Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption

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Laura Hillenbrand

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individuals who are well known, such as Benjamin Disraeli, William E. Gladstone, Winston Churchill, and Sea Lords John Fisher and John Jellicoe. The Admiralty was consistently an important department of the British government, but it was never a guaranteed stepping-stone for a First Lord to prime ministerial power. Churchill’s elevation in 1940 to prime minister arose from political considerations other than his having been a First Lord of the Admiralty.

The book illustrates how difficult it was during most of this period for any First Lord and his professional naval advisers to develop policy and administer a far-flung navy at the same time. Although day-to-day administrative matters almost always consumed attention, policy usually was made under crisis and only when it was demonstrably required, often without the benefit of any long period of careful examination. Personalities rather than processes usually drove its development, until the Admiralty finally agreed to the establishment of a permanent apparatus of policy making based on good record keeping. This important part of the machinery of government was especially necessary in times of rapid technological and various financial crises. Its effective achievement did not, however, come to fruition until the 1920s.

To assist in understanding these developments, the author has included useful appendixes. One sets out the names of the First Lords and naval professionals in the Admiralty. Another is a list of acronyms. Interspersed throughout the book are tables, which, for example, show the duties of the Lords and the structure of the Admiralty over time.

Naval historians will appreciate this well-researched and well-written and scholarly work, but even those without a detailed knowledge of the period will discover it to be an informative and agreeable read.

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Although not a historian, Laura Hillenbrand is an accomplished researcher and storyteller. In *Unbroken* she chronicles one individual’s tale of “the greatest generation,” revealing how war, particularly the Second World War, spun the lives of common, and not-so-common, individuals out of control and set them on trajectories that would otherwise have never occurred. It is also a tale of extraordinary endurance, incredible luck (both good and bad), and what can only be termed a remarkable ability to forgive immeasurable wrongdoings.

*Unbroken* is the story of Louie Zamperini, a remarkable man who was, in succession, a streetwise “tough kid,” an Olympian, an Army Air Corps bombardier, an air-crash survivor, a Japanese POW, a veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and a born-again Christian. That he survived the war is incredible; that he lived to forgive his captors is unbelievable.

At the most basic level *Unbroken* is a classic “gripping yarn.” The story’s drama is all the more compelling because the adventures, perils, and triumphs are factual. Zamperini did run in the 1936 Olympics, on the same team as Jesse Owens. He spent forty-seven days in a life raft, covering more
than a thousand miles of ocean, only to be captured by the Japanese. The endurance and courage of Zamperini and his fellow survivor, Captain Russell Allen Philips, is reason enough to read this book. The saga of Zamperini and Philips is a war story, a survival story, a prison story, and even a love story. As it is, *Unbroken* warrants a positive review and will delight readers young and old. Yet it could have been much more. For example, although Hillenbrand never deliberately raises the issue, there is a lot to say about how and what we remember and how and what we forget. By all reasonable expectations, Louie Zamperini should have been widely remembered. He experienced an epic challenge of survival and returned home to headlines, and although he continued to be in the public eye, time after time, a reader’s reaction to this book is, “Who was this guy!”

How is it that Zamperini is not a household name? How many others who deserve the honor of memory have been lost in time? The author refers to others who also have been forgotten, perhaps the most poignant of whom were nine Marines left behind during the 1942 Makin raid. They were captured by the Japanese, taken to Kwajalein, and sometime later executed. Although not apparently serendipitous, one of the book’s major contributions is the inclusion of those nine names.

Perhaps because the book is so individual-centric, Hillenbrand provides little context for the events that sweep Zamperini along his path. She provides no analysis of the larger issues. To some degree this illuminates the fundamental question: To what extent are an individual’s actions, however heroic, essential to the conclusion of struggles of nations? Nor is there an effort to deal with what might be termed midlevel questions, such as how much of the attendant sadistic treatment in Japanese POW camps was the policy of the state. Or was it just aberrant behavior on the part of sociopaths?

Similarly, Zamperini’s difficulties in adjusting to postwar life in the United States is described but with very little context, and even less attempt to use his story to deepen one’s understanding of what current-day veterans are experiencing. Hillenbrand does not ask, much less answer, whether Zamperini’s homecoming experience was typical of those of POWs dealing with a world in which post-traumatic stress syndrome was not even recognized, much less understood, or whether this was an unusual case for the time.

Hillenbrand admits to liking Louie Zamperini, and it is easy to see why she would. Although her feeling does not affect the book’s balance, it may explain why sections detailing Zamperini’s darker experiences (which include blackout drinking and spouse abuse) have a somewhat rushed feeling. It is as though Hillenbrand moves through his failings as fast as she can to showcase Zamperini’s religious rebirth at a Billy Graham meeting.

Readers who see the book for what it is—a personal narrative of an extraordinary man in an extraordinary time—will not be disappointed.