The longest run

Today, people from all over the world like to run for fun. They run marathons and take part in fun runs, even in deserts and round mountains. Back in ancient times it wasn't such a common hobby, and there was no such thing as running shoes or Fitbit! However, in Ancient Greece, some people in the army were employed as *hemerodromes*, which means 'day-runners'. These men – since back then women weren't allowed in the army – had to take messages between allies and different parts of the army, often covering great distances along the way. After all, without phones or the internet it wasn't very easy to get messages around!

One of these men is particularly famous: this is the story of Pheidippides, an Athenian *hemerodrome*, who ran the first marathon over 2,500 years ago, in the year 490BC. This is a true story – or at least parts of it may be true – so to hear this story, we're going to have to take ourselves back in time to a very important times for Athens and indeed, the whole of Greece…

Back in the fifth century BC, there wasn't a single country called Greece, like there is today. The Greek world was divided into different cities, each with their own government and ways of doing things, and two of the most powerful of these were Athens and Sparta. Both were under threat from the Persian Empire, whose leader Darius I had taken control over huge amounts of the modern-day Middle East, including countries like Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt, and even parts of Greece itself, to build one of the biggest empires the world had ever seen. Darius had his sights set on conquering the rest of Greece, too, but this was never an easy business when people resisted, and so the Persian Wars began in 499BC, with Athens and Sparta leading the fight against Persia.

These Wars – since it wasn't just one battle, or even one set of battles, but many different wars over the years – went on for fifty long years, but today we're interested in just one conflict in particular, the Battle of Marathon, which ended the first invasion of Greece.

One day, in 490BC, after several years of conflict, the Persians – who had just defeated the island of Naxos and the city of Eretria – sailed along the coast to mount an attack on Athens. They stopped their fleet in the Bay of Marathon, intending to march their army by land from there to Athens. When they arrived, an Athenian general by the name of Miltiades, who had the most experience of fighting the Persian army, led his forces down to block the two exits from the plain of Marathon, and stop the Persians from advancing to Athens. This is where Pheidippides comes into our story. The Athenian forces alone weren't strong enough to withstand the Persians, so he was sent off with a message to Sparta to ask for help.

Now Sparta was not very close to Marathon – not very close at all. By the time Pheidippides arrived with his message he was close to exhaustion. Imagine how disappointed he must have been when the Spartans sent him all the way back to Marathon with the message that they couldn't help, because according to their laws they couldn't fight until there was a full moon! With the Persians settling in at Marathon, there was no time to waste, so the runner set off straight back to Marathon to report his unfortunate news. By this time, he'd certainly proven himself an excellent runner, as he'd covered almost 150 miles in just two days!

Luckily, Miltiades had a plan of his own. Since the Persians didn't want to risk their forces before they even got to Athens, and the Athenians certainly weren't going to attack first with their smaller numbers, he had his soldiers wait in the hills around the plain of Marathon. After a stalemate of five days, instead of marching to Athens, the Persian commanders decided to put their troops back on the ships and sail the rest of the way there.

This was a terrible mistake. The commanders loaded their most valuable troops – the ones who were most dangerous in battle – onto the ships first, leaving their foot soldiers in the plain to wait to be picked up. Now the Athenians took their chance, running down from the hills where they had been waiting and charging into the unprepared Persian troops! The battle didn't last long at all before the Athenians won a decisive victory and the remaining Persian troops made a speedy retreat, much to the happiness of all the soldiers, whose families in Athens would now be safe again – at least for a little while.

The job wasn't over for Pheidippides, though – he still had one last message to carry. The people of Athens needed to know that they were safe as soon as possible, so he was sent off once again, this time to run the 26 miles to Athens and announce their victory over the invading army.

Off he went, and he soon came to the city. He ran right up to the city leaders, greeted them with a shout of 'rejoice! We won!' and, right there and then, dropped dead on that very spot.

It wasn't the luckiest of runs for our hero, then, but Pheidippes' run from Marathon to Athens gives its name to the race we know today. Nowadays, of course, marathon runners don't tend to run their races in the midst of battle, or after already having run the length of Greece a few days before, so things are a little easier. So now you know the tradition, next time you're taking part in Sports Day or maybe even running a marathon of your own, think back to Pheidippides who started the whole thing off!