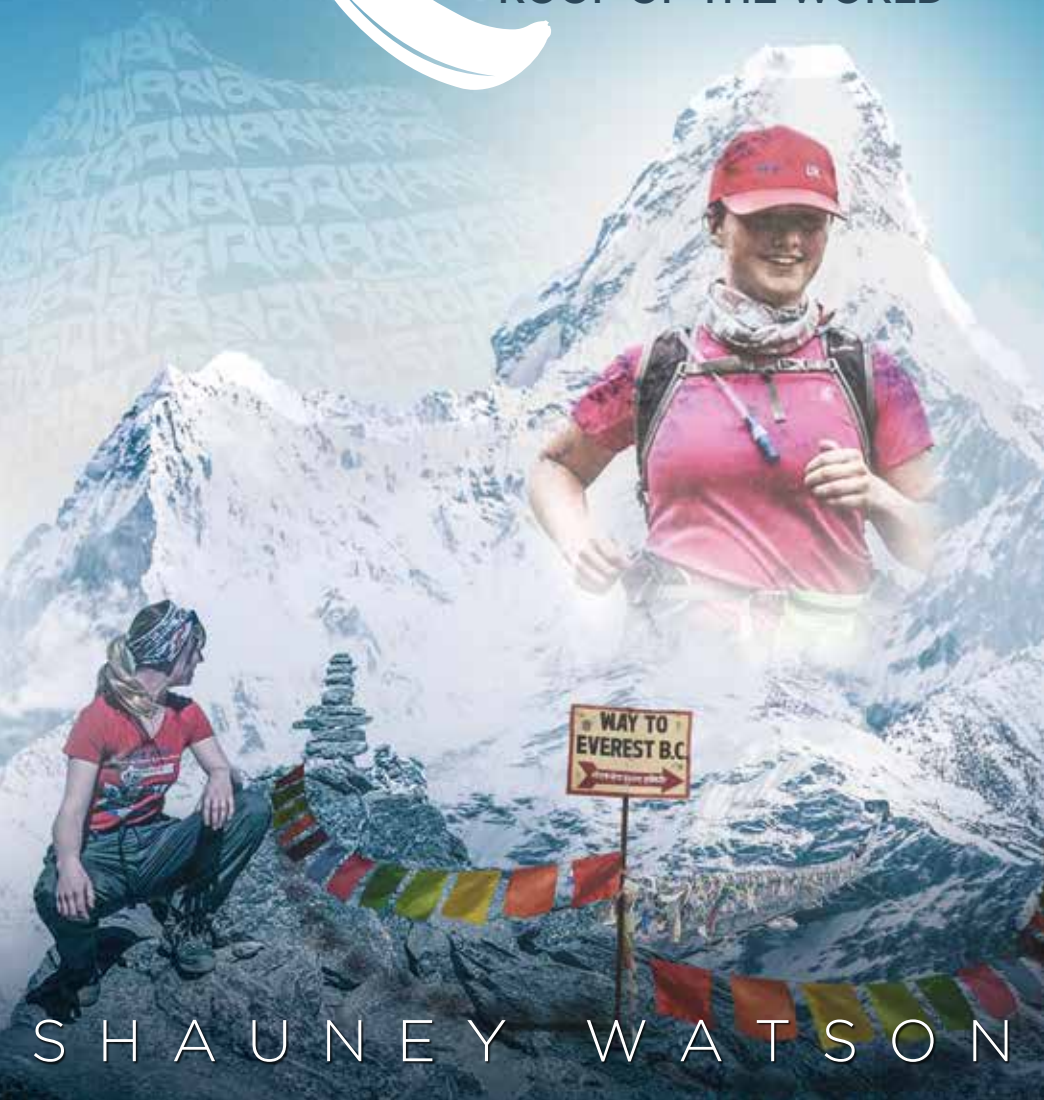


Run

How Not to

A JOURNEY TO THE
ROOF OF THE WORLD



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S H A U N E Y W A T S O N



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Chapter One

Alcohol and the internet

November 2017

There was another rum and Coke in my hand. I definitely hadn't ordered one, I was sure.

I looked at the barman with a quizzical expression and he laughed while flicking a bottle up over his arm to make someone's cocktail. With a shrug I settled myself on the bar stool in the corner. I had a feeling I was going to be here a while and I can't say I was particularly perturbed by this turn of events. Hitching my hiking boots on the bar stool footrest with a contented sigh, I watched the folk around the bar – many of whom I could now consider real friends – and smiled ruefully at their raucous celebrations.

