

Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption | Laura Hillenbrand

Reviewed by Warren Coe in the February 2012 Philogian

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*“Finally, I wish to remember the millions of Allied servicemen and prisoners
of war who lived the story of the Second World War.”*

Laura Hillenbrand

My dad served in World War II. Like many of our fathers, they returned from war, settled down, raised a family and never talked about their military experience. It isn't until you read a book like Ms. Hillenbrand's *Unbroken* that an appreciation grows for the sacrifices our fathers made on behalf of liberty and freedom.

Unbroken moves from the Pacific battlefield to Japanese prisoner-of-war camps and finally home. The story centers on Louis Zamperini, an incorrigible kid from southern California. The opening chapters take some effort to wade through—they talk about Louis' wild life as a kid and then rebellious teen. He was smoking by five years old and drinking when he was eight. He stole. He vandalized. He even rode the rails in order to escape his home.

Rebel Turned Olympian

But Louie could run like the wind. His older brother, Pete, a track star in high school, encouraged Louie to take up the sport. In time, Louis surpassed his brother's running accomplishments and became an Olympic star. Yes, he possessed the bodily DNA of a great miler. Yet, it was his tenacity, stubbornness and never-say-die attitude that placed him among the elite athletes of the world.

Then along came World War II. Louie was drafted and became a bombardier. His military life would be spent in a B – 24 Liberator. This was a war-plane that nobody wanted. It was nicknamed “the Flying Brick,” “the Flying Boxcar” and the “Constipated Lumberer.” A lot of B-24 flight crews never returned from their mission.

“Nobody's Going to Live Through This”

On an early May morning in 1943, Zamperini and the rest of the crew of the Green Hornet lifted off a runway in Hawaii and headed for a small Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This was going to be a rescue mission. However, the plane developed mechanical problems. The pilot ditched the plane in the ocean. Out of 11 crew members, only three survived; Phil, the captain, Mac, the tail gunner and Louie Zamperini.

For the next forty six days the three men lived in a raft conserving what little water and food they possessed. When that ran out they waited for rain to quench their thirst. Their only food was what they caught—an occasional fish or albatross. Louie said the albatross smelled. “The stench hung before them (the three men), spurring waves of nausea. Gagging, they couldn't get the meat into their mouths. Eventually, they gave up.” (pg143)

As they drifted across the waters they were always surrounded by sharks. At one point a shark attempted to jump into the raft for an afternoon meal of U.S. airmen. Louis beat him away by poking his eye. I guess even sharks have low tolerance for pain when it comes to their eyes.

On their 33rd day at sea, Mac died. Phil and Louie retained their sanity by asking each other questions. They would cook imaginary meals and sing "White Christmas". Louie began to pray aloud. Each night Louie and Phil took turns leading prayers. Louie vowed "that if God would save them, he would serve heaven forever." (Pg165)

After living through a strafing attack, swarming sharks and a typhoon, on the 47th day of being adrift, the sole survivors of the Green Hornet were picked up by Japanese sailors. This began the hardest journey of Louie's life.

"All of the POWs held on that Island were executed"

David Margolick observed, "While only one in 100 Americans captured in Europe died, nearly one in three perished in Japanese captivity. Zamperini had a special status: as a former Olympian, he was a valuable propaganda tool, too precious to kill." But Louie was severely tortured. Along with the other POWs, he was starved, humiliated, used as slave labor and beaten beyond imagination.

The Japanese guards were merciless in their treatment of the captured Americans. The worst of the lot was Mutsuhiro Watanabe, a k a the Bird. The Bird had Zamperini in his sights. Using his fists, the Bird delivered face-smashing punches on Louie. At one point "Louie spent hour after hour in prayer, begging for God to save him." (Pg252) But in time hatred and bitterness filled Louie's heart.

Hillenbrand does not white-wash the realities of WWII POW camps in Japan. The faint-of-heart will have difficulty reading the book. I was reminded of Ephesians 2:1 where all humanity is dead in their sins and trespasses. Man's ability to inflict cruelty upon other human beings is a sad part of our history. *Unbroken* provides a small window into the darker regions of our soul.

"The Boiling City"

"At a quarter to three on the morning of August 6, 1945, a B-29 skipped off Runway Able on Tinian Island. At the yoke was Paul Tibbets, a veteran bomber pilot. The plane headed north, toward Japan. The mission was so secret that Tibbets carried cyanide capsules for all of the crewmen, to be used if they crashed and were captured." Pg299

The United States dropped the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. At the POW camp in Naoetsu, on the north side of the Island where Louie was imprisoned, the bomb's concussion "rolled down from the hills, and the air warmed strangely." (pg300) Prisoner Ferron Cummins looked up. "A fantastically huge, roiling cloud, glowing bluish gray, swaggered over the city. It was more than three miles tall. Below it Hiroshimo was boiling." (pg300)

A Difficult Return to Civilian Life

Two atomic bombs dropped over Japan ended the war. The POWs who survived eventually returned home but for many, a more difficult journey awaited them. Louie, like so many who came home from the war struggled with alcoholism. They fought off flashbacks, nightmares and uncontrollable anger. Their marriages suffered. Sometimes their families fell apart. Even holding down a job was with great effort.

War had its debilitating effects upon Louie. It would have destroyed him if something amazing had not happened. This part of the story is better left for the reader to discover for themselves.

Why This Book?

I know that *Unbroken* isn't typical book review material for the Philogian. After all, Hillenbrand's story is about one man's

survival of a deplorable and evil POW camp. This is a book about war and how our fathers fought or died or survived it. We are talking about heroes—every one of them. We thank God for their courage to put themselves in harm's way for the sake of our liberty and freedom.

But where is God in all of this? That is why I recommend *Unbroken*. God is never far from us. Although suffering leaves us feeling isolated and alone, we discover, as Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet, found out and Louis Zamperini discovered, "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22, 23)