

Excerpt from *Unbroken* by Lauren Hillenbrand



In the late 1920s, a cunning boy named Louis Zamperini was wreaking havoc in his hometown of Torrance, California. A serial runaway and artful dodger, he robbed his neighbors' kitchens, put grease on streetcar rails and toothpicks in his teacher's tires, pelted policemen with tomatoes, and ran clever scams to part locals from their money. But when Louie reached his teens, he made a momentous discovery: he was an exceptionally gifted runner. From then on, he channeled his defiance into track, displaying prodigious talent that carried him to the 1936 Berlin Olympics and within sight of the fabled four-minute mile.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the athlete became an airman, joining the Army Air Corps. While training to be a bombardier, he formed a close friendship with his roommate and pilot, a gentle-tempered pastor's son named Russell Phillips, known to all as Phil. In the fall of 1942, Louie and Phil were transferred to Oahu to begin their war journey together. Serving in a B-24 bomber they called Super Man, they saw months of harrowing combat, culminating in an epic battle with Japanese Zeros over the island of Nauru in April of 1943. With half of his crew severely wounded and his plane's brakes shot, steering crippled, right rudder blown half off, and fuselage blasted with 600 holes, Phil somehow nursed Super Man home.

Only a few weeks later, on May 27, 1943, an officer in Louie and Phil's squadron received an emergency call. A bomber piloted by a lieutenant named Clarence Corpening had taken off from Oahu the day before and had disappeared somewhere over the Pacific. Louie and Phil, on their way to Honolulu on their day off, were stopped at the base gate. A crew was needed to undertake a search. Super Man had been totaled in the Nauru mission, so the officer ordered them to take the only plane available, Green Hornet, a battered B-24 so ominously underpowered that it flew with its tail dangling well below its nose. No one on the Phillips crew wanted to go near the plane, but an order was an order. That morning, Louie, Phil, and their crew reluctantly boarded Green Hornet. Phil taxied the plane to the runway, took off, and flew south, headed for a search area some 200 miles north of a remote island called Palmyra.

At around two that afternoon, as Green Hornet flew low over the search area, one of its four engines suddenly died, and the bomber began dropping toward the sea. In the scramble to save the plane, a crewman made a fatal error, mistakenly shutting down a second engine. Green Hornet fell from the sky.

One Thought: Hopeless

When his plane hit the ocean, Louie heard nothing at all.

There were only soundless sensations: the plane tearing apart, his body hurtling forward, wires whipping around him, water over him, gravity dragging him under. He thrashed against the wires, and the plane carried him down.

Louie was drowning. He struggled uselessly, sinking deeper and deeper, the water growing darker and heavier around him. He thought: Hopeless. There was a bolt of pain in his head, then nothing.

He woke in total darkness, sensing the plane still around him, still deep underwater, sinking. Inexplicably, miraculously, the wires had vanished. He groped along the wreckage, found an opening, and kicked through. He pulled the inflation cords on his life vest and felt it lift him. He burst into dazzling daylight and breathed.

The ocean was a jumble of bomber remains. The lifeblood of the plane—oil, hydraulic fluid, and hundreds of gallons of fuel—slopped about on the surface. Curling among the hunks of wreckage were threads of blood.

Louie heard a voice. He turned toward it and saw Phil across the debris field, clinging to what looked like a fuel tank. With him was the tail gunner, Sgt. Francis McNamara, whom everyone called Mac. Neither man had a life vest on. Blood spouted in rhythmic arcs from Phil's forehead and washed in sheets down his face. His eyes lolled about in bewilderment. Louie looked around. None of the eight other crewmen had surfaced.

Louie saw a life raft, almost certainly deployed by a crewman before impact, bobbing on the water. He knew that he had to get Phil's bleeding stopped, but if he went to him, the raft would be lost and all three survivors would perish. He swam for the raft. His clothing and shoes weighed him down, and the current and wind carried the raft away faster than he could swim. As Louie looked back at Phil and Mac, sharing the recognition that their chance was lost, he saw a long cord trailing off the raft, snaking not two feet from his face. He snatched the cord, reeled the raft in, and climbed aboard. A second raft was sliding away. He grabbed his raft's oars, rowed as hard as he could, and just managed to catch its cord and pull the second raft to him. He tied the rafts together and rowed to Phil and Mac.

Realizing that the jagged hunk that he was clinging to might perforate the rafts, Phil pushed it away. Louie pulled him aboard, and Mac climbed in under his own power. Both men, like Louie, were filmy with fuel and oil. With all three men in one raft, it was cramped; the raft was only about six feet long and a little more than two feet wide inside.

There were two gashes on the left side of Phil's forehead. Blood was spurting from the wounds and, mixed with seawater, sloshing in the bottom of the raft. Remembering a lesson from Boy Scouts, Louie ran his fingers down Phil's neck until he felt a pulse, the carotid artery. He showed

Mac the spot and told him to press down, slowing the bleeding. He yanked off his overshirt and T-shirt and asked Mac to do the same, then folded one T-shirt into a compress and pressed it to Phil's wounds. He took the other T-shirt and tied it tightly around Phil's head, then slid Phil into the second raft to rest.

