

The physician at the movies



Jack O'Connell is Louis Zamperini in *Unbroken*, directed by Angelina Jolie. © Universal Pictures

Peter E. Dans, MD

Unbroken

Starring Jack O'Donnell, Takamasa Ishihara (Miyavi),
Domhnall Gleeson, Finn Whitrock.

Directed by Angelina Jolie. Rating PG-13.

Running time 137 minutes.

Intense" best describes this film based on Laura Hillenbrand's outstanding book *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*,¹ which chronicles the extraordinary life of Olympian Louis Zamperini (Jack O'Donnell). He survived two crash landings, the last one followed by forty-seven days on a raft at sea and two years as a Japanese prisoner

of war. With its many scenes of brutality, the movie certainly does not qualify as entertainment, but it does tell an important true story. Actually, as the book's subtitle implies, there are many layers to the story. Some are done well. Others, especially the last part, would have benefited from more fleshing out.

The film begins with a harrowing crash landing of a B-24 catching flak just after Zamperini releases its bombs. Viewers are effectively brought into the plane as it starts to lose altitude. The crew manages to get back to the base; remarkably, all survive. They are not as lucky on their next mission. A clueless administrative desk jockey assigns them a plane that they know has been cannibalized to provide parts for other planes and,

sure enough, the engines go out and they crash into the sea. Swallowing blood and oil, Zamperini surfaces, and he and the two other survivors, pilot Phil Phillips (Domhnall Gleeson) and gunner Mac McNamara (Finn Whitrock), are left clinging to a raft in a limitless part of the Pacific Ocean with no landmarks.

Director Jolie then takes a step back to introduce us to Louie Zamperini, a juvenile delinquent in a loving and respected Italian-American family. His brother Pete sees the good in him—and his ability to run fast. Track gives Louie an identity, and Pete acts as his brother's timekeeper. When Louie is discouraged, Pete tells him, "If you can take it, you can make it," an admonition that will serve him well later on. Louie ultimately sets the state high school record for the mile, earning him the nickname "The Torrance Tornado."

Zamperini qualifies for the U.S. Olympic Team to compete in the 1936 Summer Games held in Berlin. Despite coming in eighth in the 5000 meters, he runs the last lap in a phenomenal 56 seconds, shattering the record of 69.2 seconds. Hitler seeks him out to shake his hand, calling him "the boy with the fast finish." Everything looks rosy for his chances in the upcoming Olympics to be held in Tokyo in 1940. The games are called off because of the war and Zamperini joins the Army Air Corps.

The film returns to the Pacific, where Zamperini tries to ration the precious fresh water and chocolate, which are depleted when a frightened Mac wolfs down a week's worth of provisions. The men are beset by sharks, and on the twenty-seventh day they are finally spotted by planes that turn out to be Japanese. They are strafed for thirty minutes as they try to escape the bullets and the sharks. The rafts are left with forty bullet holes, but the men manage to craft an intact one from the remnants. On the thirty-third day, McNamara dies. During a particularly bad storm, Zamperini prays, promising that if he survives he will give his life to God.

Finally, after drifting 2000 miles, Zamperini and Phillips make land in the Marshall Islands. They are captured by the Japanese and sent for interrogation to Kwajalein, which was known as "Execution Island" because as soon as the prisoners gave whatever information they seemed to have, they were executed by beheading. Zamperini's life is spared in recognition for his track prowess. He is sent on a "hell ship" to another POW camp; on the way, eighty prisoners die. There he is tortured mercilessly by the sadistic camp director Corporal Mutsuhiro Watanabe, played convincingly by Takamasa Ishihara, a Japanese rock star whose stage name is Miyavi. Called "The Bird," Watanabe was the scion of wealthy family. Washing out of officers school left him insecure and bitter about being unappreciated, which he proceeds to take out on his captives. He holds a special animus for the famous Zamperini. Their interaction is covered almost to excess: when the Bird tells all the prisoners to slug Louie in the jaw, a couple of times would have sufficed—we didn't need to see a squad of men do it. The Japanese had POWs do propaganda broadcasts about how well they were being treated. Those who

complied were treated to good food and hotel accommodations. Zamperini does one broadcast in which he just says he is alive but refuses to read the script. He is sent back for twenty-five more months of torture at the infamous Japanese POW camps Ofuna, Omoki, and Naoetsu.

