

LOUIS SILVIE ZAMPERINI

From Olean to Olympia

From Hell to Heaven

by Sal Martoche

Does the name Louis Silvie Zamperini ring a bell? If it does not, you are not alone. Few people know the full story of one of Western New York's finest athletes and fewer still know about his incredible heroism and indomitable will to overcome adversity against all odds. This great American hero was born in Olean, N.Y., on January 26, 1917. He would overcome great obstacles over and over again on his life's journey.

He was the son of two immigrant parents from Ve-



Louis Zamperini - 1920s.

rona, Italy. When he was very young his poverty-stricken family moved to Torrance, Calif., in search of a better life. As a boy, Louis would prove to be nothing short of a juvenile delinquent. He was a smoker, a drinker and totally incorrigible from a very early age. To some extent the great chip he carried on his shoulder can be traced to the fact that he spoke no English when he started in school and was teased mercilessly by his classmates about everything from the way he looked, dark and swarthy; the way he dressed, nearly in rags; his accent and lack of proficiency with the

English language and so much more. You name it. The older boys engaged in relentless and regular bullying and physical abuse of Louis.

When his stern and unhappy father discovered what was happening to his son when the boy came home bloodied and disheveled one day, he was more angry with Louis for allowing this to happen to him than he was with the abusers. So he took the boy out in the back of their home every day for hours over many months and relentlessly and sometimes forcefully "instructed" him on how to box and defend himself. Louis's father was very tough on this apparently weak and unmotivated son who, in fact, possessed all the tools, physically and mentally, to become an extraordinary boxer and eventually an extraordinary track and field athlete as well. In truth, one of Louis's motivations for quickly getting into shape and learning the art of boxing was to "pay back" his tormentors, and pay them back he did.

However, he was, unfortunately, still drinking, smoking, skipping school and getting into trouble with the police on a regular basis until finally his older brother, Pete, took him under his wing. Pete was a great track and field star in high school and he "talked" his younger brother into joining him on the high school team, telling him the girls loved athletes and the boys would look up to him. Louis, at first reluctant, soon became intent on doing better than his big brother. He wanted to break all of Pete's high school track records, and in fact he did. He became so dedicated to the sport he stopped drinking and smoking. He also started eating and sleeping right and developed enormous self discipline. He was so good that



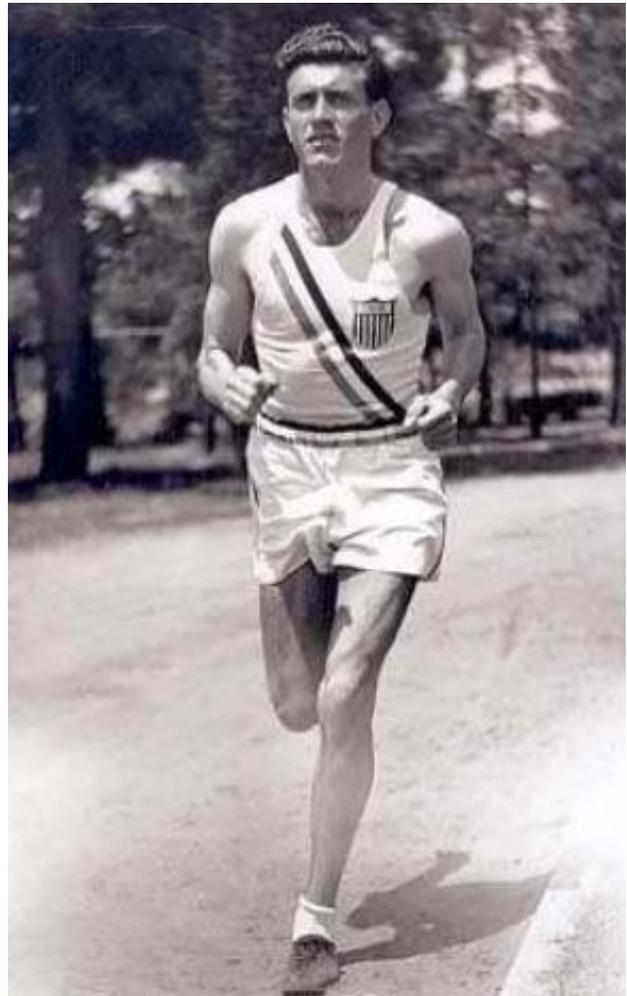
Louis and Pete Zamperini.

he won a scholarship to the University of Southern California for track and field, just as Pete had done.

In 1936, Louis, by then a cocky teenager, decided to try out for the Olympics. In those days, athletes had to pay their own way to the Olympic tryouts, but since his father worked for the railroad Louis was able to take a train from California to New York without charge, and a group of Torrance merchants raised enough money for him to live on when he got there. The day he ran the 5000 meter race on Randall Island was one of the hottest days of the year and a number of other contestants collapsed during the race. It was reported that 40 people died in Manhattan of the heat that week alone. Louis was exhausted but somehow summoned the strength to sprint to the finish line much to the amazement of everyone. He wound up in a dead heat for first place with the U.S. record-holder Dan Lash and qualified for the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany. He was just 19 years of age and to this day he remains the youngest American ever to qualify for the 5000 meter for the Olympics. Louis finished eighth in the 5000 meter distance event at the Olympics. His final lap, however, was completed in an amazing 56 seconds and it was impressive enough to catch the attention of Adolf Hitler, who insisted on a personal meeting with the young

runner. Louis later recalled that Hitler shook his hand and said, "Ah, you're the boy with the fast finish."