Phil was woozy from the blood loss and blow to his head. He knew that he'd crashed, that someone had pulled him from the water, and that Louie was with him. As the pilot, he was officially in command, but he understood that he was in no condition to make decisions. He asked Louie to take over, and Louie agreed.

"I'm glad it was you, Zamp," Phil said softly.

From somewhere nearby, there was a small sound, a moan trailing off into a gargle, a mouth trying to form a word, a throat filling with water—then silence. Louie grabbed an oar and circled around as rapidly as he could, searching for the drowning man. Whoever had made the sound had slipped under. He didn't come up again.

With Phil's bleeding under control, Louie turned his attention to the rafts. Made of two layers of canvas coated in rubber and divided into two air chambers, each was in good condition. Storage pockets in the rafts contained some survival provisions. Untying the pocket flaps, Louie found several thick chocolate bars—probably Hershey's military-issue Ration D bars—divided into segments and packaged in waxed containers to resist gas attack.

With the chocolate, Louie found several half-pint tins of water, a brass mirror, a flare gun with flares, sea dye, a set of fishhooks, a spool of fishing line, and two air pumps in canvas cases. There was also a set of pliers with a screwdriver built into the handle. Louie pondered it for a long while, trying to come up with a reason why someone would need a screwdriver or pliers on a raft. Each raft also had a patch kit, to be used if the raft leaked. That was all there was.

The provisions were grossly inadequate. Adrift near the equator with little water and no shelter, Phil, Louie, and Mac would soon be in desperate trouble.

Maintaining Order

From the moment that he had come out of the water, Mac hadn't said a word. He had somehow escaped the crash without injury, but his face had never lost its glazed, startled expression.

Louie was bent over the raft when Mac suddenly began wailing, "We're going to die!" Louie reassured him that the squadron would come for them, that they'd be found very soon. Mac continued to shout. Louie, exasperated, threatened to report Mac when they returned. It had no effect. At his wit's end, Louie whacked Mac across the cheek with the back of his hand. Mac thumped back and fell silent.

Louie set up ground rules. Each man would eat one square of chocolate in the morning, one in the evening. Louie allotted one water tin per man, with each man allowed two or three sips a day. Eating and drinking at this rate, they could stretch their supplies for a few days.

With inventory taken and rules established, there was nothing to do but wait. Louie kept his hand on Phil's head, stanching the bleeding. The last trace of Green Hornet, the shimmer of

fuel, hydraulic fluid, and oil that had wreathed the rafts since the crash, faded away. In its place, rising from below, came dark-blue shapes, gliding in lithe arcs. A neat, sharp form, flat and shining, cut the surface and began tracing circles around the rafts. Another one joined it. The sharks had found them. Fluttering close to their sides were pilot fish, striped black and white.

The sharks, which Louie thought were of the mako and reef species, were so close that the men would only have to extend their hands to touch them. The smallest were about six feet long; some were double that size. They bent themselves around the rafts as they swam, testing the fabric, dragging their fins along the bottom and sides, but not trying to get at the men on top. They seemed to be waiting for the men to come to them.

The sun sank, and it became sharply cold. The men used their hands to bail a few inches of water into each raft. Once their bodies warmed the water, they felt less chilled. Though exhausted, they fought the urge to sleep, afraid that a ship or submarine would pass and they'd miss it. Phil's lower body, under the water, was warm enough, but his upper body was so cold that he shook.

It was absolutely dark and absolutely silent, save for the chattering of Phil's teeth. The ocean was a flat calm, but a rough, rasping tremor ran through the men. The sharks were rubbing their backs along the raft bottoms.

Louie's arm was still draped over the side of his raft, his hand resting on Phil's forehead. Under Louie's hand, Phil drifted to sleep, attended by the sensation of sharks scraping down the length of his back. In the next raft, Louie, too, fell asleep.

Mac was alone in his wakefulness, his mind spinning with fear. Grasping at an addled resolution, he began to stir.

Louie woke with the sun. Mac was beside him, lying back. Phil lay in his raft, his mind still fumbling. Louie sat up and ran his eyes over the sky and ocean in search of rescuers. All he saw were sharks.

Louie decided to divvy up breakfast, a single square of chocolate for each man. He untied the raft pocket and reached in. All of the chocolate was gone. He looked around the rafts. No chocolate, no wrappers. His gaze paused on Mac. The sergeant looked back at him with wide, guilty eyes.

The realization that Mac had eaten all of the chocolate rolled hard over Louie. Mac was a recent addition to the crew, a replacement for a tail gunner who'd been wounded over Nauru, and Louie and Phil barely knew him. Back at the base, Mac had struck Louie as a decent, friendly guy, but a bit of a reveler, confident to the point of flippancy. The crash had undone him. Louie knew that Mac's consumption of the chocolate could cost them their lives, but he quelled the thought. By now, planes would be searching for them. Because the crew had not had time to send a distress signal or communicate their position as Green Hornet went down, the military would have little idea of where they were, and would be trying to find their tiny rafts in a search area of thousands of square miles. Louie was aware of this, but pushed the thought away. We'll be on Palmyra later today, maybe tomorrow, he told himself, and the loss of the chocolate won't matter. Curbing his irritation, Louie told Mac that he was disappointed in him. Understanding that Mac had acted in panic, he reassured him that they'd soon be rescued. Mac said nothing.

