

An Unpopular Hero-

SSG Joe R. Hooper

by

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I. Introduction.

A. Maslowski, Peter and Winslow, Don. Looking for a Hero, Staff Sergeant Joe Ronnie Hooper and the Vietnam War. University of Nebraska, 2004

<http://www.angelfire.com/ok/deltaraiders/page7.html>,

<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jrhooper.htm>,

<http://www.hooperconnections.com/sgtjoerhooper.html>

B. I systematically conducted my research using books, and various Internet sites to draft my NCO History Brief.

II. Body.

A. Introduction of Joe R. Hooper

B. Experiences in the US Navy

C. Experiences in the US Army

1. Delta Raiders
2. Vietnam

D. Awarding of the Medal of Honor

E. Retirement and Death

III. Closing.

A. Question and answer period.

B. In conclusion, I have introduced you to SSG Joe R. Hooper, an unpopular hero from an unpopular war. His significant contributions to this country and the Army will continue to have an impact on soldiers for generations to come.

An Unpopular Hero-SSG Joe R. Hooper

Joe Hooper was born in Piedmont, South Carolina on 8 August 1938. He was born to John Henry Hooper and his wife Maggie. He was one of four children and grew up in a poor household without any true role models. John Henry was an alcoholic who would frequently go on drinking binges. However, Joe did have some role models. His heroes were Audie Murphy and John Wayne. Whenever Joe had the chance, he would go down to the local movie house to see “To Hell and Back,” “Sands of Iwo Jima,” or “Flying Leathernecks.” He learned at an early age how war tested a man’s courage and character from these movies. James Dean was another hero of Joe’s. He used to see himself in the role James Dean played in “Rebel without a Cause.” The ups and downs of his life and career were often reflected in that same image.

Joe had a normal childhood growing up in a small and friendly community. Joe led an adventurous childhood outdoors playing cowboys and Indians or cops and robbers. Joe’s childhood mischief became teenage behavior problems and he dropped out of High School in the first semester of 11th grade on 3 January 1956. He joined the Navy on this very same day.

Boot camp was tougher than Joe had imagined, but he liked it. It brought structure and stability into his life for the first time (Maslowski, 32). When boot camp ended, the Navy assigned Airman Apprentice Joe R. Hooper to an attack squadron on board the USS Wasp, an Essex-class aircraft carrier. Joe did well his first year on board the USS Wasp, receiving a perfect 4.0 for conduct and 3.8 for professional performance. In mid-October, he was promoted to Airman and later reassigned to the USS Hancock. Many people began seeing the leadership and dedication of Joe Hooper. While there, he qualified as a Plane Captain for one of the Navy’s most successful planes, the Skyraider (Maslowski, 34). Joe’s performance record began to deteriorate as his father’s legacy reared its ugly head. He began drinking heavily and staying out

all night at brothels and picking fights. While on shore leave one time, he and his friend went and got tattoos. Joe got a set of lips on his buttocks. When asked why he did it, he would reply the lips were a symbol so that, “everyone can kiss my ass” (Maslowski, 31).

In December 1958, Joe met his future wife, Sandra Shultz. She was everything Joe was not. In mid-March, Sandra discovered she was pregnant and they were married on 17 May 1959 in Reno, Nevada. In mid-July, Joe passed his General Educational Development (GED) test. Shortly afterwards, he decided not to reenlist in the Navy and was released on 16 July 1959. That same month a Viet Cong attack near Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, killed Major Dale Buis, the first American soldier killed in this soon-to-be highly debated and unpopular war.

Joe and Sandra’s marriage was a disaster. They moved in with Sandra’s parents and Joe got a job selling Cory Cookware door-to-door. It turned out that Joe was not a very good salesman, the pay wasn’t good, and his marriage was falling apart. Joe divorced Sandra on 8 December 1959. Six days later Joe’s son, Robert Jay Hooper was born. After Joe’s divorce, he moved to nearby Glendale working in a factory. Joe got bored with this work and decided that he wanted to reenlist into the Navy. Joe went down to his local recruiting station, but the Navy recruiting office was closed. However, the Army recruiter across the street was still in and he enlisted on 31 May 1960 as a Private First Class.

