forces and it was absolutely amazing. It was hard work, in a team of motivated, tough individuals, and incredibly rewarding. We trained and practised the huge array of skills the special forces soldier needs and routinely jumped out of planes and helicopters, swam through the blackened Southern Ocean, periodically walked through deserts and jungles carrying heavy packs, regularly climbed cliffs of rock and snow, and laughed all the time. I could not have picked a better unit to join. I remember the advertisement that got me in. It asked for guys who were fit, committed, tough, volunteer parachutists, comfortable in the ocean and mature. As a surfer,

TRICK MONKEY

that sounded like me, except the mature bit.

The 1st Commando Regiment sent me all over Australia, and also to Brunei, Singapore and Papua New Guinea. I worked with soldiers from all over our region and served in a peace-monitoring force in PNG. It taught me to be resolute, to look past the obvious, to be aggressive when you need to be, and calm and easy-going the rest of the time. It taught me that I had huge power, but should be humble.

I spent the turn of the millennium in the jungle in PNG, on peace operations for the Australian Army, listening to bombs go off nearby. Local villagers were exploding old bombs that were lying around from World War II by placing them in their cooking fires. They reckoned it was a great way to ring in the year 2000. I bet you just used fireworks. How passé.

Unless you have been in such a unit, you are imagining the wrong thing about the army I was in. After twelve years of service I could count on one hand the number of salutes I had performed to officers. We didn't march around the barracks and I never spit-polished my boots, ever. My boots were for walking long distances in swamps or deserts, not the parade square. My rifle was for killing the enemy, not twirling around my arm like a trick monkey. We had no time to practise that crap, and no wish to either. You imagine that military units want people who are all the same; in the 1st Commando Regiment everyone was different. I came into the unit as a left-leaning unionist and political agitator while my best mate in the unit could easily have been a Nazi in a previous life. It worked though.

We used to look at the Melbourne skyline from 10 kilometres

CAR CHASES

offshore, treading water in the inky blackness of 2 AM Port Phillip Bay, and wonder what the rich people were doing. It couldn't be as amazing as what we were doing.

After a while I decided I needed a change and joined the Victoria Police. My brother was a detective at the time, and enjoyed 'the job', as it is colloquially referred to. I stayed as a reserve member of the Australian Army, but was a policeman as well. It was a great mix, with many complementary, if not directly applicable, skill sets. Again, I felt like joining the police was a sort of community service, with car chases thrown in as a bonus. (Car chases are easily as exciting as they seem in the movies.)

I worked in the western suburbs of Melbourne and enjoyed all the different situations that confronted a police officer every day. When you asked a question, people gave you an answer. When you told them to do something, they did it. If I'm honest, I also enjoyed the things about the police that would appeal to a little boy. Chasing crooks down dark alleys, driving fast, rescuing damsels, kicking in doors and justice like it was in the cartoons on Saturday mornings.

A couple of my mates at the 1st Commando Regiment decided to start a humanitarian aid organisation called Australian Aid International. My mate Frank told me his plans and asked me if I would consider helping. By this stage I had done a complex and expansive special forces medic's course in the army, and had a bit of experience in treating casualties here and there. I liked the idea of what Frank was saying. AAI was going to be a fast, efficient agency formed to respond to disasters around the world in places where other

EXPERIENCE

aid organisations were unable to go because of climatic conditions, remote locations or danger. It ticked all the right boxes for me, and still does. It still operates that way, and hopefully always will. So I said yes to Frank, thinking that a year or two later I would end up going to Africa or somewhere to help AAI for a couple of weeks. Nope.

About a week later the Central Asian Earthquake occurred in Pakistan and 86000 people were killed. I took leave from work and got over there as soon as I could. I was pretty much hooked straightaway. Until that time I didn't know a thing about the humanitarian sector, but what I saw excited and amazed me. This sort of work seemed to satisfy the part of me that wanted to be involved in the world's big picture, the part that wanted to be involved in a large, organised agency that worked as a team, and it was a practical way to apply my ideals of social justice. Perfect. AAI has seen me work in Pakistan, numerous times in Thailand and on the frantic and precarious Thai/Burma border, Myanmar, and repeatedly in Timor-Leste and Indonesia. I am still a program manager for AAI, and hope I can remain in this role.

Jim, a good friend of mine, told me years ago that we were men waiting. Neither of us knew what for. We had filled our heads with the training and experience to handle any situation; we just didn't have the forum to apply what we knew. After the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, we knew. It feels good to know.