The chill of the night gave way to a sweltering day. Louie watched the sky. Phil slept. Mac, a shade short of being a redhead, burned in the sun. He remained in a dreamy, distant place. All three men were hungry, but they could do nothing about it. The fishhooks and line were useless. There was no bait.

As the men lay in silence, a purring sound began drifting gently between their thoughts. Then all three realized that they were hearing a plane. Searching the sky, they saw a B-25 bomber, high up and well to the east. Flying much too high to be a search plane, it was probably on its way to Palmyra.

Louie lunged for the raft pocket, retrieved the flare gun, and loaded a flare cartridge. He couldn't stand in the soft-bottomed raft, so he tipped up onto his knees and raised the gun. He squeezed the trigger, the gun bucked in his hand, and the flare, roaring red, streaked up. As it shot overhead, Louie dug out a dye pack and shook it hurriedly into the water; a pool of vivid greenish yellow bloomed over the ocean.

With the flare arcing over them, Louie, Phil, and Mac watched the bomber, willing the men aboard to see them. Slowly, the flare sputtered out. The bomber kept going, and then it was gone. The circle of color around the rafts faded away.

The plane left the castaways with an unnerving piece of information. They had known that they were drifting, but without points of reference, they hadn't known in which direction, or how fast. Since planes on the north-south passage between Hawaii and Palmyra followed a flight lane that ran close to Green Hornet's crash site, the appearance of a B-25 far to the east almost certainly meant that the rafts were drifting west, away from the view of friendly planes. The chances of rescue were already dimming.

Over the rafts, the daylight died. The men took sips of water, bailed seawater around themselves, and lay down. The sharks came to the rafts again to rub their backs on the undersides.

Another Plane on the Horizon

Phil slept for most of the next day. Louie sipped water and thought about food. Mac continued to hunker down, speaking little. For another day, rescue did not come.

Early the next morning, Louie, Mac, and Phil heard a broad, deep rumble of bomber engines, the sound of home. There it was: a B-24, low and right overhead, plowing through the clouds. It was a search plane.

Louie grabbed the flare gun, loaded it, and fired. The flare shot straight at the bomber, making a fountain of red that looked huge from the raft. Louie reloaded and fired three more times. The men waited. The plane made a sharp turn, and for a moment the castaways thought they'd been spotted. But the bomber didn't circle back. The flares spent themselves, and the plane flew on. Louie, Phil, and Mac watched the twin tails grow smaller in the distance, then disappear. Louie had a sick feeling.

With every hour, the men were drifting farther west. If they weren't found, the only way they could survive would be to get to land. To their west, they knew, there wasn't a single island for some 2,000 miles. If by some miracle they floated that far and were still alive, they might reach the Marshall Islands. If they veered a little south, they might reach the Gilberts. If they were lucky enough to drift to those islands, rather than passing by and out again into the open Pacific, they'd have another problem. Both sets of islands belonged to the Japanese, who were notorious for murdering prisoners of war.

The castaways' bodies were declining. They were intensely thirsty and hungry. After the B-24 sighting, they floated for another frigid night, then another long day. Each man drank the last drops of his water. No rescuers came. If the search hadn't been called off, the men knew, it soon would be.

Sometime on the fifth day, Mac snapped again. After having said almost nothing for days, he suddenly began screaming that they were going to die. Wild-eyed and raving, he couldn't stop shouting. Louie slapped him across the face. Mac abruptly went silent and lay down, appearing strangely contented. Maybe he was comforted by Louie's assertion of control, thereby protected from the awful possibilities that his imagination hung before him.

That night, Louie prayed. He had prayed only once before in his life, in childhood, when his mother was sick and he had been filled with a rushing fear that he would lose her. That night on the raft, in words composed in his head, never passing his lips, he pleaded for help.

Phil felt as if he were on fire. The equatorial sun lay upon the men, scalding their skin. Their upper lips burned and cracked, swelling so dramatically that the flesh obstructed their nostrils, while their lower lips bulged against their chins. Their bodies were slashed with open cracks that formed under the corrosive onslaught of sun, salt, wind, and fuel residue. Whitecaps slapped into the fissures, generating an agonizing scalding sensation. Sunlight glared off the ocean, sending barbs of white light into the men's pupils and leaving their heads pounding. The men's feet were cratered with quarter-size salt sores. The rafts baked along with their occupants, emitting a bitter smell.

The water tins were empty. Desperately thirsty and overheated, the men could do no more than use their hands to bail seawater over themselves. The coolness of the ocean beckoned and couldn't be answered, for the sharks circled. One shark, six or eight feet long, stalked the rafts without rest, day and night. The men became especially wary of him, and when he ventured too close, one of them would jab him with an oar.