He completed his basic training at Ft. Ord, California and volunteered for airborne training at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. After being with the 82nd Airborne Division for thirteen months the Army then sent Joe to Korea (Maslowski, 55). Joe was assigned to Company E, 20th Infantry Regiment which had the boring and tedious job of providing security for the nearby 83rd Ordnance Battalion ammo depot. Most of the time Joe could be found drinking or fighting.

Joe's career in the Army thus far was not a polished one. Once, Joe returned twelve hours late from a temporary duty assignment. Another time, he left his post without being properly relieved which resulted in an Article 15. However, Joe did enjoy the Army life. So much, that while in Korea, he received an early discharge from his original enlistment and immediately reenlisted for six more years (Maslowski, 58). Joe arrived to Korea as a Corporal and by tours end, he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant.

Joe's next assignment was working on training ranges at Ft Hood, Texas. He enjoyed his duty there because it was active, outdoor duty. In fact, he performed so well that his supervisor wrote a special letter praising Joe's alacrity and tenacity in performing his duties, recommending him for promotion (Maslowski, 59). Joe was later reassigned to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky where he attended several training courses and schools. Joe's social life became a training distracter causing various infractions that would lead to his dismissal from some of the training. Joe was reassigned to the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Overall, Joe behaved himself and performed all his duties well. In September 1966, this would earn him a promotion to Staff Sergeant.

SSG Joe Hooper would find himself on the assignment that would be change his life forever. Joe's next duty assignment found him at Fort Kobbe, Panama. In July 1967, he would be reassigned to Bravo Company after a few behavioral problems. In May, Joe received an Article 15 for missing a reveille formation. He was restricted to the battalion area for 30 days, forfeiture of \$163, and reduced to the rank of Sergeant, that was suspended for ninety days. However, Joe did not behave for very long and in June, the commander vacated his suspension and he was reduced to the rank of Sergeant. In mid-July, Joe was Absent Without Leave (AWOL) for several days and another Article 15 was administered. A month later, Joe went

AWOL again, but this time Joe received a Summary Court Martial. He was restricted for sixty days, forfeiture of \$177, and reduced to the rank of Corporal. On 9 September 1967, Joe was reassigned to a new company that was being formed in the 101st Airborne Division. This company would become known as the Delta Raiders.

In mid-1967, the Pentagon authorized a fourth Rifle Company for each of the Battalions of the 101st Airborne Division to meet the demands of the Vietnam War. With four companies, the Battalion commander could send three companies out to search and destroy the enemy and the fourth would be used for security of the Fire Base. The commander of the fourth company from 2/501st Infantry Regiment would be Captain Charles Wayne McMenemy.

CPT McMenemy was an experienced veteran of the Vietnam War. He knew that he had to have tough and realistic training in order for his men to survive the jungles of Southeast Asia. Whenever the other units would run two miles, his company would run five miles. While the other companies would sleep at night, Delta Company would be practicing night operations. CPT McMenemy's company received the highest ratings during all Battalion evaluations and would win all competitions prior to deploying to Vietnam. Joe Hooper stood out during this training as a real leader. CPT McMenemy saw this and promoted Joe Hooper back to Sergeant.

However, the company was mainly comprised of troubled soldiers with disciplinary problems. Since they were the extra company in the Battalion, there was very little training equipment and supplies for them to use, so they would steal it from the other companies. The Battalion commander knew that his Delta Company was the best, but he was getting frustrated with them raiding the other companies. The nickname "Delta Raiders," which would be made famous by Joe Hooper and his comrades, was given to CPT McMenemy's unit. After receiving only six weeks of training, the Delta Raiders would arrive in Vietnam on 18 December 1967.

The Delta Raiders were based near Cu Chi in the northern sector of South Vietnam. Their primary mission would be to go on search and destroy missions to eradicate the enemy from this area. The terrain there was tremendously dense made up mostly of trees with a thick undergrowth of intertwining vines covered with thorns and forty foot high bamboo. The air was hot and thick with humidity. The jungle was not a friendly place.

It was February 21, 1968, in this unfriendly environment, that SGT Joe Hooper would earn the Medal of Honor for his actions that saved the lives of many men. Delta Company was on a search and destroy patrol headed south toward the city of Hue when they came across some articles that were discarded by an North Vietnamese Army unit the night before. They estimated that there were approximately about one hundred NVA soldiers in the group. As the company approached a river right after this discovery, they encountered a withering hail of fire from rockets and machine guns from bunkers lining the opposite shore. The barrage caused the company to halt and take cover. SGT Hooper and another Squad Leader rallied several men and charged across the chest deep river to engage the enemy. Once across the river, the men violently assaulted the first five bunkers killing the enemy within. This inspired the rest of the platoon after seeing their actions and they continued the attack forward. The men again came under intense fire and halted to take cover. This time though, they began to take casualties.

