

29/3/2015. *Unbroken*

At the end of 2014 a film came out called *Unbroken*, and the DVD is out in a few weeks. The film is based on a biography of the same name about Louis Zamperini (1917-2014), an American of Italian ancestry. Zamperini was a tearaway who learned to channel his energy into athletics and at 19 reached the final of the 5000m in the Berlin Olympics of 1936. He didn't win a medal but his sprint finish in the last lap impressed Hitler, who shook him by the hand. He believed he could do better in 1940, but those Olympics – assigned to Tokyo – never took place due to the War. Zamperini would still find himself in Japan, however. After the Japanese attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, which brought the USA into the conflict at the end of 1941, he became an airman in the Pacific theatre. The first plane he crewed in came under enemy fire and only just limped back to base. Weeks later, in May 1943, the second suffered mechanical failure and crashed in the ocean far from land. Zamperini and the two other survivors took to an open raft and survived for a then record 47 days, drinking rainwater, eating seabirds and fish they caught with bits of seabird, fighting off sharks, enduring storms and being shot at by a Japanese aeroplane. One man died and Zamperini and the other made it to a Japanese-occupied island. He was soon put in prisoner-of-war camps in mainland Japan. There he was regularly tortured, mainly by one sadistic senior guard. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been obliterated by atomic bombs and Japan surrendered, Zamperini was repatriated. A wartime knee injury put paid to his athletic career. He married his girlfriend but was consumed by desire for revenge on his tormentors, and he began to drink heavily. He intended to go to US-occupied Japan to track down and kill his torturers. He awoke from a dream in which he was strangling one of them to find his hands round his wife's neck. She said that this could not go on and pressed him to go to a Billy Graham rally, as she had recently done. He went, and experienced a radical conversion. His problems left him as soon as he inwardly forgave his captors. He did eventually go back to Japan to track down his torturers – but to tell them he forgave them and offer Christ to them. Some converted, but the principal one, who came out of hiding only after the US occupation of Japan had ended, always refused to meet him. For the rest of Zamperini's long life he became a Christian inspirational speaker who ran summer camps for inner-city kids. In his mid-90s he was still climbing trees on his land to prune them with a chainsaw. He died last summer aged 97.

I was put on to Zamperini because a decade ago I was lent a previous book by his biographer Laura Hillenbrand, about the racehorse Seabiscuit – an outsider who took on the East Coast racing establishment in the depression years. This book was so good (the film didn't match) that I kept watch for what she would write next. She is not a Christian but she is an empathetic journalist, and her book about Zamperini is remarkable because it is a conversion story told by a secular writer. You can sense that she doesn't really get it but is concerned to tell the story honestly. This book will be read by many people who would never read a Christian testimony, and we can pray that it will turn them to Christ. In the film, which is directed by Angelina Jolie from a script by the Coen brothers, the pre-war part is told in flashback, and the post-war conversion and forgiveness story is told in a short epilogue with words on the screen and stills. Zamperini's son, himself Christian, is happy with the way his father's conversion is handled in the film. There is none of Hollywood's now routine anti-Christianity in the film, although it is best to regard it as being mainly about Zamperini's war.