The Nepalese barman laughing and joking with customers on the opposite side of the bar to me was quite possibly the coolest barman I had ever met. In fact, it's unlikely I will come across a cooler barman. He ducked

under the bar to take his shot on the pool table and I shifted to let him past.

Our vivacious group were currently making merry in what is apparently the highest Irish pub in the world. The walls of this little pub are covered in flags and memorabilia from the many, many trekkers who had passed through its doors. The flags had likely seen many a party like the one going on tonight. Later in the evening the electricity would cut out, which is a regular occurrence in Namche Bazaar, and the barman would play his guitar and sing to us. But for now, being the girl sitting at the end of the bar, contentedly looking on, I was handed a phone full of music and a set of speakers and was told to keep everyone dancing.

I was surprised to have yet another rum and Coke plonked down in front of me ten minutes later, by a drunk but very kind man from my group. Really, I had tried to stress during this trip that, though I may like rum and Coke, it regularly led to reckless decision-making on my part. In hindsight, I thought, as I sipped it, my reckless decision-making isn't like everyone else's. I'm not talking, 'Let's steal this traffic cone and take it home' at 3am after a heavy Friday night.

It's far more: 'Let's wholeheartedly decide to do something physically and outrageously demanding, and design it in such a way I can't allow myself to back out. Because that sounds like it won't drive me to self-

induced misery and near insanity at all.' Then again, I smiled to myself, if it weren't for a couple of glasses of rum and Coke, the last four crazy, painful, awe-inspiring and incredible weeks would never have happened to me. Perhaps Captain Morgan deserves a little bit of recognition for that one.

Two years previously

There I was, a whole two years ago, also sitting with a rum and Coke in my hand, on one of the sofas in my mum and dad's house. Google was open on the laptop in front of me and, as had so often been the case over the last few weeks, I was feeling particularly uneasy with myself.

I was 19 going on 20 and at that tricky point where you're wondering what the hell you're doing with your life. Part of you is trying to convince yourself you've got your shit together, while the other part considers surviving on a family-sized pack of Walkers crisps and watching Jeremy Kyle reruns all day might be easier than adult life. Or at least the semi-adult life I appeared to be attempting to lead.

Being an over-thinking, control-freak stress-head with no social skills and limited finances (gentlemen, form an orderly queue please), I had taken up running about 18 months earlier. It gave me something I could structure and control and, best of all, I didn't have to speak to anyone while I did it.

I say I ‘took up’ running but that’s bullshit. I had been a keen horse rider my whole life and liked to keep fit so I could at least stay in the saddle more than I hit the ground. For this reason I decided to go for a light one-mile jog one day, got hopelessly lost and ended up doing six miles. This is testimony to my excellent navigational skills and quite possibly why I really should have known better than to consider fell running 18 months later. You know, running in those places where you need a map and compass and things.

Anyway, managing to run six miles startled me, and it got me thinking. Perhaps I could do a ten-kilometre race; wouldn’t that be exciting! Of course, I got curious and entered one, and once I successfully completed it I got that rush of excitement where you begin to wonder what else you can manage. A half-marathon, perhaps? Like most newbie runners, the excitement of managing something new and physically demanding kept me setting new challenges for myself and so, once the half was accomplished, I inevitably ended up deciding to tackle a marathon for charity.

It’s worth back-tracking a year or two here to explain.

Studying various psychological therapies after high school, I had come to learn a little about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the psychological condition which can affect anyone who has suffered a trauma. For those it affects, the memory of the event isn’t collected and stored

in a functional way in the brain. Instead, the memory 'shatters', with fragments of it lodging in areas of the mind in which they cannot be accepted. This leads to debilitating symptoms such as flashbacks, whereby the event is essentially lived all over again, not to mention the behaviour change and relationship breakdowns that can and usually do happen as well.

I have no mental illness to speak of but just knowing what goes on in my own head, from being a nervous child, depressingly moody teenager and now a stressy young adult, I know how difficult it is to work with a temperamental mind. And that's just with normal, day-to-day things! I can only imagine the hell of having PTSD.

It wasn't long before I found out what a growing problem PTSD was in soldiers, how little support was in place for ex-soldiers and how bad this problem was likely to become in the future.

While the US collects data on soldiers suffering mental illness after they have left the military system, the UK's Ministry of Defence (MOD) doesn't. This means the UK's statistics on soldiers suffering from PTSD come from data collected on soldiers still under the care of the MOD and not from veterans in the years after retirement.

