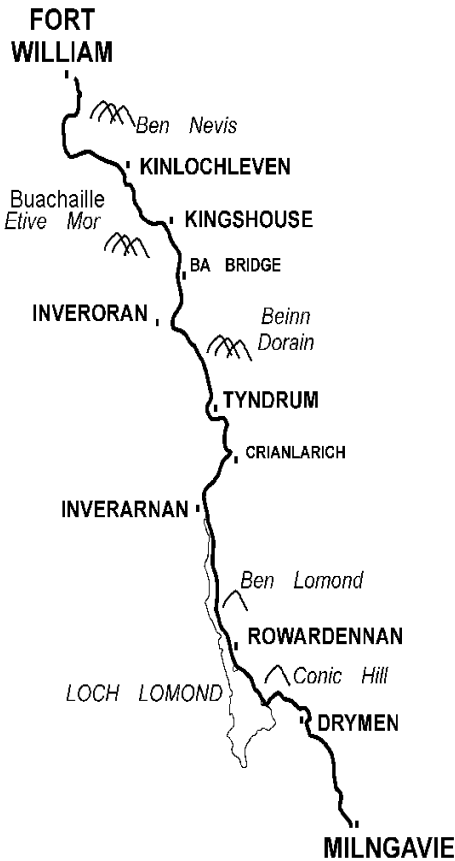


Allan Grant's West Highland Way Race

A midsummer run 21/22 June 2014



95 miles (153.6 km); 14,760 feet (4500 m) ascent/descent

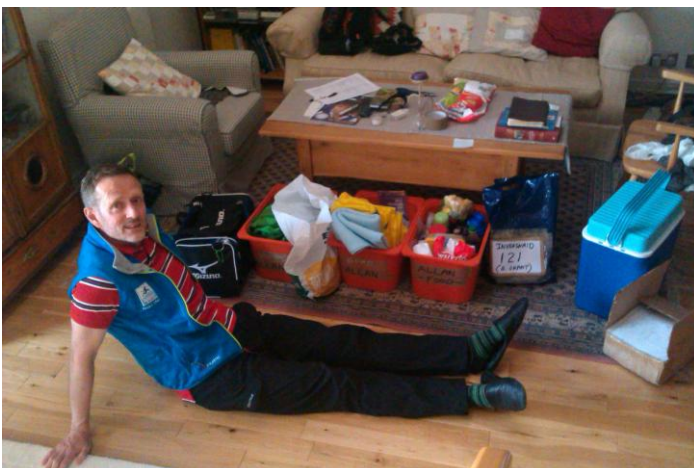
As in previous years I followed a 24 week training plan and felt it had gone well. Doing a similar overall mileage in the period of 1,000 miles I had consciously sought to improve the quality of training sessions. In my case this meant focussing on the specific terrain of the WHW with constant undulations, prolonged sessions of grinding uphill followed by quad challenging downhill. It was specifically the latter that I was aware of was going to make the difference for me, particularly in the 2nd half of the race. I knew that this was where I had the most to gain timewise. If I could maintain some semblance of a running pace on the downhill after 70+ miles I had the most to gain as gravity would be my friend. Also in previous years I did not really do any proper 'back to backs' (1 marathon type length run followed by another the next day). Instinctively I knew that this was good for me as it 'strengthens' mind and body to face the fatigue you inevitably face on the WHWR. Putting the word 'strengthen' alongside 'fatigue' sounds like a mismatch of terms but the mind also needs training in this game. If you can run for 6 hours on an evening, go to bed and then run another 5-6 hours upon wakening it builds resilience not only physically. However despite having this knowledge the past 3 years I had always 'cheated' myself into separating 2 long runs by a day.

As with last 3 years I was blessed with a great bunch of folks helping me. This year saw the most changes from previously with 3 of the 5 crew new to it. Someone who has remained unchanged has been Elisabeth who has had to sacrifice more than a few times to enable me

to train. She has always encouraged me in 'going for it' even when the commitment impinges on her and am so grateful for this. This account is dedicated to Elisabeth, newcomers Mary Kiely (my cousin) and her husband Tom; Don Mellor and Andy Gillies (both on their 3rd time supporting) and Dougie Robertson also new to the game. They all helped me along the way and believed that I could do better than previously. We achieved this together as a team and hope they realise this. Support is more than providing the right food or willingly doing

some menial task for me. It is also about engaging me when mind and heart are bone weary. Having even a bit of your enthusiasm rubbing off on me when brain and body are screaming for relief from exertion, nausea and dizziness is worth a lot.

