

# Unbroken

by Laura Hillenbrand

## PREFACE

ALL HE COULD SEE, IN EVERY DIRECTION, WAS WATER. It was June 23, 1943. Somewhere on the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean, Army Air Forces bombardier and Olympic runner Louie Zamperini lay across a small raft, drifting westward. Slumped alongside him was a sergeant, one of his plane's gunners. On a separate raft, tethered to the first, lay another crewman, a gash zigzagging across his forehead. Their bodies, burned by the sun and stained yellow from the raft dye, had winnowed down to skeletons. Sharks glided in lazy loops around them, dragging their backs along the rafts, waiting.

The men had been adrift for twenty-seven days. Borne by an equatorial current, they had floated at least one thousand miles, deep into Japanese-controlled waters. The rafts were beginning to deteriorate into jelly, and gave off a sour, burning odor. The men's bodies were pocked with salt sores, and their lips were so swollen that they pressed into their nostrils and chins. They spent their days with their eyes fixed on the sky, singing "White Christmas," muttering about food. No one was even looking for them anymore. They were alone on sixty-four million square miles of ocean.

A month earlier, twenty-six-year-old Zamperini had been one of the greatest runners in the world, expected by many to be the first to break

the four-minute mile, one of the most celebrated barriers in sport. Now his Olympian's body had wasted to less than one hundred pounds and his famous legs could no longer lift him. Almost everyone outside of his family had given him up for dead.

On that morning of the twenty-seventh day, the men heard a distant, deep strumming. Every airman knew that sound: pistons. Their eyes caught a glint in the sky—a plane, high overhead. Zamperini fired two flares and shook powdered dye into the water, enveloping the rafts in a circle of vivid orange. The plane kept going, slowly disappearing. The men sagged. Then the sound returned, and the plane came back into view. The crew had seen them.

With arms shrunken to little more than bone and yellowed skin, the castaways waved and shouted; their voices thin from thirst. The plane dropped low and swept alongside the rafts. Zamperini saw the profiles of the crewmen, dark against bright blueness.

There was a terrific roaring sound. The water, and the rafts themselves, seemed to boil. It was machine gun fire. This was not an American rescue plane. It was a Japanese bomber.

The men pitched themselves into the water and hung together under the rafts, cringing as bullets punched through the rubber and sliced effervescent lines in the water around their faces. The firing blazed on, then sputtered out as the bomber overshot them. The men dragged themselves back onto the one raft that was still mostly inflated. The bomber banked sideways, circling toward them again. As it leveled off, Zamperini could see the muzzles of the machine guns, aimed directly at them.

Zamperini looked toward his crewmates. They were too weak to go back in the water. As they lay down on the floor of the raft, hands over their heads, Zamperini splashed overboard alone.

Somewhere beneath him, the sharks were done waiting. They bent their bodies in the water and swam toward the man under the raft.