

Welsh 1000m Peaks Race 2007 - The Black Spot.

Blind Pew? Remember him; from Treasure Island?
When the tapping of his stick on the road struck fear into all who heard it.
And the message he carried; a square of paper thrust into the unfortunate's palm, which when opened revealed the dreaded Black Spot.
Well, I heard the tapping of his stick yesterday; but when I opened my hand, it was not for me.

There was lots of fun and laughter at the start. The Idwal Cottage car park was filled with bemused walkers, who were surrounded by mountaineers and fell-runners eager to be off in the C and E Classes of the Welsh 1000m Mountain Marathon.
Old acquaintances were renewed, and old adversaries appraised for fitness. There were more new faces this year, but sadly fewer old foes.

Harvey reminded us that there was no Snowdon Cafe this year, but bottles of water were available at Pen Y Pass for us to carry up to the finish, in lieu of a cup of tea. Furthermore, the medals awarded to finishers had proved too heavy to carry to the summit, and would therefore be available back at Pen Y Pass; or by post; in exchange for a scrappy bit of paper. Cor! Who would be an organiser?

The gun fired, and 50 competitors set off at a good lick for Bwlch Tryfan. Strangely, I find myself at the back of a long line of wriggling figures. Up in Cwm Bochlywd the road is far behind but in the valley I hear a police siren, and later on a helicopter.

I find Control Golf in the mist blown in on the Southerly wind, and Jean clips me through. Then on to the rocky Miner's Track for a fast descent towards the Pen y Gwryd. A song from Maddy Prior flits before me; "And feet that were nimble, tread carefully now, as gentle a measure, as age do allow".
Ha! Anno Domini steers my faltering steps.

In Cwm Ffynnon the deep bog is firmer this year and holds my weight, and I make steady progress to Pen Y Pass where Hilda faithfully records my time. At the roadside, Christopher and Harvey are talking seriously, so I wave and press on up the PyG.

Martine and Tony on Carnedd Ugain, though chilled, greet me warmly, and I turn for a final effort back to the finger stone and on to the finish. At the summit, Gerry and Steve see me safely over the line, and amazingly, I have recorded exactly the same time as Colin Donnelly, the fell runner's Class A winner; but I have to remind myself that he started from Aber. I unpin and hand in my number to show that I have finished and Jesse presses a bit of paper into my hand instead of a medal.

It is busy here with happy walkers despite the mist and I struggle into some warm clothing to drink my celebratory bottle of water. Slowly now, I retrace my steps down the PyG, to meet other competitors still toiling upwards, and I am pleased to see PyP come into view as I turn the corner from Bwlch Moch.

I cross the road, and a stick tap taps behind me.

At the hostel, Harvey greets me with the awful news that a competitor has been killed falling from the cliffs above Llyn Llugwy. Aah me. What can we do? What can be done? Why? How?
But now it is too late.

We know the actual place well. A tricky crag that competitors are warned in the race regulations to avoid.

The casualty, Sgt Upton, was a member of a strong military team from 1Para, who were in the lead. Yet, a simple accident and a simple fall led to disaster. Haven't we all been close to those moments ourselves?

Later, in the Tyn y Coed, Major Ken Potter said that Sgt Upton's job in the Parachute Regiment involved adventure and danger, and for today he had volunteered to fill in for a team member who had dropped out. He loved the mountains and had been looking forward to the challenge of the race. And showing that he enjoyed, and upheld, the Regiment's motto of 'Ready for Anything'.

I am sure that each of us in the Gorphwysfa have had many such near misses, and been grateful to escape with a fright; but sadly, and tragically in this case, a near miss proves to be fatal.

For many years I have added my philosophy of 'Carpe Diem' to these Journal articles.

'Seize the day'. Take the opportunity while you may.

But now, whenever I hear the tapping of a stick, I will think of Sgt Upton – and glance in my palm.

Wyn Jones