CHAPTER 35

Coming Undone

One evening in 1946, Louie sat in a dinner club, with Cynthia nestled near him. Phil and Cecy were visiting, and Fred Garrett had joined them. Phil and Louie were grinning at each other. The last time they'd been together was in early 1944, when Phil was leaving Ofuna and they didn't know if they'd live to see each other again.

They were happy. Sporting a prosthetic leg, Fred bumped to the dance floor to prove he could still cut a rug. Phil and Cecy were moving to New Mexico, where Phil would open a plastics business. Louie and Cynthia were glowing from their honeymoon. As the men laughed and chatted, all they'd been through seemed forgotten. But then a waiter set a plate before Fred. On it, beside the entrée, was white rice. That was all it took. Fred was suddenly raving, furious, shouting at the waiter. Louie tried to calm him, but Fred had come undone.

The waiter hurried the rice away and Fred pulled himself together, but the spell was broken. For these men, nothing was ever going to be the same.

After World War II, former prisoners of the Japanese, known as Pacific POWs, came home. Physically, they were ravaged. The average army or army

air forces POW had lost sixty-one pounds. They were severely malnourished, many were crippled, and nearly all were afflicted with serious diseases. Many would never fully recover. Some couldn't be saved.

The emotional injuries were even worse. Mental illnesses were among the most common diagnoses given to former Pacific POWs, and they proved lasting. Some forty years after the war, nearly 90 percent of former Pacific POWs in one study still suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a devastating syndrome characterized in part by flashbacks, anxiety, and intense nightmares.

Postwar life was often tormented. Men sleepwalked, acting out prison camp traumas, and woke screaming or lashing out. One had a recurrent hallucination of seeing his dead POW friends walking past. Another, a wealthy physician, fought urges to scavenge in trash cans. One man regularly woke running outside, shouting for help, and avoided hotels because his screaming nightmares upset other guests. Sixty years after the war, he still hoarded clothes and food. Many men escaped by drinking: more than a quarter of former Pacific POWs became alcoholics. Seeing an Asian person, or hearing Japanese, left many men shaking, weeping, enraged, or lost in flashbacks. At one hospital just after the war, former POWs tried to attack a staffer who was of Japanese ancestry, not knowing he was an American veteran.

The Pacific POWs who went home in 1945 were torn-down men. Carrying unspeakable memories of torture and humiliation, they felt deeply vulnerable. Their dignity was gone, replaced with a sense of shame and worthlessness. The central struggle of postwar life was to restore their dignity. There was no one right way to peace; every man had to find his own path. Some succeeded. For others, the war never ended. For some, years of rage, terror, and humiliation concentrated into an obsession with revenge.

The honeymoon brought Louie a brief respite from his troubles. Sleeping beside Cynthia each night, he still saw the Bird lurking in his dreams, but now, the sergeant hung back. It was the closest thing to peace Louie had known since *Green Hornet* had hit the water.

Cynthia Zamperini on her honeymoon. COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

Louie and Cynthia rented an apartment in a cheap quarter of Hollywood. Louie's mother had been awarded his $10,000 life insurance payout when he was declared dead, and Louie was allowed to keep it. Investing it brought him a modest income, but the apartment was the best he could do. It was tiny, nothing like the mansion Cynthia had grown up in, but she did her best to make it homey.

On his first night there, Louie fell into a dream. As always, the Bird was there, but he was no longer hesitant. The sergeant towered over Louie, the belt flicking from his hand, lashing Louie's face. Every night, he returned. Louie was helpless once again.

