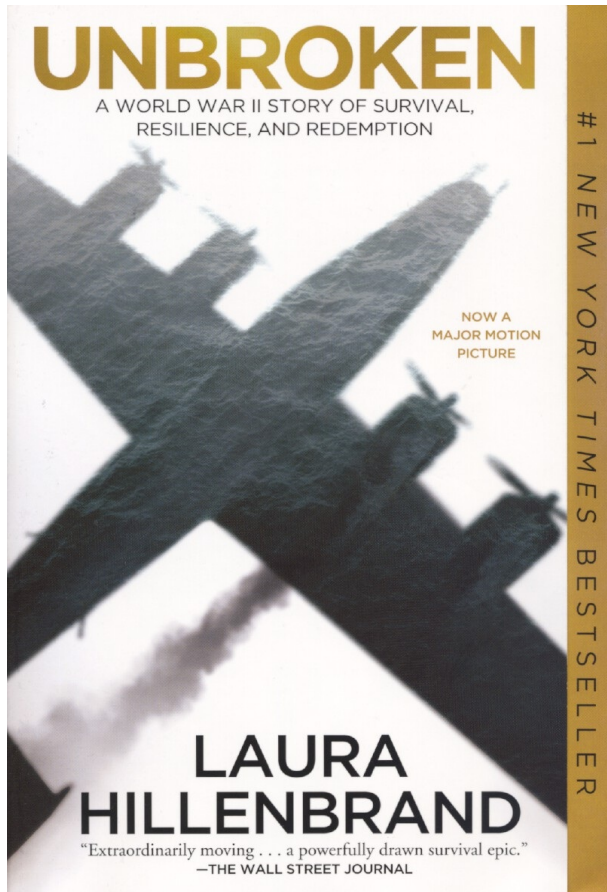


***Unbroken* and the POW Messages of Louie Zamperini**

by

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It was a moment of triumph for Louis Zamperini, the trouble-making and well-known high school runner from Torrance, California, when he won a place on the 1936 U.S. Olympic track team and traveled to Berlin to represent his country. Victory would elude him, but he viewed it as a dry run for Tokyo 1940 (those games would be canceled). When he came home he attended USC, and in 1941 he earned a commission in the Army Air Corps, where he served as a bombardier. On May 27, 1943, while on a search mission for a downed plane, his B-24 crashed in the Pacific, some 225 miles north of Palmyra Island. Louie spent 47 days on a raft with two fellow crewmen, one of whom died during the trip. The currents carried them 2,000 mile west, to eventual discovery and capture by the Japanese.

Two years of captivity followed. Louie was interned at four different POW facilities—first Kwajalein, then the secret Ofuna interrogation center near Yokohama,

followed by confinement at the Omori POW camp near Tokyo and the Naoetsu camp on Japan's west coast. All the while he was subjected to some of the worst treatment meted out to prisoners of war.

Unbroken, the 2010 bestseller by Laura Hillenbrand, is Louie's story. The movie version was released on Christmas Day 2014, nearly six month's after Louie Zamperini's death at age 97.

It was not until I was two-thirds through the book that I discovered that Louie's story had an important shortwave connection: the world learned of his survival only by way of POW messages broadcast over Radio Tokyo in 1944. The author gives the details, and while they are generally consistent with what has been learned over the years about POW messaging during Word War II, every new story provides some additional insight.

Messages from POWs were broadcast on shortwave from Berlin and Tokyo and some other Axis-controlled cities. Typically they included the POW's name, his family's address, and a brief message. In the United States, many shortwave listeners monitored these broadcasts and wrote postcards or letters to the POW's family, apprising them of the contents of the messages. It is unknown how many listeners engaged in this process. An informal database of POW monitors whose names have come to light over the years contains about 350 entries, but the actual number of monitors was surely higher. The military also notified families about the POW messages and sent an "official" text of the message as transcribed by government monitors. However, it was not unusual for families to hear from the civilian listeners first.

To learn more about POW messages, go to ontheshortwaves.com and click on "DX History," then "POW Monitoring." In particular the article "[POW Monitoring and the Messages of Alfred R. Young](#)," and the review of Lisa L. Spahr's book, [World War II Radio Heroes: Letters of Compassion](#), which is posted on the site under "Book Reviews," contain detailed information about POW monitoring.

