

# Unbroken (WWII POW) by Laura Hillenbrand (2010)

Note to reader: there are times it is difficult to read due to the brutality.

**Louis Zamperini** [LZ] [1917-2014] grew up poor & fearless. He often got in trouble. His older brother, Pete, ran track & thought running would keep him out of trouble. At first, he hated it, but the summer of '32 he ran a lot, then became a natural. By '33 he ran the mile in 4:42 & won a 2-mile race against college students. In '34 he shattered the national high school mile record with 4:21.

1936 he wasn't fast enough to qualify for the Olympics in the mile, but did in the 5k. He gained 12 lbs on the ship to Europe. He felt sluggish in the race, but pushed the last lap in 56 sec for the fastest American 5k time of 14:47 [8<sup>th</sup> place]. The fans loved him & Hitler asked to meet him. He stole a flag while he was there & police asked him why. He wanted a souvenir for the great time he was having. They let him keep it.

He started college at USC. By '38 he ran a 4:14 mile [world record was 4:06]. Former Olympian, Charles Paddock, thought he would be the 1<sup>st</sup> to break the 4-minute mile. He was trying to break it at the '38 NCAA championships, but the other runners tripped, kicked & broke his rib in the race [he still ran a 4:08 mile]. He had his dreams on the 1500 at the 1940 Olympics in Tokyo, but that was not to happen.

'37 Japan invaded China & '39 Germany invaded Poland. WWII broke out & the Olympics were cancelled ['40 & '44]. '41 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. On one day they simultaneously attacked Thailand, Shanghai, Malaya, Philippines, Guam, Midway & Wake. Most fell easily, but Wake fought valiantly killing 1153 Japanese [52 Americans] before it fell 23Dec41.

LZ went to the Air Force, was assigned to a B-24 [flying coffin] with pilot Allen Phillips [AP]. 23Dec42 (26) B-24s attacked the Japanese on Wake. It was a success, but his plane barely made it back to base [all engines were out of fuel by the time it taxied to the bunker]. On a mission to Nauru [phosphate plant] they were under attack & shot down a zero before he made his kill shot. They came back with 594 holes in their plane & lost most of their crew. No one could believe they made it.

The Norden bombsight would lock onto a target & take control of the plane for 4 minutes, while the enemy only needed 1 minute to calculate their altitude. B-17 & B-29 [flying fortress] had wings mounted below the fuselage & would float when landing on water, but the B-24 broke-up when ditching. The lethal speed of a bullet is gone a few feet after entering the water.

27May43 he ran a 4:12 mile on the sand, and then was called out for a search mission & crashed into the sea. As the plane sank LZ was trapped, but by God's grace he got free & came to the surface. Only 3 survived the crash [LZ, AP & Mac]. He barely caught the trailing rope to the life raft before it drifted away. The provision box was gone. They had 3 chocolate bars & 3 pints of water & some misc items. It had no transmitter, shade, water anchor [to catch the currents], & no water desalinizing filter.

They saw one search plane, but the plane didn't see the two tiny rafts. The sharks found them & would rub the backs along the bottom of the raft. The current was carrying them into enemy territory. They were reported missing & the search called off. A week into it, a bird landed on the raft & they caught it & used it as bait to catch fish. They kept their minds active by describing his mom's cooking & making plans for the future. His optimism & another's hopelessness became self-fulfilling. After weeks, they were so thirsty he prayed for God to save them & he would serve God. It rained.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> day a Japanese plane flew by & shot at them. LZ jumped into the water, but the others were too tired. He had to fight off the sharks to avoid the bullets. After circling back several times, the plane left & they were alive. The raft was sinking & the 2<sup>nd</sup> raft was beyond repair [they used it for shade & collect rain]. The sharks attacked. It took all 3 men to get through this [one pumping air into the raft, one fought off the sharks & one repaired the raft].

One day the sharks were attacking them again. He grabbed a small one by the tail & killed it. They ate the liver & used the meat as bait. After a month a great white shark [20' long] hit the raft from the bottom & they were airborne. It left. Mac died. On the 47<sup>th</sup> day [July 13<sup>th</sup>] they came to part of the Marshall Islands, but were picked up by a patrol boat. They now weighed 80 lbs.

