

THE STORY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI⁶

The year is 1932, and the place is Torrance, California.

Louis Zamperini is a teenager – and a hopeless delinquent – in trouble over and over again, addicted to beating up the bullies at his high school, to alcohol and to smoking. To channel Louis’ fiery nature, his older brother Pete challenges him to run on the track team, even taking him on training runs and pushing him when he slacks off. Day by day over the course of a summer, Louis builds a habit of practicing and prioritizing his training over other activities, then begins to run races: and wins, with an undefeated pattern in high school, even setting an interscholastic record for the mile-long run. He qualified for the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and placed 8th in the 5,000-meter run.

In 1941, Louis enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps – and, in 1943, during World War II, he was sent on a bombing mission. His bomber crashes into the ocean, and eight of the eleven aboard die. Louis survives 47 days adrift, eating raw fish, fending off sharks, and avoiding capsizing during a storm. He is captured by the Japanese Navy, held in captivity, severely beaten, and mistreated. One guard, later listed among the most wanted war criminals in Japan, tortures him: first by having every prisoner in the camp “teach him a lesson” by punching him, then forcing him to hold a weight for an extended period of time at risk of being shot if he drops it. As his endurance is tested, he fights desperate circumstances with cleverness, hope, and humor. In the midst of brutality, he rebels because he recognizes that his captors can violate his dignity but cannot take it away. He chooses to try to survive.

He survived until the end of the war in 1945. In the United States, he had been declared KIA (killed in action) but received a hero’s welcome upon his return. He battles nightmares and begins to drink heavily, until, at his wife’s encouragement, he returns to his previous habits of working toward the good and spends the remainder of his life as a motivational speaker, even returning to Japan to extend forgiveness to the guards who tortured him. He died in 2014 at the age of 97.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

- What are Louis’ excellent choices?
- What are his non-excellent choices?
- How does Louis live the life of a hero?

⁶ Lucky Louie Zamperini, America in WWII, available at <http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/lucky-louie/> (last visited Dec 7, 2022).