On the third day without water, a smudge appeared on the horizon. It grew, darkened, billowed over the rafts, and lidded the sun. Down came rain. The men threw back their heads, spilled their bodies back, spread their arms, and opened their mouths. The rain fell on their chests, lips, faces, tongues. It soothed their skin, washed the salt and sweat and fuel from their pores, slid down their throats, fed their bodies. It was a sensory explosion.

They knew the rain wouldn't last. They had to find a way to save the water. The narrow water tins, opened to the downpour, caught virtually nothing. Keeping his head tipped up and his mouth open, Louie felt around for something better and found one of the air pumps. It was sheathed in a canvas case about 14 inches long, stitched down one side. He tore the seam

open, spread the fabric to form a triangular bowl, and watched happily as the rain pooled on the fabric.

He had collected some two pints of water when a whitecap cracked into the raft, crested over, and slopped into the canvas, spoiling the water.

Louie tried a new technique. Instead of allowing large pools of water to gather, he began continuously sucking the captured water into his mouth, then spitting it in the cans. Once the cans were full, he kept harvesting the rain, giving one man a drink every 30 seconds or so. They tore open the second pump case to form another rain catcher. When the sun emerged, they found that the canvas cases made excellent hats. They began rotations with them, two men in, one man out.

More days passed. The men were ravenous. It was now clear that Mac's binge on the chocolate, which had seemed only moderately worrisome at the time, was a catastrophe. Louie resented Mac, and Mac seemed to know it. Though Mac never spoke of it, Louie sensed that he was consumed with guilt over what he had done.

As hunger bleated inside them, the men found themselves unable to direct their thoughts away from food. They stared into the ocean, watching all of the edible creatures, but without bait, they couldn't catch even a minnow. Occasionally, a bird passed, always out of reach. The men studied their shoes and wondered if they could eat the leather. They decided that they couldn't.

One day, 9 or 10 days into their odyssey, Louie felt something alight on his canvas hat, and saw its shadow fall before him. It was an albatross. With Louie's head hidden, the bird hadn't recognized that he was landing on a man.

Slowly, slowly, Louie raised his hand toward the bird, his motion so gradual that it was little more noticeable than the turning of a minute hand on a clock. The bird rested calmly. In time, Louie's hand was beside the bird, his fingers open. Then Louie snapped his hand shut, clamping down on the bird's legs. The bird pecked frantically, slashing Louie's knuckles. He grabbed its head and broke its neck.

Louie used the pliers to tear the bird open. A gust of fetid odor rose from the body, and everyone recoiled. Louie handed a bit of meat to Phil and Mac and took some for himself. The stench hung before them, spurring waves of nausea. Gagging, they couldn't get the meat into their mouths. Eventually, they gave up.

Though they couldn't eat the bird, they finally had bait. Louie took out the fishing gear, tied a small hook to a line, baited it, and fed it into the water. In a moment, a shark cruised by, bit down on the hook, and severed the line. Louie tried with another hook, and again a shark took it. A third try produced the same result. Finally, the sharks let a hook hang unmolested. Louie felt a tug and pulled up the line. On its end hung a slender pilot fish, about 10 inches long. As Louie pulled it apart, everyone felt apprehensive. None of them had eaten raw fish before. They each put a bit of meat into their mouths and found it flavorless. They ate it down to the bones.

It was the first food to cross their lips in more than a week. Among three men, the small fish didn't go far, but the protein gave them a push of energy. Louie had demonstrated that if they

were persistent and resourceful they could catch food, and both he and Phil felt inspired. Only Mac remained unchanged.

Phil felt uneasy about the bird, and reminded Louie that killing an albatross was said to bring bad luck. After a plane crash, Louie replied, what more bad luck could they have?

Coping Mechanisms

Several more days passed. The men floated in a sensory vacuum. In calm weather, the ocean was silent. There was nothing to touch but water, skin, hair, and canvas. Other than the charred smell of the raft, there were no odors, and there was nothing to look at but sky and sea. At some point, Louie stuck his finger in his ear and felt wax there. He smelled his finger, and by virtue of being new, the scent of the wax was curiously refreshing. He developed a habit of twisting his finger in his ear and sniffing it. Phil and Mac began doing it, too.

Louie and Phil, like all other airmen, had heard unsettling stories about men lost at sea without provisions. Under the stresses of dehydration, starvation, and exposure, many castaways went insane, hallucinating, arguing with imaginary foes, exhibiting bizarre behavior, sometimes even flinging themselves overboard and drowning in an effort to reach illusory rescue ships. Thinking about these stories, Louie was concerned more about sanity than he was about sustenance. He was determined that, no matter what happened to their bodies, their minds would stay under control.

A few days after the crash, Louie began peppering the other two with questions on every conceivable subject. Phil took up the challenge, and he and Louie turned the raft into a nonstop quiz show. They shared their histories, from first memories onward, recounted in minute detail. They described the best dates they'd ever had, and laid plans for what they'd do when they were home and the war was over. They told and retold stories of practical jokes that they'd played on each other. Every answer was followed with a question. Phil sang church hymns; Louie taught the other two the lyrics to "White Christmas." They sang it over the ocean, a holiday song in June, heard only by circling sharks.

