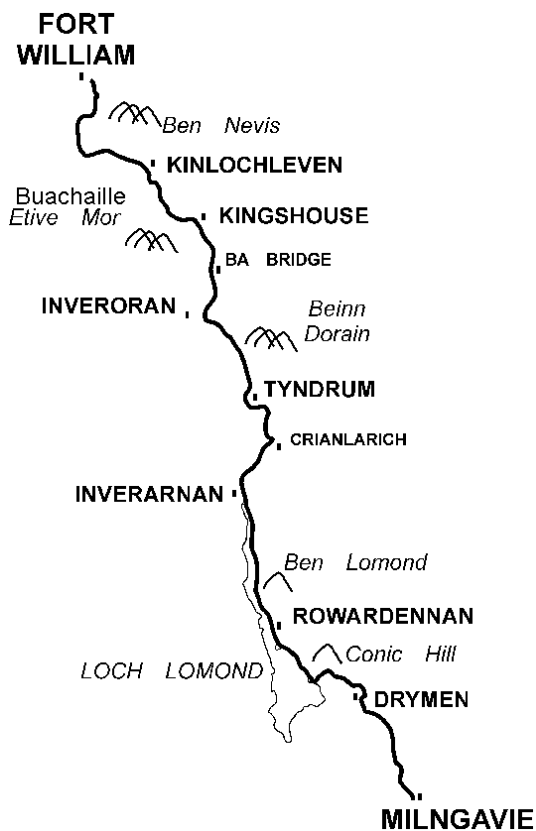


Allan Grant's West Highland Way Race 2011

An Account



The WHW race is approx. 95 miles (153.6 km) with 14,760 feet (4,995m) of ascent along what is mainly trails. It starts from Milngavie on the north side of Glasgow and ends in Fort William at the foot of Ben Nevis, the UK's highest mountain.

This account is dedicated to Elisabeth and my support team, without whom I would not have made it and whose patience and fortitude spoke volumes to me. It is with thanks to my God for showing me afresh the wonder and beauty of the world around us; the amazing but often unrealised potential of our minds and bodies and in our common humanity. The organisers had given the unusual opportunity for you to choose your own running number. I chose 121, reflecting on Psalm 121 which was a traditional song of the ancient Israelites as they would make the climb up to

Jerusalem to worship. It has several encouragements for anyone contemplating a long, fatiguing journey.

Here it is below— what's in brackets are mine!

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?

2 My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

8 The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from (Milngavie to Fort William)

this time on and for evermore.

Elisabeth's support started months ago in not discouraging me to attempt this. She has put up with the disrupted lifestyle accorded by the training and giving me the much needed stimulus to go on when my resolve flagged (*"nobody else but yourself is asking you to do this"*). Your shrewd perception of what was needed and when was crucial as has so often been in the past. You believed I could do it and am so grateful. She also very wisely decided that after being on my support for the Fling twice before (a shorter ultra; 60% of the WHW) that being my wife it probably was not a good idea to be the front line support on this altogether more challenging event both for participant and supporter. In this kind of endurance event there is a kind of visceral, primitive level of support needed for many hours. That's where the support crew guys come in....



Support in Milngavie at Dutton's home – about 90 mins. before start

Back row (l to r): Don, Martin, Jim, Andy Front: Angus, me, Elisabeth

The final dedication is to certain children in Pakistan whose lot in life and opportunity is unbelievably less than most who probably will read this. Doing this is on one level a personal challenge. To do it for a cause that may lift some of them from a life of grinding poverty,

discrimination and slave like labour is a privilege. To learn how to read and write and to do this in the context of loving, compassionate teachers is a strategic long-term vision. Mike and Kerstin Wakeley started Starfish Asia after 20+ years of serving the people of Pakistan. In the 8 or so years since its start they now directly support over 5,000 children in this way, based from their home in London. Read about this great work at www.starfishasia.com You can sponsor me till end of August 2011 at uk.virginmoneygiving.com/aegrant

And to my story...

