

Unbroken: Louis Zamperini's Story of Survival and Redemption

On a May afternoon in 1943, an Army Air Forces bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean and disappeared, leaving only a spray of debris and a slick of oil, gasoline and blood.

Then, on the ocean surface, a face appeared. It was that of a young lieutenant, the plane's bombardier, who was struggling to a life raft and pulling himself aboard.

So began one of the most extraordinary odysseys of World War II.

The lieutenant's name was Louis Zamperini and the story of his POW experience—and conversion to Christ at the 1949 Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles—is told in the No. 1 bestseller, *Unbroken*.

Written by Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken* has been hailed by *TIME* magazine as the best nonfiction book of the year.

We caught up with Mr. Zamperini by phone a few weeks ago to talk about his June 10 book signing at the Billy Graham Library, and how God is using *Unbroken* to touch lives around the world.

Zamperini's story began in Torrance, Calif. The child of Italian immigrants often found himself in trouble with the authorities—until a police officer suggested that the high-spirited boy use his gift of “fleeing” for sport instead of mischief.

By the end of high school, he had become a world class runner, setting a world high school record in the mile. He qualified to run on the 1936 Olympic team by tying the world record

holder in the 5,000-meter race.

During the Berlin Olympics, Zamperini was America's top finisher in the event, covering the final lap in an astounding 56 seconds.

Following the Games, he enrolled and competed for the University of Southern California on national record-breaking teams. Many said Zamperini would have broken the four-minute mile had he not retired from the sport to join the U.S. Air Corps as a bombardier in the South Pacific during World War II.

On a routine reconnaissance run, his aircraft crashed into the Pacific Ocean, and Zamperini and another crew member survived in a life raft for 47 days, drifting 2,000 miles, into Japanese controlled waters.

His rescuers were also his torturers, as the Japanese put Zamperini into a series of prison camps. One particular guard wanted to make an example of the eternally optimistic Olympic runner, and for two years the guard tried to break Zamperini's spirit with verbal and physical cruelty.

But the feisty young man outlasted the guard, and when the war ended Zamperini returned to Torrance to a hero's welcome. He partied with celebrities and married a debutante, but his life soon spiraled out of control—until *that* day.

The year was 1949; the city Los Angeles. Zamperini was adrift and struggling with alcoholism and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His wife, Cynthia, was ready to slap him with divorce papers, but neighbors convinced the young woman to listen to the bold evangelist preaching in a big tent outside downtown Los Angeles.

Mrs. Zamperini accepted Christ that night and told her husband that because of her conversion, she wouldn't file for divorce. But, she wanted Louis to accompany her to the Crusade.

"After a week of arguing, she finally persuaded me to go," Zamperini recalls, "but I was resentful. I'd always been poisoned against such tent meetings since I was a youngster."

In *Unbroken*, Hillenbrand paints a vivid picture of what happened when Zamperini walked into the Billy Graham Crusade, and even included portions of the sermon he heard.

The chapter is an answer to prayer, says Zamperini. "*Unbroken* is Laura's book, so all I could do was pray that she would somehow have the gospel in it. Then she called me and told me she talked to Billy Graham and got a hold of Cliff Barrows. She wanted to include the sermon I heard, and they sent it to her."

Zamperini is thankful for Hillenbrand's persistence and thoroughness. He describes her as an amazing researcher. "She has such depth in her writing and she confirms every single thing."

Unbroken is really a history book, says Zamperini. "I get calls from World War II veterans, and they say, 'I have just finished *Unbroken* and finally someone has written the truth about the war in the Pacific.'"

While secular audiences are eating up Hillenbrand's captivating descriptions of Zamperini's track career, World War II experience and the horrifying prisoner-of-war account, Christians are finding fresh inspiration in the pages of *Unbroken*.

"I get so many letters from Christians," says Zamperini, "and some of them are having a tough time. I write them back and share Scriptures with them."

He describes a letter he received from a man who was fired from his job: "This guy was a Christian and forgave everyone else in his life, but he had a hard time forgiving the boss who fired him. He hated the man. But then he read in *Unbroken*

how I forgave the POW prison guard.”

The man not only forgave his boss, he is now praying for him.

When Zamperini opened his mailbox a few days before this interview, he found a letter he says he’ll always treasure.

It was from Billy Graham.

“Dear Louis,” wrote Mr. Graham, “My associate Maury Scobee read me parts of the new book about you yesterday. What a life you have lived. What a description you have in the book of your conversion to Christ in 1949. I had tears in my eyes and praise in my heart for what God has done through you.”

“*Unbroken* has had a tremendous influence and it’s turned into a God-given opportunity to share the Gospel,” Zamperini adds. “The book has yielded an unbelievable ministry.”

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