Vietnam veteran beats cancer, dedicates life to service

Vietnam veteran John Dillahunt used DAV’s Transportation Network to help him beat cancer. For nearly a decade, he’s been connecting his fellow veterans with transportation through the program.

John Dillahunt’s life changed the moment he was diagnosed with cancer. Although he had no idea what his next steps would be, he knew he would have to find a way to manage the 285-mile round trip to the nearest Veterans Affairs medical center in Durham, N.C. for treatment.

Dillahunt would be forced to undergo a surgery, hormone
therapy and 32 radiation treatments. This in itself is no small task, but is considerably more taxing when considering those radiation treatments would require Dillahunt to travel four hours to and from the VA hospital every day for nearly six weeks.

Dillahunt served in the Army from 1967 to 1972 and served two combat tours in Vietnam. At the time of his diagnosis, he was not familiar with DAV and the services available to him.

“I was in Bridgeton [N.C.] one day when I happened to walk outside and see a DAV van,” said Dillahunt. “I never really thought about what they did but I decided to contact them and see if they could help me.”

Dillahunt said the decision to call DAV not only changed his life, but also put him on a path to positively impact the lives of other veterans for years to come.

“They took care of me – 32 times, five days a week,” said Dillahunt. “I wanted to give something back to those who gave to me. Helping the guys and gals that fought for this country – there’s nothing better than that.”

Dillahunt now serves as the van coordinator for Chapter 40 in New Bern, N.C. and as a volunteer driver.

“When I was going through surgery and treatment, I just felt like if the Lord chooses to keep me around, I would dedicate my life to helping others,” said Dillahunt. “Anything I can do to help someone in need, that’s where my ministry is.” “He never ceases to amaze me,” said Karen A. Hacker, Commander of DAV Chapter 40 in New Bern, N.C. “Earlier this year we were given an opportunity to have a fundraiser with one week notice. This fundraiser was labor intensive, and I almost cancelled the event because of lack of participation, but John called me and volunteered himself, his wife and donated his ATV to assist in the fundraiser.”
"I was not aware that John was still suffering from shingles at the time, but he was at the event both days from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. even though he was in pain and taking medication," said Hacker. "John told me ‘we can’t not do this’ and with his assistance we had a great fundraiser and raised money toward a new DAV van.

Dillahunt’s wife of 48 years, Elner, is also a volunteer driver for DAV

“I got involved in volunteering for DAV because of seeing my husband’s dedication and because DAV helped my husband with transportation during the time he needed help the most,” said, Elner

Elner said she has seen a change in her husband since he became active in DAV, saying he is always willing to help anyone but the biggest difference is his helping veterans

“He is aware of his drivers on a daily basis and ensures all is well with our drivers and our vans,” said Hacker. “John will sometimes get a call at 4 a.m. and he or his wife, Elner, will get the van on the road by 5 a.m. and ensure those veterans don’t miss their appointments.

“This is a perfect example of what compassion veteran-to-veteran can accomplish,” said DAV National Director of Voluntary Services, John Kleindienst. “Mr. Dillahunt was in need, he called DAV and we were able to ensure he got to those critical appointments. And now look at all he has done and continues to do for his fellow veterans. With caring and dedicated volunteers like Mr. Dillahunt, DAV is in a great position to continue to empower veterans to live high-quality lives for decades to come.

On top of volunteering with DAV, Dillahunt is an active member of Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, where he chairs its deacon board, and as a Sunday school teacher. When he finds himself with a down moment he volunteers for the Food Bank of
Central Eastern Carolina by distributing food to participating churches

“John Dillahunt is undoubtedly the most caring man you can ever meet,” said fellow Chapter 40 member Guy Pascarella. “I have experienced John’s determination and pride as he dedicates himself to help his fellow man. Thank you, John, for making my life more meaningful.”