Epilogue

In the California mountains on a June day in 1954, a mess of boys tumbled from a truck and stood blinking in the sunshine. They were quick-fisted, hard-faced boys, most of them veterans of juvenile hall. Louie stood with them, watching them feel earth without pavement, space without walls. He felt as if he were watching his own youth again.

So opened the great project of Louie's life, Victory Boys Camp. Beginning with only an idea and very little money, he'd found a campsite, talked businesses into donating materials, and spent two years building the camp himself.

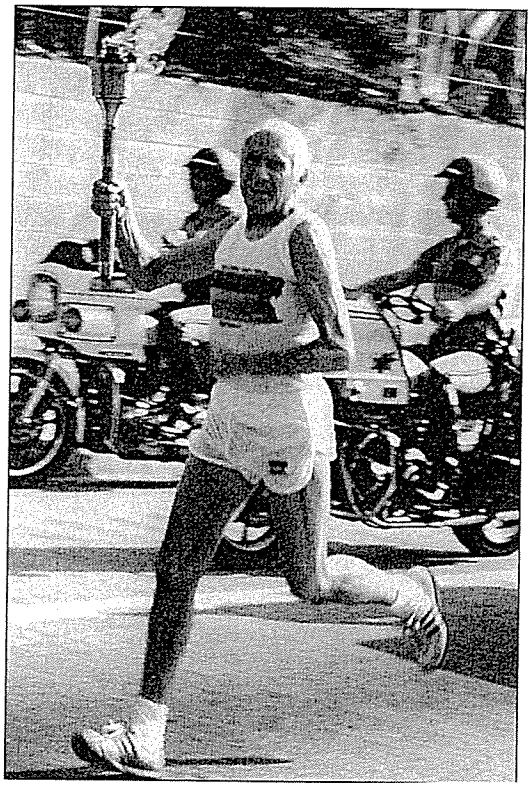
At Victory, lost boys found themselves. Louie took them fishing, skiing, swimming, and camping. He led them on hikes, letting them talk out their troubles, and rappelled down cliffs beside them. At each day's end, he sat with them by a campfire, speaking of his youth, the war, and the road that led him to peace. He went easy on Christianity but laid it before them. Some were convinced, some were not, but either way, boys who arrived at Victory as ruffians often left it renewed and reformed.

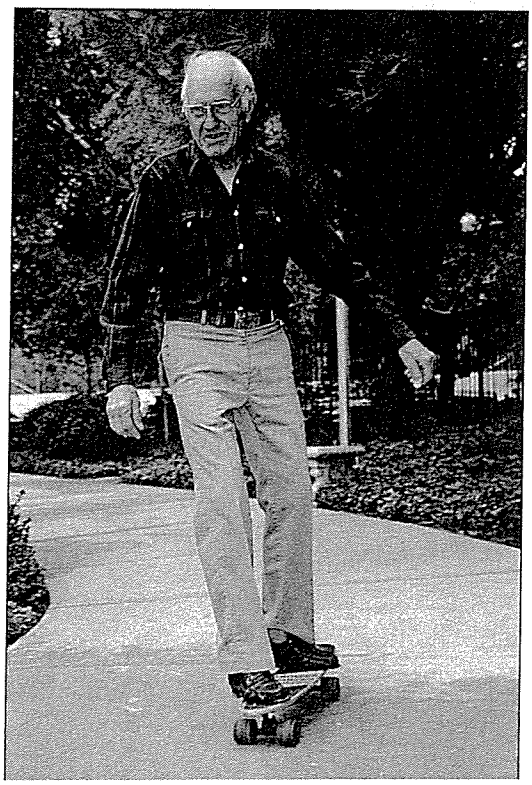
When he wasn't with his campers, Louie was walking the world, telling his story everywhere from classrooms to stadiums. On the side, he worked in a local church, supervising the senior center.

His body gave no quarter to age or punishment. In time, even his injured leg healed. When Louie was in his sixties, he was running the mile in less than six minutes. When he was in his seventies, he discovered skateboarding. At eighty-five, he returned to Kwajalein on a quest, ultimately unsuccessful, to find the bodies of the marines whose names had been etched in his cell wall. When he was ninety, his neighbors saw him high in a tree, chain saw in hand. "When God wants me, he'll take me," he told Pete. "Why the hell are you trying to help him?" Pete replied. Well into his tenth decade, he could still be seen perched on skis, merrily cannonballing down mountains.

He remained invariably cheerful. His belief that everything happened for a reason and would come to good gave him a laughing, infectious joy even in hard times. "I never knew anyone," Pete once said, "who didn't love Louie."

Left: *Louie carries the torch before the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.* Right: *Louie took up skateboarding in his seventies.* PHOTOS COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI





Russell Allen Phillips with his children, Chris and Karen, bedtime, 1952.
COURTESY OF KAREN LOOMIS

With the war over, Phil dropped his wartime nickname and became Allen again. He and Cecy eventually moved to his boyhood hometown in Indiana, where they taught in a junior high and raised two children.

