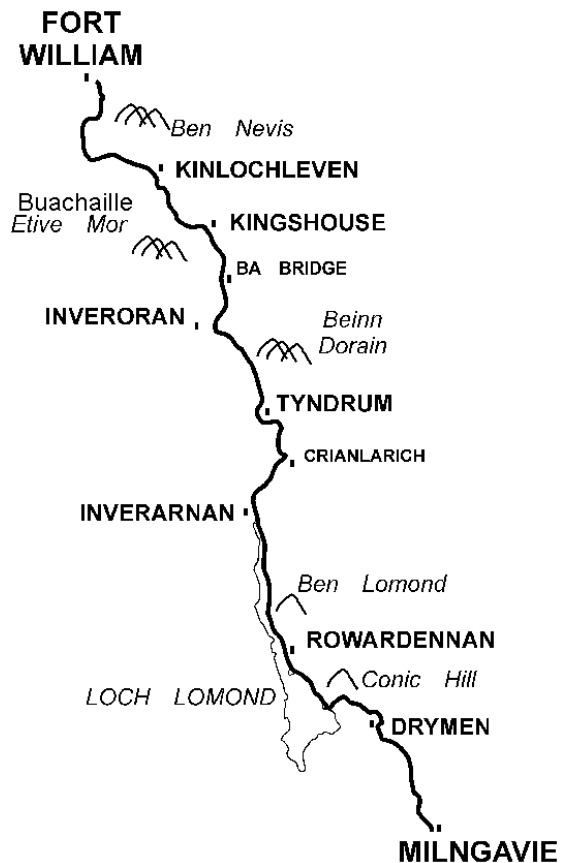


## Allan Grant's West Highland Way Race 2012

### A midsummer run

A few hours before the start a friend texted to say that she was looking forward to my story of this year's effort. Up to that point I had not given it a thought. I had felt the vividness of doing it for this first time was exceptional and that experience would not be replicated. I now realise that the combination of very long distances, varied and beautiful terrain and the extreme vagaries of the Scottish weather all conspire to make every attempt a very unique experience. And so it proved.

The facts are the same; distance (153.6 km); approx. 4,995m of ascent & descent; same time of year; same running number (121 - requested as the psalm of that number I find an encouragement to long distance running). Also almost the same group of committed folks as support crew. Support is crucial as a run of this type needs help. Due to another commitment Andy Gillies could not come this year but thank him for joining me on several training runs in the hills and for giving of his coaching expertise. The other team members you will meet in the account. However I firstly want to thank Elisabeth once again for her solid support in encouraging me many months before standing on the start line at 1 am on Sat. June 23. She also had to endure both the emotional strain as a spouse and the physically draining time of following me and the support crew throughout the weekend. She, wisely, chose again not to be on the sharp edge of the support and left it to the lads to sort me out.



Another thing that was the same was I was running in aid of Starfish Asia who help desperately poor families in Pakistan send their children to school. Education is often the only realistic prospect of escape from a life of bonded labour; in effect slavery. You can make a donation online till early Sept. ( <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/aegrant> ). Details of their work can also be found at <http://www.starfishasia.com/>

Last year my emotions were predominately that of fear of the unknown and the seemingly unrealistic prospect of finishing. This year there was still a lot of trepidation in the days before and found it very hard to concentrate on anything other than the mental preparation. There was also the practical – lists of things to take; foodstuffs; gear etc. There was also the importance of eating well. I generally have no problem with food (I can hear some people laugh at that) but I am lazy when it comes to thinking and planning about eating what is best. However I did try and make a bit more effort in the last few weeks. Medical and

nutritional opinion can be varied on what exactly is best. The 'do what works for you' approach is welcome though you never know what works till the day.

A word on training. This had gone well and followed the same regime as the year before; starting in early January and finishing peak training volume of 117 km (73 miles) a week by beg. of June with a 3 week tapering off before the big day. The one difference was although I did similar distances week on week to last year I paid more attention to training on hills rather than just 'doing the miles'. Generally I ran 4 times a week and sometimes 5. This for me keeps it on the committed side rather than the obsessive. The discipline of ultra running requires a lot but to my mind should be just that – a discipline. It reaps benefits mentally and physically and I find as a Christian has spiritual benefits as well. Anything that benefits and integrates our whole being must surely be worthwhile as we are made to be complete people. Obsessiveness to my mind is an imbalance between the parts of our make up. I am sure I get it wrong at times but to be aware of this is half the battle. Quite a number of people have labelled me mad in recent months. It does not always come across as a joke but more (I hope!) from a lack of understanding. This is my defense!