He is eventually freed at war's end. The film ends when he gets back to the United States and is welcomed by his family. He had lost nearly 100 pounds, and weighed 65 pounds when he returned home. His conditioning probably helped him survive. Amazingly, despite all the trauma, he lived to 97.

The "redemption" in the subtitle is covered in a few scrolling paragraphs as part of the final credits. On Greta Van Susteren's show in December 2014, Franklin Graham, son of the Reverend Billy Graham, discussed his new film *Louie Zamperini: Captured by Grace*, which focuses on what Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story." Although careful to commend Jolie for doing a good job, he noted that the film makers chose to end the movie at the book's chapter 33, leaving out five chapters and an epilogue in which Billy Graham played a prominent role. In doing so, she missed the opportunity to create a real-life story of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the difficulty veterans have re-entering civilian life, as well as the role of faith in combating it. If she had, a good film could have been a great film, ranking with the 1946 Academy Award-winning Best Picture *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

In Graham's film, Zamperini recounts the perils of being a "hero." Everybody wanted to buy him a drink or to invest in some deal. He descended into alcoholism; drinking to oblivion was the only way to blot out the nightmares of torture at the hands of Bird, whom he vowed to kill. In May 1946, he married Florida debutante Cynthia Applewhite, with whom he had a child. The nightmares did not abate, and psychiatric treatment didn't help. One night, he woke up with his hands around his pregnant wife's throat. Afraid and fed up with his benders, Cynthia filed for divorce. Attending a tent meeting during the Reverend Billy Graham's first national tour, Cynthia accepted Graham's invitation to welcome Christ into her heart and urged Louie to go hear him. He told her that he didn't need anybody to tell him that he was a sinner. She responded that if he attended she would not divorce him.

The first night, he stormed out of the meeting. The next day, he was about to walk out again—then he remembered his promise to serve God. He stayed and heeded Graham's call to conversion. He went home and "got rid of his liquor, cigarettes and girlie magazines" and retrieved the New Testament that servicemen were given but which he had never consulted. As he contemplated his life, he realized that he had survived; God had kept his promise but he hadn't. The rage, fear, and humiliation seeped out of him to be replaced by peace, and the Bird left his dreams. He dedicated his life to helping wayward boys as the director of the "Victory Boys Camp."

He decided to return to Japan to preach forgiveness. His message to 850 war criminals at Sugamo Prison touched a

number of guards, many of them his former captors. Before his conversion Louie had wanted to kill the Japanese; now he was able to go back and forgive them.

Addendum: It is estimated that twenty-seven percent of western POWs died in Japanese captivity, seven times that of British and American POWs held by the Germans.² Watanabe was in the Top 40 list of war criminals. Unrepentant, he was aghast at being ranked with Tojo and went into hiding. He came out only when, for political reasons (the Korean War had broken out and a rehabilitated Japan was essential for stability in the region), General Douglas MacArthur, pardoned all criminals not in custody. The remaining captives who had not been tried were freed when the American occupation ended in 1952. The Bird never agreed to meet Louie. He died in 2003 at eighty-five, a wealthy man.

References

1. Hillenbrand L. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. New York: Random House; 2010.
2. McClarey DR. *The Pacific War Online Encyclopedia*: http://www.pwencycl.kgbudge.com/P/r/Prisoners_Of_War.htm.

American Sniper

Starring Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller, and Kyle Gallner.

Directed by Clint Eastwood. Rated R.

Running time 132 minutes.

If *Unbroken* is a 10 on the intensity scale of 1 to 10, this film rates a *This Is Spinal Tap* 11. It tells the story of Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), a Navy SEAL whose job was to protect

Marines and American and Iraqi soldiers as they fought and captured such hostile towns as Fallujah and Ramadi. The film opens with his father teaching him how to hunt and conveying a philosophy of life. He divides people into sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs. The sheep are like innocent Americans, the wolves are those who want to hurt them, and the sheep dogs are those who protect the sheep. They are the ones who care for others.

