

had been confused with the sadistic Kono and sentenced to several years. I told him I would try to help.

I also spoke to James Sasaki, who that day decided to become a Christian. "I don't understand how you can come back here and forgive us," he said. "Your Christianity must be real, but I don't understand it."

"It is real," I said, "and if you continue in your faith, you will one day understand."

I had many questions for Sasaki. Why, I asked, had I spent fourteen months at Ofuna, a high-profile interrogation camp, when I wasn't high-profile? "You were being prepared. We decided to hide you away for a year and a month until your government officially declared you dead," he explained.

"Why did you have to wait?"

"The element of surprise."

"Surprise at what?"

"Your voice making broadcasts."

"Is that why, when I stole food at Ofuna—a crime punishable by death—and the Weasel—a guard who would turn on you if he saw you spitting on the ground—caught me, you never did anything and I was spared?"

"Yes. I kept it quiet. But we made your life as miserable as possible—also at Omori—so that when you were offered a better life at Radio Tokyo, you would accept it."

"That was Watanabe's job?"

"Yes."

"But I didn't cooperate."

"I know. And you were sent to Camp 4-B."

Camp 4-B. The freezing hellhole. In my mind I heard the sound of granulated snow crunching beneath the Bird's boots as he faced me with a wicked grin the day I arrived. I remember my knees buckling at the thought of never being free of him.

"What about Watanabe?" I prodded. "Is he here? Is he alive?" According to testimony from surviving POWs, the Bird had been listed by General MacArthur as a class-A war criminal, the twenty-

third most-wanted. I had expected to see him in the audience, or at least discover that he had been tried and executed.

"Missing. There is still a reward, twenty-five thousand dollars, but we believe he committed hari-kiri," Sasaki simply said.

I didn't want to believe that. Despite his cruelty and bluster I thought Watanabe was too chicken to commit hara-kiri. After the war Frank Tinker and I even came up with a possible scenario: Watanabe always wanted to be an officer. Perhaps he had left Naoetsu two days early, escaped to Korea, and become an officer in the North Korean Army, and gotten killed there.

So much for wishful thinking.

I had come to Japan with forgiveness in my heart. I just wanted to look the Bird in the eyes, put my arm around him, and say "I forgive you." Yet, even in apparent death, as he had in life, the Bird still managed to confound me.

I LEFT THE prison having promised Kano, James Sasaki, and Admiral Yokura that I'd try to help their cases for early release. Yokura had told me, "Louie, I do not understand your democracy. I have done nothing wrong, and yet I am sentenced to twenty-five years in prison."

To the best of my knowledge, that was true. During the war-crimes trials our government had hired a lawyer to defend the Japanese. He didn't want to do the job until he saw some defendants being "railroaded" by judges in a hurry to sentence prisoners left and right. He stayed in the country and still had access to the files, which he let me see. Admiral Yokura's file indicated he was a kind, personable guy. I'd met him at Ofuna and again at Omori. When I read the transcripts of his trial, it shocked me. The evidence showed him innocent of every accusation. On the next-to-the-last page it said, "Innocent"—and yet the final page read, "Sentence: 10 years." It didn't make sense.

I wrote a deposition to General MacArthur indicating I had read Yokura's case history and, "by your own courts he was found absolutely innocent of any crime. Yet, on the last page he's sentenced to ten years. That evidently is an error. Please read the last two pages

and come to some conclusion." The attorney had my note delivered to SAC headquarters, and eventually Yokura was let out of prison.

I also wrote that Kano was not Kono. Kono was the Bird's sycophantic right-hand man; he was a bastard. Kano was a nice guy. He took chances with his own life by helping us. Kano was also freed.

Sasaki was my only failure. Shortly after my liberation I had completed an affidavit on his behalf and thought the matter done. After seeing him at Sugamo I wrote to MacArthur—and then his successor, General Matthew Ridgway—that Sasaki (and Yokura) "were not war criminals in any sense of the term, not only to my personal knowledge but also to the knowledge of many of the other personnel who were imprisoned with me and subsequently in the Ofuna Prisoner of War Center. Since my return I have met some of the former prisoners of war and all have experienced the same shock and surprise that I did when learning that these men are now serving prison terms." But I couldn't get to first base with SAC for Sasaki, and neither could the attorney. And no one would tell us why. "Handsome Harry" had to wait until 1952's general amnesty to go free.