As with last year the Dutton family kindly entertained the support crew and I in the short time before the start. Only a few metres away from the start it could not have been more convenient. Dry and warm and to be enjoyed. Thank you so much. Thanks also to those who texted and emailed me with their assurances of prayer. It proved a great source of comfort. Unlike last year I did not suffer from a stomach bug or fever so was feeling as good as I probably could be facing the prospect of 30 plus hours in motion.



*With Andy, Martin Jim and Angus at the Dutton's ( Don missing from photo)*

At 12:30 am we had similar briefing to last year with the proviso of the weather. It was going to be wet which was definitely understating things. The organisers do a fantastic job in conveying a great sense of gung ho tempered with huge respect and care for your medical and safety well being. The message seems to be *'This is not for the faint of heart but neither is it for the foolish'*. This attitude is mirrored by the small army of dedicated volunteers who marshal and do incredibly menial jobs for many hours day and night with great cheerfulness in often extreme environments. If you are not acquainted with the ravaging hunger of millions of West coast midges intent on your blood you may not quite appreciate this type of torture.

0100 and it's off through the road underpass at Milngavie station. The most unromantic of starts which does not do justice to the beautiful and dramatic landscape we would be going



through. A few familiar faces flash by in the crowd of well-wishers along Milngavie High St. The first 20km were done in the dark with headtorches and it is difficult to describe the torrents of rain. I can only like it to being on a treadmill in a car wash. We could have been anywhere in the world at that stage as visibility was limited to the few puddles ahead of you and the blinding effect of the light on the rain. Early in the race there are plenty of people to talk to as we are more bunched up. Somewhat surreal is talking to people in these conditions. One fellow I must have chatted to for half an hour I do not know what he looks like. With his very strong Belfast accent it meant I often had to shout at him to repeat what he had said to me over the driving rain. During this period we passed through Dumgoyne and the Beech Tree Inn to see briefly Jim (driver) and Martin (runner) who were the support on the first half of race.

*We're off!*

No beautiful dawn this year. Instead a very slow lightening of the dark into a shade of grey as we approached Drymen (20km) and a brief meeting with Jim and Martin. And so on to Conic Hill (about the 30km mark). Take it easy going up and especially careful going down. During the uphill stretch I companioned with Ian and when asked if he had done it before was shocked by his 'this is my 9<sup>th</sup> time' reply. This prompted the natural response from me 'why do you keep doing this'. Trudging up the raging torrent that Conic Hill had become at 0415 got the predictable response *"no idea – you'll have to ask me afterwards"*.

On the descent I phone Jim and Martin to brew up some tea. Stomach ok so will go for Elisabeth's oat and yoghurt mix. Thanks guys for your encouragement. I know there is not much practical support needed in the early stages but your words and presence meant a lot.

Upon leaving them I realise that runners are no longer bunched up. We are now running our own race and the time from now on will be punctuated by repeated meetings of runners whom you are in similar pace to and whom you overtake and are overtaken by. I've observed similar pace runners over long distances are either better at climbs or descents but not both (then they would be at a higher pace) so you end up meeting folks many times. It provides an interesting balance between solitude and sociability. The sociability however tends to more silent companionship in suffering in the latter stages!

An aside about the weather. The organisers have described it as 'truly horrendous' and it rained solidly the first 12 hours. 172 runners set off from Milngavie at 1am and 119 finished the race at Fort William. Those who withdrew I really feel for and one fellow I know had symptoms of hypothermia (in midsummer!) by halfway stage. Sometimes small decisions make all the difference. Martin had predicted that the going up Loch Lomond would be chilling and that I should wear the heavy weather jacket instead of the super lightweight 60g jacket I favoured. Thinking back this was so providential and if anything I should have worn more base layers. Problem is that you assume you will get hot with the exertion but the chilling effect of incessant lashing rain felt like February temperatures instead of June. So thank you Martin.

