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## WWII – Book Review

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

Laura Hillenbrand is the author of the book Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption. She has written a book with two historical plots intertwined. One is the personal experience of the airman Louis Zamperini and the other is a historical view of World War II (WWII). Zamperini was a famous track star for the U. S. He participated in the Olympic track events in Berlin, Germany where he ran the 5000 meter race. Zamperini has published his autobiography titled The Devil at my Heels but Hillenbrand’s book adds a very good historical context to his story. The book is not at all boring. She includes small details about Americans reactions after Pearl Harbor and the experience of soldiers in the Pacific arena that although they may be terribly shocking these details makes WWII come alive.

Hillenbrand had Zamperini’s permission to write his story in for her book. Zamperini also gave his full cooperation to the author by talking to her and allowing her to talk to his family and friends. The book is important as a private historical memory of World War II of one incredible soldier and it is important as the historical memory of the American culture at the time. The events of war are coupled with the experience and emotions of a soldier who survived Hell during the war and of the folks back home. The book is frightening, touching and incredible all at the same time.

## One Mile Runner

Zamperini was a first generation American-Italian born in Olean, New York on January 26, 1917. His family moved to California because he needed a healthier place to live because he suffered from pneumonia. There were not many Italians in California at the time and as a young person he started getting into a lot of trouble. He broke the law by stealing and just all around trouble making. Fortunately he was saved from a life of crime because his brother started coaching him as a runner. Zamperini held the interscholastic record for the mile for many years after he broke the standing record in 1934. His training as a runner is what eventually led to Zamperini running the 5000 meter race in Germany at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Ironically he was noticed by Hitler; Zamperini even received a handshake from Hitler. Zamperini had set a goal for himself and that was to run the mile in a shorter time - faster than four minutes. Reaching that goal would have been another record breaker and it seemed absolutely doable until world events interrupted his life plan.

## The Bombadier

WW II intruded on their dreams just like it did for millions of families around the world. Hildebrand describes new facts about the reaction of Americans to the bombing in Hawaii of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The extent the attack struck fear into Americans was more than reported in history textbooks. “ Blackout curtains were hung in windows across America, from solitary farmhouse to the White house” (Hillenbrand, 2010, 52). The frightening rumors that were rushing over the nations included an expected attack on Kansas City, bombing attacks on San Francisco and the Japanese capture of Pearl Harbor. (Hillenbrand, 2010, 52)

Also Hillenbrand is able to help people understand the way Japan seemed to be bulldozing over country after country including the Phillipines, Guam, Burma, British Borneo, Hong Kong, North Borneo, Rabaul, Manila and the U. S. Philipine base all by the end of January. “ The British were driven from Malaya and into surrender in Singapore in seventy days” (Hillenbrand, 2010, 52). This makes the success of tiny Wake in shoving back the Japanese forces astonishing.

Zamperini signed up for the United States Army Air Force immediately after Pearl Harbor. He was on his way to becoming a bombardier; he learned in the B-24 type aircrafts and was assigned to a group in the Seventh Air Force.
Many readers have probably never heard of this USAAF command, but it was the one that bombed all of the distant targets for Admiral Nimitz's thrust in the Central Pacific. Just to have this portrayal of what life and operations were like in the Seventh in the early stages of the war makes this book (Unbroken) worthwhile. (Willey, 2011, 50)

Through telling Zamberini’s story we learn a lot about how the air force worked (and what did not work) in the early months of WWII. For example, young air force trainees were dying before they even left for the war. Hillenbrand (2010) reports that 52, 651 air crashes took place stateside during training which was not a hopeful fact for Army Air Force (AAF) trainees (61). The author also describes with great sensitivity the positive progress for improving the chances of survival if a bomber goes down at sea; only to be faced by the zero progress in protecting men from almost inevitable death by drowning in the Pacific Ocean (Hillenbrand, 2010, 87).

## Surviving the Pacific Ocean

On a combat mission over the Pacific Ocean Zamperini’s B-24 aircraft broke apart sending them tumbling into the sea. He barely survived until he was fished out of the water and taken to Japan. The detail of the life and death challenges men faced when they found themselves in the sea were very vivid - the lack of food and water, the burning sun, the sharks, and the attacks from the air. There were no happy solutions. If on one hand it was good to be undercover during an air attack, on the other its dangerous to take cover in the water with the sharks. Most of the men who landed in the Pacific Ocean drowned and their bodies were never recovered. The technology of today for rescues and tracking had not yet been developed. Zamperini’s ordeal at sea lasted 47 days.