Here is the Zamperini POW message story.

Wednesday, October 18, 1944 (*Unbroken*, pgs. 252-253). Radio Tokyo's POW message program, "The Postman Calls," aired a message said to be from Louie, advising that he was uninjured, in good health, longing for his family, praying for their health, and hoping to see them again someday. Louie was in the Omori camp.

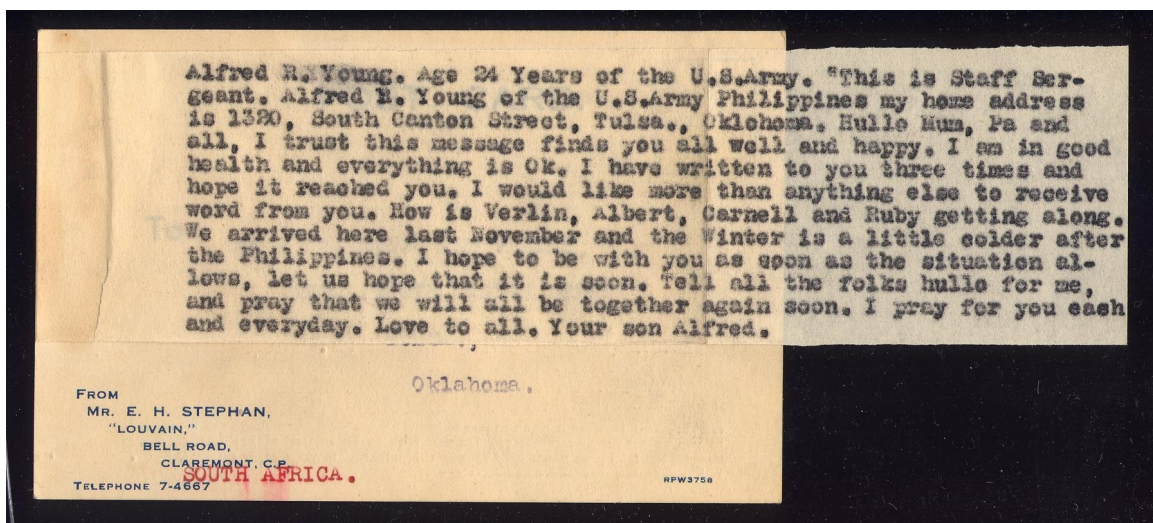
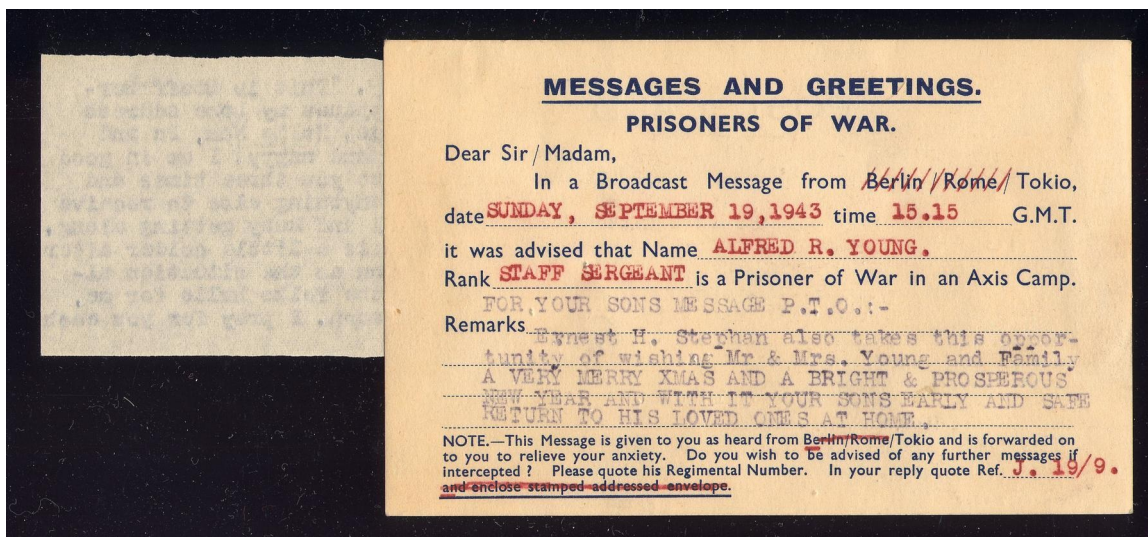
The most important thing about the October 18 message is that, according to Louie, he knew nothing about it. "The Japanese had written it themselves or forced a propaganda prisoner to do so" (p. 253). Reviews of other POW messages have suggested that the Japanese sometimes varied the content of a message over multiple airings. This is no surprise. What is a surprise is that the message was apparently made up and broadcast without the POW having any knowledge of it. One of the sources cited by Hillenbrand observed that POWs were made to complete questionnaires after their capture.¹ Might the Japanese have composed some fairly generic messages from that information and broadcast them without a POW's knowledge? Apparently so. Or might Louie's memory of the details of this incident, some 60 years earlier, failed him?