For Louie and Phil, the conversations did more than keep their minds sharp. As they imagined themselves back in the world, they willed a happy ending onto their ordeal and made it their expectation. With these talks, they created something to live for.

As Louie and Phil grilled each other, Mac usually sat in silence. He shared few memories, and though the other two encouraged him, he couldn't imagine a future. To him, it seemed, the world was too far gone.

Given the dismal record of raft-bound men, Mac's despair was reasonable. What is remarkable is that the two men who shared Mac's plight didn't share his hopelessness. Though all three faced the same hardship, their differing perceptions of it appeared to be shaping their fates. Louie's and Phil's hope displaced their fear and inspired them to work toward their survival, and each success renewed their physical and emotional vigor. Mac's resignation seemed to paralyze him, and the less he participated in their efforts to survive, the more he slipped. Though he did the least, as the days passed, it was he who faded the most. Louie's and Phil's optimism and Mac's hopelessness were becoming self-fulfilling.

The men had been adrift for two weeks. The rafts were decomposing in the sun and salt water, bleeding vivid yellow dye onto the men's clothing and skin and making everything sticky.

The men's bodies slowly withered. Each day, Louie noticed an incremental difference in his weight, and the weight of his raftmates: the pants looser, the faces narrower. As they passed the fortnight mark, they began to look grotesque. Their flesh had evaporated. Their cheeks had sunken into concavity. Their bodies were digesting themselves.

They were reaching a stage of their ordeal that had been a gruesome turning point for other castaways. In 1820, after the whaling ship *Essex* was sunk by an enraged whale, the lifeboat-bound survivors, on the brink of death, resorted to cannibalism. Some 60 years later, after 19 days adrift, starving survivors of the sunken yacht *Mignonette* killed and ate a teenage crewman. Stories of cannibalism among castaways were so common that the British sailors considered the practice of choosing and sacrificing a victim to be an established "custom of the sea." To well-fed men on land, the idea of cannibalism has always inspired revulsion. To many sailors who have stood on the threshold of death, lost in the agony of starvation, it has seemed a reasonable, even inescapable solution.

For Louie, the idea of consuming a human being was revolting and unthinkable, even if the person had died naturally. All three men held the same conviction. Cannibalism wouldn't be considered, then or ever.

A second albatross fluttered onto Louie's head sometime around the 14th day. Again Louie slowly raised his hand, snatched it, and killed it. The men sat there looking at it, remembering the stench of the first bird. When Louie opened it up, they were happily surprised to find that it didn't smell that bad. Still, no one wanted to eat it. Louie portioned out the meat and insisted that everyone eat. All three men forced it down. Because Mac seemed to need food the most, they gave him all of the blood.

In the bird's stomach they found several tiny fish. Using them as bait, Louie caught a bigger fish. He also saved some of the bird for bait, and cleaned the bones and set them out to dry in hopes that they might be useful as fishhooks.

Time spun out endlessly. Occasionally, the men caught small terns that landed on the raft. Louie caught a few fish, once tying hooks onto his fingers like claws and snatching a pilot fish straight out of the ocean. On another day, he parlayed a tiny fish, thrown into the raft by a whitecap, into bait that yielded a comparatively fat pilot fish. Rains came intermittently, leaving the men sucking up every drop that fell into their rain catchers. Louie and Phil took turns leading prayers each night. Mac remained in his own world.

Then rains stopped coming and the water tins ran dry again. On their sixth day without water, the men recognized that they weren't going to last much longer. Mac was failing especially quickly.

They bowed their heads together as Louie prayed aloud for rain. The next day, by divine intervention or the fickle humors of the tropics, the sky broke open and rain poured down. Twice more the water ran out, twice more they prayed, and twice more rain came. The showers gave them just enough water to last a short while longer. If only a plane would come.

In the Line of Fire

On the morning of the 27th day, a plane came.

It began with a rumble of engines, and appeared as a spot in the sky. It was a twin-engine bomber, moving west at a brisk clip and so far away that expending the flares and dye would be a questionable move. The men conferred and voted. They decided to take a shot.

Louie fired one flare, reloaded, then fired a second, drawing vivid lines across the sky. He opened a dye container and spilled its contents into the ocean, then dug out the mirror and angled a square of light toward the bomber.

The men waited, hoping. The plane grew smaller, then faded away.

As the castaways slumped in the rafts, trying to accept another lost chance, over the western horizon there was a glimmer, tracing a wide curve, then flying toward them. The bomber was coming back.

Overcome with joy, Louie, Phil, and Mac tugged their shirts over their heads and snapped them back and forth in the air, calling out. The bomber leveled off, skimming over the water. Louie squinted at the cockpit. He made out two silhouettes, a pilot and co-pilot. Crying with joy, he thought of Palmyra, food, solid ground underfoot.

And then, all at once, the ocean erupted. There was a deafening noise, and the rafts began hopping and shuddering under the castaways. The bomber's gunners were firing at them.

Louie, Phil, and Mac clawed for the raft walls and threw themselves overboard. They swam under the rafts and huddled there in terror, watching bullets cut bright slits in the water around them. Then the firing stopped.