THIS TIME WHEN I landed in Los Angeles there was no welcoming committee, no speeches, no fanfare. I simply went home to my wife and child. Happily. I may have been doing the Lord's work—and more successfully than I had imagined—but I had missed them terribly. I also knew that I had finally come full circle. Except for continuing to tell my story and spreading the Word, a great part of my life was over: the delinquency, the running, the war, the imprisonment, the drinking, the nightmares, the greediness and desperation, the unhappiness. I was completely satisfied with my test of forgiveness and more than ready to move on.

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NOT EVERY OLD SOLDIER FADES AWAY

IF THE LOVE of family and friends and a newfound peace of mind alone could sustain me, what a wonderful world it would be. However, I also needed a job, preferably one that would not only support my family but allow me to serve the Lord as I had promised on the raft.

A Christian college in Hawaii inquired about my taking a teaching position. Another, on the East Coast, offered me work as a coach. But I was too busy speaking all over the country to take advantage of the many opportunities that came my way. Once I gave twelve talks in a day. It was almost as if I were campaigning for office.

In 1951 I toured from the Northwest to Florida. Miami was supposed to be my last stop, but I got booked from there through the West Indies. In Nassau they didn't have a place big enough for the thousands who came, so we used a huge vacant lot. In Jamaica I circled the island, speaking often. I also went to Cuba—this was before Castro took power—and appeared for two nights at a church in Havana. The first talk was "Devil at My Heels," my war story. The second was "Communism versus Christianity in Japan," based on my experience at Waseda University. Both were advertised in the newspaper. The second night a bearded young man and his friends, all dressed in khaki but with no official designation, sat in the back of a church and listened. Afterward Pastor Rodriguez walked Cynthia and me to his

Olympian and serviceman. I cherished my family. That's the way life is and is supposed to be. I've probably had enough excitement for one man. Smooth seas aren't so bad. However, one day, in early 1997 . . .

THE PHONE RANG at my house in the Hollywood Hills, and Cynthia answered. Draggan Mihailovich, an Emmy Award-winning senior producer with the Olympic Features Unit of CBS Sports, was on the line—and for some reason he wanted to speak with me.

But I'll let Draggan tell it:

I'd followed the Olympics and read David Wallechinsky's books, which had anecdotes about these great Olympic heroes, but I'd never heard of Louie. By sheer chance—it was the luckiest thing in the world—talk about divine intervention or whatnot—I was working on a story and I just happened to go to the news library because I wanted to research the Army's great football team of 1945 for a piece about their fiftieth anniversary. I wanted to check out the *New York Times* from then on microfilm, and find out if maybe on the day Army played Navy, did MacArthur land somewhere, or whatever.

So I'm flipping through the pages, and out of the corner of my eye I see the word *Olympic* and wonder what it was, since 1945 wasn't an Olympic year and they hadn't even held an Olympics since 1936. And on the front page of the *New York Times*, on September 10, I read, ZAMPERINI, OLYMPIC MILER, SAFE AFTER EPIC ORDEAL. I wondered, who is this guy? I started to read the story and realized the reporter had talked to Louie just days after he'd been released. My production assistant was with me, and we were blown away. But we also thought, None of these guys can be alive, so how do you even tell this story?

To be honest—and I hate to admit it—I sat on it for about six months because the prospect of Louie being alive and being able to tell the story anyway was just so out there. Finally, I thought maybe I'll just give it a shot. I'll make sure he's dead; I'll at least sleep better knowing I gave it my best shot.

I found an address for Louie in Hollywood from 1979, then made a call. Cynthia answered the phone. I'd just had an experience where I called a widow and found out her husband was dead and she took it really badly, so I was already apprehensive. But I introduced myself and said, "Can I speak to Mr. Louis Zamperini?"

She said, "Oh, well . . ."

And I thought, Oh gosh. Not again.

". . . he's not home right now."

I said, "Are you kidding? *The Louie Zamperini*, war hero, prisoner of war, Olympic runner?"

"That's him. He's down at the church. He'd love to talk to you."

And that's how it started. I called back, spoke to Louie, told him I'd be in California in a couple of weeks and would he mind sitting down and telling me his story.

