

## Battle of the Bulge

### Sailors weigh in on what worked for them

By Terrina Weatherspoon, Defense Media Activity

**“The stress of your weight in the military is immeasurable,” said AMC Michelle Korab. “For me it started with the sweatband I was required to wear in Boot Camp for chow, letting everyone know I wasn’t to be given sweets of any kind.”**

Every day, service members across the Navy struggle with their weight. Diets, pills, energy drinks, fat suits, and extreme measures are all used to hit that magic number whether on the scale or in the waist band; most hoping to lose weight and not careers. However, there is a better way to keep what you’ve earned.

Sailors can achieve long-term health and fitness by making regular physical activity and a solid nutrition plan a lifestyle priority. That commitment is consistent with Navy Core Values and helps ensure Sailors remain competitive. Every Sailor competes to stay in the Navy and fitness is one component of this process.

When young Gina Colagiovanni joined the Navy, she was well within standards. At 5 foot nothing and about 125 pounds, she had room to grow. But her weight soon became a roller coaster ride that she was desperate to be thrown from.

“I was interested in submitting a special program screening package,” said Senior Chief Colagiovanni. “Although I was within standards, I quickly found that neither was I in any physical shape, which would have supported passing the screening test, nor did I possess the requisite PRT scores to even apply. You never know what options you are limiting yourself to until you have no options at all. But that’s what happens when you only strive to meet the bare minimum, and as much as I hate to admit it, I was that person.”

And Colagiovanni is not alone. Many Sailors do not see the purpose in pushing themselves to an excellent or outstanding score on PRT. Although achieving the bare minimum is acceptable according to Navy standards, it may lead to anxiety associated with the bi-yearly test.

“I tried every ‘get skinny quick’ fad diet that came out, to include but not limited to, the ever so horrid cabbage soup diet,” said Colagiovanni. “The unfortunate reality is when people continually ride that line of being out of standards, they tend to take drastic, and most of the time unhealthy, measures come crunch time.

Truth be told, I did the same. And I can honestly say that it has been easier to change my lifestyle than to deal with the stress involved in trying to cut weight quickly those two times a year.”

The Navy encourages Sailors to visit their Physical Readiness Program website ([http://www.public.navy.mil/bupersnpc/support/21st\\_Century\\_Sailor/physical/Pages/default2.aspx0](http://www.public.navy.mil/bupersnpc/support/21st_Century_Sailor/physical/Pages/default2.aspx0).) There Sailors can find sample workouts for individuals and groups.

A monthly newsletter is also produced that has a workout of the month that anyone can do. It generally has a beginner and advanced program. OPNAVINST 6110.1J guides also provide information on physical fitness programs, different exercises to use, contraindicated exercises and stretches, and general nutrition guidance.

Chief Petty Officer Maggie Smith joined the military at 5’2 and 140 pounds. Her hate for getting yelled at helped her shed 37 pounds and graduate boot camp at 113 pounds. So years later, when she found herself at her heaviest at 185 she began yelling at herself - as a chief petty officer, she needed to see something else when she looked in the mirror.

She decided to really get honest and accountable. She knew there was more she could do, so she did it. She didn’t always succeed, but she would keep that open dialogue with herself.

“There is no secret to success,” said Smith. “It was diet and exercise, moderately and regularly. Period.”

Currently at 103 pounds, Smith is now a competitive body builder and her command’s fitness leader.

If only it were always that simple, right?



Senior Chief Gina Colagiovanni - Before and after.

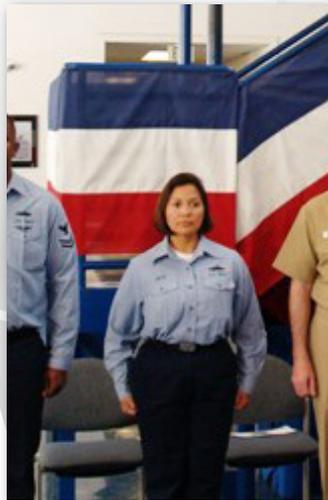
Smith said it can be. But Sailors have to start holding themselves accountable.