Allen rarely mentioned the war. Other than the scars on his forehead, only his habits spoke of what he'd endured. Having lived for weeks on raw albatross and tern, he tended to avoid poultry. He liked to eat food straight out of cans, cold. And the onetime daredevil pilot wouldn't go near an airplane. As the jet age overtook America, he stayed in his car.

He never returned to Japan, and seemed, outwardly, free of bitterness. Though almost always treated as a footnote in what was celebrated as Louie's story, he bore it graciously. He spoke fondly of Zamp for the rest of his life.

In 1998, shortly before Allen died, the staff of his retirement home learned

In 1996, two years before his death, Phil sat at the controls of a B-24 once more.
COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

his war story and scheduled an event to honor him. For the first time in his life, Allen became an open book. As people hushed to hear him speak, his daughter, Karen, saw a lovely light coming to her father's face. There was, she said, "a little grin underneath."

Pete devoted his life to the work he was born to do, coaching high school track and football, with enormous success. Coach Zamperini retired in 1977.

"I'm retired; my wife is just tired," Pete loved to say. But retirement never really took. At ninety, Pete had the littlest kids in his neighborhood in training, fashioning dumbbells out of cement and cans, as his dad had done for Louie. He'd cheer the kids through sprints, awarding a dime for each race, a quarter for a personal best.

He remained deeply devoted to his brother. In old age, he still proudly remembered every detail of Louie's races, seventy-five years after Louie had run them. He was haunted by Louie's war experiences. Asked to join a 1992 fishing trip, he brought a dazzling assortment of safety items, including a plastic bag to use as a flotation device, a lanyard, a whistle, and a pocketknife that he imagined flailing at sharks. He spent the trip staring uneasily at the ocean. Describing Louie's ordeal to an audience gathered to honor him, he broke down. It was some time before he could go on.

In May of 2008, the brothers said goodbye. Pete was dying of melanoma. Their sister Virginia had died a few weeks before; Sylvia would follow months later. Cynthia, gorgeous as ever, had died of cancer in 2001, drifting away as Louie pressed his face to hers, whispering *I love you*. Louie, declared dead more than sixty years earlier, would outlive them all.

Pete was on his bed, eyes closed. Louie sat beside him. Softly, he spoke of their lives, tracing the paths they'd taken since coming to California in 1919. The two ancient men lingered together as they had as boys, lying side by side, waiting for the *Graf Zeppelin*.

Louie spoke of what a wild boy he'd been, and how Pete had rescued him. He told of the bountiful lives he and Pete had found in guiding children. All those kids, Louie said, "are part of you, Pete."

Pete's eyes opened, and with sudden clarity, rested on the face of his little brother for the last time. He couldn't speak, but he was beaming.

In late 1996, in Louie's church in Hollywood, a telephone rang. Louie, then a nudge short of eighty, answered.

The caller was Draggan Mihailovich, a CBS-TV producer. The 1998 Winter Olympics had been awarded to Japan, and Louie had accepted an invitation to run the torch past Naoetsu. Mihailovich was filming a profile of Louie, to be aired during the Olympics, and had gone to Japan to prepare. There, while chatting with a man over a bowl of noodles, he'd made a shocking discovery.

Mihailovich asked Louie if he was sitting down. Louie said yes. Mihailovich told him to grab hold of his chair.

"The Bird is alive."

Louie nearly hit the floor. When he collected himself, the first thing he said was that he wanted to see him.

The dead man had walked out of the darkness one night in 1952. He stepped off a train, walked through a city, and stopped before a house. Under a gate light, he saw his mother's name.

In the seven years in which he'd been thought dead, he'd been hiding in the countryside, selling ice cream and fish and laboring in rice paddies. Then one day, he'd seen a newspaper story that startled him. As part of America's effort to reconcile with Japan, the arrest order for war crimes suspects had been dropped. There on the page was his name. He was free to go home.

Watanabe rang the bell, the gate swung open, and there was his youngest brother, whom he hadn't seen since the latter was a boy. His brother threw his arms around him, then pulled him inside, shouting that Mutsuhiro was home.

Watanabe's exile was over. He married, had two children, opened a successful insurance business, and lived in a luxurious Tokyo apartment. He never faced prosecution. Late in his life, when asked about what he'd done to POWs, he admitted to having been "severe," and was sometimes apologetic, but always with absurd justifications, self-serving lies, self-pity, and even apparent pride.

He never forgot Louie. Asked about him in a 1997 CBS interview, he knew the name instantly. "Six hundred prisoner," he said. "Zamperini number one.

