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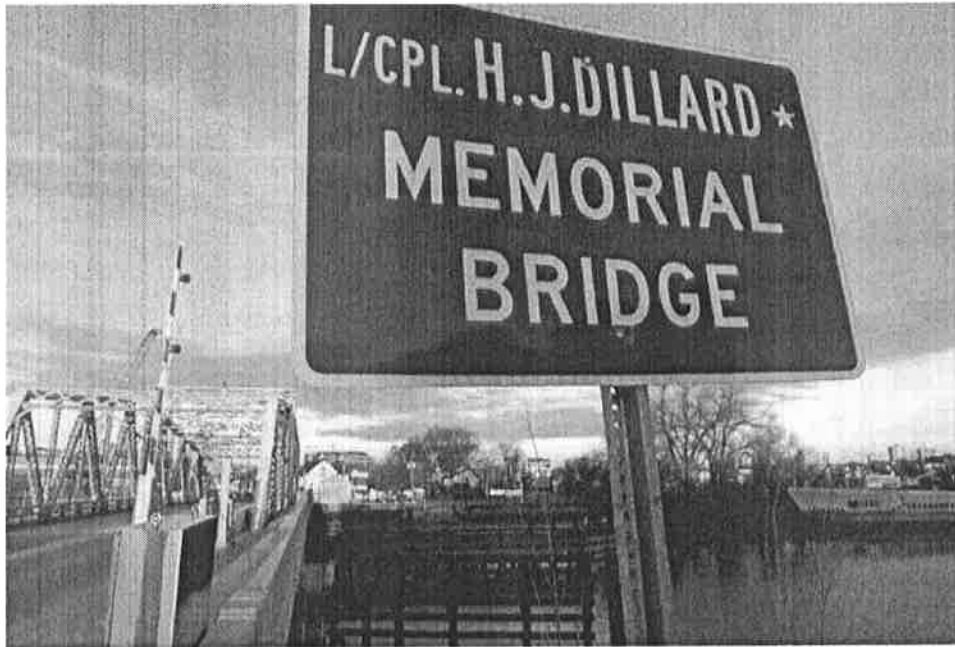
NO. 1 IN BREAKING LOCAL NEWS

## The Name-Dropper: Harold J. Dillard Memorial Bridge

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BY JEFFREY PAGE

SPECIAL TO THE RECORD | THE RECORD



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The Court Street Bridge carries Harold Dillard's name.

*Who was Lee of Fort Lee, Votee of Votee Park and Merritt of Camp Merritt? The Name-Dropper gives you the lowdown on some of the people whose names you see on public statues, memorial plaques, park signs, highways and even some local streets around North Jersey. Have suggestions? Email them to [features@northjersey.com](mailto:features@northjersey.com) and put Name-Dropper in the subject field.*

Harold Dillard was not the president. He didn't find the cure for an unforgiving disease, and he didn't sign the Declaration of Independence. He was just a guy from the neighborhood, well-liked by the people on his block and by classmates and teammates at Hackensack High School.

Nevertheless, his name came to grace the century-old Court Street Bridge, an important crossing of the Hackensack River that joins Bogota and Hackensack.

In 1981, the Hackensack City Council approved a measure to rename the crossing as the Harold J. Dillard Memorial Bridge in tribute to a nice guy killed in Vietnam 14 years earlier.

More recently the bridge, built in 1908 and in pitiful condition, underwent a rebuilding. Again, the city dedicated it to Dillard's memory – to the relief of some of his friends who feared his name might be lost.

Dillard was known in his Passaic Street neighborhood as someone always willing to lend a hand, and known throughout the city for his athletic exploits. For example, before graduation from Hackensack High, he got honorable mention on the All-County Track Team, perhaps based on his high jump of 6 feet 4 inches – he also ran hurdles – and was cited for exemplary sportsmanship, The Record reported at the time. He won letters for varsity football and basketball as well as track.

### Photos: How some North Jersey spots got their names

Dillard, known to some friends as Duke and to some others as Dukie, graduated in the Hackensack Class of 1965. Before the year was out he enlisted for war, most likely aware that Vietnam would be in his immediate future. But by signing up and not waiting to be drafted, he could be fairly sure of getting into the branch of service he wanted, said Gene Puntasecca, one of Dillard's high school buddies. That was the Marine

Corps, though his listing in the Class of '65's yearbook notes an interest in the Air Force.

Being a Marine in Vietnam in May of 1967 made it a good bet that Dillard would find himself in Operation Hickory, the prolonged combat in Quang Tri Province designed to force units of the North Vietnamese Army out of the Demilitarized Zone. It was a brutal 10-day fight in which 142 Marines died.

One was Harold J. Dillard at the age of 20.

And, except for his family's private grief and recollections, and the sorrow of his friends, that could have been the end of the story of Harold Dillard. But that would not do.

"How do I put this," Puntasecca said. "Harold Dillard was one of those rare people who didn't have a bad word for anyone, and no one had a bad word for him. You met him; you liked him. Simple as that."

Another friend, Noël Dunn, described Dillard in terms you don't often hear anymore. "He was three years older than me, and he was my hero. We were all very proud of him, proud to know him. You knew that he was going to be a very important guy some day," Dunn said.

Dunn also recalled that Dillard, three grades ahead of him and a varsity track star, took the time to coach him in the art of the run.

But it wasn't just athletics in which Dillard excelled. "It didn't matter if he knew you or not," Dunn said, "but if he came walking along and saw you looking sad, he'd stop and ask what was wrong. Then, 'Let's talk,' he'd say.

"That happened with me a few times when I was feeling down and – wow! – that was my hero talking to me. And he didn't care about color, didn't matter if you were black or white," said Dunn, who, like Dillard, is African-American. "It was like he loved everybody."

After enlistment and boot camp Dillard served a tour of duty in Vietnam and took part in Operation Hastings, an 18-day battle during which the Marines suffered 126 killed as they inflicted heavier casualties on several companies of the North Vietnamese Army. Dillard was awarded the Vietnamese Medal of Gallantry.

After Hastings, he was assigned to Okinawa, from where he sent a letter to the aunt and uncle who raised him and his siblings – his mother died of pneumonia when Harold was 8 years old – to say he might be coming home soon. But then a second letter arrived in Hackensack. It was Harold again, this time telling his grandmother that he was back in Vietnam for a second tour.

Dillard was killed in May 1967 in intense combat at a place called Hill 117 near Quang Tri, itself about 20 miles south of the DMZ.

"When the news came, an absolute sense of disbelief and shock swept through all of us who knew him," Puntasecca said. "I saw it in the newspaper. What a terrible thing that loss was, that this really great kid was gone."

As word got around a few years ago that the Dillard bridge was to be temporarily closed for rehabilitation, some people who had known Harold Dillard began a campaign to make sure their friend's name remained on the crossing and that public recognition of Dillard never would be lost.