I was not sure I could be a family man, policeman, soldier and humanitarian all at the same time. A number of other significant players held a similar view. In 2006 I decided to seek employment as a contracted security consultant. I wasn't

INSECURE

dissatisfied with the police, but when I looked at my superiors, who were all great guys doing a really hard task, I just didn't want their job. If I didn't want to be promoted into those positions, I shouldn't really stay. I left the police on good terms, and have a great deal of respect for the many people I know who are still police and for Victoria Police as an organisation. The world was, and is, insecure; I had developed a highly ethical and moral way of applying and achieving security, and I can really see where the humanitarian and security sectors share a lot of common ground. I knew I had skills that I could apply to both. Becoming a security consultant was going to augment working for AAI very well.

I worked in Iraq for all of 2007, first as a police instructor for the Iraqi National Police then as a contracted private security detachment member. All the nightmares about working in Iraq are true in some way. Our friends were killed, we were shelled and shot at, and we observed the community in that country tearing itself apart. A private security detachment member is like a soldier who provides security to some group of people or important infrastructure. We usually provided security for the road transport that was our shuttle of staff back and forth from Baghdad to the police academy where we worked. The conflict in Iraq has seen this industry rise exponentially, and it is an imperfect solution to the need for security personnel where soldiers are unavailable to do the job.

If I get a chance to explain my work in Iraq, no one considers me, or anyone I worked with, a mercenary. Though, in purely technical terms, we were all selling our military skills to a non-state entity. That is the very definition of a mercenary.

ARGUMENTS

The word mercenary conjures up images of guns for hire doing dirty work and ultimately killing for a commercial reason. That's not me at all. I moved into that role because I wanted to make sure that our staff were secure, and that we made good ethical decisions about providing security. I can promise you that every time we rolled out of our gates we considered the safety of our passengers, our own safety and the safety of the public in Iraq. I know that had our positions been reversed, and I was a disadvantaged man struggling for survival in my occupied country, then I would be likely to use my skills for violence against those rich jailers who drove their armoured vehicles through my neighbourhood. You might be surprised that I never got any arguments when I talked to the rest of the team about that.

I have finished that role for now, but would go back to it given the right circumstances. This seems strange to many people. This is not some quest for more adventure, or violence – far from it. Knowing there is a moral grounding for the work and reasonably safe conditions would help, but feeling that I can also provide a humanitarian edge to security operations would be very rewarding to me. We will see.

I worked in those jobs listed above and a number of others as well. I always looked for something that would pay the bills, but that taught me something too. I like activities and sports that can get me into trouble. I like surfing, diving, mountain bike riding and sea kayaking. Tennis, croquet and spectator sports never really did it for me. There's nothing wrong with them, but they just don't blow my hair back.

Alright. That's me, but where am I going with this book?

HUMOUR

I started thinking about writing the book because I had so many good stories from unusual situations I have been involved in. But really, every time I wanted to write it, I thought it was a bit hollow, so I didn't bother. To me it was just some guy sounding off about how interesting he thought he was.

One night I spoke to a mate of mine, who I hadn't seen in years, and he asked me to recount some of the good and bad moments from the last few years. I did and we laughed through some good stories and just about cried because of some others. Towards the end of the night he stumped me.

'So what?' he said. 'What have you got to pass on? What did you learn that you can tell somebody?'

He was right. Who cares what happened? What is important is whether it was an entertaining story and how it can instruct us on life. At the time I gave him some weak answer, but on the way home I thought about it properly. I decided to take every story I had recounted, and look at why I remembered it, and why I retell that particular story. I remember stories that are funny, that make me laugh even thinking about them. But usually, I tell stories because there is a moral or some voice of advice in there somewhere, among the humour.

Great. That made writing this book a good deal easier. I looked at the stories I had, and grouped them into categories of why a person may want to hear it or why I might want to tell it. Subjects jumped out at me. Pay attention to your surroundings. Emotions like fear and how they affect our lives. Having a sense of humour, and why that is important. That's what we have here now.

I have something else I had better say. You could read this

STORIES

book and think that I'm some sort of angel, always doing the right thing, helping people constantly, and getting through the tough parts miraculously unscathed. Not true. I have made all the mistakes that anybody else has, and done all the bad things you have, and probably a few more that you didn't know existed. That's not what this book is about, and there is probably little real value in those stories. I have not shied away from them because I want to appear like some knight on a white charger, they're just not that funny, or instructive enough. Besides, medics in the army have a saying, 'We bury our mistakes'.

Now that you have read this far, you can jump to any point in the book and start at that chapter, with no need to read the book chronologically. It is not arranged that way at all. Knowing what you now know, you can read Chapter 7 first. It's a cracker. Still, starting at the front is something to do for lack of a plan.

Please enjoy.