"I knew I was overweight and had to stop eating as much and get more movement in my body before my physical fitness test; and yes, I have had to be taped, but passed," said Smith. "That is why I am very empathetic to the struggles of weight loss. I can appreciate the struggle involved, but my threshold for excuses is low to zero. You hear all kinds of weight gain urban legends about genetics/TAD/deployment/LIMDU status; and most Sailors are convinced that this is the ground truth."

"I used to feel a sense of dread every six months when it was time for PRT again," said Korab, who is down 80 pounds from her topped out weight of 222. "I tried all of the extreme measures you've heard about. I went to medical and had my thyroid checked. No amount of dieting or exercise seemed to work. I was desperate and felt like my career totally depended on it."

Smith said that while medical conditions may play a part in weight fluctuations, there usually is another side of the story.

"TAD's/deployment/LIMDU, etc., did not make me unfit," said Smith. "I did that. Me, alone. As a CFL, I document scores during Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. There are one hundred and eighty days - opportunities - between each cycle to maintain or improve my score. I make the choice. Further, as a member of the United States Navy, it is a condition of my continued employment. If I want a different metric, I can choose another employer."



*Chief Petty Officer Maggie Smith, after losing 82 pounds is her command's fitness leader and a competitive body builder.*

Korab said her weight loss finally started on cruise. She lost 40 pounds, then over time, 40 more.

"It takes an immense amount of self-control and knowledge of what is good for you," said Korab. "Of course it's hard, and it's easy to place blame on food, family, and the Navy."

Chief Justin Perdun blamed it on a deployment to Afghanistan.

"The food was free and available," said Perdun. "There were even fast food joints you could visit. After about six months of eating what I wanted and not exercising, I got up to 160. At 5'4 it was quite a heft."

Lucky for Perdun, new requirements meant that he would not have to take the PRT while on deployment. He was able to recognize the problem and correct it before it did serious damage to his career.

That routine brought Justin down to 145 and the best shape of his life, effectively saving his career. He was recently selected for chief, something that would not have happened with a failed PRT.

ITCS Tanya Whitner joined the Navy at 5'6 and 163 pounds. Already on the border, and having battled with her weight her whole young life, her weight crept up to 205. After failing two PRTs, she knew she had to make a change.

"I was out-performing my peers, but because of my weight I was not selected for missions, Sailor of the Quarter, or awards," said Whitner. "I had the continual sense of, if I do not fit this weight standard, then I'm worthless. I was always in a state of embarrassment because I was wearing the largest uniforms and they were still tight."

Whitner even resorted to taking laxatives for several months in hopes of losing weight, not fully understanding how exercise, nutrition and weight loss worked. After failing to advance to

E-6, and knowing she was just points away, points she could have had, had she not received a promotable eval due to her PRT failures, she decided it was time.

"I knew right then and there that this was entirely my own fault and I had to get it under control," said Whitner.

The next cycle she was in standards, received an EP eval and was subsequently selected for promotion.

"I was not educated on proper nutrition, diet and exercise," said Whitner. "I didn't understand portion sizes or the fact that

running one mile would not erase the amount of food I was eating."

The Navy has steadily tried to educate Sailors on nutrition by providing programs intended to set the foundation for a culture that supports healthy eating. Programs ranging from healthful eating to weight management to performance nutrition are all located on the Navy nutrition webpage.

HMCS Ally Chiang lost 50 pounds to join the Navy, but gained it all back and then some. It took failing two PRTs to get her back on track. She now serves as her command's CFL and co-chairs the CPO 365 PT committee. She was the Armed Forces honor runner for Fitness Magazine's Women's Half Marathon this past April and is also a ShipShape instructor.

She said the Navy has come a very long way toward a culture of

fitness. Currently the Physical Readiness Program website is the most viewed series of web pages on BUPERS. Also, during many on-site visits Navy program coordinators see commands using the workouts provided by the CFL 5-day course and the CFL Seminar.