The stretch from Balmaha to Rowardennan along the east side of Loch Lomond is quite familiar to me. It is very undulating and to my mind has a lot of similar looking places. This conspires to making you think you are further on than you are esp. when fatigue is setting in. Upon arrival Rowardennan it was good to meet again with Jim and Martin and try and eat something akin to breakfast as it's that time of day. The next 2 sections would be the loneliest of the whole race as no support allowed at Inversnaid and Bein Glas checkpoints. It would be 36 km when I would next see them at the halfway point at Auchtertyre Farm. So far I was about 40 mins. behind my predicted schedule but given weather that was good. Strangely I don't remember too much of these 36km – perhaps the lack of others around and the need to keep focussed mentally as well as physically has blurred this time.

One annoying incident however during this stretch does come to mind. It had been my habit to send pre-drafted texts to support crew, Elisabeth, my sister and parents upon leaving each checkpoint. All I had to do was open appropriate draft and send. This was especially important for crew in this section when they were not meeting me and had to have some idea of how my times were going and where exactly I was. The organisers expect support crew to be the first line of safety for the runner. Leaving Inversnaid I discovered that most of the buttons on phone had succumbed to the wet and though screen was still working the buttons were not. No one knew where I was. I then had the frustrating experience of receiving texts wondering where I was but not being able to properly read or send. After maybe half an hour of this, another runner came alongside and he kindly offered his phone to use. Only problem was there was only one phone number I had in my memory. This was my head memory, not phone memory as couldn't access that though by this time head was not working so well either! The number remembered was our home landline phone. Would Elisabeth still be at home or had she left in car for Glencoe? Fortunately she was

home and she relayed messages of where I was and that I was incommunicado and not to worry.

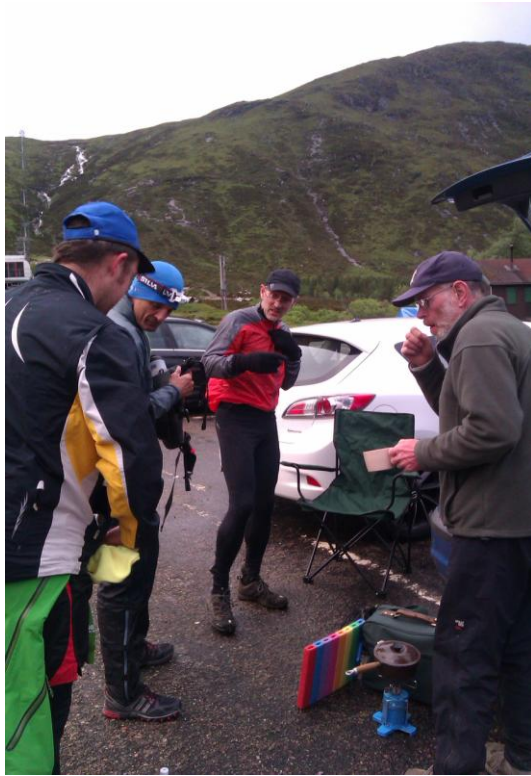
In the woods above Crianlarich (Bogle Glen) Martin met me and replenished my water supply and some food. No alongside support was yet allowed so I continued on my way to the support crew changover point at Auchtertyre (80 km mark). A welcome site indeed to see all the 5 guys together. They had found a very welcome shelter in which I could change into dry clothes and trail shoes. I was starting to favour using road shoes as I was now starting to painfully feel every stone. Don wisely said I needed to maintain grip over the flooded streams and rocks. Safety over comfort won the day. A welcome experience was devouring a bacon roll which someone had conjured up. In some ways the WHWR is a tale of 2 races as the two halves are quite distinctive and 2<sup>nd</sup> half of a gruelling race like this is always going to be the tougher. The welcome part is that provided you are more than 4 hours behind the leader (never a danger with me) you are allowed runner support to accompany you. This is such a psychological boost. So it was goodbye to Jim and Martin and welcome to Angus (driver), Andy and Don. It was now Don with me as we left Auchtertyre and headed to Bridge of Orchy via Tyndrum. Again a stretch I know quite well but only 2<sup>nd</sup> time in life I had experienced running over 85 km. The mental and physical boost at Auchtertyre I think encourages all as we got alongside some other runners and this accompanied by the freshness of their support runners made it a pleasant experience. One lady Ada did not have a support runner and when asked said she was 'saving' her for when needed! More of that later.

