

Louis Zamperini, Olympian and WWII hero, dies at 97

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Louis Zamperini was an Olympic distance runner and World War II veteran. (Associated Press file)

LOS ANGELES — Seventy years ago, the world was convinced that Louis Zamperini was dead. There had been no word of the track star and former Olympian since his World War II bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean.

But Zamperini was alive. After surviving 47 days in a life raft in shark-infested waters and enduring two years as a Japanese prisoner of war, he was liberated in time to attend the second running of an invitational mile that had been named in his memory.

Zamperini, a war hero, Olympian and the subject of a celebrated book and upcoming movie, died after a long battle with pneumonia, his family said Thursday in a statement. He was 97.

Laura Hillenbrand, the author of the best-selling book "Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption," said Zamperini became a surrogate grandfather and beloved friend who helped her cope with her own debilitating illness, chronic fatigue syndrome.

"In a life of almost unimaginable drama, he experienced supreme triumphs, but also brutal hardship, incomprehensible suffering, and the cruelty of his fellow man. But Louie greeted every challenge of his long journey with singular resilience, determination and ingenuity, with a ferocious will to survive and prevail, and with hope that knew no master," said Hillenbrand, whose book is being made into a movie directed by Angelina Jolie and is scheduled for a December release.

Zamperini was born on Jan. 26, 1917, in Olean, N.Y. When he was 2, the family moved to Southern California, where he spent a rebellious childhood before channeling his energy and tenacity into sports. He became a world-class runner on his high school track team.

In 1934, Zamperini — nicknamed the "Torrance Tornado" for his hometown of Torrance, Calif. — broke the 18-year-old interscholastic record for the mile in 4:21.2, a mark that would stand for 20 years.

A track star at the University of Southern California, Zamperini competed in the 5,000-meter run at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He finished eighth but caught attention by running the final lap in 56 seconds — and grabbed headlines by stealing a Nazi flag.

But it was Zamperini's incredible World War II story that captured the imagination of millions back home.

He was a bombardier on a U.S. Army Air Forces bomber that crashed in the Pacific Ocean during a reconnaissance mission. He and one of the other surviving crew members drifted for 47 days on a raft, drinking rainwater and eating fish and birds they caught with their bare hands, before being captured by Japanese forces. A third man died before they reached land.

Zamperini spent more than two years as a prisoner of war in Japanese prison camps, where he survived beatings, starvation, debilitating illnesses and psychological torture.

When he was liberated at the end of the war, he was a changed man and wrestled with rage, depression and alcoholism that almost cost him his marriage.

Several years after his return, Zamperini attended a Billy Graham revival in Los Angeles and embraced Christianity — a faith that would sustain him for the rest of his life.

In 1998, he went back to Japan to run a leg of the torch relay at the Nagano Olympics and ran past the former camps where he had been imprisoned.

Lt. Zamperini was a bombardier on a B-24 Liberator in the 11th Bombardment Group (H), 42nd Squadron. More information may be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Zamperini



Capt. Louis Zamperini, right, and Capt. Fred Garrett at Hamilton Field, Calif., after their release from a Japanese prisoner of war camp in 1945. Credit PCS/Associated Press