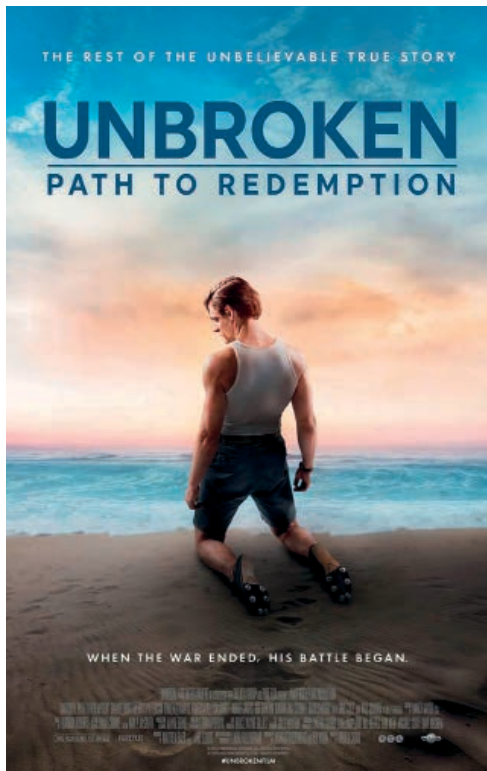


TRUE-LIFE STORY



By Gerard Condon

LAURA Hillenbrand's bestselling *Unbroken* (2010) told the extraordinary story of Louis Zamperini, Olympic athlete, World War II hero and born-again Christian. Angelina Jolie's adaptation for the big screen won three Oscar-nominations. Her film focused on the most dramatic episodes of Zamperini's life: how he survived an air crash and his resilience as a Japanese prisoner of war. Now, a new movie directed by Harold Cronk for *Pure Flix*, takes up the story of what happened *after* the war and how it was religious faith, rather than military courage, that ultimately saved Zamperini.

Louis Zamperini (1917-2014) was, by his own account, something of a rascal as a young fellow growing up in Torrance, California. His Italian cultural background made him the target of bullies. His father

The film begins where Angelina Jolie's Unbroken ends, showing the next amazing chapters of a true story of forgiveness, redemption and grace

taught him how to box so that he could get even. However, his older brother, Pete, channelled Louis' rebellious spirit into athletics. By the mid-1930s Zamperini was close to clocking four-minute miles, a magical target at that time. He represented the United States at the Berlin Olympic games of 1936 and personally met Adolf Hitler.

Zamperini enlisted in the US air corps following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, and served as a bombardier. He had several lucky escapes during combat, but it was during a routine search mission that his aircraft crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Zamperini survived, along with two crewmates, and drifted on a life-raft for weeks on end, living off on rainwater and small fish, while beating away predatory sharks. Two of the three survived to make land on the Marshall Islands, but were immediately captured by the occupying Japanese forces. For the remaining two years of the war, Zamperini would be detained in a number of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. He suffered grievously at the hands of the notorious corporal Mutsuhiro 'The Bird' Watanabe. It was Zamperini's ability to endure pain, which he acquired from athletics, that helped him to stay alive.

Hero's return

This movie takes up the story in 1950. Zamperini (played by Samuel Hunt) is back in Japan seeking out his captors, who are now held as American prisoners of war. All the time

since his release he has been bent on revenge. How would he react to meeting 'The Bird' (David Sakurai) now that the tables had been turned?

After the defeat of Japan in August 1945, Zamperini had received a hero's welcome home. When his priest blesses God for his safe return, Zamperini replies with a grin that it wasn't God who saved him, "a couple of atomic bombs did that, Padre." Outwardly confident, he was also prone to angry outbursts and relived his traumatic war memories by night, in nightmares that acquired a hallucinogenic quality. In one scene, as Zamperini sleeps, his arm drops down by the side of the bed. Water begins to fill the room in the gaps between the floorboards. Suddenly he is lying flat on the raft drifting on the Pacific, dying of thirst and surrounded by sharks. He awakes screaming in terror as soon as the imagined water reaches his fingers.

A macho response

Following the war the army sent Zamperini on a nationwide tour to sell war bonds. Soon, though, he was drinking heavily, in an effort to anaesthetize the painful memories. He was sent to an army doctor (Gary Cole, in a sympathetic role) who reminds him that "everyone needs help at some point, even heroes." But the combat veteran dismisses the offer of assistance, in typical macho fashion. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had not yet been recognised as a medical condition. So his commanding officer (Bob Gunton) sent him on

leave to Miami to “get yourself a sun-tan and lay off the hooch.”

There, at the poolside, he meets and falls for Cynthia Applewhite (Merritt Patterson), and the couple quickly decide to get married. They return to Torrance to set up home. But Zamperini is still held captive by his memories. She convinces him to resume athletics and he begins to train for the 1948 London Olympics. However his plans are cut short by an accident, and the doctors tell him that he can never run again. His downward spiral into alcoholism accelerates. He is consumed, too, by a burning desire to avenge his maltreatment. Not even the birth of the couple’s first child, nor the concern of his older brother (Bobby Campo) can halt his slide into self-destruction.

Tent crusade

Cynthia threatens to divorce him, but her determination to make their marriage work is renewed after attending a rally led by Billy Graham. The evangelical preacher, who died in 2018 and was well disposed to Catholicism, had brought his ‘tent crusade’ to Los Angeles in October 1949. Cynthia convinced her reluctant husband to attend the next rally. He was initially hostile to the preacher (played by Graham’s real-life grandson, Will Graham), and stormed out



Samuel Hunt, right, with Merritt Patterson, left, who plays Cynthia, the young woman who captures Zamperini’s eye and heart

of the meeting, but later returned, having suddenly decided to accept the Gospel. In those few moments, Zamperini would later report, he found acceptance, healing of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the ability to forgive his enemies. This turning point in his life is also the centrepiece of the movie.

The movie’s epilogue explains that Zamperini would go on to become a Christian evangelist, with Billy Graham as his mentor. He became well known for his work with young people, telling them his story of survival and conversion. He also attempted to meet his chief persecutor. However Corporal Watanabe, who died in 2003, remained unrepentant.

Unbroken by God

While *Path to Redemption* takes up where the 2014 movie, *Unbroken*, left off, this one cannot be considered its sequel. The entire cast is different as is the production team (apart from Matthew Baer). Whereas the Jolie movie was made for the Hollywood mainstream, this one is shaped by its Christian-evangelical credentials. Harold Cronk previously directed the *God’s Not Dead* series (2014-2018) and

The Case for Christ (2017) for Pure Flix. This outing is less preachy than the others, and does a good job at allowing the personal story speak for itself, at least until the closing scenes.

Cronk and his team made good use of their modest budget of \$6 million (Jolie spent \$65 million). The scenes of Zamperini’s hallucinations, where memory melds into reality, are especially well executed. The period details look authentic and are beautifully photographed, but everything seems too clean to be real, from the immaculate military uniforms, to the coiffed hair-dos, to the oversized automobiles. The storyline, too, is predictable, even for those who had not read the book. The attempts at humour are clunky and formulaic.

Samuel Hunt rises to the challenge of portraying the conflicted war hero. His character is not that appealing, a true reflection of the complex nature of a man troubled by his past. His is the hard-earned lesson that goes back to the teachings of St. Paul, that salvation comes from the power of God working in us, rather than our own strength. Or, to paraphrase the movie’s title, we may be broken by life, but can be unbroken by God. ♦

The American actor Samuel Hunt plays the lead role as Louis Zamperini, Olympic gold medallist and war hero

