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Recommended Citation

Stephen P. Walsh, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption by Laura Hillenbrand*, 8 DePaul J. Sports L. & Contemp. Probs. 171 (2012)
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jslcp/vol8/iss2/9>

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UNBROKEN: A WORLD WAR II STORY OF SURVIVAL, RESILIENCE, AND REDEMPTION

Book written by Laura Hillenbrand
[Random House, 2010]
496 Pages
ISBN: 978-1-4000-6416-8

“IN WAR, THERE ARE NO UNWOUNDED SOLDIERS.” –
JOSÉ NAROSKY¹

April 22, 2012 marked the 8-year anniversary of the death of Patrick Tillman: NFL athlete, United States Army corporal, and one of this generation’s true heroes.² In the wake of September 11, Tillman decided to forgo a \$3.6 million dollar contract with the NFL’s Arizona Cardinals and enlist with the United States Army.³ Corporal Tillman was sent to Afghanistan where he was subsequently killed.⁴ After his death, Corporal Tillman became an iconic symbol of patriotism and selflessness. He served as an example, to all Americans, of a true national hero. In her novel, *Unbroken*, author Laura Hillenbrand tells the incredible story of another true American hero - world-class athlete turned World War II (WWII) bombardier, Louis Silvie Zamperini.⁵ *Unbroken* chronicles Zamperini’s transformation from adolescent troublemaker, to world-class runner, to prisoner of war (POW), to true American hero.⁶

Unbroken begins in late August of 1929 in Torrance, California, a small-town of approximately 1,800 people.⁷ Since the day he could walk, the unbridled Zamperini constantly attracted the attention of the Torrance Police Department. Officers were introduced to Zamper-

1. RONC. EGGERTSEN, *PRIVATE RYAN, REMEMBERING OUR WWII SOLDIERS, ANCESTRY*, VOL. 16, NO. 6, NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1998, at 20.

2. Anahad O’Connor, *Times Topics: Pat Tillman*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 1, 2007, available at http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/t/pat_tillman/index.html.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. LAURA HILLENBRAND, *UNBROKEN: A WORLD WAR II STORY OF SURVIVAL, RESILIENCE, AND REDEMPTION* (2010).

6. After returning home, Zamperini received three distinct medals of honor from the United States Army Air Force: 1) the Purple Heart, 2) the Distinguished Flying Cross, and 3) the Prisoner of War Medal.

7. *Supra*, note 5 at 5.

ini when he was just a child streaking through the streets of Torrance. Torrance Police Officers remained well acquainted with Zamperini throughout his adolescence due to Zamperini's insatiable desire to abscond with anything that was not bolted down to the floor.⁸ No one was able to tame Zamperini's wild nature until his sophomore year at Torrance High, where his older brother Pete Zamperini introduced him to the sport of track and field.⁹ Louis was a natural runner and quickly became obsessed with training for several hours each day. Louis began winning running competitions by incredible margins, setting several statewide and national records in the men's mile. He became a hometown hero; one newspaper dubbed him "The Torrance Tornado."¹⁰ His success garnered national recognition and eventually led to an invitation to participate in the 5,000-meter event in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany.¹¹ After mild success at the 1936 Olympics, Louis attended the University of Southern California, and began training for the 1940 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. However, as fate would have it, the 1940 Olympics were canceled and America was thrust into WWII in 1941.

Parts II & III of *Unbroken* describe the early stages of Zamperini's career as a bombardier in the United States' Army Air Corps during WWII.¹² Louis joined the Army Air Corps in early 1941 and his crew was assigned to fly a B-24D, a plane with so many mechanical and operational deficiencies that it was dubbed "the Flying Coffin."¹³ This title would serve to be all too accurate for Louis and his crewman. On Thursday, May 27, 1943 Zamperini's B-24D experienced engine failure and crashed into the Pacific Ocean, leaving Zamperini and two other crewman stranded at sea in two six-foot inflatable rafts.¹⁴ The rest of the plane's crew perished in the accident. Louis and his two companions spent the next forty-seven tumultuous days at sea, fighting off sharks, dehydration, starvation, and even a Japanese fighter plane.¹⁵ Only Zamperini and one other serviceman survived the entire ordeal and on the forty-seventh day the ragged life raft finally found land.¹⁶ However, being stranded at sea would pale in compari-

8. *Supra*, note 5. at 7.

9. *Supra*, note 5 at 14.

10. *Supra*, note 5 at 21.

11. *Supra*, note 5 at 27.

12. *Supra*, note 5 at 57.

13. *Supra*, note 5 at 60.

14. *Supra*, note 5 at 114.

15. *Supra*, note 5 at 125-71.

16. *Supra*, note 5 at 171.

son to the subsequent two and a half years in which Zamperini spent in and out of Japanese POW camps.