After the Olympics were over Louis finally enrolled at USC, where he broke several track records, including one in the mile despite severe cuts from a few competitors attempting to spike him during the race. His record in that race was to hold for 15 years, and earned him the nickname "The Torrance



Louis, training for the '36 Olympics.

Tornado."

In 1941 Louis enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps and earned a commission as a second lieutenant. He was deployed to the Pacific theater as a

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bombardier. In April 1943, during a bombing mission against a Japanese-held island, his plane was badly damaged in combat and, although it made it back to the base, it was no longer flight-worthy. A number of the crew were injured and the healthy crew members, including him, were transferred to Hawaii to await reassignment. Louis was assigned to conduct a search for a lost aircraft and its crew. Unfortunately, while engaged in the search, his plane crashed in the Pacific and eight of the 11 men aboard were lost.

The three survivors were Louis and two crew mates, the pilot, Russell Alan Phillips, and Airman Francis McNamara, who ultimately died after 33 days at sea.

These gallant men subsisted on rainwater, small



Louie, ready for the chill of high altitude.

fish eaten raw, and birds that landed on their raft. During this entire ordeal they had to fend off constant shark attacks. Finally, after 47 days adrift, Louis and Phillips reached the Marshall Islands, 2000 miles from



This raft is similar to the one Zamperini and company were stranded on for 47 days.

where they went down, but their ordeal was far from over. They were immediately taken prisoner by the Japanese Navy.

Their Japanese captors not only failed to care for their wounds and exhaustion but were guilty of horrible atrocities against them and other prisoners. They took particular delight in torturing Louis because he would not yield, he would not bend and they could not humiliate him. There was one sadistic captor in particular who was reprehensible in his treatment of Louis. He regularly beat Louis into unconsciousness and left him with broken bones but he could not break Louis's spirit. It is no surprise that Louis survived his two-year ordeal because of his great physical and mental strength. His captors knew he was an Olympian and wanted badly to break him so they could use him in propaganda, but those very qualities that made him appealing to them probably saved his life. The Japanese were afraid that if he died in captivity it might reflect badly on them in world opinion. Russell Allen Phillips, his pilot and fellow POW, would remain his best friend for life.

Louis had first been declared missing in action and then listed as killed in action, but after the war ended

he returned home to a well deserved hero's welcome. He married a beautiful and wonderful woman in 1946 and they raised two children together, but it was not easy for them. He was physically healed when he returned from captivity but his heart and soul were still wounded. Although he was raised a devout Catholic he had lost his faith during his incredible ordeal. He was sullen and withdrawn. He was also drinking again and suffering from what we would today call post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). His marriage was close to being over and in a last-ditch attempt to save it his wife insisted that he accompany her to an evangelical crusade led by Billy Graham in Los Angeles. Miraculously, it changed Louis's life and he became a born-again Christian.

Louis eventually became a Christian evangelist himself and one of his constant themes was forgiveness. He believed that it was necessary for any person of faith to forgive even the worst atrocities and, with that in mind, he went to Japan and visited the guards from his POW days to let them know that he had forgiven them. He tried hard while he was there to meet with his chief and most brutal tormentor from the war years, a man named Mutsuhiro Watanabe, known as

"The Bird," who had somehow evaded prosecution as a war criminal, but the unrepentant man refused to see him and also refused to read a letter Louis sent him in which he expressed his forgiveness.

By some twist of fate Louis, who continued to strongly support USC athletics and regularly attended football games at the university, in 2009 befriended its star quarterback, Matt Barkley. Barkley is currently the back-up quarterback for the Buffalo Bills.

He remained married to Cynthia Applewhite for 55 years, until her death in 2001. He died in 2014 in Los Angeles at age 97. Laura Hillenbrand immortalized him in a biography entitled "Unbroken: a World War Two Story of Survival, Resilience and Redemption," which is well worth reading. It was made into a movie entitled simply, "Unbroken."

Louis Zamperini is yet another Western New York hero that you will be able to celebrate and learn more about when the new Centro Culturale Italiano is completed in his honor.

LOUIS ZAMPERINI
 Captain
 U. S. Army Air Corps
 World War II
 POW:
 July 13, 1943 to
 March 2, 1945

Distinguished Flying Cross

Prisoner of War

Other MEDALS-RIBBONS: Purple Heart, American Campaign, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign, World War II Victory

As a B-24 Bombarrier, his plane crashed in the Pacific. He survived 47 days at sea and nearly two years as a Prisoner of War.

Army Air Corps

UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

B-24 Liberator

"Unbroken"