

## Employee Returns After Cancer Battle

By Betsy Kozak-Howard, ACC-APG



Working for the Army Contracting Command – Aberdeen Proving Ground is even better the second time around, according to Ernie Dixon, procurement analyst in the contracting center’s Research Triangle Park Division outside of Raleigh, N.C. What makes it better is that he is healthier and doing well which wasn’t the case in 2011 when Dixon was diagnosed with cancer.

When he left, his responsibilities were distributed among his co-workers and Dixon left his job to focus on his health. After two years of battling head and neck cancer of the soft-palate, Dixon returned to ACC-APG in February 2013.

“I’m happy to be back,” said Dixon. “I feel great and I’m truly blessed to have a job doing what I love.”

The Army veteran recalled the day that he was informed of his diagnosis.

“I was at work when I received the phone call from my doctor and he told me that I had an extremely rare head and neck cancer. Less than 400 cases of it had been reported across the U.S. and Europe in the last 30 years,” he said. “Nothing could have prepared me for that phone call. I felt like I was just issued a death sentence. I was told that this cancer is very rare and I perplexed as to the cause since I had never been a smoker, dipped or chewed tobacco products. I was devastated and had no idea what I was facing.”

Dixon first discovered the cancer himself when he noticed a lesion in his mouth. Not certain what it was, Dixon went for medical testing and the initial tests were negative. With follow-up analysis it was clear that he had a cancerous tumor within the fleshy soft palate in the top of his mouth.

“My surgery to remove the tumor was scheduled for May 2011,” said Dixon. “While I waited for my surgery date, the tumor grew and it became difficult to breathe, talk or eat. The tumor felt like the consistency of spaghetti in my mouth and it would fall back into my airway making it impossible to sleep. Concerned, my wife notified the doctor and the surgery was completed a month early.”

With the baseball-sized tumor removed, Dixon began radiation and chemotherapy treatments at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Cancer Center.

“The treatments were difficult,” recalled the father of five. “I couldn’t talk very well due to the atrophy and burning from the radiation.”

Dixon’s radiation treatments ended in July 2011 and were followed by chemotherapy in October. He also had to endure a feeding tube from April 2011 until December 2012. In the process he lost a significant amount of weight; starting at 240 pounds and leveling off at 180 pounds when the treatment was.

Dixon said the radiation and chemo caused immune system suppression to the point that his red and white blood cell count was extremely impaired making his ability to fight infections a challenge. Through numerous blood transfusions, multiple emergency room visits and a few trips to the intensive care unit due to infections, Dixon still held on.

On the path to recovery, Dixon had some health setbacks. “I was prescribed some powerful medication to help me through the pain,” he pointed out. “As I recovered, I had to wean myself from the narcotics to detoxify my body. It was difficult and now I have a new appreciation for people with drug addictions. I suffered withdrawal symptoms such as cramps, sweats and delirium tremens for more than seven months and was just extremely uncomfortable.”

During an emergency room visit, doctors misdiagnosed a problem with my appendix. Two days after this visit, the appendix ruptured which required emergency surgery and a nine-day hospital stay. Dixon acknowledges “the perfection of God’s

timing. If this had happened when my immune system was so suppressed, we would not be having this discussion right now," he quipped.

Throughout his entire treatment, Dixon felt that the support of his family, friends, faith and co-workers was instrumental to his recovery. When he left his duties with the RTP Division, he initially took a medical leave of absence which exhausted all of his sick and annual leave. Dixon was approved for the Voluntary Leave Transfer Program, which gave government employees the ability to donate leave to support his medical emergency. After approximately six months on medical leave, Dixon resigned his position.

"I hated leaving my job but felt truly blessed by the donations of leave," Dixon recalled. "My utmost concern was taking care of my family and the donated leave helped ease some of this stress. I personally sent thank you e-mail messages to each of the donors to express my gratitude for their generosity."

Dixon is currently in remission and in December 2012, he was given clearance to return to work.

"I wanted to return to work and was grateful for my chance to contribute. I applied for a procurement analyst position with ACC-APG and I feel fortunate to be back. I wanted so much to return to the RTP Division that I would have accepted a position sweeping floors," Dixon concluded.