Part IV of *Unbroken*, the longest and most captivating of all of the sections, details Zamperini and his fellow POWs' shared struggles in numerous Japanese POW camps. The Japanese signed, but never ratified, or in other words made legally enforceable, the 1929 Geneva Convention (the Convention), which defined the humanitarian protections for POWs.¹⁷ Unfortunately for Zamperini and other POWs, this meant that Japan and its military personnel could not be held legally accountable for the treatment of the POWs that were kept in Japanese POW camps. As is the case today, the Convention aimed to protect POWs from acts of violence and humiliation and ensure their dignity, health, and personal rights. Under the Convention, POWs are entitled to have communication with their families, receive adequate medical attention to any illness or injury, and are not to be mentally or physically tortured, amongst other things.¹⁸

During WWII, the Japanese Army violated all of the Convention's provisions. *Unbroken* recounts in graphic detail the horrors that Allied POWs were forced to endure in Japanese POW camps. Allied POWs were beaten, tortured, starved, and denied medical treatment. Hillenbrand describes sadistic men like Sueharu Kitamura, dubbed "The Quack" by Allied POWs, who used POWs as test subjects for chemical and biological warfare, tortured and mutilated sick and injured POWs under the veil of "treatment," as well as ordered and engaged in vicious beatings of POWs for trivial mistakes such as failing to salute him every time he passed.¹⁹

As egregious and brutal as the Quack's actions were, no man's behavior was as ruthless and barbaric as that of Japanese Corporal Mutsumihiro Watanabe, or as he was known by POWs throughout Japan, "the Bird."²⁰ The Bird's insatiable appetite for violence bordered on eroticism.²¹ He beat POWs daily, and many of these beatings routinely resulted in fractured windpipes, shattered teeth, broken bones.

17. Statistical and Accounting Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, U.S. Army, *Army Battle Casualties and Nonbattle Deaths in World War II: Final Report (7 December-31 December 1946)* p. 7.

18. Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, July 27, 1929, 6 U.S.T. 3316, T.I.A.S. No. 3364. [Part 1, Article 2 of the 1929 Geneva Convention: "They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity."]

19. *Supra*, note 5 at 196.

20. The POWs had a host of nicknames for Watanabe including but not limited to Animal, Big Flag, and Little Napoleon.

21. According to Yuichi Hatto, an accountant for the Japanese Army, Watanabe "freely admit[ed] that beating prisoners brought him to climax."

He practiced judo on appendectomy patients. On one occasion, the Bird tied a sixty-five year old POW to a tree and left him there for several days. POWs abhorred The Bird so much that on several occasions POWs, with no regard for the repercussions of their actions, made attempts on the Bird's life. After the war, the Bird plagued the dreams of Zamperini and thousands of other POWs who survived any of the Bird's camps. As Zamperini wrote in a post-war letter to Mut-suhiro, "[t]he post-war nightmares caused my life to crumble. . ."²²

As is the case for many POWs who survive to see the end of a war, Zamperini suffered from severe alcoholism for several years following the end of WWII. Drinking himself into unconsciousness was the only way for Zamperini to keep the Bird from tormenting his sleep.²³ Zamperini eventually regained faith in mankind with the help of his wife Cynthia. In 1954, Zamperini opened his nonprofit Victory Boys Camp, a summer camp for troubled youths that is still operating today.²⁴ Zamperini returned to running, although never competitively, and was asked to Olympic torch before five different Olympic Games.²⁵ Today, Zamperini is ninety-five years old and continues to tour the United States giving motivational speeches to trouble children.

Approximately 34,648 American soldiers were held in Japan as prisoners of war during WWII, and of those 34,648 POWs, 12,935 died, more than 37 percent.²⁶ Under the Treaty of Peace, Japan later had to pay \$12.6 million in money and assets to POWs for their war crimes.²⁷ Additionally, thousands of Japanese military officials were later tried and convicted for their crimes against humanity with sentences including execution, lifetime imprisonment, or decades of hard labor. All things considered, one cannot help but feel a sense of injustice at the end of *Unbroken*. The America's War Crimes Act of 1948 and 1952 entitled former POWs of WWII to a measly dollar for every day of imprisonment only if the individual could prove that he/she was not provided with the amount and quality of food mandated by the Geneva Convention, and an extra one dollar and fifty cents if the individual could prove that he/she was subjected to inhumane and/or hard labor.²⁸ It is difficult to fathom the suffering Zamperini and other

22. *Supra*, note 5 at 397.

23. *Supra*, note 7 at 178.

24. *Supra*, note 7 at 195.

25. *Id.*

26. *Supra*, note 5 at 315. Compared to the one percent of American POWs who died while being held in Nazi and Italian camps.

27. *Supra*, note 5 at 391.

28. *Supra*, note 5 at 200.

POWs endured and to truly appreciate how they survived the ordeal of being prisoners in Japanese POW camps. It was a suffering that struck at the core of what made them human beings: all dignity stripped away, all hope crushed.

As America rapidly approaches the eighth anniversary of Corporal Patrick Tillman's death, Americans should be cognizant of how they define and use the term "hero." It is not uncommon, or even wrong, to emulate popular athletes; however *hero* is a term that should be reserved for only those who truly deserve it – people like Corporal Tillman and Louis Zamperini. *Unbroken* is a wonderfully crafted novel that reminds Americans of what they owe this country and those brave people who serve to protect it.

Stephen P. Walsh