My story? For nearly fifty years I'd lived my life the way God wanted me to. I'd been active in the church and sports and raising my family. I'd also been honored to run with the Olympic Torch before the Los Angeles Games in 1984 and the Atlanta Games in 1996, and occasionally the newspapers did a nostalgia piece about me.

I'd even unearthed new facts about my war story, among them, why I could never help get James Sasaki out of prison.

A couple of years earlier, at the Zamperini Field air fair, a young policeman came up to me while I greeted pilots. He said, "Oh, Mr. Zamperini, I have your book. Could you autograph it for me?"

When I opened it I saw it was already autographed "to Ernie Ashton," a guy I went to high school with, who later became a policeman. The young man said Ernie had died and he'd come by the book and read it. I signed it again, and then he said, "Oh, by the way, Ernie wrote something on another page." I flipped through the book, and on the page where I mentioned Sasaki, this is what he'd written at the bottom: "Jimmy Sasaki had a powerful radio transmitter in a field off Torrance Boulevard near a Southern California Edison substation, which was in constant radio contact with the Japanese government. He left the USA by boat before a raid by the FBI and CIA."

Sasaki had been a spy.

No wonder he had bragged so often at Ofuna about his fondness for Long Beach and San Pedro. He'd go there, then to his transmitter, and broadcast a report about ship movement in the harbor.

When Draggan called, I saw an opportunity to complete the record. We met, he took some notes, realized he'd found more than he expected. He put together a little outline and proposed a segment about me to air during the Winter Olympics. CBS loved it and allotted ten minutes.

As part of his research—Draggan loves research—he flew to Japan and started digging. He went to Wotje and filmed. He went to Naoetsu, now renamed Joetsu, and discovered that in October 1995 the site of Camp 4-B had been turned into a Peace Park, with a memorial dedicated to the Allied prisoners of war who died there. Kids who were in school when I was a prisoner had grown up, made some money, pooled their resources, pitched in to buy the land, and created the park. They didn't want their kids or their kids' kids to forget what had happened.

He also wanted me to go to Japan and carry the Olympic Torch again, this time for a kilometer at the 1998 Winter Games in nearby Nagano. I suggested I do it right alongside the old prison camp, but as it didn't exist, I ran through town just a few miles away, and later he filmed me visiting the Peace Park memorial.

I'm a die-hard pack rat, and as the piece took shape Draggan and I spent days going through so much of the stuff I've kept all my life: letters, documents, magazines, newspapers, films, pictures, scraps of this and that, and finally, my World War II diary. He didn't mind. "Everything has to be authentic," he said. "We have to confirm everything."

For instance, when I told Draggan about the Bird and the time I had to hold up the wooden beam, he asked, "Who else saw that?" Most of the guys were dead, but Draggan got ahold of Tom Wade in England, and Wade gave him his book, *Prisoner of the Japanese*, in which he just happened to write that very story.

I also told Draggan, "My whole life is serving God. If you want this to be authentic, you have to have my conversion in there."

"There's no story without that," he said immediately. "We're basing this all on a theme of forgiveness."

I was greatly relieved. "Besides my conversion," I said, "I want you to show a picture of Billy Graham to confirm it. When people hear the name Billy Graham they think of one thing: the gospel."

He said, "You got it," and he took care of everything.

Based on the material I'd archived, and the proof of events from his research, CBS gave Draggan five more minutes of airtime. Then another five. Lucky me. After all I'd been through, I thought it couldn't get better than that.

I WAS WRONG.

While I was answering mail in my office at the church, the phone rang. Draggan was on the line from Tokyo, where he'd gone to verify more of my story and to shoot footage. "Are you sitting down?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, hold on to your chair."

I grabbed the edge of my seat. "Okay. What's up?"

"We found the Bird," Draggan said. "And he's alive."

When I could finally speak, all I said was, "What!?"

"Yeah, we found him. He's retired and wealthy from selling life insurance. We're going to try and get an interview."

"Really?"

"Would you like to see him?"

"Absolutely."

AFTER WE HUNG UP I flashed back to the final week at Camp 4-B. The Bird had left two days before we knew the war was over, and no one had seen him since. Even his mother, when questioned, said the family hadn't heard from him. Eventually she built a shrine to her son and we assumed Watanabe was simply dead.

Draggan had somehow tracked him down, called the Bird's home, spoken to his wife, and asked for an interview. She said he was sick. A couple of days later he tried again, and this time she said, "He's on a trip."