Probably for about 48 hours before I found that my mind and body were having conversations with each other. My body knew this was the biggest challenge of its life and it seemed every little ache and pain I was aware of and a bit paranoid about. My mind was subtly signalling 'get ready'. There was also the voice of reason wondering why I should choose to do this at 54 and not 24! My eating strategy for the 4 – 5 days before was being undermined as I lost my appetite, felt tired and had a queasy stomach. All this I attributed to nerves but on reflection I think I also had some mild infection. Indeed on the Friday just before the race I think I had a bit of a fever. However we could not find thermometer but that was probably a good thing - knowing more might have added to my worries.

Organisers had helpfully organised for those who were able to come a support crew briefing on the Friday morning in Tiso's outdoor centre in Glasgow. Apart from some useful last minute and up to date tips probably the most significant help to me personally was that one of those briefing had done the race with a broken ankle. If one can run 95 miles on a broken ankle maybe I could manage on a slight fever – anyhow it was an encouragement.

It was great to have the use of the Dutton's home immediately before the race as it provided a comfortable atmosphere for support crew, some friends and myself to 'relax' and take a few 'pre-race pics'. I was going to be in the elements continuously for 2 nights and a day - so much better than hanging around in a car park on a damp Friday evening. Registration was a low key, somewhat muted, affair and included a weigh in with strict instructions to hold onto this for subsequent times so they could monitor any abnormalities up or down.

0030- Saturday 18th June. Organisers had pre-race briefing in Milngavie station car park. Critical information imparted 'there will be weather'. Indeed the prospect was to be a damp weekend which was probably a good thing for me in the circumstances. We were told our hands and feet would swell and to remove any rings. This I forgot about doing until a critical point later. We were also given what I thought was a bizarre instruction – pick up any litter you see along the way! I was thinking – you expect we run 95 miles and also carry everybody's dropped rubbish. It seemed a bit surreal and fills me with thoughts of a haggard figure limping into Fort William with a great black bin bag on his back! However I think it reflects the profound respect we should have for the beautiful wild country we would be going through. It is indeed a travesty that people do not respect it. I confess I did not pick up

any rubbish I saw but all kudos to Martin who did. At this point I really want to thank the organisers for their professionalism and control of the whole race. The logistics of managing things over 95+ miles of often inhospitable terrain is formidable – a huge thank you for making such an event possible.

There was an unsettling drama while the briefing was going on – my drinking bladder was leaking and my race bag was completely soaked. Elisabeth and Don took over this whole issue and replaced it with an old one I had. It was one huge stress I did not need pre-race and they handled it for me so well.

A few minutes with support crew and Elisabeth for farewells. On with headtorches. On one level you have the equipment for this kind of thing but the reality is it is all about heart and mind; body and determination. Training had involved using my fantastic GPS watch and heart rate monitor– however to have all that detail now was info. overload - I just needed the time of day to make the various checkpoints and cut off times. To me the race was about completing it and doing it within the time limits.



***Massed start 151
starters (113
finished) I'm
somewhere near the
back (deliberately!)***

0100 – final countdown was done by all participants, no great klaxon – a fitting way of starting. After all we were setting off on an odyssey, this was not a 100m sprint. Off we went up the station steps (warned not to trip and fall!) and after a few hundred metres came to the official marked start of the WHW. In a blur I saw Elisabeth, crew and friends and within seconds out of the relatively civilised Milngavie High St. into the dark woodlands. Lots of headtorches bobbing, with anonymous talking heads excitedly chatting. I was happy to just listen at this stage and try and settle into a routine. Very aware to make sure adrenaline not get me too excited and just to consciously monitor pace. After leaving the Mugdock woods it was nice to be in the more open country and see the skyline. Passing Carbeth huts

reminded me of the common occupation of most of humanity at this time of night – tucked up in bed, asleep – a touch of envy as we moved on in the drizzly darkness.

Whilst leaving the road just past Easter Carbeth house we rejoin the trail it is fitting to mention those wonderful marshals and supporters exemplified by a cheery gentleman opening the gate. To volunteer to do this in the middle of a wet night takes special people.

