

The Comrades Marathon. The Living WWI Memorial. Proudly South African.



Vic Clapham was the founder of the Comrades Marathon.



A copper medal, named 'The Vic Clapham Medal' is awarded to runners who complete the race in 11 to 12 hours.

Since 1921 South African soldiers and veterans have commemorated and still commemorate the fallen of World War One and other wars, in different ways as well as differently to many other Allies and nations. The Comrades Marathon being a prime example.

The Comrades Marathon is a race of 89 kilometers and was run for the first time in 1921 with 34 veterans participating. By the year 2000, 24000 participants entered in what is today known as the world's toughest ultra-marathon, the Ultimate Race.

The WWI veteran who originally thought of the race was Private No 487, Victor Clapham. He had fought and marched 1700 miles across the Savannahs in the East African Campaign while serving in the 8th South African Infantry. As a result of contracting Blackwater Fever, Dysentery and Malaria, Private Clapham was sent back to South Africa and was boarded in 1917. His memories of death, suffering and camaraderie spurred him on to think of a way of remembering his buddies, their sacrifices and service.

While the South African soldiers who were known as Springboks were fighting in East Africa other South Africans fought in Europe. In France after the Battle of Delville Wood where the Springboks suffered severely, Colonel Thackery included the following in his report to Brig.-General Tim Lukin:

"Runners were the only means of communication left and they were more often killed than able to get through. I know of eight who were killed. The few messages that got through took hours. A very large number of runners are required."

Major Heal also reported on 08 August 1916 about a runner during the battle of Delville Wood:

"Can you see that boy in 'D'? He was sent back with an urgent message, badly wounded and realised he couldn't last out. He crawled back and handed the message all blood-stained to the officer with: 'I'm sorry, Sir, but I couldn't get through with it,' and fell dead".

Vic Clapham was determined to honour the Fallen by remembering them in a unique way. He persevered with his idea of testing and overcoming individual frailties and problems by suggesting a marathon race. The race was named the Comrades Marathon as a result of the way in which it had started.

The comrades of the Durban Light Infantry and the Royal Natal Carbineers in Pietermaritzburg felt the need of a reunion after they returned from WWI. As a challenge and with much encouragement from Vic Clapham they threw the gauntlet down and challenged each other to a race. For a number of years the marathon races ended alternatively at each of the two respective drill halls.

The first Comrades Marathon race in 1921 was a 'down run,' (Pietermaritzburg to Durban). 34 Veterans of WW1 participated.



General Jan Smuts

Originally, the race was run on the 24th of May - the birth dates of both General Jan C Smuts (the commander under whom Private Vic Clapham had personally fought in East Africa) and General Tim Lukin (the Commanding Officer of the South African Forces that had fought and suffered in Delville Wood and Europe). May 24 was also officially known as Empire Day.



Major General Sir Tim Lukin



Arthur Newton was the greatest Ultra-marathon runner of his time.

In 1922 Arthur 'Greatheart' Newton won the Comrades Marathon. He won this ultra-marathon on a total of four occasions between the years 1922 to 1927. No wonder he was nicknamed 'Greatheart'. He was also a veteran of WWI having served in the Natal Light Horse as a dispatch rider. While running the Comrades, he had much time to remember his comrades and experiences during the Great War.

Arthur Newton died in 1957 but his ghost is said to be resting at 'Arthur's Seat'. This 'seat' is literally a 'hole' that has been cut out of the embankment about half way through the race, close to Drummond and about 150 meters from the Wall of Honour. 'Arthur's Seat' is reputed to have been a favourite resting spot of Arthur 'Greatheart' Newton.

Tradition has it that runners who pay their respect at this spot by stopping, placing a flower at the spot, doffing their peaks and greeting Arthur's spirit with, "Good morning, Sir," would most likely enjoy a good second half of the race. The tradition is so strong with runners in-the-know that in 2011, with the up-run when the red poppy of remembrance appeared on the number patches of the athletes, a refreshment table close to 'Arthur's Seat' handed out red roses to the runners for that specific purpose. (Red Flanders poppies do not flower in South Africa at that time).



Arthur's Seat

In 1922 the age limit for participation was set at 18 years, the same age requirement for enlistment during WWI.

Vic Clapham became known as the 'Father of the Comrades' and organized the race annually until 1938. To honour his memory, the Vic Clapham medal was introduced and is awarded to all runners who finish the race between 11 and 12 hours. The symbolism being that the guns of WWI stopped firing at 11:00 on the 11th of the 11th month 1918. Vic Clapham was also responsible for establishing 15 MOTH (Members of the Order of Tin Hats) shell holes (meeting places) after WWII and was in charge of the MOTH museum at the Warriors Gate, Durban.



