

Revisiting a VFW Member's Brush With 'the Greatest'

Two years after sharing his little-known time in the boxing ring against one of the sport's most iconic figures with VFW magazine, Henry Hooper's now famous story has earned him an Emmy Award as well as a Presidential Lifetime Achievement nomination

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When Henry Hooper II first sat down with *VFW* magazine to speak about his brief boxing career in 2022, he had no idea it would lead, in a couple of years, to an Emmy Award and later a Presidential Lifetime Achievement nomination.

An acting member of VFW's National Council of Administration at the time, Hooper had shared this little-known period of his life with *VFW* magazine in the article "A VFW Member's Brush With 'The Greatest'" in the February 2022 issue.

Steeped in nostalgia, the story provides a glimpse into Hooper's amateur boxing career as a wiry 20-year-old Marine, which had been, until then, a topic of curiosity for many of the VFW members he served with on VFW's National Council of Administration.

"So many of my comrades always ask about my boxing background, but I really never talk about my fights," said Hooper, a Life member of VFW Post 11333 in Cordova, Tennessee. "I doubt if more than a handful of councilmen know that little bit of my history."

As if dug up and curated from some vestige of time, Hooper's candid telling of his days as one of the top young boxing amateurs in the country, with a winning record across several weight classes, culminated in a shot to represent his country in the 1960 Summer Olympics.

Hooper traveled to San Francisco for the U.S. boxing team's Olympic qualifying trials at the

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Cow Palace that May, where he was one boxing match victory away from earning his spot on Team USA.

His opponent: A young light heavyweight Kentuckian named Cassius Clay.

Hooper, now 85 years old, holds no qualms about the result of that bout, which would catapult Clay, who later became Muhammad Ali, into one of the world's most iconic and polarizing figures, often dubbed "The Greatest" in the sport of boxing. Hooper was defeated by technical knockout in the third round.

The VFW life member would instead go on to serve in the Marine Corps before enlisting in the Army as a Green Beret, deploying to Vietnam with the 5th Special Forces Group as a combat medic from June 1963-1964.

With more than 11 years in the military, and several more as a Secret Service agent to four U.S. Presidents, Hooper's own exploits outside of the ring have since enveloped that part of his story.

But *this* was the story that sat on Hooper's lap, opened to page 30 of *VFW* magazine's February 2022 issue, as he waited for his doctor's appointment at the Lt. Col. Luke Weathers Jr. VA Medical Center in Memphis, Tennessee.

While reading the magazine, Hooper caught the attention of Willie Logan, a former Memphis VA public affairs officer, as she walked by. Hooper, who serves in the advisory board at the hospital, answered her questions and eventually let her borrow the magazine.

"When I came out of my appointment, Mrs. Logan got to talking to me about letting them do a story on this for Black History Month," Hooper recalled. "I was reluctant at first, but she was a longtime friend, so I agreed to it in the end."

Orchestrated by Logan and filmed by Visual Information Specialist Romeo Lucchesi of the Public Affairs Office at the VA in Memphis, the short documentary was later submitted for the 2023 Nashville/Midsouth Emmy Awards video essay category, and won.

"It was exciting, but sort of a surprise," Hooper said of winning the Emmy for the film, titled *The Green Beret Who Fought Muhammad Ali*. "And it all came to fruition after people started reading the article you wrote in *VFW* magazine. It would not have been known if not for that initial article from *VFW*."

The popularity of the short, 6-minute video essay also has, since winning an Emmy, led to other avenues of recognition, including an Aster Award, which honors the best in health care advertising.

And most recently, to Hooper's newfound surprise, it found its way to the Ali estate, which nominated him for a Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award last May.

"Initially, I was told by the Auxiliary President of my Post [11333]," Hooper said. "It appears that it was introduced to the Ali family, who then made the recommendation for me to receive this award."

Hooper added that, with all the current travel he has been conducting since officially retiring from his health insurance business, the news was both a pleasant surprise and humbling. While he now awaits word about the ceremony at the White House, he plans to continue to work on authoring two books that have been in the works for some time.

The first is his memoir, and the second is another little-known part of his story, much like his brief boxing career, that details his 48 years alongside his late wife.

This article is featured in the 2024 September issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.