

A VFW Member's Brush With 'The Greatest'

A former Specials Forces veteran and VFW Life member from Memphis shares his little-known time in the boxing ring against one of the sport's most iconic and polarizing figures

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Henry Hooper II sat at his home, nestled along a swath of colonial houses overlooking the Mississippi River on a cloudy November morning in Memphis, Tennessee.

The river, like Hooper's own life, passes through many destinations, touching many lives along the way, but ultimately running in one direction. For Hooper, that has always been the soldier's life.

A man of principle and unwavering devotion to serving others, Hooper spent more than 11 years serving his country and then some. The Memphian's titles include Vietnam veteran, Marine and Army Green Beret, former Secret Service agent to four U.S. Presidents, acting member of VFW's National Council of Administration and former VFW Department of Tennessee commander.

With a life written in more chapters than a Leo Tolstoy novel, one of Hooper's most cherished, yet little-revisited chapters comes from his life inside the boxing ring in the early 1960s.

"So many of my comrades always ask me about my boxing background, but I really never talked about my fights," said Hooper, a former Department of Tennessee commander and Life member of VFW Post 11333 in Cordova, Tennessee. "I currently serve on the National Council of Administration, and I doubt if more than a handful of councilmen know that little bit of my history."

A MEMORABLE CLASH

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Then a wiry 20-year-old Marine with gazelle-like reflexes and a skilled, counter-offensive boxing style, Hooper had established himself as one of the top young boxing amateurs in the country with a winning record across several weight classes.

Like any young boxer trying to represent his country on the world's greatest stage at the time, Hooper traveled to San Francisco for the U.S. boxing team's Olympic qualifying trials at the Cow Palace in May 1960.

Coming off a split-decision loss in the Military Inter-Service Championship bout against then-Airman Bobby Foster, who would become light heavyweight champion of the world in 1968, Hooper entered the trials with confidence.

He was one boxing match from clinching his spot on Team USA, but he would need to fend off another young light heavyweight boxing prospect with similar aspirations. That fighter was a Kentuckian named Cassius Clay.

"Cassius and I had similar styles," Hooper said. "I didn't think he was any better than I was. He didn't talk much during the fight either, not like he would be later known to do with everyone else. The guy would just swing so hard, he'd be off-balance."

By most historical accounts, which includes David Maraniss's "Rome 1960: The Olympics that Changed the World" book in 2008, the fight between both men had been a draw entering the third round.

Where Maraniss's account and Hooper's recollection diverge is in the ending.

Maraniss's historical account details how Hooper received a devastating blow that sent him to the canvas, but that's not quite how Hooper himself remembers it.

"In boxing, you're told to never take your eye off of your opponent," Hooper said. "The referee was saying something, and I glanced at him. There's a mandatory one-step back, but Cassius didn't step back. He rocked back and rocked right into my jaw."

Although the blow did send Hooper to the canvas, he recalled being more than ready to get back into the fight if not for the quick technical knockout, called by the referee.

"I went down really surprised, but I popped right back up," Hooper said. "My head, as far as I was concerned, was clear. But the referee signaled a technical knockout, and that was that."

The two men had been on a collision course leading to the confines of the boxing ring at the Cow Palace, but it was the outcome of their brief brush with history that led each one down a different path.

For Hooper, his duty to the country would always come first. He discharged from the Marine Corps and re-enlisted in the Army as a Green Beret, deploying to Vietnam with the 5th Special Forces Group as a combat medic from June 1963-1964.

Clay, who went on to win a gold medal in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, rose to prominence in the sport, upsetting Sonny Liston to earn his first heavyweight title in February 1964 before converting to Islam and changing his name to Muhammad Ali.

Considered one of the greatest sports figures of the 20th century, Ali, who finished his career with three world titles, 56 wins and five losses, also is remembered for his conscientious objection to the Vietnam War that stripped him of his first belt.

“I held no animosity against Ali for his anti-war stance,” Hooper admitted. “That was a way of getting deferred from service for many people, but they never offered him a deferral. He was man enough to stand up for his convictions and didn’t run to Canada like many did. He went to jail [for it], and I went to Vietnam.”

TWO DIFFERENT PATHS

Despite their respective careers and viewpoints diverging, Hooper always kept an eye out for Ali, who after his imprisonment continued on his rise toward becoming arguably the greatest heavyweight in the history of boxing.

But both men would cross paths once more as a result of their choices in life.

The last time Hooper and Ali met was on a night in 1978 at the White House in Washington, D.C.

Hooper, who had been assigned to the White House by the Secret Service, recognized Ali as one of the many renowned guests invited to partake in a state dinner hosted by President Jimmy Carter.

“He spotted me and started looking, and I guess he was trying to ponder where he remembered me from,” Hooper said. “He finally walked over to me and says, ‘Man, I know we’ve met somewhere. I don’t remember where. You just look familiar.’”

Hooper grinned and told him, “The Cow Palace. San Francisco. Olympic trials.”

“‘Oh, I knew it,’ ” Hooper recalled a gleeful Ali saying. “We sort of embraced there and got to talking awhile about our bout and other things.”

When Ali passed away on June 3, 2016, he had encompassed a life that outside of his exploits in the ring included roles as an entertainer, activist, philanthropist and poet.

Leaving a wave of worldwide sadness and mourning on that day, Ali's legacy weighed heavily for the same man that many moons ago had lost to him at The Cow Palace in San Francisco back in May 1960.

"When you're here, you should do the best you can with whatever God-given talent you have, and hopefully you have an impact on the lives of people, not just for personal satisfaction," Hooper said. "That's how I've lived my life, and I believe that's the legacy Ali left behind."

Hooper, now 83 years old, continues to apply such philosophy to his life. From an unwavering commitment to serving fellow veterans on behalf of VFW to helping locals as a State Farm insurance agent in Memphis, Hooper never stops striving to impact the lives of those around him.

"So much of what I am today is the result of my development as a man in the military," Hooper said. "I was 17 years old when I enlisted, so serving others is something that has always been influenced on me. It keeps me going and giving back to other veterans and my community."

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