The men surfaced. The bomber had overshot them and was now to the east, moving away. Two sharks were nosing around. The men had to get out of the water immediately.

Clinging to the side of Louie and Mac's raft, Phil was completely done in. The leap into the water had taken everything that was left in him. He floundered, unable to pull himself over the raft wall. Louie swam up behind him and gave him a push, and Phil slopped up on board. Mac, too, needed Louie's help to climb over the wall. Louie then dragged himself up, and the three sat there, stunned but uninjured. They couldn't believe that the airmen, mistaking them for Japanese, would strafe unarmed castaways. Under them, the raft felt doughy. It was leaking air.

In the distance, the bomber swung around and flew toward the rafts again. Louie hoped that the crew had realized the mistake and was returning to help them. Flying about 200 feet over the water, the bomber raced at them, following a path parallel to the rafts. As its side passed into view, all three men saw it at once: behind the wing, painted over the waist, was a red circle. The bomber was Japanese.

Louie saw the gunners taking aim and knew he had to go back in the water. Phil and Mac didn't move. They were both exhausted. They knew that if they went overboard again they wouldn't be

strong enough to get back in, and the sharks would take them. If they stayed on the raft, it seemed impossible that the gunners could miss them.

As the bomber flew toward them, they lay down. Phil pulled his knees to his chest and covered his head in his hands. Mac balled himself up beside him. Louie took a last glance at them, then dropped into the water and swam back under the rafts.

Bullets showered the ocean in a glittering downpour. Looking up, Louie saw them popping through the canvas, shooting beams of intensely bright tropical sunlight through the rafts' shadows. But after a few feet, the bullets spent their force and fluttered down, fizzing. Louie straightened his arms over his head and pushed against the bottom of one of the rafts, trying to get far enough down to be outside the bullets' lethal range. Above him, he could see the depressions formed by Mac's and Phil's bodies. Neither man was moving.

As the bullets raked overhead, the current clutched at Louie, rotating his body horizontally and dragging him from the rafts. He kicked against it, but the effort was no use. He was being sucked away, and he knew that if he lost touch with the rafts he wouldn't be able to swim hard enough against the current to get back. Just as he was pulled loose, he saw the cord that strayed off the end of one of the rafts. He grabbed it and tied it around his waist.

As he held his breath and hung underwater, his legs being tugged in front of him by the current, Louie looked down at his feet. His left sock was pulled up on his shin; his right had slipped halfway off. He watched it flap in the current. Then, in the murky blur beyond it, he saw the huge, gaping mouth of a shark, emerging out of the darkness and rushing straight at his legs.

Louie recoiled in horror, jerking his legs to the side, away from the shark's mouth. The shark kept coming, directly at Louie's head. Louie rammed his palm into the tip of the shark's nose. The shark flinched, circled away, then swam back at him again. Louie waited until the shark was inches from him, then struck it in the nose again. Again, the shark peeled away.

Above, the bullets stopped coming. As quickly as he could, Louie pulled himself along the cord until he reached the raft. He grabbed its wall and lifted himself clear of the shark.

Mac and Phil were lying together in the fetal position. They were absolutely still, and bullet holes dappled the raft around them. Louie shook Mac, and Mac made a sound. Louie asked if he'd been hit. Mac said no. Louie spoke to Phil. Phil said he was O.K.

The bomber circled back for another go, and Louie tipped back into the ocean. As bullets knifed the water around him, two sharks came at him. Louie hung there, gyrating in the water and flailing his arms and legs, as the sharks snapped at him and the bullets came down. The moment the bomber sped out of firing range, he clambered onto the raft again. Phil and Mac were still unhit.

Four more times the Japanese strafed them, sending Louie into the water to kick and punch at the sharks until the bomber had passed. Though he had fought the sharks to the point of exhaustion, he was not bitten. Every time he emerged, he was certain that Phil and Mac would be dead. Impossibly, though there were bullet holes all around the men, even in the tiny spaces between them, not one bullet had hit either man.

The bomber crew made a last gesture of sadism. The plane circled back, and Louie ducked into the water again. The plane's bomb-bay doors rolled open, and a depth charge tumbled out. The men braced themselves for an explosion, but none came. Either the charge was a dud or the bombardier had forgotten to arm it. If the Japanese are this inept, Phil thought, America will win the war. The bomber flew west and disappeared over the horizon.

Phil's raft had been slashed in two. A bullet had struck the air pump and ricocheted across the base of the raft, slitting it from end to end. Everything stored in it had been lost in the water. Shrunken and formless, the ruined raft lapped about on the ocean surface.

The men were sardined together on what remained of Mac and Louie's raft. The canvas was speckled with tiny bullet holes, and both air chambers were punctured. Each time one of the men moved, air sighed out of the chambers and the canvas wrinkled a little more, leaving the raft sitting lower and lower in the water. The sharks whipped around it, surely excited by the bullets, the sight and smell of men in the water, and the sinking raft.

As the men sat together, exhausted and in shock, a shark lunged up over a wall of the raft, mouth open, trying to drag a man into the ocean. Someone grabbed an oar and hit the shark, and it slid off. Then another shark jumped on and, after it, another. The men gripped the oars and wheeled around, swinging at the sharks. As they turned and swung and the sharks flopped up, air hissed out of the bullet holes, and the raft sank deeper. Soon, part of the raft was submerged.