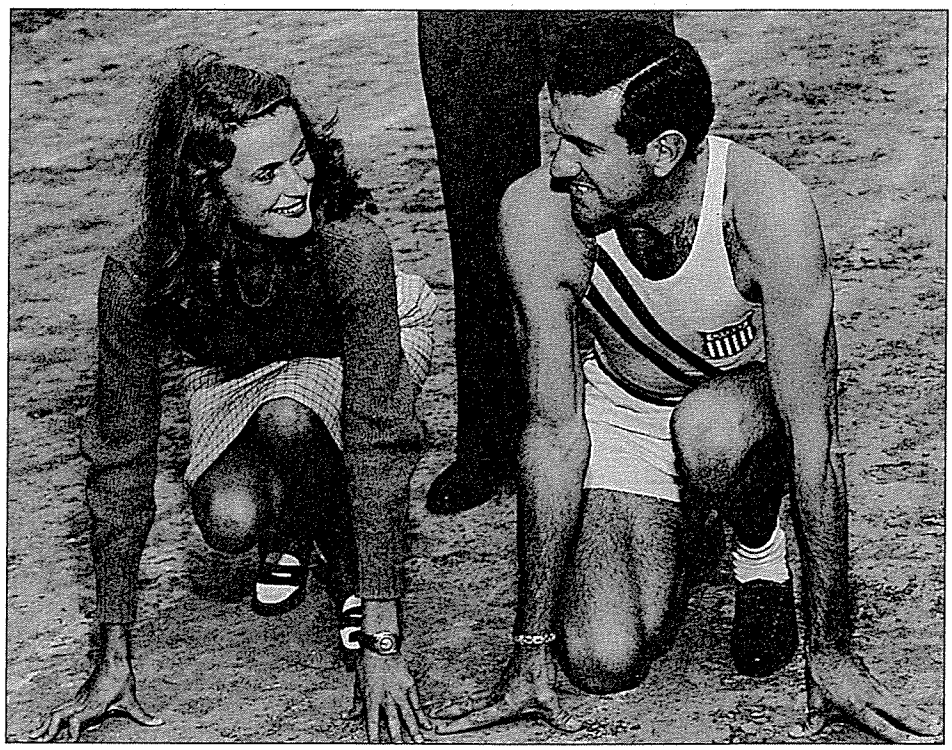
Trying to cope with his nightmares and increasing anxiety, Louie began to feel an old pull. The summer Olympics, suspended since 1936, were set to return. They'd be held in London in July 1948, two years away. Louie began taking long hikes, borrowing a dog for company. His bad leg felt sturdy, his body healthy.

He began training. His strength returned, and his dodgy leg gave him no pain. He took it slowly, thinking always of London in '48. He began clocking miles in 4:18 with ease. He was coming all the way back.

But running wasn't the same. Once, he'd felt liberated by it, but now it felt forced and joyless. With no other answer to his turmoil, Louie doubled his workouts, and his body answered.

One day, Louie set off to see how fast he could turn two miles. He felt pain in his bad ankle, just where it had been injured at Naoetsu. He shouldn't have kept pushing, but pushing was all he knew now. As he completed the first mile, his ankle was crackling with pain. On he went, running for London.

Late in his last lap, there was an abrupt slicing sensation in his ankle. He half hopped to the line and collapsed. He'd run the year's fastest two-mile on the Pacific coast, but it didn't matter. A doctor confirmed he'd worsened his war injury disastrously. It was all over.



Courtesy of Louis Zamperini

Louie was wrecked. The quest that had saved him as a kid, that had sustained him through prison camp, was lost. The last barricade within him fell. By day, he obsessed about the Bird. In his nightmares, the sergeant lashed him. As the belt whipped him, Louie would grasp his attacker's throat and close his hands around it. No matter how hard he squeezed, the black eyes still danced at him. Louie regularly woke screaming and soaked in sweat. He was afraid to sleep.

He began going to bars and drinking hard, trying to drown the war. He often drank so much he passed out, but he welcomed it; it saved him from having to go to bed and wait for his monster. Cynthia couldn't talk him into giving it up. He left her alone each night while he went out to lose the war.

Rage consumed him. Once, he harassed a man for walking slowly in front of his car, and the man spat at him. Louie jumped out, and as Cynthia screamed for him to stop, beat the man to the ground. When another man accidentally let a door swing into him, Louie chested up to him and provoked a scuffle that ended with Louie grinding the man's face in the dirt.

His mind derailed. While sitting at a bar, he heard a sudden, loud sound, perhaps a car backfiring. Instantly, he was on the floor, cringing, as the bar fell silent and people stared. On another night, he was drinking, his mind drifting, when someone yelled something while joking with friends. In Louie's mind, it was *"Keirei!"* He leapt to attention, heart pounding, awaiting the flying belt buckle. The illusion cleared and he saw that again, everyone was looking at him. He felt foolish and humiliated.

One day, Louie was overcome by a strange feeling, and suddenly he was back in the war, not a memory, but the actual *experience*—the glaring and grating and stench and howl and terror of it. When he emerged, he was confused and frightened. It was his first flashback. After that, if he glimpsed blood or saw a tussle in a bar, everything would reassemble itself as prison camp. Sometimes he felt imaginary lice and fleas wiggling on his skin. He drank harder.

And then he saw a newspaper story that riveted his attention. A former POW had walked into a store, spotted one of his captors, and had him

arrested. Louie's fury crystallized. He saw himself finding the Bird and overpowering him, strangling him slowly, making him feel all the pain, fear, and helplessness that Louie felt. His veins beat with an electric urgency.

Louie had no idea where the Bird was but felt sure that if he could return to Japan, he could hunt him down. This would be his reply to the Bird's effort to extinguish his dignity: *I am still a man.* He saw no other way to save himself.

Louie had found a quest to replace his lost Olympics. He was going to kill the Bird.