Kyle is a Texan who aspires to be a cowboy, spending his time on the rodeo circuit busting broncos and carousing until he sees news footage of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings and finds his calling. A self-professed sheep dog, he commits his life to getting the bad guys and protecting the sheep from the wolves. He trains as a Navy SEAL, training so rigorous as to border on what some might consider torture, conducted by hard-nosed drill sergeants spouting profanity and insults to toughen up the recruits. He meets his future wife Taya (Sienna Miller) in a bar. Their romance and marriage are well-handled, and the light-heartedness is a nice counterbalance to the SEAL training and what is to come later.

Following the September 11 attacks, he begins the first of four tours in Iraq that will ultimately total 1000 days. In between the tours, he is zombie-like, often sitting on a chair in the house. Meanwhile he and his wife have two children. His wife says she needs him to be human, but he finds it difficult to be a father or to connect with his wife and others on the home front. He wants to go back to protect his men,

Life in Iraq is primitive, but they do have cell phone access. I was surprised to see him talking to his wife while stalking a target. He must stay alert for hours as he covers the Marines going door-to-door, never knowing what's behind one. When



American Sniper, directed by Clint Eastwood. From left, Kyle Gallner and Bradley Cooper. © Warner Bros.

he has to relieve himself, he does so in a special bag. As the number of his kills rises to 255 (160 officially confirmed), making him “the most lethal sniper in U.S. history,” the terrorists put a bounty on his head. He wants to get Anwar al-Awlaki, the American recruiter for al-Qaeda who was placed by President Obama on an authorized to kill list in 2010. During Kyle’s tours, al-Awlaki is protected by the Butcher, who kills and beheads any Iraqi collaborator who reveals their whereabouts. On Kyle’s

his position. He is wounded and during a sandstorm he barely makes it to a rescue helicopter.

Again, he finds it difficult to adjust to life back home. There is an excellent scene portraying a Navy psychiatrist to whom he admits that he is haunted by the guys he couldn’t save. The doctor takes him back to a ward filled with seriously injured survivors. The sheepdog again finds a mission and as he helps them, he overcomes his PTSD.



From left, Bradley Cooper and Jake McDorman in *American Sniper*. © Warner Bros.

Bradley Cooper bulked up forty pounds by eating 8000 calories a day to play Kyle, whom he resembles. He carries ninety percent of the film. Cooper deserved the Oscar nomination for Best Actor and should have been a front runner for capturing the award, as should the film have been for Best Picture. This is considered by many to be the first film to realistically portray the Iraq war and to show that the men who volunteer to protect us do it for love of country. I was swept into the movie and experienced a frisson of fear as the Marines went house to house, only to do it again the next day if they survived. If I were one of those men who survived or a relative of one who died, I would be heartbroken to see those towns being recaptured by ISIS once America withdrew from Iraq. The film

first tour, the Butcher does just that to a father and son while Kyle is pinned down by an Al Qaeda sniper. During his second tour he just misses taking down the Butcher.

Kyle is not interested in the number of kills or in his being considered a “legend” by those he protects. He prefers to focus on how many Americans and Iraqi soldiers he has saved from bombs, grenades, and IEDs, a figure essentially unknowable but estimated to be in the thousands. His work is carefully regulated and monitored. He must see the weapon to assure that the target is armed; otherwise he can be brought up on charges. This is especially difficult because weapons can be carried undetected by women and children. Hampered by sudden sandstorms and often up to a mile from the target, his job is extraordinarily difficult. During his third tour, the sniper named Mustafa kills one of his buddies. Kyle feels guilty and agrees to an unprecedented fourth tour. During a particularly dangerous attempt to get the Butcher, Kyle calls his wife and tells her he has had enough. Meanwhile Mustafa is spotted over a mile away and Kyle tries a shot that alerts the terrorists to

broke the box office record for a drama or an R-rated film, garnering \$105.2 million, well over its budget of \$58.8 million, in the first weekend it opened.¹ People who had given up on Hollywood’s ability to get it right are going to theaters in droves. It is not an easy film to watch but it is worth seeing, no matter your political persuasion or attitude about the war. I didn’t know the ending and was glad I didn’t.

References

1. Fritz B and Molinski D. American Sniper gets a hero’s welcome: Resonating with people in smaller cities, military film has huge \$105.3 million debut weekend. Wall Street J 2015 Jan 20: B1–2.

Dr. Dans (AQA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos’s* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
E-mail: pdans@verizon.net