

# **Haysop Creek Bridge is now called “Sp. 4 Willie Gardner, Jr. Memorial Bridge”**

By Deborah Martin  
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Sp. 4 Willie Gardner, Jr., a Vietnam hero has become the first black soldier to have a construction in Bibb County dedicated in honor of his sacrifice for his country. The Haysop Creek Bridge on highway 25 is now known as “Sp. 4 Willie Gardner, Jr. Memorial Bridge.”

Willie Gardner, Jr. was born on July 12, 1950 in Bibb County. His parents are 80-years old Bernice Gardner and Willie Gardner Sr. He has four sisters and three brothers and they are as follows: Lucille Melton, William Gardner, Estella Chism and Glenda Marsh, James Gardner and Earnest Gardner who is now deceased.

Willie graduated from Faucette High School in Brent. After joining the US Army on June 14, 1970, he was killed in action eight months later on February 12, 1971 in the Republic of Vietnam. He was a Specialist 4 in Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry in the 32nd Infantry Division the famous (Americal).

On that fateful evening, Willie Gardner volunteered to lead a team through the jungle to search for the enemy. He never returned from that mission. “We are here to honor and celebrate the life of Willie Gardner, Jr.” He was a true hero and no one has felt the sacrifice of Willie Gardner like his mother Mrs. Bernice Gardner”, Kinard said.

Gathered at the Brent City Hall on Friday May 22, Willie Gardener’s family and the very men, who had served with him in Viet Nam, sat solemnly remembering the man who had such an impact on each of their lives. “You can see the love the men had for Willie Gardener, Jr.” Member of Charlie Company Dennis Murphy said. As each Vietnam Vet spoke of Willie Gardner, all who attended the ceremony learned, who Willie Gardner, Jr., the man really was and what he truly stood for. There were over 70 people who humbly attended the ceremony.

First Lt., John C. Calhoun, said, “When I came in and saw the portrait of Willie, I decided then that his picture defines the character of the man. There is nothing else to be said.”

First Lt. Platoon Leader, Peter Doyle said, “We are just very pleased that the county, the State of Alabama and City of Brent decided to honor Willie in this way.

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Sp. 5, Paul G. Grooms said, "When they first contacted me about coming down here, I took a moment of reflection and I kind of wondered how would you sum up Willie Gardener? The best way I could sum up Willie's life is love. He had love of his family, love of his nation, love of life and love for us.

Now, VP for Enrollment and Student Affairs at Neumann College Dennis Murphy said, "When I received the call about Willie, my wife asked if he had any regrets.

She had never asked me that before and it stopped me in my tracks. I looked away for a moment and said yes, I have two regrets. One has been fulfilled today upon meeting the Gardner family and thanking them for their sacrifice. The second regret I can't change. I didn't bring Willie home to his mama."

Murphy went on to explain who Willie Gardener was. He said, "Willie was a gentle giant of a man. Mrs. Gardener, you raised a son that loved his family. He often spoke of his home, his extended family, his mama's cooking and his God.

Willie always put others first. If he had sea rations and you didn't, he would share it with you. If you were having difficulty carrying your ammunition and equipment, he would share your load. If your need was to talk about home, your girlfriend and your dreams, Willie was a great listener. He was completely non judgmental.

He accepted the good and the bad with the same even temperament. He was a rock and we could always count on him and in war that made him our MVP.

Willie was a great soldier. He epitomized the statistics and the mark of a great soldier. He had endurance. No one could carry more or walk further than he. He had courage. He knew the dangers of war but he also knew he could never let his troopers down. Willie never backed down when asked to do more. He was a true American hero."

Willie Gardner, Jr., was posthumously awarded the following: Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart First Award, Purple Heart Second Award, Army Commendation Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Qualification Badges on the rifle, automatic rifle, grenade, pistol and machine gun.

Seven of Willie Gardener's 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, traveled from as far as Massachusetts. They were as follows: John C. Calhoun, Co. C 1-46 Field First Sergeant of Ware Shoals, South Carolina, Peter K. Doyle, Co. C 1-46, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt., Platoon Leader from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Kenneth M. Gates, Co. C 1-46, Sp. 4 T.O. from Warren, Illinois, C. Lanny Gilliland, Co. C 1-46, Sp. 4, Rifleman, from Hurdle Mills, North Carolina, Paul G. Grooms, Co. C-1-46, Sp. 4, Rifleman, from Bismarck, North Dakota, Dennis J. Murphy, Co. C 1-46, Sp. 4, Rifleman, from Wayne, Pennsylvania and William G. Walker, Co. C 1-46, Sgt, Squad Leader from Vine Grove, Kentucky.

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Gilliland was the main force that took on the responsibility of getting in touch with all the men who had served with Willie Gardener, Jr., to make this special auspicious trip to Brent Alabama for the ceremony. Veteran Affairs Roger Kinard helped William Holifield coordinate the bridge naming.

Kinard said State Representative Cam Ward was the spearhead for today's proclamation and dedication of this bridge in Willie Gardner's honor.

Rep. Ward said, "It is very seldom that I have the opportunity to really be as honored and humbled as I have am today. I know that words and speeches and even naming of the bridge won't do enough to ease some of the sorrow that you have felt. If you look at that wonderful picture there (Willie Gardner, Jr) and you think about this monument that we are dedicating in his honor today.

It makes you realize that as someone had said earlier, God is indeed shining down upon us today with his arm around Willie Gardner and he has a big smile on his face and that makes it a little bit more worthwhile out there when you see that."

Representative Ward presented to the Gardner family, with a copy of the House Joint Resolution 23 that was signed by the Governor of Alabama, Bob Riley approving the dedication of the bridge. It was beautifully framed.

Kinard wanted acknowledge Johnson Sign, Citizens who signed the petition for this dedication, Ashley's Florists for the table centerpiece and the Centreville Press for covering this special occasion.

"I think they're just extremely pleased that their family member, their loved one is going to have his name out there. It kind of validates what he did." His name is going to be out there forever more, being recognized for his service and his gallantry. He was a Silver Star recipient, which is third back from the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was a soldier's soldier," Kinard said.

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**See photos below.**



**Center Piece/Sign:** This Centerpiece was made for Willie Gardner, Jr. Memorial Bridge Dedication. Ashley's Florist donated this floral arrangement. Photo by Deborah Martin, Centreville Press.



**Haysop Platoon:** Seven of Willie Gardner, Juniors Platoon is honoring their fellow soldier at Brent City Hall. Pictured R-L is John C. Calhoun, Peter K. Doyle, Kenneth M. Gates, C. Lanny Gilliland, Paul G. Grooms, Dennis J. Murphy and William G. Walker. Photo by Deborah Martin, Centreville Press.



**State Representative Cam Ward** presenting to the family a beautiful framed document signed by Governor Bob Riley dedicating a bridge now named “The Willie Gardner, Jr. Memorial Bridge” Photo by Deborah Martin, Centreville Press



**Haysop Family:** The Gardener family is attending a ceremony they will never forget. Known as a wonderful loving son and brother, Willie Gardner is being honored today, proudly by those who know what kind of hero he truly was. Seated front L-R is William Garner, Lucille Melton, Bernice Gardner, Glenda Marsh and Stella Chism. Pictured Back L-R Veterans Affairs Roger Kinard and State Rep. Cam Ward. Brother - James Gardner could not attend his brother Willie’s dedication. Photo by Deborah Martin, Centreville Press.