As in my previous 3 times I once again wanted to raise some funds for Starfish Asia who do such a great work in educating disadvantaged children in



Where did I put the kitchen sink?

Pakistan. **See the link at the end if you wish to help.**

And so the big day drew near. I took Friday off, ostensibly for rest. The reality was that despite having worked on lists for gear and food and getting the 'right' things for several evenings previously I still found myself using most of the day on last minute things I thought might help. I did spend a couple of hours lying down but not a wink of sleep. The adrenaline was kicking in. Was not as nervous as other times. Kept telling myself I had done this 3 times before and each time I had improved time wise. However I was also aware that due to the distance involved anything could happen. Indeed each year there were challenges to face, each subsequent year I sought to mitigate them only to find that new and different issues presented themselves. The wheels seem to come off in different ways. Was also aware that this year the weather was drier and hotter with less wet and cold to contend with. However greater heat would bring a different set of issues.

Once again was thankful for Gordon and Kirsteen Dutton making their home available before the start. Their home is literally next door to St. Paul's, the church where I registered and got weighed . It could hardly be more convenient. Their home as in previous years provided a much appreciated shelter in



An oasis of warmth and calm



What am I doing here again!

the hour or so beforehand. All of support was there except Andy whom I'd see at the halfway point of race. Jim and Angus also came, both of whom had been support drivers previously and I appreciated their encouragement.

And so a short walk over to the race briefing at 12:30am. Last minute hug with Elisabeth and goodbyes to support. As the clock struck 1am we were off to the surreal sound of a bugle. We leave through the most unglamorous of urban start lines, Milngavie station's pedestrian underpass! The scenery would only get better.



12:30am race briefing

The first miles passed off in relevant quiet when I compare it to the incessant banter of the first hour of previous years. Was everybody more subdued or experienced? About 50% had never done the race before so maybe there was more folk caught up with their own thoughts as to what they were embarking on. Not that there was total silence but there was a definite difference. Was a privilege to chat briefly with Fiona Rennie doing her 10th

WHWR and is battling very serious health issues.

Got to Beech Tree Inn (12km) on schedule to see Mary and Tom. Nothing needed at this stage but good to see them in the darkness. Speaking of darkness the night seemed a lot shorter this year. The clouds had disappeared and by the time I arrived at Drymen (20km) at a bit over 3am there was no need for headtorch. That was nice. Mary and Tom topped up my drinking electrolyte but that was all. I had been nibbling some chocolate peanuts which was sufficient. Breakfast would wait till Balmaha.



Off through the underpass



Balmaha

And so on to Conic hill which gives you such breathtaking views of Loch Lomond in the early morning from the top. Then down to Balmaha (31.5km) where Tom and Mary had tea, yoghurt and some of Elisabeth's homemade shortbread which was to become a consistent staple throughout the journey. It felt good, I was just on target time wise and was glad to leave Tom and Mary's company after a few minutes stop. Nothing to do with them I may add but everything to do with the clouds of midges which were consistently thick all along Loch Lomond.

Not many memories of time to Rowardennan (44km). I had been along many times beforehand in training and the route seemed

burned into my memory. Tom and Mary again met me in Rowardennan and I took on food and drink. I would

not see them for quite some time as they would not be there at the next checkpoint at Inversnaid. On arrival at Inversnaid (55km) I sat down to eat a bit on a wall beside a cheerful fellow whose appearance looked anything but cheering. Both his knees were covered in blood and one of his arms was bandaged. Gave him a tuna sandwich which he was delighted with having no interest in his own food. He had fallen earlier and had his arm patched up. Don't know why they didn't tend to his knees at same time.

So far things were going according to plan, on time and no serious things physically. Think the main issue was the heat and the need to reduce my core and head temperature. I had taken to soaking my buff in streams and splashing my face which provided some welcome cooling. However because of the recent hot and dry weather a lot of places had dried up. Leaving Inversnaid I had the mishap of leaving without one of the 2 waterbottles I was carrying. Probably lost 5 mins going back and retrieving this. In previous years such an incident would have been a great source of frustration to me. I would have expended much needed mental energy fretting over it being a waste of time and physical energy. This time I was more sanguine and strangely lifted by my learning this bit of self control. Not that that helped my memory problems. I then did a similar thing again a short time later. Delighted at finding a nice fresh stream to cool myself off in, I then carried on for a further 3-4 mins only to remember I'd taken my sunglasses off and left them. Another return trip and several minutes lost but very thankful I found them.