Frantic, Louie fumbled for the air pump, hooked it up to one of the two valves, and began pumping as hard as he could. Air flowed into the chamber and seeped out through the bullet holes, but Louie found that if he pumped very quickly just enough air passed through the raft to lift it up in the water and keep it mostly inflated. When Louie was too tired to go on, he passed the pump to one of the other two, and they took turns pumping. The sharks kept coming, and the men kept beating them away.

As Phil and Mac pumped and struck at the sharks, Louie groped for the provisions pocket. He grabbed the patch kit, and began repairing the bullet holes. As he worked, keeping his eyes on the patches, the sharks continued snapping at him. Growing wiser, they gave up flinging themselves haphazardly at the men and began stalking about, waiting for a moment when an oar was down or a back was turned before bulling their way aboard. Over and over again, they lunged at Louie from behind, where he couldn't see them. Mac and Phil smacked them away.

Hour after hour, the men worked, rotating the duties, clumsy with fatigue. All three were indispensable: had there been only two, they couldn't have pumped, patched, and repelled the sharks. For the first time on the raft, Mac was truly helpful. He had the strength to work the pump handle only a few times in a row, but with the oar he kept every shark away.

Night fell. In the darkness, patching was impossible, but the pumping couldn't be stopped. They pumped all night long, so exhausted that they lost the feeling in their arms.

In the morning the patching resumed. The rate of air loss gradually lessened, and they were able to rest for longer periods. Eventually, the air held enough for them to begin brief sleep rotations.

Finally, they could find no more holes to patch. With the raft now reasonably inflated, the sharks stopped attacking.

Losing Phil's raft was a heavy blow. Not only were all of the items stored on it gone, but now three men were wedged into a two-man raft, so close together that they had to take turns straightening their legs. At night, they slept in a bony pile, feet to head. Louie dragged the ruined raft aboard and pulled apart the layers of canvas, creating a large, light sheet. At last, they had a canopy to block the sun in daytime and the cold at night.

When they had a moment to collect themselves, Louie and Phil discussed the Japanese bomber. They thought that it must have come from the Marshall or Gilbert Islands. Estimating the bomber's cruising speed and range, they made rough calculations to arrive at how many hours it could remain airborne after it left them, and thus how far they were from its point of origin. They concluded that they were some 850 miles from the bomber's base. If their calculations were correct, then they had already drifted well over 1,000 miles.

Using their figures, Louie and Phil made educated guesses about when they'd reach the Marshalls or Gilberts. Phil guessed the 46th day; Louie guessed the 47th. This would mean that they would have to survive for three more weeks on a bullet-riddled raft. No castaways on an inflatable raft had ever survived for so long.

Louie sat awake, looking into the sea. Phil was asleep. Mac was virtually catatonic.

Two sharks, about eight feet long, were placidly circling the raft. Each time one slid past, Louie studied its skin. He had banged sharks on the nose many times, but had never really felt the hide. Curious, he dropped a hand into the water and laid it lightly on a passing shark, feeling its back and dorsal fin as it slid beneath him. It felt like sandpaper, just as everyone said. The shark swished on. The second shark passed, and Louie again let his hand follow its body. Beautiful, he thought.

Soon after, Louie noticed something odd. Both sharks were gone. Never in four weeks had the sharks left. Louie got up on his knees and leaned out over the water, looking as far down as he could, puzzled.

He was kneeling there, perched over the edge of the raft, when one of the sharks that he had touched leapt from the water at terrific speed, mouth wide open, lunging straight at his head. Louie threw both hands in front of his face. The shark collided with him head-on, trying to get its mouth around his upper body. Louie, his hands on the animal's snout, shoved as hard as he could, and the shark splashed back into the water. A moment later, the second shark jumped up. Louie grabbed an oar and struck the shark in the nose, and it jerked back and slid away. Then the first shark lunged for him again. Louie was recoiling when he saw an oar swing past, sending the animal into the ocean. To Louie's surprise, it wasn't Phil who had saved him. It was Mac.

Louie had no time to thank him. One of the sharks jumped up again, followed by the other. Louie and Mac crouched side by side, clubbing each shark as it lunged at them. Mac was a new man. A moment before, he had seemed almost comatose. Now he was infused with frenzied energy.

For several minutes, the sharks took turns bellying onto the raft with gaping mouths, always launching themselves from the same spot. Finally, they gave up. Louie and Mac collapsed. Phil, who had been startled awake but had been unable to help because there were only two oars, stared at them in groggy confusion.

“What happened?” he said.

Louie looked at Mac with happy amazement and told him how grateful and proud of him he was. Mac, crumpled on the bottom of the raft, smiled back. He had pushed himself beyond his body’s capacities, but the frightened, child-like expression had left his face. Mac had reclaimed himself.

