

The Pheidippides Legend

An Honor to Bear

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A Short Story, Based on History and Legend:
The Soldier/Runner Had One Last Task to
Perform Before He Could Rest.

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PHEIDIPPIDES FORCED himself to stir. Just to move required supreme effort. He was amazed at the force of the arrow that stuck him and knocked him to the dust. In actuality, the arrow had done little more than graze his arm, but the force of that glancing blow spun him and threw him to the ground. Stunned, he contemplated the physics behind the event while he tried to regain his footing and resume his charge toward the Persians. It was such a foolish thing to be thinking about while Persian arrows flew all round him, but one's mind can do such strange things in battle.

The little olive tree under which he now rested offered precious little shade from the relentless sun. He shifted, in search of a position that allowed his weary body a moment's rest. His weariness was bone-deep, born of too many miles in too few days. His hands were still stained with blood from the recent carnage. It was hot—far hotter than it should be in the middle of September. His armor—helmet; shield, breastplate, and greaves—attracted and magnified the rays of the fierce sun. September was always a hot month in Greece, but this year it was ever hotter than usual. The gentle breeze from the nearby Aegean did not help. Pheidippides fought the numbness that was trying to take over his brain. This was the first time he had been off his feet in hours.

The question he had been asking himself for the past several days brought him back like the arrow that had wounded him: Why in the world did I offer myself as a runner? Was it General Miltiades' talk of bravery and valor? What was I thinking, to believe I could be a soldier and a runner at the same time? Though sometimes exhilarating, the work was tough, grueling, exhausting, dangerous.

Pheidippides had decided last spring that he would leave the army when his commitment was over. He had given Athens 11 years of his life. He was now 33 years old and wanted to spend time with his wife and son, who were safely stashed away with her grandparents in Corinth. He pushed himself up on an elbow, a chore against the crushing weight of his armor, and he wondered if he would live long enough to see his family again. But, so far so good, he thought, and smiled grimly. He had survived the last few days and was still alive after being hit by a Persian arrow. Perhaps the gods smiled upon Athens, and his hard work on her behalf.

He visited Corinth—in his mind—such a beautiful city, sitting on the hills above the Gulf. Pheidippides had always enjoyed visiting the city. Even though large, it was a peaceful place—slow and unhurried. He loved roaming her gentle hills. Mostly he just plain loved to run. He would follow game trails for hours, up and down hills with never a worry about getting lost. The sea was to the north and the Acrocorinth to the south. His wife was born and raised not far from Corinth. He remembered climbing with his family

up the hundreds of marble steps to the Acrocorinth—a spot both sacred and safe. Pity any Persian who tried to ascend the Acrocorinth. He would be buried beneath a flow of boulders and stones long before the heavy spears began coming down on him.

Pheidippides saw himself standing near the Temple of Apollo, gazing out over the Gulf. What a magnificent sight! With the exception of the Acropolis in Athens, he felt that the Acrocorinth was the most impressive spot on Earth.

Pheidippides hated war. He hated the battles, the sour smells, and the moans and lamentations of the dying. But he believed in Athens, and he despised the thought of his son growing up under the heel of the Persians. He hoped his son was running the hills and fishing the Gulf, as he had done and as his own father had done before him.

Damn the Persians! Just the thought of them caused an angry shudder. And for their King Darius, Pheidippides had a class of hatred all his own. Darius, with his ambitious plans to extend the Persian Empire throughout the world. How dare he sail across the Aegean to attack peaceful Athens!

For a moment Pheidippides clung to the olive tree, orienting himself before pushing all the way up off the ground. What day was it anyway? Maybe the seventeenth? Yes, yes, September 17. He had almost lost track of time, but yesterday had been the sixteenth, when he had arrived back at the battle site. The days before were a horrible blur. Only five days ago, he had been selected to run to Sparta to request aid against the Persians. It had been a mind-boggling ordeal. None of the runners in the other phili had ever been asked to run such a distance.

He had set out early afternoon of the twelfth and had run continuously for nearly 48 hours. Forty-eight hours! Two solid days and nights of running, with no rest. He covered more than a hundred hilly kilometers each day. Water was scarce, as was food. By the time he finally arrived at Sparta, he was exhausted, but nonetheless met with the Spartans immediately to deliver the aid plea from Athens. He found them willing enough to help, for it would be in their own best interests to keep the Persians out of Greece, but Spartan law forbade them from departing until the moon had reached its fullest. That would be several more days and the wait would most certainly cause the Spartans to arrive after the battle—too late to be of much help.