The Roman god 'Mercury'



Private Clapham had done service in the East African campaign as a medical orderly so it was and still is appropriate that the logo of the Comrades Marathon is that of the Roman god 'Mercury'.

The direction in which the Comrades Marathon is run alternates each year. The 'up run' starts from Durban and the 'down run' starts from Pietermaritzburg but no matter in which direction the race is run, the race starts after the public clock in the tower of the City Hall in question, strikes the hour and the Westminster Chime. Since 1948 the sound of Max Trimbourne's imitation of a cock crowing has also been introduced at the start. The Westminster Chime and hour stroke is the same chime that starts the international observance of the 2 Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance at 11:00 on Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day, annually on 11 November.

*One minute of silence in remembrance of the Fallen
One minute of silence in gratitude for those who survived.
The prayer of the Westminster Chimes being:*

*“Lord, in this hour
Be Thy my guide
And by Thy power
No foot will slide.”*



*“Oh Lord our God
Make strife to cease
In Thy good time
Grant us Thy peace.”*

11:00 - Big Ben London



Pietermaritzburg City Hall



Durban City Hall

Many South Africans who had run the Comrades in memory of the fallen of WWI, joined the fighting forces during WWII. Some survived to participate again after the war but two previous winners did not. Frank Sutton had won the Comrades Marathon in 1928. He volunteered for active service during WWII and fell on 29 November 1942. His name is recorded on the stone memorial at El Alamein and hopefully he is also remembered by others who participate in the 'living memorial' to the fallen Springboks.

Phil Masterson-Smith was another champion who lost his life in WWII. He had won the Comrades in 1931 at 19 years of age. The record of being the youngest winner of the Comrades Marathon is still recorded against his name. Today the minimum age requirement is 20 years in the year of the race. Phil Masterson-Smith volunteered for active service with the Royal Natal Carbineers. He lost his life on 5 June 1942 at the Battle of El Alamein.



Phil Masterson-Smith wearing no. 45 – Comrades 1931

The Comrades Marathon was not run during WWII (1941 – 1945) but some returning veterans who had run the race before the war returned to run the Comrades race after the war. They ran in memory of their buddies who had fallen in WWII. Bill Cochrane was the champion of the 1935 Comrades Marathon. He joined the South African fighting forces as a gunner in WWII. Bill was captured in the Western Desert and landed up in a prisoner-of-war camp for the rest of the war. While imprisoned he resolved that if he survived the war, he would re-run the Comrades which he did with great success. He won the 1946 race and ironically ran past the Oribi prisoner-of-war camp near Pietermaritzburg where the Italian POW's watched him pass. They were waiting to be repatriated.



Anthony Clapham wearing his red socks.

In 2012 Anthony Clapham, great grandson of Vic Clapham (the 'Father of the Comrades Marathon'), successfully completed the race and won the Vic Clapham medal. Anthony Clapham ran the Comrades as a "red-socker". The "Red Sock Friday Movement" is a global social community that celebrates the companionship and endurance experienced by friends who were POW (prisoners of war) escapes in Italy during WWII.

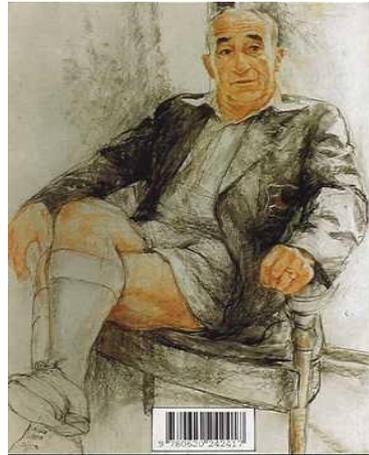
"My inspiration to run the Comrades initially was in memory of my great grandfather Vic Clapham"
– Anthony Clapham

The great Wally Hayward was another Comrades Marathon champion who fought during WWII. He returned from the front as a decorated veteran and went on to win the Comrades on five occasions. Wally was one of the greatest Comrades Marathon runners. His seven medals included five wins, three of them record breaking runs. He had a remarkable Comrades career spanning 60 years. Wally remains the oldest person ever to finish the race.

He passed away on 29 April 2006. Since 2007 the Wally Hayward medal is awarded to those who do not finish in the top 10, yet complete the race within six hours.



1930 - Wally holding the Comrades winner's trophy.



