

NCO Stories

A selection of Valor



Staff Sgt. Joe R. Hooper

Citation to award the Medal of Honor

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, Staff Sgt. (then Sgt.) Joe R. Hooper distinguished himself while serving as squad leader with Company D, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 501st Infantry, 101st Airborne Division.

On Feb. 21, 1968, Company D was assaulting a heavily defended enemy position along a river bank near Hue, Republic of Vietnam, when it encountered a withering hail of fire from rockets, machine guns and automatic weapons. Hooper rallied several men and stormed across the river, overrunning several bunkers on the opposite shore. Inspired, the rest of the company moved to the attack.

With utter disregard for his own safety, he moved out under the intense fire again and pulled back the wounded, moving them to safety. During this act, Hooper was seriously wounded, but he refused medical aid and returned to his men.

With the relentless enemy fire disrupting the attack, he single-handedly stormed three enemy bunkers, destroying them with hand grenades and rifle fire, and shot two enemy soldiers who had attacked and wounded the chaplain.

Leading his men forward in a sweep of the area, Hooper destroyed three buildings housing enemy riflemen. At this point, he was attacked by a North Vietnamese officer whom he fatally wounded with his bayonet.

Finding his men under heavy fire from a house to the front, he proceeded alone to the building, killing its occupants with rifle fire and grenades. By now his initial body wound had been compounded by grenade fragments, yet despite the multiple wounds and loss of blood, he continued to lead his men against the intense enemy fire.

As his squad reached the final line of enemy resistance, it received devastating fire from four bunkers in line on its left flank. Hooper gathered several hand grenades and raced down a small trench which ran the length of the bunker line, tossing grenades into each bunker as he passed by, killing all but two of the occupants. With these positions destroyed, he concentrated on the last bunkers facing his men, destroying the first with an incendiary grenade and neutralizing two more by rifle fire. He then raced across an open field, still under enemy fire, to rescue a wounded man who was trapped in a trench.



Upon reaching the man, he was faced by an armed enemy soldier whom he killed with a pistol. Moving his comrade to safety and returning to his men, he neutralized the final pocket of enemy resistance by fatally wounding three North Vietnamese officers with rifle fire.

Hooper then established a final line and reorganized his men, not accepting treatment until this was accomplished and not

consenting to evacuation until the following morning.

His supreme valor, inspiring leadership and heroic self-sacrifice were directly responsible for the company's success and provided a lasting example in personal courage for every man on the field. Hooper's actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the U.S. Army.

Most Decorated Soldier in the Vietnam War

By Stephanie Sanchez →

Even after leaving Vietnam, Staff Sgt. Joe R. Hooper continued to fight battles – with himself.

Hooper struggled with alcoholism. The addiction started from distress caused by anti-war politics, according to several news accounts.

Many people know little about Hooper, who died of a cerebral hemorrhage on May 6, 1979. But he is one of the most decorated Soldiers in the Army, along with Sgt. Alvin York and 1st Lt. Audie Murphy. He received more medals than any other Soldier in the Vietnam War.

During his 17-year military career, Hooper earned more than 30 medals, including the Medal of Honor, two Silver Stars, six Bronze Stars and eight Purple Hearts. President Richard Nixon presented the sergeant, who later moved up the ranks to staff sergeant, the nation's highest military honor on March 7, 1969, for his service during the Vietnam War.

Hooper is credited with killing 115 North Vietnamese and saving several of his comrades on Feb. 21, 1968.

On that day, Hooper was leading his squad along a river bank near Hue, Vietnam, when it stumbled across a North Vietnamese divisional headquarters. Immediately, there was a hail of fire from rockets, machine guns and automatic weapons.

"It was six against maybe 140 of them," Hooper told the *Seattle Times* in 1977. "It was hand-to-hand, and the main battle lasted six and a half hours. It seemed like a long time before other companies got there to help."



Courtesy photo

President Richard Nixon presents the Medal of Honor to then Sgt. Joe R. Hooper at the White House on March 7, 1969. Hooper served two tours of duty in Vietnam.

At the beginning of the attack, Hooper quickly rallied several men and stormed across the river, overrunning several bunkers. Then he moved into heavy fire to pull wounded men to safety.

While helping his Soldiers, Hooper was shot but refused to be treated.

"With the relentless enemy fire disrupting the attack, he single-handedly stormed three enemy bunkers, destroying them with hand grenades and rifle fire, and shot two enemy soldiers who had attacked and wounded the chaplain," according to his citation. "Leading his men forward in a sweep of the area, Hooper

destroyed three buildings housing enemy riflemen. At this point, he was attacked by a North Vietnamese officer, whom he fatally wounded with his bayonet."

As the squad continued to move forward, it was attacked by North Vietnamese in four bunkers. Hooper, again protecting his Soldiers, grabbed several hand grenades and raced down a small trench, which ran the length of the bunker line. He tossed the grenades into each bunker, eventually killing all the occupants.

At the end of the attack, Hooper established a final line and reorganized his men, still not accepting treatment and not consenting to be evacuated until the next morning. Along with his bul-

let wounds, Hooper received several shrapnel wounds.

A *Seattle Weekly* story states that Hooper retired from the Army in 1974 with a \$12,000 retirement check that he carried around in his shoe.