



**Louis
Zamperini**
Army Air Corps

Louis Zamperini

Jan 26, 1917 - Jul 2, 2014

BIRTHPLACE: Olean, NY

SOLDIER DETAILS

HIGHEST RANK: Captain

DIVISION: Army Air Corps, 372nd Bomb Squadron

THEATER OF OPERATION: Pacific

SERVED: 1941 - Sep 21, 2022

MILITARY HONORS: Distinguished Flying Cross

HONORED BY: The Eisenhower Foundation

BIOGRAPHY

Louis Zamperini, was the son of first generation Italian immigrants born on January 26, 1917 in Olean New York. When Louis was a toddler the Zamperini family relocated to Torrance, California. Growing up in Torrance, Louis was noted for a lot of things and running was one of them. Zamperini became known as the "Torrance Tornado" - taking after his older brother Pete who was already a track star. Louis began to break records for long distance running. His talent awarded him a scholarship to the University of Southern California. At the age of 19 years old he qualified for the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin Germany. He would compete in the 5000 meter race and place 8th overall but his impressive finish garnished the attention of many spectators. After the Olympics, Zamperini returned to USC where in 1938, he set a national collegiate mile record that stood for 15 years. In September of 1941, Louis Zamperini enlisted in the United States Army Air Forces serving as a bombardier on the B-24 Liberator "Super Man" with the 372nd Bomb Squadron. After flying several missions, on May 27, 1943 his aircraft went down due to mechanical failure. Stranded for 47 days in the Pacific Ocean, Zamperini and the only other surviving crew member, Pilot Russ Philips, were captured by the Japanese Navy after their raft reached the Marshall Islands. "For forty-seven days Louis Zamperini drifted idly in the Pacific Ocean. Armed with a few small tins of drinking water, a flare gun, some fishing line, and a couple of Hershey D-Ration candy bars, Zamperini and two other soldiers struggled to stay alive. Their struggle was exacerbated by vicious sharks, blistering heat, treacherous swells, and Japanese fighter pilots. For most people, this experience would undoubtedly be the most challenging of their lives. For Zamperini, it was not even the most difficult of the war." - US National Archives December 24, 2014. The then-75 pounds Zamperini was held for six weeks on Kwajalein Atoll and transferred to multiple interrogation centers and Prisoner of War camps. For two long years he suffered psychological and physical abuse at the hands of cruel prison guards and the sadistic Sgt. Mutsuhiro "The Bird" Watanabe. He was declared dead to his parents in a June 1943 telegram. Meanwhile, the former track

star, Watanabe's "number one prisoner," was spared from execution but served as a propaganda tool. When he refused to comply after being forced to make radio broadcasts at the Ofuna interrogation center, he was immediately sent back to Watanabe on the mainland and subjected to more abuse." Liberation finally took place in September 1945. After years of malnourishment and torture, Zamperini could not be a runner anymore. After finding solace in Christianity at a Billy Graham sermon, however, he returned to Japan as a missionary in 1950 and forgave his former captors imprisoned at Sugamo. Watanabe, one of the top 40 war criminals in Japan sought by America, refused to meet him. Zamperini later travelled across the US as an inspirational speaker and established the Victory Boys Camp, a wilderness camp for troubled youths. Fifty years after breaking the National High School mile record, Zamperini made a triumphant return to the Los Angeles Coliseum to carry the Olympic torch in 1984. In 1988, he ran a leg of the Olympic torch relay at the Nagano winter games." Zamperini recounts his story in two autobiographies, both titled *Devil at My Heels*, published in 1956 and 2003. His story was also documented in Laura Hillenbrand's biography *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* and the 2014 film *Unbroken* directed by Angelina Jolie. The University of Southern California dedicated the Louis Zamperini Plaza in honor of the "Torrance Tornado. Courtesy of Vantage Point, Veteran's Administration & WW II Uncovered