The MOD's statistics show that from 2015 to 2016, 0.18 per cent of the armed forces had an initial assessment for PTSD, and from 2016 to 2017 this rose

to 0.19 per cent. But PTSD can either lie dormant or simply unrecognised in a person for five-plus years before it surfaces or the person finally seeks help. When you take this into account, it becomes clear that the MOD's statistics on mental illness among veterans are likely to be way off the mark.

Keystone US studies have found PTSD affects up to 18 per cent of combat veterans, and when you consider the unique factors involved in warfare these days, this statistic is unsurprising. From the fear of sustained attack, biological and chemical weapons and uncovering human remains, to having a friend and colleague shot or injured in front of you or being shot or injured yourself, the list of those factors is extensive. Furthermore, deployment length is often unknown and multiple deployments are always likely.

A study by the King's Centre for Military Health Research of 4,928 UK armed forces personnel deployed in Iraq in 2003 found that 12 per cent admitted to being violent after returning home. Often this was triggered by flashbacks of combat and trauma.

Once soldiers have retired from the armed forces, they are left with the daunting task of trying to establish a functioning civilian life. This can be a struggle even for those veterans not challenged by physical or mental illness, but for those suffering from acute stress or PTSD, the task can be overwhelming.

Combat Stress is a veterans' mental health charity dedicated to helping soldiers and veterans suffering with mental illness. The demand for its services has grown massively in the last few years due to the increase in the number of veterans from recent conflicts beginning to seek the charity's help.

A better awareness and understanding of mental illness in soldiers has helped to increase the number of veterans seeking help, but the stigma still remains at military unit level. The charity estimates that referrals will continue to rise over the next ten years as it deals with the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Through therapeutic work, complete remission can be achieved in 30–50 per cent of cases, and partial improvement can be expected in most.

Though it is often said that prevention is better than cure, it's difficult to see how to prevent PTSD occurring in soldiers facing such volatile environments. Training programmes have been developed to try to prepare soldiers for combat and other stress factors related to deployment, and to reduce their risk of exposure to traumatic events, e.g. military sexual trauma. Part of each programme trains service personnel how to respond to such events should they occur.

The next step from here is trying to detect and treat mental disorders in the early stages. Acute Stress Disorder often presents before the onset of chronic PTSD. It has

been found that intervening at this stage can significantly reduce symptoms and prevent PTSD taking hold.

Interventions can be implemented immediately after trauma and this has also been shown to reduce the risk of PTSD developing.

Of course, this all relies on symptoms being detected instantly and acted upon quickly which often isn't the case, sadly.

Though we may not be at war at the moment, the effects of conflicts over the last 20 to 50 years are still being felt across the veteran community. Ex-soldiers without the support they need so often reach the point at which they feel they can't keep going. It's all too common to hear of another soldier having taken his or her own life.

I find this more than just sad, more than just unfair; I find it bloody despicable. These men and women join our military to serve our country because they feel it's right or honourable or their duty, and they come out of it with these mental scars which prevent them from moving on into normal civilian life, prevent them from enjoying being with their families, prevent them from living. And the system they work for does so little to help or support them in the years after service. PTSD isn't a new thing – we've known about it since the Great War – so why isn't more being done?

This played on my mind for a long time after studying it, and what bugged me was the fact that I

couldn't really do anything about it. I wasn't likely to be in any kind of government position where I could try to make a change. Nor was I likely to be involved in any kind of mental health care regime designed for recovering PTSD sufferers.

All I could do that *might* help was run. Maybe, through this, I could at least raise money for other people in the right sectors who could then do something about it. I decided that the charity I had heard of most while studying PTSD was Combat Stress, and I signed up for the Loch Ness Marathon to raise some money for them. As any marathon runner knows, when you sign up for that first marathon there is some serious doubt that runs through your mind (and body) because a marathon is the biggest thing a human body can physically do, isn't it? Of course it's not, and any marathon runner will tell you how perfectly achievable it is ... if you put the work in.

But then BANG! The weeks of training and all the hype around the marathon are over, and you're dropped from a great height back down to earth. It was such a big deal for me for about five months, raising money while training and training and training, and then ... nothing. And this crash landing back down to earth, I would later find out, is the 'post-marathon blues stage' of the whole marathon experience. Everyone will fail to warn you about this stage, trust me.

And so here you are, all caught up. Maybe you can better understand the feelings I was having as I sat here on mum and dad's sofa, in front of a laptop with a glass full of rum and Coke, a heart full of post-mara blues, and a head full of lifestyle choices featuring Jeremy Kyle reruns.

I was frustrated, too. The marathon had raised £750 for Combat Stress, which was great. I was extremely humbled by people's generosity. But in the great scheme of things, that wasn't going to do very much. Surely there was more I could do?