Bridge of Orchy will be remembered for the midges. They were particularly ravenous. I suppose there is the slight advantage of making checkpoint turnarounds faster. Another quick cup of tea from Angus – thank you, it couldn't have been easy brewing up in these conditions. Jim and Angus as drivers were in a sense one step away from the running. I am very aware of the through the night driving, the long periods of waiting and the comparatively very short periods of intense activity when you meet me at a checkpoint. The support runners have hours with me instead of the few minutes you share. You keep the show on the road – thank you. On from B of O to head to Glencoe with the pleasant realisation that I am ahead of last year at this time. Andy is now accompanying and does a good job of humouring me. We are now into the remoter areas. Angus and Don meet us briefly on the tarmac road at Inverornan. We were all enjoying the respite from rain. In Rannoch Moor we see the sun for the first time spectacularly shining through one of the glens. Andy suggests we pray as we traversed here and it was good to speak to the One who has created such atmospheric and dramatic surroundings.

Some time was then spent discussing what would be on the menu on arrival in Glencoe. Food is a vexing topic as by this time I feel that everything I carefully thought I would need has no appeal to me. Constant eating is more or less essential but taste buds lose their sensitivity and you don't feel hungry but you know you must eat and get these calories in. I ordered chicken soup.



A definite buzz around the ski centre car park at Glencoe. A sense that you were coming to the really tough bits but that folks and support were gearing up effectively for it. There was still a long way to go (40km) yet there was a feeling amongst runners and supporters alike



that it was doable. The relative brightness afforded by no rain lent credibility to that. It was now Don's turn to be with me. Relatively pleasant until Altnafeadh at the foot of the devil's staircase. It was now a grinding climb to the top and the descent to sea level at Kinlochleven. As it was now dusk this would be through the night. As we climbed we caught up with Ada, mentioned previously. This time she was with her support and she sure needed her. She was groaning loudly. She was having an attack of sciatica. How she managed to continue for another 33km must have been a story (and that she did as she got her goblet at the awards ceremony in a wheel chair).

As with this part last year I started to demonstrate the same symptom of severe dizziness. My tracks were now that of a drunken man and I couldn't land my feet properly on the

#### *About to leave Glencoe*

rocks. This was added to by a feeling of extreme tiredness which I had not had last year. Angus, the doctor in our midst, later reckoned that doing something for the second time the body does not produce so much adrenalin and that was probably why I felt more fatigued than last year. The weariness was of an intensity I had never before experienced. The darkness and the restarting of the rain didn't help. I was also feeling cold but the dominant feeling was definitely tiredness. I resorted to sitting every now and then and sensed I slept just for a few seconds and this happened a number of times. I really appreciated Don's wisdom in grabbing my hand and pulling me up. My reasoning was becoming dangerous and I was becoming obsessed with lying down in the middle of the streams and going to sleep. The cold or wet did not matter – it was rest and cessation of movement I craved more than anything. I now realise that to not have had anyone with me at that point would have been dangerous.

At last we arrived in Kinlochleven about 1:40 am to see Angus, bizarrely, waiting at a bus stop to greet us in the quiet. He then went with us to the leisure centre where I had the déjà vus experience of explaining to the race doctor my dizziness (same complaint as last year). It didn't occur to me to tell him of my extreme tiredness which by then was in abeyance probably due to the relative warmth of the centre and lounging on a couch. Maybe his diagnosis would have been different but I got the OK from him after a BP reading. My weight was also OK. Weight was being monitored at beginning, end and a few points in between looking out for dangerous weight gain or loss. I was not feeling great but I was definitely not the worst off and the 5 mattresses in the gymnasium seemed to be in good use.

So it was then off in the pre dawn gloom on the last stretch to Fort William with Andy. The long descent into Kinlochleven is followed by a stiff climb up to the Lairigh Mhor, a very long slightly undulating valley followed by the final descent into FW.