Bein Glas arrival

There is a stretch after Inversnaid where the trail is described as 'technical'. It's a curious term to me as it's not really possible to do any running as you try to clamber with feet and hands over rocks and boulders. There then follows a long, slow ascent up towards Bein Glas as you leave Loch Lomond behind. I arrived at the Bein Glas checkpoint (65km) just as Tom and Mary had set themselves up to meet me so they hadn't much waiting around. Some of Elisabeth's homemade meatballs, chocolate milkshake and some chicken noodle soup were the order of the day. I was about 10-15 mins ahead of where I expected to be at this point so I was pleased with how things were going.

It was off then on the next section towards Glen Bogle, the woods above Crianlarich. This is a noisy section. You are never very far from the busy and high speed cars on the main A82, a sharp contrast to the more remote north east section of Loch Lomond.

One memory sticks out here which was a humbling experience taught to me by a fellow runner. A woman had slowly passed me and about a half hour later I slowly caught up with her again. I wondered if she had run into difficulties. As I came alongside I realised that her slowing down was caused by her picking up litter others had dropped. She was bewailing the fact that nobody else was picking up litter. I am ashamed to say that all I did was acknowledge what she was doing and fell into silence. I couldn't bring myself to help her. I didn't just feel but was a complete hypocrite. I had all these rational reasons, we were in a race not a litter picking tour. I was weary and trying to conserve energy. I

had enough trouble making sure I myself didn't leave any litter. All these reasons withered in the light of the rightness of what she was doing even though it seemed crazy to be carrying other folks plastic bottles etc.

Tom and Mary I met briefly in Glen Bogle (75km) who had valiantly come with some meatballs and a cold latte. I was starting to lose interest in eating anything and had some nausea. Tom and Mary's duties would be over by the time I arrived in Auchtertyre. There Dougie, Andy and Don would take over support for the 2nd half of the race. Tom and Mary would make their way to Fort William to get some well earned rest and were planning to be there at the end.

The 5km from Glen Bogle to Auchtertyre through the forest was uneventful and was encouraged that I was able to run the descents. Arriving at Auchtertyre (80km) I always find that the race really has a clear division between 'before' and 'after' this point. It is a tale of two races. You now need not be on your own whilst running and I have always had support runners from that point. They are fresh and energetic and had not been up all off the previous night. That rubs off on the weary runner. Your mental and physical stamina is going to be challenged much more in the 2nd half than in the first and to have companions when suffering is a real benefit. Andy would now join me and would be with me all the way to Glencoe. Whether it is the constant presence of someone else or not I notice that I started to verbalise my inner feelings more. It was more moaning about my nausea or the fact I had no interest in food or drink, that there was nothing physically or mentally to look forward to in the coming 12-15 hours. I had no sensation of thirst. Andy, rather than berating me about my negativity, kept getting me to focus on the here and now. I needed to engage on solutions and not dwell on feelings. It was hot, I must drink or I'll keel over. Taking in much food was not so critical as you can consume your body fat for many hours as energy. A footnote – to stave off cramp I had decided to rub salt every hour or two inside my mouth (*footnote – maybe I took too much and this contributed to my being sick later in race*). Whether it did the trick or not I didn't have cramp which had been my previous experience. My weight at Auchtertyre had remained unchanged which was a good sign. Dougie had brought other foods which were not on my list and I was pleasantly surprised when he offered a pear. It's a fruit I rarely eat or like but for some strange reason 'pear' sounded good to the ears and indeed it tasted good.

5km after Auchtertyre is Tyndrum and approaching there the only food I could think of ingesting was ice cream and suggested this to Andy. It so happened that Tom and Mary met us on entering the village as they were on their way north to Fort William anyway. They valiantly obliged by getting the said ice cream for which was very grateful.

The stretch to Bridge of Orchy I remember as being quite social. Like me, many also had support runners at this stage. Sat down for some minutes at Bridge of Orchy (96km) and had some tea, ginger beer, yoghurt and took another of Dougie's creative fruit offerings, a peach.

Some 4km after B of O we met Murdo. He is something of a tradition as he camps out every year on a hill at the 100km mark and hands out a single jelly baby to each tired runner as she/ he passes. On then on a long descent to the remote and beautiful Inverornan. It was not a checkpoint but Dougie and Don had driven there to meet us just around Victoria Bridge before going on General Wade's old drover's road. This time round the ancient jagged cobbled stones did not hurt my feet nearly as much as previously. The strategy of wearing Hoka shoes was working. Eventually we came to Rannoch moor which at times can be quite featureless and yet is also punctuated with some stunning mountain scenes. Andy kept cajoling me to keep my eyes on the horizon and draw strength from that and to body check my gait, shoulders etc. Always asking me to describe what I was anticipating up ahead. All of this I knew would be good but would not have willed myself to do had he not

been there. Thank you Andy for doing something when both flesh and spirit were weak. Didn't realise how much it had taken out of you as I see from photos!