And so onto the ascent down to Beech Tree Inn and a great encouragement to be met by a cheering group of supporters and first stage support crew of Jim, Andy and his wife Jenna. It's a very early stage of the whole race and not much physical support should be needed but it is very important I think to have such encouragement before the field thins out and you are on your own. With 151 starters and only 113 finishers 'back of the pack' runners like me were few and far between in the last stages.

A rather flat stage now and then onto to the longest paved section of the whole route on the way to Drymen. Starting chatting with a few on the inclines when we slowed down. Interesting to chat with one, Jim, an older man, who was cheerily encouraging everybody he met that he had done this 19 times; more than anyone. His advice was strategic for me – get to Bridge of Orchy within the cut off times and, in theory, you'd only have to maintain 2.75 mile/ hour to get to Fort William in under 35 hours. He then demonstrated what 2.75 mile/ hour was like! His advice was crucial because the way the cut off times are designed you basically have to do the first 96 km 59.5 miles) at a running pace. Even if you are reduced to shuffling after that you have a chance!

On approach to Drymen there was enough light to switch off head torch. And so to Drymen where again support were there to cheer. I reported I had some stomache problems at that point and Andy very thoughtfully ran after me with toilet paper. An unpleasant experience in Garabhan forest was made that much more bearable.

Garabhan forest and suddenly I was on my own in the early morning. Thoughts start to turn within. Conic hill is silhouetted against the pre-dawn sky and presents the first major challenge. I found the ascent much tougher than when I had run the Fling in April which starts 5 hours later – maybe something to do with one's body clock.

On the descent down to Balmaha you get that beautiful sight of Loch Lomond spread out before you. Careful here as it's very wet, muddy and slippery. In to Balmaha car park where first official checkpoint is and meet support and a 10 minute stop. They are kindly offering me all manner of foods and I'm getting disappointed with myself that I can't enthusiastically oblige. Appetite had gone, stomache was churning and not one single food interested me. That was the case for the entire race. However I was obsessive about getting in the fluids – water with an electrolyte tablet. A bland citrus flavour. I did have tea and eat something in Balmaha but there and subsequent stops throughout the entire race I was only nibbling things.

The next big challenge is the whole East side of Loch Lomond. It is very undulating terrain even though it largely follows the Loch side and the last section you have to clamber over rocks. Having done this several times in training I knew how tough this could be. I guess the only advantage is knowledge and there is a slight help in knowing what is next on the trail. Indeed to visualise the route in sections and playing it over in your mind is part of the key to doing it. I can't imagine how runners from overseas who come here and run the route from scratch can cope. The distance to most people (incl. myself) is mind bogglingly long. The brain can't take it in but we can take in sections and sew them together. Leaving Balmaha I was again on my own even though there were other runners at the stop. By this time we are all on our own schedules. Fairly uneventful the run to Rowardennan and then a pre-arranged stop to meet crew and eat/drink what I could and sit down a bit. I feel as if I have already lived through a very long day and a long evening – in fact it was still morning.

On leaving Rowardennan I was entering a very long section in which because of various access issues support crew could not meet you but organisers had arranged drop bags at checkpoints and other stops. And so the long, gradual ascent from Rowardennan. In the latter stage towards Inversnaid suddenly had a few more companion runners and shared joys and woes. Arrived at Inversnaid to be met by some tough mountain rescue people and catch my drop bags. I say tough as I could not stop for more than a few minutes – the midges were in a frenzy. Contents of drop bag did not interest me at all. All that planning – imagining what you'd need when. However, must needs and forced some sweet rice pudding down. I have the feeling that after this machine like eating certain foods may no longer appeal to me. Thought at least sipping the flat coke was a good idea and rather abstractedly took the bottle with me which I did for many miles without drinking any more of it. Eventually I gave it to one of the marshals to dispose of. Some things do not seem rational but you do them and move on.

It was around this point that I suddenly remembered the pre-race brief *"your hands will swell and you should take off any rings"*. Panic as I looked down to see swollen hands and a 5 minute desperate bid to remove my wedding ring. At last I succeeded.