Another word about my physical or perhaps mental state. The dizziness had disappeared but now I started to see things that weren't there. I don't think it was hallucinating in that I saw the same things (stones, rocks, tree trunks) but the patterns and colours seemed to me to be processed into houses and figures. However I didn't see them as rocks until a few feet away. I actually quite enjoyed the experience but now realise that the dizziness and these visual tricks were probably a mixture of exhaustion and mild hypothermia. Many years ago I took up oil painting for a time and it seemed exactly like that. Any oil painting looked at from a few inches has no discernable pattern, only oil and brushstrokes. It's only as you stand back you see a whole different perspective and a beauty you didn't realise was there. I kept these experiences from Andy. Perhaps he wondered though when I exclaimed once what a beautiful picture someone had painted on a boulder only to realise somewhat bashfully as we passed it was lichen growing on it. I sensed a sideways glance from Andy who just humoured me and wisely said nothing more about it, as you do. I decided then not to make any more comments on what I was seeing. Elisabeth who is the artist says she sees such patterns all the time so I'm holding out that it was an experience of enhanced creative imagination and not the first signs of madness.

Although the distance to FW from Kinlochleven is about 24km each km achieved is like a milestone and seems to take so long on this the last and slowest part of the route. Wilderness Rescue team members with their specially trained dogs met us on a couple of occasions and one lot even had us pose for pictures! They seemed incredibly cheerful, almost party like, despite the damp and time of day.

There is a welcome midpoint at Lundavra where a fire was lit. My right knee had become very sore. I had taken paracetamol and it had helped a bit but I was also able to put a cold compress inside my leggings and ran with it. Both my feet had been sore for a good chunk of the race and it's only afterwards that I now realise they were very swollen and that that pain could probably have been eased simply by loosening shoelaces. The warmth was good but as with last year felt that it was unwise to linger as it was too comfortable with the last 12km. to go. I feared that some last minute deep sleep would overcome me and the goal would slip away. Besides we had to be in FW before they stopped serving the hearty buffet breakfast we had ordered! So it was away from the fire and off with both Andy and Don this time.

They patiently spearheaded the way ahead and then waited for me as I shuffled up to them. We started to discuss arrival times and I knew I could beat last year. I had nursed the idea of sub 30 for a time but now also knew that was unrealistic as the knee and foot pain could not be ignored and attempting to do so would have been foolish. However I was definitely going to give it a last extra push. As we arrived at the forest road which heralds the descent to Fort William Don and Andy were excited by seeing the outlying of the town.

I was not so enthused as I knew it for what they were – outlying areas. We still had nearly 6 km to go – far too long for a last minute push though the lads didn't think so. Anyhow they got on the mobile to tell Angus we would be there soon and predicted a hopelessly unrealistic time of arrival which in the end was over 30 mins off. However hope and

expectations rose as the destination was now in sight. I did eventually start to speed up and even passed other runners.



Elisabeth, Angus and his wife Ruth were now in the Braveheart car park to greet us having been hastened out of their slumbers by our overly enthusiastic arrival time. A welcome sight indeed and off we all ran for the final mile or so. An agonisingly long last mile. Passed one fellow in particular who looked awful and it puzzled me that he did not have a smile on his face at that point. I did not see the slabs of skin that Elisabeth said were his feet afterwards. I'm sure though he'd have had a smile in the end.

*Don and I picking up pace on forest road above FW*

At 8:17:30 am I banged the door of the leisure centre which by tradition marks the end of the race. Warm congratulations from the organisers; a very welcome cessation of movement; a seat and a hot coffee and the realisation it's all over. 31 hour 17 mins. and 30 secs. This was 1 hour 36 mins. and 47 secs. up on last year. Something to savour.

A nice shower and it was off to the Alexandra hotel with Elisabeth, crew and Ruth (Angus's wife) for a welcome breakfast before the award ceremony where I got prized goblet no. 2. Despite the terrible weather a new course record had been achieved where Terry Conway did it in a truly mind boggling 15 hr: 39 min.

*Receiving  
goblet no. 2  
from John  
Kynaston*







*Andy and Don stood down! (That post race breakfast did its work)*



*Still at last! After 31 hr.17min & 30sec.*



*Now I can sleep*

A huge thanks once again to Andy, Jim, Martin, Angus, Don and Elisabeth for giving of their time and energy to serve in this endeavour. It was truly a team effort and thanks for believing I could do it.

Allan Grant  
27<sup>th</sup> June 2012