Arriving Glencoe



That burger tasted good!

It wasn't too long before we reached the long descending turn leftwards towards Glencoe ski lift (114km). There I had the welcome sight of Elisabeth who had joined the rest of the crew for this stage and subsequent checkpoints. Dougie again pulled out one of his imaginative culinary

suggestions. Not a fruit this time

but would I like a hamburger? I had thought he was going to fetch from the ski lift cafe nearby but instead in an instance he was cooking burgers from the tailgate of the car. I found myself wondering if his wife Margo knew of all this domestic skill. It tasted delicious with brown sauce which I never ordinarily like!



In Glencoe Don getting ready to take over from a tired Andy (seated) and Dougie busy in his kitchen.

Glencoe was where we would change over support runners with Don now taking over from Andy. It's only now I realise how much energy it cost Andy to keep me going when I saw this picture of you in Glencoe. Race prospects were good, over an hour ahead of this time last year.

Had a good chat with Don all the way to the beginning of the devil's staircase, an infamous long, winding ascent out of Glencoe. There the conversation dropped due to increased exertion and what was becoming a common theme for me every year at this point, dizziness. At least this time it was in daylight. I was determined that we would cover as much terrain as possible in the light before Kinlochleven. The checkpoint at Kinlochleven (129km) is different as wisely the organisers make it inside the leisure centre there. This makes for warmth and the availability of toilets etc. A chance to freshen up a bit before the final push.



A tough moment in Kinlochleven



Dougie getting ready to join us, with his all singing, all dancing midge hat.

The weigh in there showed little change in weight so guess that was a good sign but I was feeling very nauseous and uncomfortably hot. After a few moments seated I had to rush to the toilets where I brought everything up. Couldn't have happened in a better place and after a good wash felt better than I'd been for many hours. After 30 years of marriage Elisabeth and I share many things. This was the first time she shared her toothbrush with me. A quick brush of my teeth and I was a new man.

Don and I would now be joined by Dougie who was giving up the driving to Andy and wanted to run the final bit. Great to have the additional company. So we proceeded from sea level Kinlochleven on the long, steady climb up towards the long valley (Iharig) that would eventually lead to the penultimate checkpoint at Lundavra. The nausea had gone but not the general exhaustion and dizziness. My theory to mitigate the difficulty with balance was not to have a head torch and to try to move in the light of others. Wearing a torch bobbing on your head when exhausted on a second night plays tricks with your eyes and I believe contributes to hallucinations. It seemed to work a bit and my eyes and brain were not as confused as in the past.

As we travelled along the valley we reached the welcome sight of the wilderness response team and their man hunting sheepdogs. They are always cheerful and upbeat and were offering refreshments such as Irn Bru. I was more interested in sitting down for a few moments to alleviate dizziness but no sooner did I do it than a deep chill came over me. How quickly things can change. Some more layers and borrowing a body warmer for a few minutes from the response team did the trick but needed to keep moving.



With Don and Andy at Lundavra (don't know where Dougie had disappeared to!)

After what seemed an age we reached Lundavra (141.5km) and the welcome beacon of a bonfire, another WHWR tradition. John and Katrina Kynaston were manning this and really appreciate their commitment to supporting in this way. Welcoming bone weary travellers over many hours and fetching and putting wood on the fire for that time through the night can't always be fun. I had no appetite but a concerned Andy who had driven there managed to get me take one gel for the final push. The times looked good. I was earlier than I had ever been and should be able to get my sub 30

hour target but by how much I was unsure. And so we were off and with the scent of completion appearing my mood lightened and returned to

more observations of our surroundings. The outlines of Britain's highest mountain Ben Nevis started to appear in the pre-dawn. There were bizarre twinkling lights rapidly descending down the Ben. This was no hallucination as the others saw it and can only conclude it was mountain bikers honing their skills. The daylight was starting to come and myriads of birdsong accompanied us. This all lent welcome sustenance to the sense of achievement and the journey coming to an end. Before you turn into the Nevis valley there is an old moss covered forest which has both a peaceful and ancient quality about it, a comforting harbinger of the end soon coming.



The Final Push!