SGT Hooper, without pausing to think about it, jumped out and began to grab some of the wounded men. On his second trip to grab another casualty away from the open fire, SGT Hooper was wounded. He continued to evacuate the soldier to safety. Once he got the soldier to the medics, he refused medical aid and returned to his men. Upon returning, SGT Hooper sent another man out to see where the main source of fire was coming from as he provided covering fire. The man returned pointing out three bunkers just in front of them. SGT Hooper jumped up

and single handedly eliminated the three bunkers with a combination of hand grenades and rifle fire. He then returned, checking the status of his platoon and putting his men on line. As he was doing this, three NVA assaulted the line injuring the Chaplain. SGT Hooper, again without hesitation, killed two of the three assaulting NVA and evacuated the Chaplain to the rear for medical aid. SGT Hooper returned moments later with his platoon on line and they continued their sweep of the area. While doing this, three NVA men ran across the field to a group of houses. SGT Hooper killed one with rifle fire just before he reached the house. He then took a Light Antitank Weapon (LAW) and destroyed the house, killing the remaining two NVA men. He came back and took another LAW and destroyed two more houses where the NVA men came from, killing several defenders inside. The platoon continued their sweep to a small bunker line. Once at the bunker line, SGT Hooper, who was out of ammo by this time, jumped down in the trench to survey the situation. Just as he did this, a NVA officer attacked him. SGT Hooper quickly drew his bayonet and killed the officer in hand-to-hand combat. After returning from the trench, SGT Hooper found his men once again under intense fire from another small house. He grabbed a few grenades and charged the house killing all the attackers inside. However, during this action, the grenade fragments complicated SGT Hooper's initial wounds. He still refused medical aid and continued the fight. As his platoon reached the final line of resistance, they received a devastating barrage of fire from four bunkers on their left flank. SGT Hooper and another sergeant instantly ran down through the enemy trench line, tossing a grenade in each bunker as they passed. SGT Hooper continued into another trench destroying another bunker and its occupants with an incendiary grenade. He then stopped and killed defenders of two more enemy bunkers with rifle fire. SGT Hooper heard the cries of one of his own men who were wounded and trapped in a nearby trench from enemy machinegun fire. He automatically went to

the soldiers' aid, but was surprised by a NVA soldier who was hiding. SGT Hooper pulled out a pistol and killed the attacking NVA man. He ran down the remaining stretch of trench, killing three more NVA men. Looking over the battlefield, SGT Hooper assessed the situation and moved his men forward to establish a final line. Once there, he had his men reorganize and distribute their remaining ammunition and prepare for another attack. Not until these tasks were complete would he accept medical aid. No more NVA would attack and his platoon returned to base. It was estimated that SGT Joe Hooper killed approximately 23 men himself on that day.

It would be more than a year later that newly promoted SSG Joe Hooper was recognized for his heroism. On 7 March 1969, President Richard Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to SSG Joe R. Hooper at the White House. Present at Joe's ceremony were members of his family, Maggie and John Henry; and members of his unit; Captain McMenemy, LT Grimsley, Platoon Sergeant Parker, and Chaplain Erbach. Sadly, this would be the last time that many of these people would ever see Joe.

Joe was discharged from active service in 1973 during the drawdown of troops after the Vietnam War. He would later be found dead on May 6, 1979 in a hotel room in Louisville, Kentucky while he was attending the Kentucky Derby. The autopsy found that he died in his sleep of a cerebral brain hemorrhage. He was only 40 years old. Joe Hooper was the most decorated Soldier of the Vietnam War with the Medal of Honor, two Silver Stars, and seven Purple Hearts. Many who served with Joe considered him a friend, a leader, and a real hero in their hearts and minds. However, he would never receive the popularity, fame, and fortune that some of the war heroes of the past received. Perhaps this was because he was an unpopular hero of an unpopular war.

Work Cited

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Ronnie Hooper and the Vietnam War. University of Nebraska, 2004