The author says this broadcast "wasn't aired" in America, but that it was picked up in South Africa by a man named E. H. Stephan, or that Stephan had a report of it. He sent a card, with a copy of the text of the message attached, to the Zamperinis. He got some parts of the address wrong (a common problem), and so it didn't reach Louie's home in Torrance until circa late January 1945.

Hillenbrand says that "Stephan worked for a service that monitored broadcasts and sent news of POWs to family members. He filled out a card with information about the broadcast.

¹E. Bartlett Kerr, *Surrender & Survival: The Experience of American POWs in the Pacific 1941-1945* (New York, NY: Morrow 1985), p. 189.

Louie, the card said, was a POW in an Axis camp. ¶Stephan stapled a transcript of the radio message to the card . . .” (pg. 253). Below is an example of Stephan’s work, taken from the cards and letters received from shortwave listeners by another American family, the Youngs of Tulsa, Oklahoma, as described in the Young [article](#) cited earlier.



It is unclear exactly what Hillenbrand means with regard to the broadcast not being aired in America. The message programs were not, so far as is known, picked up and rebroadcast over local American stations. The government believed that the POW message programs from Tokyo and elsewhere were entirely propagandistic. It frowned on civilian monitors who contacted the POW families, and the FCC would likely have had something to say about stations relaying the programs. Hillenbrand may have meant that the particular program containing Louie’s message was not beamed to America. This could have been the case, as Tokyo beamed different shortwave programs to different parts of the world. But surely a message to a California family would have been scheduled for a beam to North America.

Saturday, November 18, 1944 (pgs. 226, 258-262). In June 1944, in accordance with standard procedure, the military declared Louie dead as of May 28, 1944, a year and a day after his plane went down. The news apparently reached the American media in mid-November and was picked up in Tokyo. Two people from Radio Tokyo visited Louie and showed him a transcript of an NBC broadcast covering the declaration of his death. They wanted him to broadcast a message, which he could compose himself, showing that he was alive. He thought about it and decided to do it. He was taken to Radio Tokyo, where he was greeted warmly, and he recorded his message. Most POW messages were voiced by announcers—whom listeners often mistook for the prisoner—but Louie read his own.

On November 18, Radio Tokyo broadcast a long teaser about Louie. It reminded listeners about the October 18 message, and took the American government to task for its “erroneous” death declaration, an example, it said, of American lies contributing to the pain of POW families. The announcers fondly recalled Louie’s performance as a runner, describing him as “the same old Louis, cheerful, sportsmanlike, the idol of all our Southern California fans and graduates” (pg. 261), and urged listeners to keep on listening to the program, which could be counted on to set the record straight regarding the status of POWs. There was no specific mention of a further message.

As luck would have it, this broadcast was heard by Lynn Moody, an Office of War Information employee in San Francisco who was filling in for an FCC employee on break from monitoring and typing up transcripts of broadcasts from Japan. Moody heard and transcribed the message. She was extremely excited because Louie was a friend of hers—a 1940 classmate at USC.