One of the most touching parts of the book was the account from the perspective of Zamperini’s family back in Torrence, Califorina worrying and wondering about whether their son was dead or alive. In a dramatic radio message his voice was heard over the radio throughout the United States. Although his parents had not heard it they heard from many people. The message from “ their Louie” started with “ Hello mother and father, relatives and friends. This is your Louie talking. Through the courtesy of the authorities here I am broadcasting this personal message to you. This will be the first time in two and one half years that you will hear my voice.” (Hillenbrand, 2010, 256-257) Two and one half years is a long time to wait to hear the voice of a loved one. His message was upbeat and he reported on others that were with him so his parents would not worry.

## The Bird’s Hell

In fact, Zamberini ended up in one of the worst if not the worst place to be in the world. He was in the prison first at Kwajalein, a city on then he was removed by there by boat and his internment in Japan was in three different Prisoner of War (POW) camps on the island of Honshi. At the Omori camp the POWs could watch the Allies bombing Tokyo but their suffering continued seemingly without end. When the Allies engaged in dog fights with the Japanese Zamparini could see them. The POWs were treated worse as the Allies made it to Japan. Very bad things were done to them that were hard enough to read but impossible to repeat.

The Bird was the nickname for the sadistic prison guard, Mutsuhiro Watanabe; who made the prisoners suffer extremes of psychological and physical torture; especially Zamperini, and continued to make all kinds of tortures like whipping with belt buckle to the head, laying facedown in feces and worse. Some POWs were burned alive. The Japanese made them beat up on each other. These are just a few of the unbelievable challenges Zamparini survived. It was difficult to read how the arrogant leaders of the Japanese Imperial Army treated the prisoners of war with no concern for the Geneva Conventions.

In1942 the Bataan Death March took place, 80 miles of torturous walking, starving and attacks from the Japanese guards. The horror of the march was vividly written by Hillenbrand. Seventy six thousand prisoners both Americans and Philipinos were forced on a death march with barely any water, they were bayoneted, murdered, surrendering soldiers were killed, weak soldiers were run over by military, terrible horrors took place. Few survived.

## Painful Road Home

Zamperini told one reporter when he returned home“ If I knew I had to go through those experiences again,” he finally said, “ I’d kill myself” (Hillenbrand, 2010, 321). The end of the war was announced in August; on September 2nd food was finally dropped to the ground on pallets for the starving men in the POW camp (Hillenbrand, 2010. 324). The Zamperini family finally was sure he was alive when his brother in California called them by telephone to read the headline “ Zamperini comes back from the dead. (Hillenbrand, 2010. 324) The post traumatic stress he had to deal with was horrible. He swore he would go back to Japan and find the Bird one day. He developed a problem with alcoholism. His saving was a conversion to Christianity led by Billy Graham in an evangelical tent service in Los Angeles. He did return to Japan, not to successfully find Bird but to meet with other Japanese prison guards. His new found religious belief allowed him to speak with them in compassion. He gave them Bibles. This was not what Zamperini had expected to happen but after the experience he was able to live in peace with himself.

## Conclusion

The next book to read is definitely The Devil at my Heels Zamberini’s autobiography of his terrible ordeal. The two books, The Devil at my Heels and Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption would probably make good pair of books for understanding war in general and from personal perspective. As history Hillenbrand’s book is very valuable because she offers so many details such as the aircraft production of Lockheed, the number of air crashes state side, and training to be a bombardier. Somehow she makes it all interesting but some of the events are almost to horrific to be able to read. The dry facts and details of war become important in Hillenbrand’s book. She offers a truer picture of that time in the history of the U. S. which gives meaning to what before was just some event in history called WWII. Hillenbrand shows how Zamperini was able to go full circle to the point of offering compassion to his enemies. In this book we learn what gives a man the right to call himself a hero.

## References

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Willey, Scott A. (2011). A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption. Air Power History, 58(2), 50. Web. Retrieved from http://www. questia. com

. Hillenbrand gives the families’ personal perspective on the roller coaster emotions that they felt