

Lessons in Toughness and Courage

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

For more than two centuries a defining phenomenon of the American military has been the remarkable record of countless citizen soldiers, responding to emergent wartime needs with extraordinary resilience, ingenuity, and heroism. Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken* delivers a powerful World War II saga of one such man—Louis Silvie Zamperini (whom the author calls “Louie” throughout).

But Louie's life at war was far from the normative war epic of combat violence depicting exceptional bravery, endurance, and pluck in the face of enemy fire. Rather, *Unbroken* embraces the courage, stamina, and grace of a young army officer who, for most of his wartime service, was hors de combat—first surviving his plane's plunge into the Pacific, then adrift for over 6 weeks on a raft, then as a prisoner of war (POW) in Japan and, finally, years of postwar trauma and recovery. The ordeals of Louie and many others in Japanese captivity were at least as wrenching as the later experiences of American POWs in Korea and North Vietnam, where captors carried out sadistic, savage practices that flouted both humanity and international law.

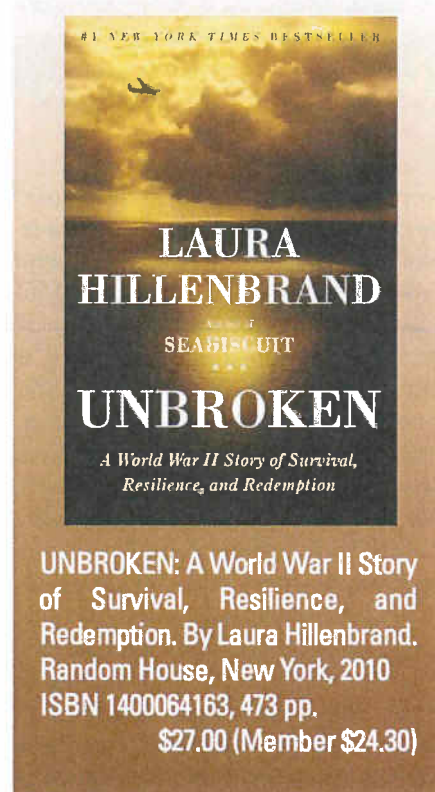
The author has done her homework. She is a gifted, engaging writer whose previous work, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* (Ballantine Books, 2002), was a major national bestseller. Hillenbrand's portrayal of Louie's odyssey merits instant classic status. The narrative of *Unbroken* is so com-

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PELLING, the story so riveting, and the lessons so insightful and permanent that every American in uniform should read, savor, and learn from this book.

As a teenager and a young man, Louie's athletic triumphs catapulted him to national stardom. Born in 1917 to Italian immigrants, his talent and grit overcame poverty and his own troubled behavior as he matured into the world's fastest high school miler, ever. He went on to compete as a world-class track athlete at the University of Southern California and in the 5,000-meter run for the United States in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. His horizons seemed limitless as he looked forward to the next Olympics, scheduled in 1940 in Tokyo and then in Finland when Tokyo withdrew. Then, war looming, the Olympics were cancelled, and Louie was inconsolable.

In early 1940 he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, but washed out. Rejoining in 1941, he was on duty in Texas when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor triggered America's entry into World War II. Louie's Olympic disappointment would evaporate in the coming years. By the time Louie Zamperini was 28, he had endured and survived such physical, mental, and emotional torment and deprivation



that the story of his cataclysms seem impossible, or at least implausible.

As a “bombardier” officer assigned to a B-24, Louie saw sporadic action in the Pacific. On 27 May 1943, Louie was aboard a mechanically defective B-24, launched from Oahu to search for a missing plane and its crew, when an engine failure drove his aircraft into the Pacific. Louie was among only three survivors who clung to two small inflatable rafts. Thus began a harrowing survival tale spanning 47 days at sea, where the three, later two, men lived on practically nothing, drinking the little they could get, and eating an occasional raw fish or bird. Sharks and enemy air patrols were constant threats, and they had to abandon one of the rafts when an enemy plane shot it up. Ultimately, they had ridden ocean currents some 2,000 miles when they saw land.

A day of reckoning arrived when Louie and pilot “Phil” Phillips were taken prisoner as they paddled ashore to a Japanese-occupied atoll in the Marshall Islands. Transported from Kwajalein Atoll to mainland Japan, he

remained a POW there until liberation 2 years later. When Louie's captors learned of his prewar athletic stardom, they singled him out for especially atrocious treatment. One Japanese NCO, known as "the Bird," was particularly brutal, sadistic, and surely mentally unhinged; he often focused his bizarre savagery on Louie. Hillenbrand weaves seamlessly the constant torment and deprivation of Louie and his fellow POWs with their fading hopes and withering survival instincts. Starvation rations, slave labor, and psychological as well as physical brutality characterized the daily routine of American captives in Japan. Inevitably, huge numbers of prisoners perished. Survivors lived with haunting recollections and/or permanent physical damage. Yet Louie and many others retained their fighting spirit, savoring little "victories" with whatever stealth defiance they could muster.

As the climax of the war approached and Japan's fate became more imminent, the Japanese military decided to murder all prisoners in its hands before the anticipated invasion. In the months before the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan's fate was ever clearer. In August 1945, with the sudden atomic acceleration of the war's end, many prisoners, including Louie, lived to return home. And, like many others, Louie suffered gravely from nightmares, depression, and alcohol. Although the modern term, post-traumatic stress disorder, was never applied to World War II veterans, their mostly untreated and unrecognized maladies presaged today's recognition of and attention to this phenomenon. In Louie's specific case, his ultimate "escape" from his wartime demons may be measured from the day he was persuaded to attend a sermon by the Reverend Billy Graham who had, at that

time, become something of a religious superstar.

Hillenbrand masterfully follows Louie's long life into the present. Louie even tried to track down his most egregious tormentor in Japan, the Bird, but to no avail, because the Bird, who died in 2003, avoided Louie's overtures. In 1998 Louie returned to the village in Japan where he had been a prisoner at the time of his liberation. This time, as he ran, at age 81, carrying the Olympic torch, Japanese civilians stood "clapping, waving, cheering Louie on, and 120 Japanese soldiers, formed into two columns, parting to let him pass."

At the time of this review, Louie is 94 years old and lives in Hollywood, CA. Hillenbrand has written a book every serviceman and woman should read, about a man everyone should admire.

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