On to Bein Glas farm, another official checkpoint but because of landlord restrictions no support allowed so a somewhat lonely, beleaguered experience. The marshals, organisers did all they could to alleviate this. Moving on it was subsequently all the more refreshing to meet Andy's cheery face and firm handshake in the approaches to the forest above Crianlarich. At last I was starting to feel I could entertain a certain milestone of the run upon entering Auchtertyre Farm and a weigh in– 80 km, just over halfway. Here first and second stage support were all together so it was great to see them all. Jim rather apologetically saying he had to leave. After trailing around driving night and day after me for 15 hours – his contribution was heroic. He had offered to help even before I applied to do this. It was a small encouragement at the time that got me thinking I might get some help to do this if I attempted it.

I could now have running companions with me all the time which was great and was shared between Martin and Don.



Auchtertyre (80km) – Cold potatoes & flat coke

In Auchtertyre Don taught me something by performing the most Christ like service – he washed my feet. I hope he doesn't mind this comparison but he has a wonderful empathy for what's needed and when – a great gift. I realised afresh that the only way I could get to Fort W was with these feet and he gave them respect when I was unaware of what I needed. Plenty of tender skin but no blisters – after a complete change of clothes clear to go!

After Auchtertyre Don was with me through Tyndrum

and to Bridge of Orchy. I had become a bit obsessive about cut off times – seeing my margins at checkpoints being reduced so knew that I was going slower. Getting to B of O with an increased margin would be a psychological help. As we went through Tyndrum I knew I was moving into new experiential territory as I had never run more than 85km (as per the Fling) so there was an excitement in doing that. A few km out of Tyndrum we caught up with a lonely figure of a man – a young man Jamie doing a slow walk. I knew that was not good at this stage and both Don and I thought we could help him. Don invited him to join the rather shuffling but none the less running movement that he had encouraged me to do. And so it proved to be a help to him. Along the way I found it encouraging to meet several other 'back of the pack' but much younger men determined to achieve our common goal of finishing but struggling with their own issues.

Approaching B of O as a threesome it was heartening to see Elisabeth who then joined me for the last km or so whilst Don ran ahead to get tea and other things ready. In B of O we

were met once again by Angus' cheerful enthusiasm. Stuffed down some chicken soup etc. whilst seated in the car. As getting ready to leave wind and rain picked up and I became very chilly as I had stopped moving. Fortunately, had not left and put on several more layers – another critical action done at the right time. Thanks you guys!



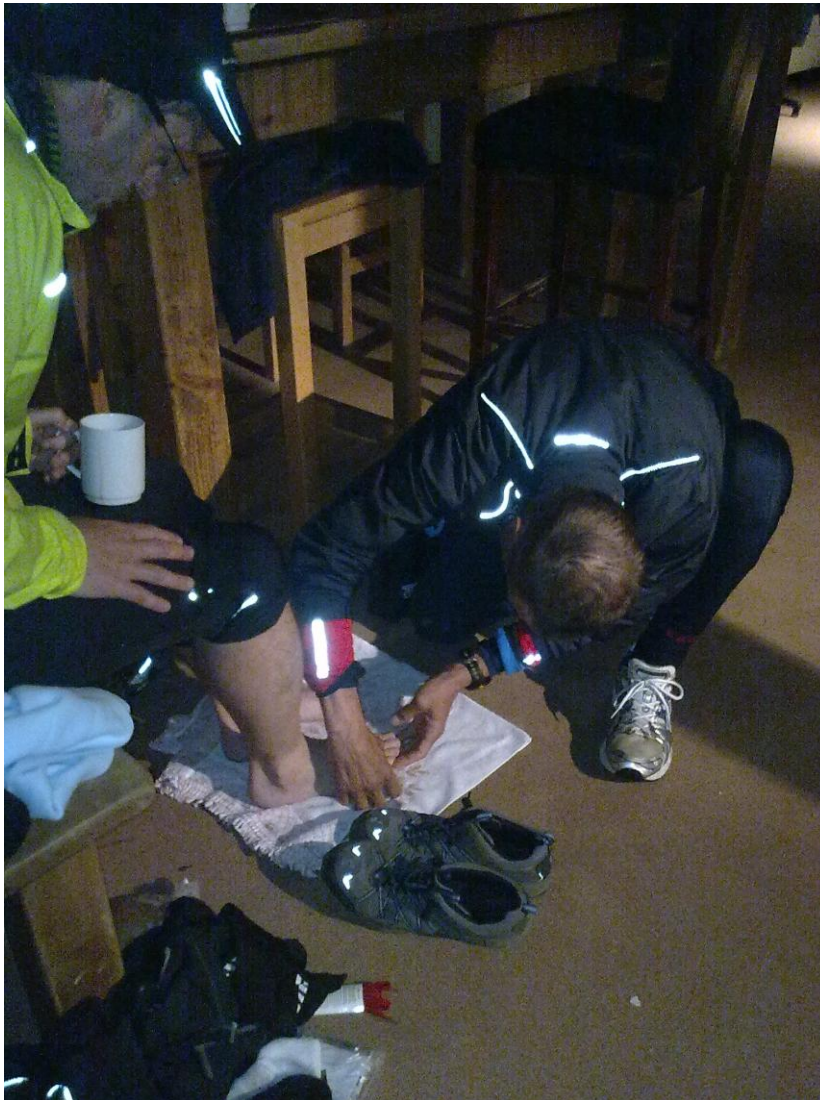
Coming into Bridge of Orchy (96km mark)