Still tired, and now discouraged, he set off on his journey to Marathon. He ran through his exhaustion, through day and night. When he reported back to General Miltiades to deliver the bad news, he was reluctant at first, but then he decided to tell the General of his encounter with the god Pan, in the mountains near Sparta. Pan was like the vision of a man in fever, but the encounter was clear in his memory. Pan was upset with the Athenians, for they were not showing him proper respect. Pan gave Pheidippides threats and warnings of the loss of divine support should they not increase their reverence of him.

What Pheidippides saw when he arrived in Marathon from Sparta was frightening. Scores of Persian ships were beached on the edge of the sea. Smoke from thousands of cook fires told of tens of thousands of invaders camped near the beach and yet more still arriving. In sheer numbers, it appeared that the Athenians stood little chance against the heavily armed infantry and cavalry of the Persians. Athens had no cavalry and certainly no bows to match the Persian longbows. The primary Athenian defensive weapon was only a long and heavy spear. But the out numbered Athenians and Plataeans had something that made them great. They had visionary leadership. The ten generals, one in

charge of each phili, were seasoned veterans and excellent tacticians. That was Miltiades' strong suit.

From his position on the littered ground, Pheidippides looked for evidence of how the battle began. By all indications, the Persians had lined up exactly as they normally did: Elbow to elbow, 30 men deep. The 55,000 Persians would have formed a line 1,600 meters wide. Against that massive force, General Miltiades lined up his 10,000 soldiers, eight men deep in the flanks, but weak in the center, where it was only four men deep.

The Athenians, all trained athletes more lightly armored than the enemy, made the terrible dash across the killing zone, where arrows from the longbows fell like hail. The hand-to-hand fighting began after Pheidippides fell and the center of the Athenian army collapsed. Through this corridor poured thousands of the Persians. Then Miltiades brought his flanking soldiers around and closed the hole, trapping the Persians. The longbows were ineffective at short range, against the expertly wielded long spears of the Athenians. He remembered the screams and moans of the impaled Persians as the sound rose above the clang and clash of armor and spear. The dust was still rising from the plain in front of Pheidippides, but from his elevated position he could see that the strategy had worked perfectly.

Pheidippides felt fortunate. He was not seriously wounded—only dog-tired and sore. He wound a scrap of cloth around the arrow wound even though most of the bleeding had stopped. Soldiers staggered about the battlefield below where arrows protruded from the ground, where spears impaled enemy Persians. At least he was still alive, he noted. In fact, not many Greeks were dead—or not as many as there could have been, or by all rights should have been. Not that this happy fact would matter to the families of the Greeks who died on behalf of their city-state.

Of the 10,000 Greek soldiers, Pheidippides estimated that not more than 200 had been killed. On the Persian side, it was another matter. Though it was hard to estimate such numbers, difficult to sort the dead from the dying with a quick glance, he estimated there were more than 6,000 Persians dead. What a battle! A small force had defended their homeland against a far superior force. Some 10,000 Athenians versus 48,000 hard, tough Persians equipped with longbows. The Hellenes had fought like wild animals with spears.

Pheidippides remembered passing the body of the young water boy who had been weaving his way among the thirsty Athenians, passing out water to sate their thirst before the battle. A Persian arrow felled the young boy, and the sight of him lying on the hard ground incensed the Athenian soldiers and rallied their charge.

Pheidippides could not stay lost in his own thoughts. He heard his name called from down the line. It was Epikides calling to him, and Pheidippides dreaded hearing what was now wanted of him. Pheidippides wanted badly to lie back down in the sparse shade of the little olive bush and disappear.

“Pheidippides!” Epikides called. “The General wants to see you. General Miltiades wants you. He’s by that outcropping of rocks just south of the hill.”

As he made his way to where the General stood, Pheidippides fought off nausea of fatigue that threatened to bring him to his knees. He had a suspicion of what lay ahead.

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Dimitrios was tired of playing with his sister Melita. Unfortunately, she was the only child left to keep him company. People from his village and the neighboring ones had packed up and moved to the Acropolis. It was old news that the Athenian army was already in Marathon to engage the Persians. Dimitrios had stood in awe as the soldiers marched past his village on their way to their fate, just 30 kilometers away. But there was reliable word that the Persian navy was headed toward Athens to attack it from behind, so everyone had packed up and headed for higher ground, specifically the Acropolis. Correction: Not everyone. Not his father, Ephor. No. Ephor wasn't about to be scared off his land by the threat of an invading army, not even if it was the mighty Persian army. No force in nature would get him away from his land, his olive orchard, and his vineyard that his great, great, great grandfather had tended. No Persian was that strong.

