

# Famous New Yorker Louis Zamperini

Louis Zamperini's story has been told many times over, and has been read and seen by millions of people, for more than seventy years after it seemed to have ended.

Louis Zamperini was born to Italian immigrant parents in Olean, Cattaraugus County, on January 26, 1917. In 1919 the family moved to Torrance, California. Teased in school for his limited English, Louis became a fighter and troublemaker until his older brother convinced him to take up track and field.

In high school Louis became "the Torrance Tornado," one of the best young middle-distance runners in the U.S. In 1934 he set a world interscholastic record for the mile run. He earned an athletic scholarship from the University of Southern California and an invitation to try out for the 1936 U.S. Olympic team.

With more experienced milers running in the 1,500 meter race, Zamperini thought he'd have a better chance in the 5,000 meter event. He made the team and finished eighth, but was complimented by Adolf Hitler for his finishing kick. Louis later got arrested for stealing a Nazi banner from a flagpole, but the authorities let the harmless prankster go.

Only 19 in 1936, Zamperini planned to compete in the 1940 Olympics in Japan. He became a dominant miler, setting an NCAA record in 1938, but World War II ruined his Olympic dream. The 1940 games were cancelled, and one year later the U.S. and Japan were at war.

Zamperini enlisted before Pearl Harbor and became a bombardier. During a rescue mission on May 27, 1943, Lt. Zamperini's plane crashed into the Pacific Ocean, killing everyone on board but Zamperini and two crewmates.

What followed made Zamperini an American legend. While one crewmate died, Zamperini and Phil Phillips survived on rain water and raw fish for 47 days, until the Japanese captured their life raft. While Zamperini endured relentless torture, the U.S. military declared him dead in June 1944. His high school named its track field after him and Madison Square Garden held a "memorial" track meet in his honor. While he reluctantly made a propaganda radio broadcast for his Japanese captors later in 1944, the U.S. didn't confirm that Zamperini was alive until after Japan surrendered in 1945.

Hailed as a hero, Zamperini had trouble adjusting to civilian life. While he supported Japan's return to the Olympics, he dreamed about strangling his torturers. He complained of headaches, drank heavily and was desperate to escape the "heavy, filthy air" of his home.

Religion helps some veterans cope with post-traumatic stress. Zamperini became an evangelist and returned to Japan in 1950 with a message of forgiveness. He found further fulfillment by opening the Victory Boys Camp for troubled youths in 1954.

Zamperini first published his memoir, *Devil at My Heels*, in 1956. He revised it in 2003. In 2010, Laura Hillebrand published her Zamperini biography, *Unbroken*. It became a best-seller and made Zamperini a celebrity all over again. He was the subject of a religious documentary film in the 1990s, but *Unbroken's* success guaranteed a big-budget Hollywood treatment. Director Angelina Jolie showed Zamperini her movie version of *Unbroken* shortly before he died on July 2, 2014. The film's box-office success will help keep Zamperini's story alive for generations to come.

To learn more about Louis Zamperini read his biography, *Devil at My Heels* and/or Hillebrand's novel, *Unbroken*. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2015.



**Lt. Lou Zamperini examines damage to his Liberator aircraft, 1943**  
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**Olean** is located about 74 miles southeast of Buffalo in the Western Southern Tier region and less than 5 miles from the Pennsylvania border.