"Zamperini was well known to me," he said. "If he says he was beaten by Watanabe, then such a thing probably occurred at the camp." He called beatings "unavoidable." Told that Louie wished to come to offer forgiveness, Watanabe said he would see him and apologize.

One day a few months later, Louie sat at his desk for hours, thinking. Then he began to write.

To Matsuhiro [sic] Watanabe,

As a result of my prisoner of war experience under your unwarranted and unreasonable punishment, my post-war life became a nightmare. It was not so much due to the pain and suffering as it was the tension of stress and humiliation that caused me to hate with a vengeance.

Under your discipline, my rights, not only as a prisoner of war but also as a human being, were stripped from me. It was a struggle to maintain enough dignity and hope to live until the war's end.

The post-war nightmares caused my life to crumble, but thanks to a confrontation with God through the evangelist Billy Graham, I committed my life to Christ. Love replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, "Forgive your enemies and pray for them."

As you probably know, I returned to Japan in 1952 [sic] . . . I asked then about you, and was told that you probably had committed Hara Kiri [sic], which I was sad to hear. At that moment, like the others, I also forgave you and now would hope that you would also become a Christian.

Louis Zamperini

Louie carried the letter to Japan, intending to give it to the Bird. The meeting was not to be. Asked if he'd see Zamperini, as he'd agreed, Watanabe practically spat his reply: the answer was no.

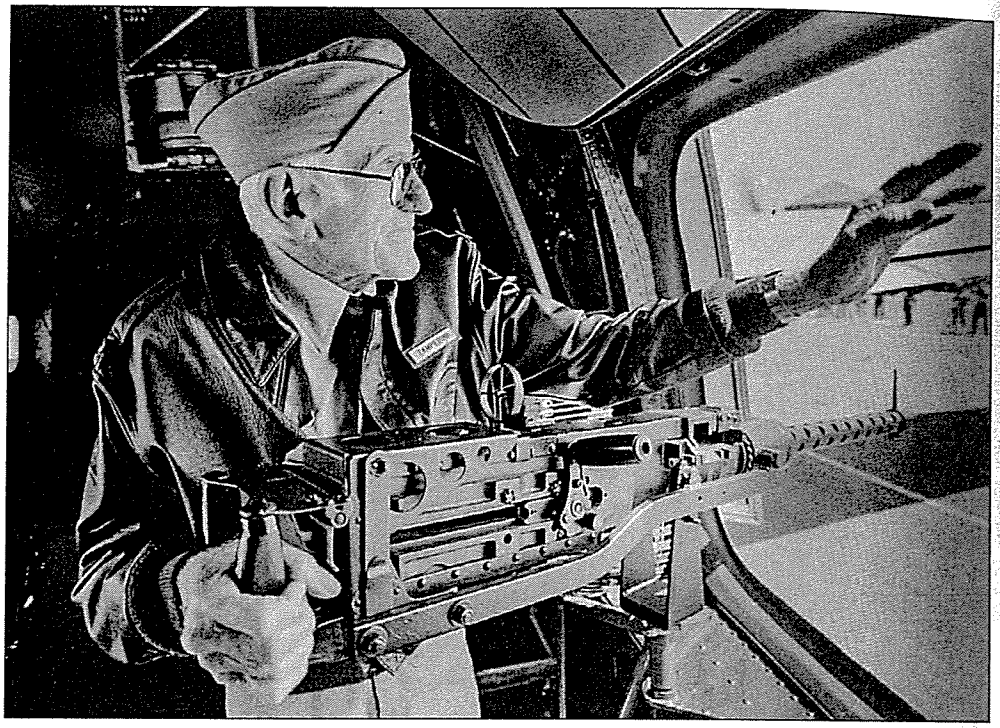
When Louie arrived at Naoetsu, he still had the letter. Someone took it, promising to get it to Watanabe. If Watanabe received it, he never replied.

Watanabe died in April 2003.

On the morning of January 22, 1998, snow sifted gently over Naoetsu. Louis Zamperini, four days short of his eighty-first birthday, stood in a swirl of white. His body was worn and weathered, his skin scratched in lines, mapping the miles of his life. His riot of black hair was now a translucent scrim of white, but his blue eyes still threw sparks. On his right hand, a scar was still visible, the last mark *Green Hornet* had left in the world.

It was time. Louie extended his hand, and in it was placed the Olympic torch. His legs could no longer reach and push as they once had, but they were still sure beneath him. He began running.

All he could see, in every direction, were smiling Japanese faces. There were children in hooded coats, men who'd once worked beside the POW slaves, civilians clapping and cheering, and two columns of Japanese soldiers, parting to let him pass. Louie ran through the place where cages had once held him, where a black-eyed man had crawled inside him. But the cages were long gone, and so was the Bird. There was no trace of them here among the voices, the falling snow, and the old and joyful man, running.



DAILY BREEZE