Nor was the old blind man, Spyros, moving out of the way. Spyros had been an officer in the army until a blow to the back of his head took his sight. He lived down the trail from Dimitrios and was Dimitrios's friend and the source of all Dimitrios's knowledge about what was going on in the world. They talked for hours on end about the new democracy and other developments in the Athenian government. They talked also about the military, and Dimitrios had long ago decided he would join the army in a few years. It would be an acknowledgment of fate. Spyros often related the story of the day that Dimitrios was born. He was the third child in his family, the first boy after two girls. When his aunt received word of his birth she ran like mad to the rest of his family announcing at the top of her lungs, "Soldier!" Dimitrios made it his business to know each of the soldiers from his village. He attentively listened to their tales of faraway places and great battles.

Before he headed home, Dimitrios stopped at the community well, drew a bucket of water and drank deeply. He also filled the goatskin pouch he always carried, tying the leather strings tightly to avoid spilling any precious water.

Just as he turned toward home, Dimitrios glanced down the dusty road and spotted a lone soldier in the distance. The soldier appeared to be in full battle gear, and he was running, yes, running up the road toward Athens. No doubt about it: this was an official "runner," an important messenger, as no soldier in his right mind would be running in full tilt in the oppressive heat in full battle gear. Runners did not run unless they had good reason for it. There was no doubt that this approaching runner carried a special message for someone—probably someone powerful in the Athens government. Dimitrios had heard of such soldiers, men who had the stamina and heart to push themselves to the limits of human endurance. They were heroes, who ostensibly received their strength from the gods themselves. Spyros had told Dimitrios some of the stories of these godlike men, stories of legendary proportion even in the runners' own lifetime. Dimitrios remembered Christopoulos from the highlands north of Athens. And there was another, more widely known runner, but Dimitrios could not recall his name.

But as this brave soldier came closer, it became apparent that he was having difficulty. His gait was slow, his head was down, his arms were pumping too much and too high, as though he were trying to run as much with them as with his legs. As the runner came still closer, Dimitrios' fears were confirmed. The man's face was ashen, his eyes were fixed at some vague point ahead, and his jaws were clenched. It was apparent that the man had run from the battleground at Marathon. He would have had to climb the

mountains lying between the plain of Marathon and the basin that surrounded Athens. That murderous stretch alone was more than 25 kilometers wide. Lucky for the runner, he had that section of road safely behind him and what remained of the route to Athens was fairly flat. Still, the mountains had exacted their toll. It seemed questionable if he would make it another kilometer, much less all the way to Athens.

Dimitrios glanced at the goatskin pouch the runner carried and saw it was flat. No water, of course. There was probably no one left in any of the villages along the road to offer him water, and, given the drought that had plagued Greece in recent years, no streams and very few wells were still flowing. Besides, warriors like this did not have time to idle around looking for water. Their missions were always urgent.

And there was another odd thing about the runner. He was no longer perspiring! It was apparent that he had sweated, and a lot. White salt residue lay visible on his shield and his breastplate. His clothes were wet. But his skin was dry and pale.

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The assignment was as bad as Pheidippides expected. He was needed to run to Athens immediately to tell the leaders of the country of the great Athenian victory their countrymen had achieved at Marathon. It was an honor, General Miltiades explained, to bear such wonderful news. Pheidippides was to arrive in Athens just before dark, prior to the closing of the massive gates of the Acropolis for the night. He was to share his news with no one along the way, as it was first and foremost for the ears of the city's leaders. And, oh yes, there was one more matter: he was to run in his full armor in order to demonstrate to anyone who saw him that he had not been forced to relinquish his armor to the enemy in defeat.

When Pheidippides reached the first foothills above the plain of Marathon, he felt for his goatskin water pouch. Then it hit him: in his fatigue-driven stupor, he had made the terrible blunder of forgetting water! Just a half-liter remained, but surely he would be able to get water from friendly villagers along the way...