It was now Martin's turn to accompany me. A few hundred metres out of B of O I was overtaken by a fit of coughing – I'd been handed a bunch of nuts and some went down the wrong way. At this

juncture Martin's serious advice that if I did not eat I would not make it was another make or break moment. For many hours I had been moving and not really wanting to eat fighting nausea. He now insisted that I nibble something every 10 mins. and he would keep this up for the 4 hours or so to Glencoe. I must have started to look a pitiful sight shuffling along, judging by the regular verbal encouragements that I was 'doing well'. Not so long after B of O we met Angus and Don for a brief reunion at Inverornan – a beautiful and at same time desolate looking place. Meeting these guys was great – one doesn't always need to give or do something for someone – just being 'companions along the way' and sharing is so important to. The on to the section of Rannoch Moor where you meet with Wade's parliamentary roads. Rugged stony track ill suited to tender feet – at least I had changed to road shoes at B of O. It was tough. However it was comforting to have passed another milestone – 100km and that was good to know. The beast was now 2/3rd down! On this section of the route rather unusual meetings occurred and am sure they were not hallucinations – Martin can testify. Twice I was met by figures whose greetings were not the usual roadside ones *"Hi, how are you – when did you last pee? What colour was it?"* Similar experience the 2nd meeting which was ended by being handed a packet containing honeycomb. Incredibly sweet but it was a variation from nibbling a cold tuna sandwich and feeling less stressed by Martins' 10 minute commands to eat.

As we came in to Glen Corries at Glencoe it was starting to get dark. Another phase entered into – a 2nd night on the run! Elisabeth, Angus and Don like guardian angels there to welcome us in the gloom. Official checkpoint. They all agreed it would be good to get me in

from the cold. Angus suggested he drive me the 200m or so up the hill to the ski café. Purist that I am I decided to walk – I just couldn't think of being taken anywhere on wheels even if it didn't add or take from the distance. Besides I wasn't an invalid!



Foot washing no. 2! White Corries (Glencoe) ski cafe (114km)

The experience in the café was another surreal one. Another foot washing and massage from Don whilst sipping tea. It was like different parts of me were being attended to – different parts of the whole. Like a formula one car on a pit stop – except I was not going very fast! However same principle.

As Don and I left Glen Corries with our head torches on my feet felt fantastic with a pair of dry track shoes and socks. The tea had revived me. The track shoes proved

another critical choice. I had really been thinking of wearing an old pair of road shoes but Don wisely favoured the trail shoes. On reflection the treacherous, rocky flooded streams of the hills around Glencoe would have greatly increased my risk of falling had I used road shoes. I needed to feel where I was no matter how painful.

I basked in the glow of comfort jealously trying to keep my feet dry for the nearly 1 ½ hours it took to get to Altnafeidh and another brief stop and warm drink from support.