I can't quite recall how I found HorseBack UK. I would have read about it somewhere, I'm sure. What I do recall is the idea of this little charity sticking in my mind and refusing to leave.

The work Combat Stress does is life-altering as well as life-saving, and it is a charity I feel deserves as much recognition as possible. And this is something its board and thousands of staff work hard towards. But I decided if I was to carry on fundraising for this cause I wanted to find a charity small enough to go and see the inner workings, see precisely where the money raised goes, speak to the owners and hear the passion from the creators and benefactors themselves.

HorseBack UK was this charity. With a small team of dedicated staff in the hills of Aboyne in Scotland, HorseBack UK takes in groups of combat veterans

suffering from mental or physical trauma and teaches them to work with the 30 or so horses on the 'ranch'. They learn new skills in the form of equestrianism on the farm and conservation work on the estate. From learning horsemanship to repairing fences and handling falcons, the courses at HorseBack UK aim to inspire recovery, helping veterans to regain their self-esteem while learning coping strategies, life skills and lasting resilience.

The veterans get the opportunity to regain focus and purpose, to put some distance between themselves and the world they now find themselves suffocated by and be part of the atmosphere, banter and kinship they were so used to during their military careers.

Founders Jock and Emma Hutchison registered HorseBack UK as an official charity in 2009 after initially looking to set up a trekking centre in the Highlands of Scotland. Jock, a former marine, and Emma, a former police officer, were looking to settle down to a quiet country life when they invited some friends with military backgrounds to their new home in Aboyne. It was while in front of the bonfire one night that their friends mentioned how amazing this place would be for the guys coming back from Afghanistan with physical and mental war wounds. The period 2008 to 2009 had been one of the worst for fatalities and life-changing injuries in soldiers in Afghanistan. The seed was planted.

Initially looking to the oil industry to gain some sponsorship to run their first course for Afghanistan veterans, Jock and Emma were turned down. This was when they changed tack slightly and, rather than looking for sponsorship, contacted Royal Marines 45 Commando directly to gauge interest in the idea. 45 Commando had had a devastating two-year period, losing nine comrades and having others with life-changing injuries. The Royal Marines unit jumped at the opportunity to send some of their recovering soldiers to the ranch.

HorseBack UK has grown considerably over the years since these first shaky steps. Being one of the first charities to gain funding from Help for Heroes, and now with a dedicated team of volunteers and staff around them, it has two arenas, a round pen, a converted farm steading and accommodation for the men and women attending its courses. It only takes talking to one of the guys on a course at HorseBack to know how truly worth it the time and effort to build this place up has been. The work this small charity does is so important to the men and women who pass through its doors, quite literally saving the lives of those who thought they were lost.

I wanted to be able to help. But I couldn't do another fundraising road marathon; that was a certainty. The whole point of the first one was the fact that I didn't think I could do it and therefore I assumed other people would doubt me, too. To me, that seemed worth sponsoring. I

don't really see the point in sponsoring someone to do something that's a dead cert. Where's the challenge? So if I was going to try to raise more money it would have to be through something I didn't think I could do.

Cue more Captain Morgan's, Google, and a website featuring the Everest Marathon. A few minutes of reading and I decided this was the best-looking race on the whole of the internet. I had a buzzy sense of excitement beginning to grow as I read on. What did I need to have done? Only a few ultramarathons, a bit of mountain experience and some trail-racing experience: you know, all the things I'd never done in my life before. Hell, a few months ago I couldn't even go for a one-mile jog without getting lost. I was now supposed to be trusted on a mountain on my own!

But yes! This race sounded brilliantly mental. The race itself involved two weeks of trekking to the start line with temperatures ranging from -20°C to $+30^{\circ}\text{C}$ in the space of a day, and then an entire marathon with half the oxygen your body needs, over terrain to make your ankles cry.

In the space of 15 minutes I had decided I was doing it. The next race was 2017 which gave me two years to do all those ridiculous things they wanted on my CV. Plenty of time!

Being the least patient person I know, the next website I visited was the Scottish Running Guide, on

the hunt for my first ultramarathon. Might as well start as I meant to go on!

I soon found one ... and entered it about ten minutes later. It was all so wonderfully exciting!

Now, let's all just bear in mind at this point I had done *one* road marathon. That's 26.2 miles of smooth, even surface over a few undulating hills. Therefore, my decision to enter a 55-mile race (yes, 55 miles) in just five months' time was probably foolhardy at best. Planning to do the Everest Marathon in 24 months' time was even more so. But Google and my good old Captain Morgan's said it was a good idea, and, that evening, that was good enough for me ... hiccup ...