Saying Good-Bye

Around the 31st day, one last albatross landed. Louie caught it, wrenched its head off, and handed it to Phil, who turned it upside down over Mac’s mouth, letting him drink the blood. As Louie and Phil ate the meat, dipping it into the ocean to give it flavor, they fed bits to Mac, but it didn’t revive him. His eyes, sunken in their sockets, stared out lifelessly.

In subsequent days, he became a faint whisper of a man. His water tin ran dry. On the 33rd day, when Phil opened his tin and took a sip of the little he had left, Mac asked if he could drink from it. For Phil, thirst had been the cruelest trial, and he knew that the water left in his tin, essential to his own survival, couldn’t save Mac. He told Mac that he didn’t have enough left to share. Louie was sympathetic to Phil, but he couldn’t bring himself to refuse Mac. He gave him a small sip of his own water.

That evening, Phil heard a small voice. It was Mac, asking Louie if he was going to die. Louie thought it would be disrespectful to lie to Mac, who might have something that he needed to say or do before life left him. Louie told him that he thought he’d die that night. Mac had no reaction. Phil and Louie lay down, put their arms around Mac, and went to sleep.

Sometime that night, Louie was lifted from sleep by a breathy sound, a deep outrushing of air, slow and final. He knew what it was.

Sergeant Francis McNamara had begun his last journey with a panicked act, consuming the rafts’ precious food stores, and in doing so, he had placed himself and his raftmates in the deepest jeopardy. But in the last days of his life, in the struggles against the deflating raft and the jumping sharks, he had given all he had left. It wasn’t enough to save him—it had probably hastened his death—but it may have made the difference between life and death for Phil and Louie. Had Mac not survived the crash, Louie and Phil might well have been dead by that 33rd day. In the last days of his brief life, Mac had redeemed himself.

In the morning, Phil wrapped Mac in something, probably part of the ruined raft. They knelt over the body and said aloud all of the good things they knew of him. Louie wanted to give him a religious eulogy but didn’t know how, so he recited disjointed passages that he remembered from movies, ending with a few words about committing the body to the sea. And he prayed for himself and Phil, vowing that if God would save them, he would serve heaven forever.

When he was done, Louie lifted the shrouded body in his arms. It felt as if it weighed no more than 40 pounds. Louie bent over the side of the raft and gently slid Mac into the water. Mac sank away. The sharks let him be.

The next night, Louie and Phil completed their 34th day on the raft. Though they didn't know it, they had passed what was almost certainly the record for survival adrift on an inflated raft. If anyone had survived longer, they hadn't lived to tell about it.

The raft bobbed westward. Petulant storms came over now and then, raining enough to keep the water supply steady. Because the water ration was now divided by two instead of three, each man had more to drink. With no more small fishhooks left, Louie made a hook out of his lieutenant's pin and caught one fish before the pin broke.

Phil and Louie could see the bend of their thighbones under their skin, their knees bulging in the centers like birds' legs, their bellies hollow, their ribs stark. They had grown weedy beards, their skin glowed yellow from the leached raft dye, and their bodies were patterned with salt sores. They held their sun-scorched eyes to the horizon, searching for land, but there was none. Their hunger dimmed, an ominous sign. They had reached the last stage of starvation.

On the 40th day, Louie was lying beside Phil under the canopy when he abruptly sat up. He could hear singing. He nudged Phil and asked him if he heard anything. Phil said no. Louie slid the canopy off and squinted into the daylight. The ocean was a featureless flatness. He looked up.

Above him, floating in a bright cloud, he saw human figures silhouetted against the sky. He counted 21 of them. They were singing the sweetest song he had ever heard.

Louie stared up, astonished. What he was seeing and hearing was impossible, and yet he felt absolutely lucid. This was, he felt certain, no hallucination, no vision. He sat under the singers, listening to their voices, memorizing the melody, until they faded away.

Phil had heard and seen nothing. Whatever this had been, Louie concluded, it belonged to him alone.

On the men drifted. Several days passed with no food and no rain. The raft was a gelatinous mess, its patches barely holding on, some spots ballooning outward, on the verge of popping. It wouldn't bear the men's weight much longer.

In the sky, Phil noticed something different. There were more birds. Then the two men began to hear planes. Sometimes they'd see a tiny speck in the sky, sometimes two or more together, making a distant buzz. They were always much too far away to be signaled, and both men knew that, as far west as they had probably drifted, these planes were surely Japanese. As the days passed, more and more specks appeared, every day arriving earlier.

Louie had come to love sunrise and the warmth it brought, and each morning he'd lie with his eyes on the horizon, awaiting it. On the morning of July 13, the 46th full day, no sunrise came. There was only a gradual, gloomy illumination of a brooding sky. The wind caught them sharply, and Phil and Louie looked up apprehensively. A huge storm was coming. The sea began to arch

its back under the raft, sending the men up to dizzying heights. Louie looked out over the churning water and thought how lovely it was.

To the west, something appeared, so far away that it could be glimpsed only from the tops of the swells. It was a low, gray-green wiggle on the horizon. Phil and Louie would later disagree on who saw it first, but the moment the sea tossed them up, the horizon rolled westward, and their eyes grasped it, they knew what it was.

It was an island. Louie and Phil's journey had only just begun.