***Arriving Altnafeidh
for a quick cuppa
tea.(120km)***

Here the going got tough again! The 'devil's staircase' is the steep climb up from there followed by a quad busting descent to sea level at Kinlochleven. This whole section I got very dizzy and

several times had to stop in the torrential rain, head between my knees. Don patiently waiting nearby. Was thinking it might be something to do with the need to keep the head down because of the head torch and the many hours of eye/ feet coordination. Don't really know. From the training I knew the descent to Kinlochleven would be hard and long – it was actually harder and longer. The cruel bit is you see the welcoming lights of Kinlochleven like an oasis but it's actually more like a mirage as it seems to draw no closer. How welcome to eventually arrive in the pre dawn at the cosy Kinlochleven community centre. At least it appeared cosy to me to lounge in a leather sofa of all things with some tea and cake (I think). Another weigh in and a chat with the helpful and friendly race doctor, talking through what the dizziness might be. He didn't think there was an issue and gave the all clear. Dizziness didn't continue after Kinlochleven and seemed to be a problem of the night.



***Kinlochleven (129km) –
Checkpoint, weigh in and
chat with race doctor.
Good to go!***

Angus had determinedly reminded me the whole time that I was going to make it – I felt I had to smell success first and for

me that was Lundavra – the mid way point between here and Fort William. Off from Kinlochleven with Martin on a fairly steep climb up to the Lairigmhor. This was now my 2nd dawn experience and seemed to come with a heightened awareness of the wonder and beauty of this daily encore of God's creation – all that power and energy. The Lairig was beautiful and we met several mountain rescue people standing as sentinels at various points offering drinks etc..



***Dawn in Kinlochleven –
Scotland is beautiful!***

It was reassuring to see the sheep dog trained to find people. Lundavra took longer to reach than I had expected probably because Don had scouted out to meet us but he had come quite a distance. He went ahead to tell Angus to get the tea ready. A

nice touch at Lundavra check point with a bonfire. I didn't know I was cold until I felt the heat of that bonfire. It is apparently a tradition by Duncan who mans the checkpoint and started this race some 26 years ago. Sitting round the fire I could now savour the end being in sight, smell success! Don and Martin had agreed they would both come with me this last stretch which was kind. It was good to share this moment with them. Elisabeth and Angus would be waiting in Fort William.



***Lundavra (141.5 km) – 12km
to go***

Again on route met a man perched at the top of an incline who offered me some hot, sweet tea – another helper willing you on.

For the first time the sun came out beckoning towards the goal. At last we reached the forest track with Fort W. in the distance. At this point Don and Martin started to encourage me to speed up – for many hours I had been shuffling and now they asked me to run! Slowly as we went downhill with Glen Nevis I tried to pick up the pace ever so slightly.



Picking up the pace on the road into Fort William!

Next pressure was they said I should try and make it before 10am (sub-33hours) – I didn't need this as I was thinking I'd just finish and focussed on that. Thank you for seeing that I could finish with a bit of a flourish! Eventually down to Braveheart car park and on to the paved road of Fort William. Now Don telling me to pick up the pace further and really go for it. Started to do so at the 30mph sign but then realised a bit to go yet. Save final last push till I actually know the distance. Yes it was nearing and Angus and Elisabeth taking photos – a full fledged run was in order – power in the legs and the cloud of witnesses cheering on. On with the Starfish Asia T-shirt and Elisabeth garlanding me with a bouquet of flowers (a Swedish tradition) and there I was slapping my hands on the leisure centre doors – I had finished in 32:54:15. In a blur congratulated by all around, weighed in and crew and myself given the traditional quaich of whisky to share. Phew, the odyssey was over and after a quick shower we were all off for breakfast (full Scottish!) before rejoining all the finishers, crews and well wishers for the prize giving at noon. No medals – everybody gets a cut crystal glass with the route engraved – a fitting memento that will not stay in a cupboard!



**Fort William
(153.6km)**



**Getting the
prized
goblet!**

Long- distance running, like any kind of journey, can be a metaphor for life itself. This is the bigger challenge we all face and to be able to say like one of old...

'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' (Paul of Tarsus)