Portrait of Wally on the back cover of his book "Just call me Wally"



Another WWI tradition that was observed until 2003 was that of the cut-off time. Before 2003 it had been 11 hours because the guns of WWI stopped firing at 11:00 on 11th day, of the 11 month, (November) but now a new tradition has been included. A cannon shot is fired at the start of the race. This tradition is most appropriate because the guns of the 73 Siege Battery, South African Heavy Artillery held the record for the cannon in WWI with the fastest firing rate. The record was thirty-two rounds in eight minutes with each gun.

In 1974 Black South Africans were allowed to compete officially for the first time. Many having up to then participated unofficially. Many Black soldiers had fought and died in WWI. The sinking of the S.S. Mendi with the heavy loss of life incurred being a case in question.



Nurse dressed in uniform during WWI.

In 1975 when the Comrades celebrated its Golden Jubilee women were also allowed to enter for the first time. It was as if the organizers remembered that women had done military service in uniform during WWI especially as nurses and ambulance drivers. Up to 1975 the few ladies who had run the Comrades Marathon had done so unofficially.

At the turn of the century in the year 2000; 24,000 participants from all over the world, entered to run the Comrades Marathon in what is today known as the world's largest and toughest ultra-marathon. Each runner sported on their official number patch, the red poppy of remembrance. Hopefully they knew that he or she was participating in a race that is part of a Living Memorial to the South African soldiers (Springboks) who fought in World War One.

In 2009, Chris Mann, honorary Professor of poetry at Rhodes University, wrote the following tribute to Vic Clapham:

In memoriam Victor Clapham

Well Vic. I wonder what you'd make of this.
I mean the flag-hung square, the jostling crowds,
A helicopter clattering through the dark.
Runners in their thousands, massed down the street
And someone famous being interviewed
In a bright white glare on the steps of City Hall.

I wish you could be here, right here with us
Dressed in your baggy shorts and tennis shoes
Smelling the wintergreen, the nervous sweat
And feeling strange pricklings in your skin
As speakers boom the anthem down the street
That lifts the day from normal into epic time

Look at the scaffolding, the tents, the bins,
The marshals with clipboards and yellow bibs.
They do this for nothing, year after year
It's a bit like the Olympics now
All sorts of money-scheming hangers-on
But still, somehow decency on a podium

Isn't it much, much bigger than you thought?
At times I wondered what was in your mind
When back home from the war to end all wars
You'd sit in the hot steel cab of your train
Swabbing your neck and chest with cotton waste
And slowly swigging a bottle of cold sweet tea

Tell me, didn't it churn you up inside?
Watching each day across the shunting yard
The salesmen on the platform in white shirts
The women in high-heels and fancy hats
Saying good-bye with a kiss and a wave
As if their dads and uncles hadn't died at all?

Didn't you really hate it when young blokes
With slicked-back hair in the Railway's Hotel
Would turn away from you, beer-mug in hand
And switch the talk to Saturday's races
The moment you even mentioned the war
And passing round the hat for a memorial?



Chris Mann, writer of the tribute to the late Vic Clapham.



To remember that the guns of WWI stopped firing at 11:00 on the 11th of the 11th month, the red Flanders Poppy of Remembrance was displayed on the official number worn by each participant in 2011.

That must have got to you, as if your pals
Who'd marched their youth along the street
In rows and rows of boots and bayonets
On their way north to mud and death in France
Weren't even worth a few words in a bar.
Is that why you dreamed us into this marathon?

Well Vic, each year, out of that dream emerge
Not just the rugby types you started with
That group of balding friends in boxing vests
Trotting off down a farm road with a laugh
But men and women of all sorts and shapes
The black, the blond, the bronze of our humanity

Does hope, a marathon of hope like this
You make me ask, remind the heart of grace
Look Vic at what you got going with pride
A huge jostling ritual of human decency
Whose athletes set off down a cheering street
Then toil across the landscape of South Africa.

(Chris Mann)

Many improvements have been introduced over the century that the Comrades Marathon has been run. The administrators have kept up with the times: Computers, television, new timing methods, radio broadcasts, sponsorship, prize money, footwear, 'Expos', clothing, improved footwear, new timing devices, helicopters, refreshment stations, sachets, first aid and medical help, portable toilets, participation of the visually impaired runners, busses, charities, traffic control, dancing girls, fancy costumes and headgear, Wall of Honour, etc.

The red Flanders poppy of remembrance has also recently been sported on the official number patches of all participants to emphasize the 'military roots' of the race as well as the importance of remembering why the Comrades Marathon was, and still is, run. **It is to remember the Fallen and the suffering of the Springbok soldiers in The Great War also known as World War One.** May all athletes, organizers and administrators of the Comrades Marathon **SOLDIER ON!**



A "Save the Rhino" costume which an athlete wore throughout the entire race.



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