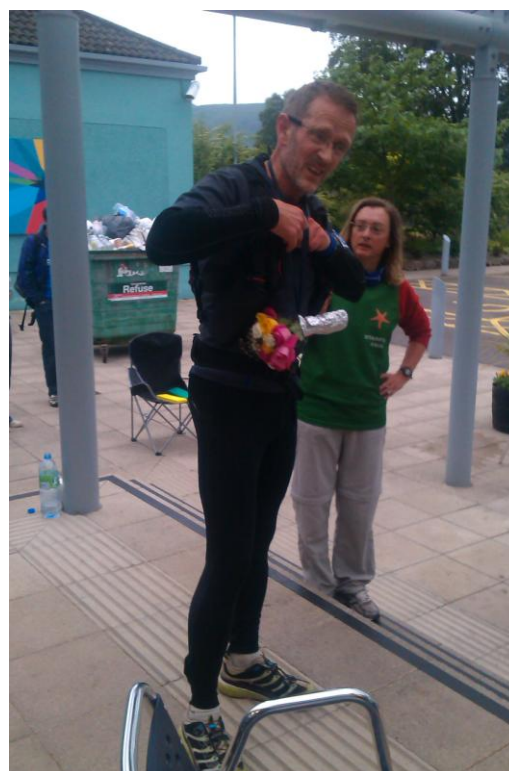
On into the fire road which slowly descends for several km into Fort William. Talk now turned to how soon I would make it to FW. It was going to be much better than last year. In the last 20 mins. or so I picked up my pace a bit. We even passed 2 others. Eventually we saw the Braveheart car park appearing. Shortly afterwards we were joined by Elisabeth, Tom and Mary just wakened from slumbers. Andy was a bit later as he hadn't believed I was coming in so soon, o ye of little faith! The last km a spurt of energy came upon me and even was able to go up a gear. Amazing what the sight of the end can do, no matter how exhausted! In the car park at leisure centre Elisabeth garlanded me with flowers and seconds later I had arrived and stamped in my time of 28:02:50. An immensely satisfying time for me. This was all of 2 hr 36 mins and 5 secs faster than last year and smashed my aim of beating 30 hours. My 4 WHW Races have all been personal bests each time and this result was 4hrs 51mins quicker than first time I did it.

After shower and short rest we all went over to a nearby hotel to have a buffet breakfast. My appetite was returning rapidly! In the

hotel car park I bumped into the winner Paul Giblin and was able to congratulate him on his unbelievable record breaking time.

Paul had sought to beat his own record of 15:07 last year which had been a jaw dropping achievement. He trounced that and came in in 14 hours 20 mins. 11 secs going so fast that organisers had a hard time setting things up quickly enough at checkpoints! Seemed a humble guy and more interested in asking about my race. We share one thing in common; a nearly 5 hour improvement on our first WHW Race 4 years ago. His of course at the sharp end!

A record number of 193 were on the start line this year including last year's record winner and 157 completed the race. I came in 118th which is well up the rankings for me!



Have I really finished!



Thanks guys for a great team effort. Where will I put that 4th crystal goblet?



The Sunday before the race I was speaking in my church. As the event was much in my mind and I'd been given freedom on what to speak I chose Hebrews 12: 1 -13 and called it 'God's Training Programme'. In fact the Message translation of the Bible entitles it 'Discipline in a long distance race'. These were my 3 points, I would have to practice what I preached.

- *You are unique but you are not on your own*
- *Training/ discipline is good for you (like a good father to a son)*
- *Keep your eyes on the big picture (Jesus)*

Maybe you can draw some parallels from my account. On a personal note fellow runners taught me things about myself which were salutary and highlighted my shortcomings. Thank you.

1. After about 2km someone fell very badly on the trail about 200m ahead of me. As I passed I found myself rather glad that this person was surrounded by concerned runners. I am unsure how I would have reacted had it happened beside me. So early in the race I was so pumped up to go I cannot imagine stopping and yet that is what it is about, helping one another achieve.
2. At another point a fellow runner was in a lot of pain, again through a fall. I had a couple of paracetamol on me but confess wondered if I would need them myself later. While I hesitated another guy came up and immediately offered paracetamol. I'd like to think I would have given him mine but why did I hesitate, again a selfish attitude to my own race.
3. The third incident mentioned earlier is the one with the litter picking lady.

As mentioned in the beginning if you would like to support Starfish Asia you can do so online at a fund-raising page I have <http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/AEGrant> This will be open till end of August 2014. Thereafter you can donate on their website <http://starfishasia.com/>