“Commands are implementing preventative measures such as mandatory command PT, command directed FEP enrollment and courtesy Body Composition Assessments,” said Chiang. “The current OPNAVINST directs members to be physically fit year round. My wish list for future additions would be to conduct mock PFAs in the same manner as they conduct random urinalysis tests. Pick random personnel each month at the beginning of the week and require them to run a mock PFA toward the end of the week, with considerations for mission and operational requirements of course.”

“Although some duty stations do present more of a challenge than others as far as living a healthy lifestyle is concerned, there are still solid fitness programs in place to assist Sailors who find themselves needing or requiring it,” said Colagiovanni. “However, I believe it all goes back to personal accountability and how much you want it and how hard you are willing to work for it.”

Truth is, said Chiang, most people who are pushing the limits of the current BCA requirements usually do not have a professional military uniform appearance. She encourages Sailors to try swallowing the same magic pill that Smith and Colagiovanni suggested - A healthy dose of accountability.

“We all have reasons why we can’t/haven’t been able to accomplish goals, and in my opinion it is usually a psychological block and not a physical one that hinders a person’s success,” said Chiang.

There are quite a few people who complain for years that they are unable to lose weight, and then one day they get serious and are able to lose it, said Chiang. It’s just a matter of wanting to change more than you want to stay the same.

But for Lt. Cmdr. Allison Martin, it was a physical thing. At a healthy 135 when she joined the Navy, pregnancy brought Martin up to her all-time high of 235. Martin was able to lose 65 pounds of that, but two years later was back up to 222 with the delivery of her second son.

“I came to terms with being one of those people that just puts on a lot of weight during pregnancy,” said Martin. “But five weeks postpartum I started the Couch-to-5K program. I had to stop the running program after a few weeks because I got a heel spur caused by chronic Achilles tendonitis. The sports medicine doc basically told me that I was pushing myself too hard too soon after pregnancy. But I was doing what I thought I had to do because I had to lose 66 pounds to be in weight standards and there was no way I was going to fail. I was not going to be that fat officer.”

Martin ended up hiring a personal trainer to help her with her

exercise and nutrition plan. Through her trainer and her own research, she learned that fat loss is hormonal and that nutrition is more important than any exercise program out there.

The Navy realizes this as well and in response is rolling out new programs for the entire Navy family this fall. The first project is “Nourish,” which takes a look at where our food comes from with the goal of starting a Navy-wide conversation on food and increasing individual food literacy. Next month we will be piloting the Nourish Family kit with 200 Navy families.

The next project is the enhanced version of the “Go for Green,” effort that assists Sailors with making informed decisions about their food options. A stoplight system that identifies foods based on their nutrition density and wholesomeness. Foods that are the least processed and have little to no added sugar, salt and fat are coded “green.” Foods slightly more processed are “yellow” and highly processed foods with a lot of added sugar, fat or salt are “red,” these should be limited or avoided. This fall commands will receive revised “Go for Green” guidance and marketing materials. The goal of the program is to increase awareness of both Sailors and food service personnel on balancing food options.

“I believe the biggest struggle today is that people do not understand that the things they eat or don’t eat have a major impact on their bodies,” said Petty Officer 1st Class Shannen Carambia.

At 5’7, Carambia found herself at 210 pounds and very unhappy. She began working out twice daily, eating better and working with an MWR rep at the gym. She is now a healthy 160 pounds and her command’s CFL.

“I have been in the Navy for 18.5 years now and tell people daily about the importance of nutrition and fitness in their lives,” said Carambia.

“The trick is, not being afraid to take that first step,” said Colagiovanni. “The road may be a long one, but it will be worth it. Grab a partner; surround yourself with like-minded, goal-oriented people. That support system can be the fuel for a successful journey.”

**\*\*MCPON Mike Stevens noted during a recent all hands call that the process the Navy currently uses to measure body fat is not due to change anytime soon.**

**“It’s probably not perfect,” said Stevens. “I don’t know that there is a system that is.”**

**Stevens went on to say that the current system is one the Navy can do anywhere in the world with a tape measure and the right qualified people, and that it gets Sailors measured appropriately. However, he adds, “It doesn’t mean we aren’t looking for better ways to do things, and we will continue to review our PRT process.”\*\***