Monday, November 20, 1944 (pgs. 262-264). Radio Tokyo broadcast Louie’s recorded message (which was again heard and transcribed by Lynn Moody). By the usual standard of POW messages it was long, and to maximize the likelihood that it would actually be broadcast Louie had decided to de-emphasize the negative. The main points of the message: he was uninjured and in good health; he hoped all members of his family were in good health; he was in a Tokyo camp and being treated as well as could be expected; and he often thought about home-cooked food. He asked that his family write and send photos, and that his father keep his guns in good condition so the two of them could do some hunting when he returned home (Louis was a hunter, and careful with his guns; this was the “fingerprint” by which the family would know the message was authentic). He greeted some specific people by name, and mentioned the names of some military buddies who were interned with him, and he closed with wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Soon the Zamperinis got a phone call from a woman in San Marino, California who had heard the message, and, as was typical in POW messaging, this was followed by numerous communications from others near and far. The exact meaning of Hillenbrand’s statement that this broadcast “had been intercepted and re-aired on several stations” (pg. 264) is unclear. It may mean that the same broadcast, or at least the same message, was repeated at different times over Radio Tokyo, which would not have been unusual.

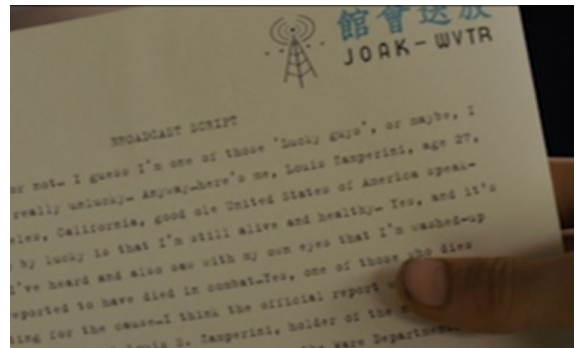
Epilogue (pgs. 265-267). Radio Tokyo wanted Louie to do another broadcast, and he composed another message to his family. But while at the station he was handed a prepared message to read. It lambasted the American government for declaring him dead, described a like problem suffered by another POW (whose wife had remarried after learning of his death), and in general attacked the credibility of U.S. government POW announcements. Louie was fed a good meal, introduced to a group of Australians and Americans who were serving as the station's propagandists (no doubt the "Zero Hour" staff), and shown the civilized living quarters he would have if he joined them. But he refused to participate and was returned to Omori. It was then that he came to believe that the Japanese had planned to use him for propaganda purposes all along, singling out the well-known American athlete for merciless treatment (and keeping his name off Red Cross lists) in order to break him and make him more amenable to their eventual entreaties. Whether they were truly playing such a long game cannot be known for sure.

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The movie is good, if not necessarily great; I gave it three stars out of five on Netflix (I'd have made it three and a half if I could have).



The scene about Louie's shortwave message was a consolidated version of the more-detailed presentation in the book (and, not unexpectedly, omitted any references to the Zamperinis getting tons of mail from SWLs who heard Louie's message). The movie is quite faithful to the book, but in watching the depiction of Louie at the station in November 1944 I was surprised at one very noticeable error (noticeable to shortwave types anyway). At one point, the camera pans down the marquee of the Radio Tokyo building, revealing the call letters "JOAK" at the left and "WVTR" at the right. Later, in the building's cafeteria, Louie is presented with a typed sheet containing the text that the Japanese wanted him to read over the air (which he refused to do). At the top right of the page is a small logo and the letters "JOAK-WVTR."



JOAK was Tokyo's main mediumwave station, and Radio Tokyo operated out of the JOAK building, so it would not be unusual to see the JOAK call letters in a wartime scene. From September 1945, after Japan had been occupied, the headquarters of America's Armed Forces Radio Network, which operated under the call letters WVTR, were in the JOAK building. But Louie was reading his message in November 1944, almost a year before the Americans arrived. Clearly there would have been no "WVTR" on the building or on Radio Tokyo stationery at that time. This was a departure from the book, for neither JOAK nor WVTR is mentioned in the book.

Demons pursued Louie after the war. As the movie put it, "After years of severe post-traumatic stress, Louie made good on his promise to serve God, a decision he credited with saving his life." He had made that promise while in the raft. It wasn't until 1949, when he heard a young preacher by the name of Billy Graham, that he pledged to keep it.



A 79-year old Louie, carrying the Olympic torch in Japan, 1998.