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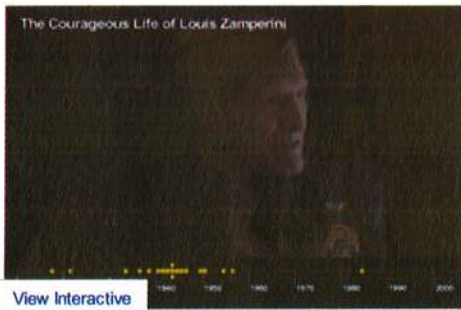
The Defiant Ones

In her new book, the author of 'Seabiscuit' turns to the unimaginable ordeal of an Olympic athlete and WW II hero. Because of her own debilitating illness, they struck a special bond.

By STEVE ONEY

With a fringe of white hair poking out from under a University of Southern California baseball cap and blue eyes sharp behind bifocals, 93-year-old Louis Zamperini refuses to concede much to old age. He still works a couple of hours each day in the yard of his Hollywood Hills home, bagging leaves, climbing stairs and, on occasion, trimming trees with a chainsaw. His outlook is upbeat, even rambunctious. "I have a cheerful countenance at all times," he says. "When you have a good attitude your immune system is fortified." But as he plunged into "Unbroken," Laura Hillenbrand's 496-page story of his life, the happy trappings of his current existence fell away.

The Courageous Life of Louis Zamperini



"Unbroken" will be published Nov. 16 with a first printing of 250,000 copies. Its publisher, Random House, hopes to repeat the success it enjoyed with "Seabiscuit," Ms. Hillenbrand's 2001 best seller, which has six million books in print and became a hit movie. "We're positioning it as the big book for the holidays," says a Barnes & Noble buyer.

One of the many notable aspects of "Unbroken" is that its author has never met her subject. Suffering from a debilitating case of chronic fatigue syndrome, she was unable to travel to Los Angeles from her Washington, D.C., home. She did the bulk of her research by phone and over the Internet, which enabled her to zero in on key collections at such institutions as the National Archives.

Journal Community

Discuss: What's the most inspirational survival story you've read or seen?



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Sally Peterson for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Zamperini, in his bomber jacket

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In 2005, Louis Zamperini spoke to the The Wall Street Journal about the differences between World War II POWs and present-day Guantanamo Bay detainees. [Read the story.](#)



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Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Laura Hillenbrand at her home in Washington; she rarely leaves the house because of her illness.

"Unbroken" details a life that was tumultuous from the beginning. As a blue-collar kid in Southern California, Mr. Zamperini fell in and out of scrapes with the law. By age 19, he'd redirected his energies into sports, becoming a record-breaking distance runner. He competed in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin where he made headlines, not just on the track (Hitler sought him out for a congratulatory handshake), but by stealing a Nazi flag from the well-guarded Reich Chancellery. The heart of the story, however, is about Mr. Zamperini's experiences while serving in the Pacific during World War II.

A bombardier on a B-24 flying out of Hawaii in May 1943, the Army Air Corps lieutenant was one of only three members of an 11-man crew to survive a crash into a trackless expanse of ocean. For 47 days, Mr. Zamperini and pilot Russell Allen Phillips (tail gunner Francis McNamara died on day 33) huddled aboard a tiny, poorly provisioned raft, subsisting on little more than rain water and the blood of hapless birds they caught and killed bare-handed. All the while sharks circled, often rubbing their backs against the bottom of the raft. The sole aircraft that sighted them was Japanese. It made two strafing runs, missing its human targets both times. After drifting some 2,000 miles west, the bullet-riddled, badly patched raft washed ashore in the Marshall Islands, where Messrs. Zamperini and Phillips were taken prisoner by the Japanese. The war still had more than two years to go.