If Pheidippides concentrated very hard, he could sort the real from the unreal—the little village dog was not a wolf, the bush ahead of him was not a Persian soldier, and the wind was not speaking to him. He could stop the hallucinations if he tried hard enough, but it was much easier not to, and helped him face the steep grades he was traveling. He knew the contour of this land; it was not friendly to speedy travel.

As he progressed, his thirst bothered him less and less. The desire to drink had abated after the last time he vomited. After each purge he managed to clear the cobwebs from his brain, now he observed the sun dropping lower and lower in the western sky. He must have been running two hours—maybe more. He was a little more than halfway to Athens. But he knew he was confused. Earlier, as he crested one of the lower mountains passes; he had distinctly heard his father speaking to him, urging him to keep going. Perhaps he could just stop for a moment and sit in the shade? But he could not. His pace slowed on the steep grades, but he willed his legs to keep moving on this most important mission of his life. Was that his son ahead on the trail? It could not be. Or could it? Maybe it was a Persian soldier, sent to waylay him. Or perhaps another visit from Pan?

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Dimitrios saw the runner stiffen, and thought for a moment the runner would strike at him with his short sword. The runner uttered something unintelligible, a name perhaps. He did realize, suddenly, that this was the famous runner that Spyros had told him about. And he remembered the name was Pheidippides.

After four kilometers, Dimitrios was still running step for step with the famous runner. He had finally convinced Pheidippides to take some water, and for a time it revived the soldier. It was uncanny, but somehow the soldier seemed to know him. Dimitrios assumed that the runner's destination was the Acropolis since that was the only word he could understand from the runner's parched and cracked lips. A few steps after the runner drank the last of Dimitrios' water; he became sick and lost what little water he had taken in.

Pheidippides was now incoherent and struggling. Twice he had taken the wrong trail and Dimitrios had to grab his arm and set him straight. He was careful to grab the runner's good arm, as his other arm had a horrible cut on it and it was bleeding through the dirty rag wrapped around it. Fortunately, the Acropolis was now in sight, probably not more than five kilometers away.

The sun was very low, almost a memory, as the two started up the long grade and marble steps leading to the Acropolis. Pheidippides had seemed content to follow Dimitrios' lead over the last few kilometers. Dimitrios had wondered whether Pheidippides could recover after his last fall, but he had bravely pulled himself back to his feet. Dimitrios hoped that the man did not collapse before he was able to complete his task.

Dimitrios felt like a warrior himself as the crowd parted before him and Pheidippides. They had made it to the top of the Acropolis and through the heavy gates just before they were sealed for the night. There must have been 20,000 people in the crowd, mostly women, old men, and children. Dimitrios felt the envious stares of the boys his age as he ran interference for Pheidippides. The marble floor of the Temple felt cool through the soles of his sandals. He now had the feeble Pheidippides by the arm and was walking him up to the elders and political leaders, who had quickly gathered. The murmuring crowd became quiet as Dimitrios and Pheidippides approached the leaders of Athens.

Pheidippides cracked lips moved, but no sound came forth. The anxious chief elder asked him several times to repeat what he had to say. The crowd was hushed as Dimitrios tried in vain to hear and understand Pheidippides words.

It took Pheidippides several seconds to focus on Dimitrios. Dimitrios saw Pheidippides looking past him and down a road only Pheidippides could see, a road deep in his soul. Dimitrios was certain Pheidippides thought Dimitrios was someone else, someone he loved and was close to—a son maybe?

"N-i-k-e." It sounded like "Nike." Could that be the word?

"Pheidippides! Try again. Tell me. Say it one more time!" Dimitrios saw Pheidippides muster all his remaining strength. And while looking squarely into Dimitrios' eyes, the word came out. There was no doubt this time, not to Dimitrios, who alone heard it. No doubt whatsoever.

"NIKE! NIKE! NIKE! He said 'NIKE!'" Dimitrios screamed. VICTORY, VICTORY for Athens! Victory over the mighty Persians! Victory. Nike, Nike!

Dimitrios knew Pheidippides was dead when he crumbled to the floor. The scribes pushed Dimitrios out of the way and tried to revive Pheidippides, but it was too late. Pheidippides, the great runner, was dead. .

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Dimitrios was tired of playing with his sister Melita. He had things to do, namely chores for his father and a visit with Spyros. Then, later, he had to run. He was now running every day, and today he was planning to run from his village to Athens and back. Twenty kilometers. He had to get into shape. There was so little time. He wanted to be a runner in the army, and he had to train hard. He was going to be a great runner...a great runner.