He got diarrhea, which made him thirstier, but they gave them very little water. POW guards deprived them of dignity. They were put into small cells & interrogated. He told them where the fake airfields in Hawaii were. 26Aug43 they were taken to Japan, where he was interrogated by an old college friend [who was really a spy] from USC. They moved him to Ofuna POW camp where they were beaten & starved. He was left off all POW lists so Red Cross didn't report him.

Japanese thought it shameful to be captured [4 allied soldiers were captured for each killed; 120 Japanese were killed for each captured]. The Japanese had a "kill all" policy if allied forces got close to retaking POWs. The abuse was beyond comprehension. Scurvy & malnutrition were common. They usually only got 500 calories per day.

They met Bill Harris who had a photographic memory. Others would still maps from newspapers & he would look at them & could recreate them later. One day his maps were found & he was beaten to the point he was never the same. The camp cook would steal the POW food [Red Cross packages] & sell them on the black market. The average POW lost 54 lbs in 18 months.

PA was sent to Ashio [underground copper mine] & LZ went to Omori, where he met the "Bird" [Mutsuhiro Watanabe]. The bird was 100 times worse than all the other guards combined. The other guards loathed him for his haughtiness & POWs hated him for his brutality. The deranged bird hated LZ & hunted him down. The POWs were sent to work in factories, train stations, etc. They would switch mailing label & sabotage engines. Some stole rice & sugar. They felt like soldiers again. But those who didn't work were on 1/2 rations.

1Nov44 a new B-29 flew over Japan taking photos [thousands followed later to bomb Japan]. The POWs saw it. The Japanese were getting unnerved & took it out on the POWs. The Japanese civilians were in just as bad of shape as the POWs. Radio Tokyo had LZ give a talk

that was intercepted & played over other stations. Word got back to his family that he was alive [even though he was reported dead]. They asked him to do more talks, but they were war propaganda & he refused.

The bird was finally moved to Naoetsu, but then had LZ shipped there to him. There they carried 4 tons of coal per day. The bird once had all 220 enlisted men punch the officers in the face. The bird had him lift a heavy beam above his head. He held it for 37 minutes before the bird hit him & he passed out. By spring of '45 Germany fell & FDR died. Orders were given to kill all POWs at Naoetsu on 22Aug45.

Aug 1<sup>st</sup> B-29s dumped leaflets warning civilians to leave the city. Japanese police arrested anyone with one. 6Aug45 the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima & 3 days later Nagasaki. The B-29 only had 43 seconds after they released the bomb before it reached its destination. Then they were hit with light 10 times as bright as the sun & a shock wave at 1000 fps. By Aug 15<sup>th</sup> LZ had beriberi & orders given NOT to kill the POWs. Aug 20 a relief plane dropped some food. But gorging only brought diarrhea.

The war was over. The bird disappeared. Japan officially surrendered 2Sep45. A man-hunt for the bird was on, but never found. 37% of American POWs in Japan died [only 1% in Germany]. POWs were sent to a hospital & nursed back to health [1/2 had beriberi] before going home. PA got home & married Cecy. LZ was back from the dead & went on a speaking tour. He met Cynthia & got married.

He tried running, but his broken ankle wouldn't take it. Nightmares taunted him. He began to drink [25% Pacific POW became alcoholics]. He would get set-off by little things & have flashbacks. He went to VA hospitals, but it didn't help. They were broke from bad investments. He wanted to find & kill the bird. One night he thought he was choking the bird, but it was his pregnant wife. She wanted a divorce.

Sept '49 Billy Graham was a young evangelist who threw up a 480' circus tent for a revival in Los Angeles. Cynthia was invited & she became a Christian. She begged LZ to come & he finally did, but he walked out. He came back another night, but this time he gave his life to Jesus. He had no more nightmares or flashbacks, and he was delivered from drinking & smoking. He was a new man. They remained married & had two kids.

1950 he went back to Japan to tell the guards he forgave them. He opened a camp for troubled boys and had many speaking engagements. As the cold war was heating up, a treaty was signed with Japan & amnesty was given to former war criminals. He carried the torch in the '84 & '98 Olympics.

Quotes: "A lifetime of glory is worth a moment of pain." [LZ]

Other books: Seabiscuit (Laura Hillenbrand); Zane Grey & Ellery Queen novels; Ghost Soldiers (Hampton Sides); Unjust Enrichment (Linda Holmes); Finish Forty & Home (Phil Searce);