For 25 months in such infamous Japanese POW camps as Ofuna, Omori and Naoetsu, Mr. Zamperini was physically tortured and subjected to constant psychological abuse. He was beaten. He was starved. He was denied medical care for maladies that included beriberi and chronic bloody diarrhea. His fellow prisoners—among them Mr. Phillips—were treated almost as badly. But Mr. Zamperini was singled out by a sadistic guard named Mutsuhiro Watanabe, known to prisoners as "the Bird," a handle picked because it had no negative connotations that might bring down his irrational wrath. The Bird intended to make an example of the famous Olympian. He regularly whipped him across the face with a belt buckle and forced him to perform demeaning acts, among them push-ups atop pits of human excrement. The Bird's goal was to force Mr. Zamperini to broadcast anti-American propaganda over the radio. Mr. Zamperini refused. Following Japan's surrender, Mr. Watanabe was ranked seventh among its most wanted war criminals (Tojo was first). Because war-crime prosecutions were suspended in the 1950s, he was never brought to justice.



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Associated Press

Mr. Zamperini, record-setting miler, 1939

This all came rushing back when Mr. Zamperini first sat down with a copy of "Unbroken" last month. "As I was reading," he says, gesturing with an arm to a peaceful vista of palm trees outside his house, "I had to look out that picture window from time to time to make sure that I wasn't still in Japan. When I got to the end I called Laura and told her she'd put me back in prison, and she said, 'I'm sorry.' "

"It's almost unimaginable what Louie went through," says Ms. Hillenbrand from her home on a late fall afternoon. She discovered Mr. Zamperini's story while researching "Seabiscuit," the saga of another individual—in that case, a horse—that confronted long odds. "Louie and Seabiscuit were both Californians and both on the sports pages in the 1930s," she says. "I was fascinated. When I learned about his World War II experiences, I thought, 'If this guy is still alive, I want to meet him.' "

Following the publication of "Seabiscuit," Ms. Hillenbrand wrote to Mr. Zamperini. Shortly thereafter they had the first of many long phone conversations. His tale of survival captivated her both on its merits and because she could relate to it personally. "I'm attracted," she says, "to subjects who overcome tremendous suffering and learn to cope emotionally with it."



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Louis Zamperini

In basic training, pre-WWII helmet, 1941

The 43-year-old Ms. Hillenbrand contracted chronic fatigue syndrome during her sophomore year at Kenyon College. The bewildering disease, thought to originate from a virus, can be enfeebling and is incurable. Ms. Hillenbrand is today essentially a prisoner in her own home. She is so consistently weak and dizzy (vertigo is a side effect) that she recently installed a chair lift to get to the second floor of her house, where she lives with her husband, G. Borden Flanagan, an assistant professor of political philosophy at American University. What to others might seem simple matters are to her subjects of grave consideration. "I skipped my shower today," she says, "in order to have the strength to do this interview. My illness is excruciating and difficult to cope with. It takes over your entire life and causes more suffering than I can describe."

Ms. Hillenbrand's research was complicated by her disease. But as she likes to remind people, she came down with chronic fatigue syndrome before starting her writing career, and she has learned to work around it. "For 'Seabiscuit,' " she says, "I interviewed 100 people I never met." For "Unbroken," Ms. Hillenbrand located not only many of Mr. Zamperini's fellow POWs and the in-laws of Mr. Phillips, but the most friendly of his Japanese captors. She also interviewed scores of experts on the War in the Pacific (the book is extensively end-noted) and

benefited from her subject's personal files, which he shipped to Washington for her use. "A superlative pack rat," she writes, "Louie has saved virtually every artifact of his life."



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Louis Zamperini

His damaged B-24 after a mission., 1943

During her exploration of Mr. Zamperini's war years, Ms. Hillenbrand was most intrigued by his capacity to endure hardship. "One of the fascinating things about Louie," she says, "is that he never allowed himself to be a passive participant in his ordeal. It's why he survived. When he was being tortured, he wasn't just lying there and getting hit. He was always figuring out ways to escape emotionally or physically."



Louis Zamperini

Mr. Zamperini with mother at homecoming, 1945

Mr. Zamperini owes this resiliency, Ms. Hillenbrand concluded, to his rebellious nature. "Defiance defines Louie," she says. "As a boy he was a hell-raiser. He refused to be corralled. When someone pushed him he pushed back. That made him an impossible kid but an unbreakable man."

Although Mr. Zamperini came back to California in one piece, he was emotionally ruined. At night, his demons descended in the form of vengeful dreams about Mr. Watanabe. He drank heavily. He nearly destroyed his marriage. In 1949, at the urging of his wife, Cynthia, Mr. Zamperini attended a Billy Graham crusade in downtown Los Angeles, where he became a Christian. (The conversion of the war hero helped put the young evangelist on the map.) Ultimately Mr. Zamperini forgave his tormentors and enjoyed a successful career running a center for troubled youth. He even reached out to Mr. Watanabe. "As a result of my prisoner of war experience under your unwarranted and unreasonable punishment," Mr. Zamperini wrote his former guard in the 1990s, "my post-war life became a nightmare ... but thanks to a confrontation with God ... I committed my life to Christ. Love replaced the hate I had for you." A third party promised to deliver the letter to Mr. Watanabe. He did not reply, and it is not known whether he received it. He died in 2003.

Although Mr.



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Sally Peterson for The Wall Street Journal

Mr. Zamperini still has his purloined Nazi flag.

and she hasn't pulled out of it. "This is going to be hard," she says. "I'm very afraid. I'm not functioning well. I'm going to have to be careful that I don't slip back to the bottom." Next week's "Today" show interview was taped at her home.



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Louis Zamperini

A rambunctious youth in Torrance, Calif.

Mr. Zamperini's internal battles and ultimate redemption point to a key difference between "Unbroken" and Ms. Hillenbrand's previous book. "Seabiscuit's story is one of accomplishment," she says. "Louie's is one of survival. Seabiscuit's story played out before the whole world. Louie dealt with his ordeal essentially alone. His was a mental struggle." That struggle, she adds, feels particularly resonant in 2010. "This is a time when people need to be buoyed by something, and Louie blows breath into people by making them realize that they can overcome more than they think."

Because of Ms. Hillenbrand's illness, there will be no author tour. In 2007 she sank deeper into chronic fatigue syndrome,

Mr. Zamperini—whose health issues don't go beyond taking blood-thinning medication following a recent angioplasty—is raring to go. His wife died in 2001, and while he is close to his two children and a grandson, he lives alone. In short, he's up for an adventure. He has told Random House he will promote the book in Ms. Hillenbrand's stead. He also has signed with a San Francisco-based speakers' agency. His goal is to become an inspirational mainstay on cruise ships. He has transformed what he learned as a POW into parables ("Hope has to have a reason. Faith has to have an object") that he feels can reduce stress and are perfect for an anxiety-filled time.



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Louis Zamperini

Visiting a prison camp in Japan in 1950

There is also, not surprisingly, movie interest (the film version of "Seabiscuit" took in \$150 million world-wide at the box office). The outlook, however, is uncertain. In the 1950s, Mr. Zamperini published an autobiography titled "Devil at My Heels." Universal, envisioning a vehicle for Tony Curtis, optioned Mr. Zamperini's life rights. The project went nowhere. In the 1990s, Universal re-optioned the rights, this time for Nicolas Cage. Again the project faltered. In 2003, Mr. Zamperini and writer David Rensin updated "Devil at My Heels."



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Louis Zamperini

Running in the Olympic torch relay in Los Angeles, 1984

Andrew Rigrod, an entertainment lawyer representing Mr. Zamperini, believes the rights have now reverted to his client. A Universal spokeswoman says that this is most likely correct, but says the studio still owns the previous project and is developing it. She adds that she expects things to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Mr. Zamperini's hope, Mr. Rigrod says, is that he and Ms. Hillenbrand (who is represented by CAA) will join forces. "He wants the movie to be based on Laura's book," says the lawyer, "and he would cooperate and participate." Says Mr. Zamperini: "For the work she's done, she deserves the movie. I told her I don't want anything

Over the course of the seven years Ms. Hillenbrand toiled on "Unbroken," she and Mr. Zamperini became friends, despite

never laying eyes on each other. "I call him a virtuoso of joy," she says. "When things are going bad, I phone him." Says Mr. Zamperini, "Every time I say good-bye to her, I tell her I love her and she tells me, 'I love you.' I've never known a girl like her.

"Laura brought my war buddies back to life," he says. "The fact that Laura has suffered so much enabled her to put our suffering into words."