

A Sailor assigned to the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC) is using his love of fitness and weight lifting to inspire others – and being rewarded for his efforts.

Information System Technician Third Class Benjamin Salb, a native of Waukesha, Wis., was selected as the Navy's 1st place (male) winner for the 2011 Bodybuilding.com Military Challenge.

The 12-week contest, open to all active and reserve military members and their spouses, challenged participants to transform their bodies by reaching physical fitness goals. Winners were chosen based on their ability to reach those goals and their ability to inspire others.

“I know what it's like to look in the mirror and be disappointed even though you feel you've worked harder than anyone else in the gym,” wrote Salb in his required contest essay. “I know what it's like to want to give up. I've been there on numerous occasions.”

Salb learned of the contest through sheer coincident when a fellow Sailor saw him wearing a Bodybuilding.com T-shirt.

“I got a free T-shirt with one of my [bodybuilding.com] orders, and the shirt was from the 2010 Military Challenge,” he said. “One day I came into work wearing the shirt, when one of my Shipmates asked me if I had done the challenge. I had no idea what he was talking about.”

Salb, who said he has battled insecurities with his body image since a young age, decided to check out what the contest was all about and quickly discovered this was a challenge he wanted to take on.

“The reason I decided to start bodybuilding was because I didn't like my foundation,” he explained. “I'm not one of those genetic super humans that came out of the womb with a six-pack. I'm thick; my entire family is thick. Heck, even the state I was raised in is thick; I'm from Wisconsin.”

Staying motivated during the 12-week event wasn't easy, said Salb. “Every day around 9 a.m. I wanted to quit. I wanted to break the glass on the vending machine and eat everything made of chocolate.”

During those tough moment Salb said he would consider the “nothing worth doing is ever easy.”

“I would reflect on where I was in life and the challenges I went through to get there. Nothing I did was easy,” he said. “The Military Challenge may have been especially tough, but I knew eventually it would just be a memory to reflect on, and I wanted it to be a good memory. So, I kept pushing.”

Salb said that there were many days during the competition that he just didn’t feel like himself.

“I’m usually a chipper guy, making snarky comments and mingling with my co-workers,” he said. “But during those 12 weeks I always felt weak, like I had the flu. I could barely walk up the stairs and the elevator became my new best friend.”

Though difficult, Salb found encouragement and motivation through family, friends and co-workers.

“I never met someone that was not supportive,” he said. “NHHC was especially supportive to me during challenge. On a daily basis, someone would ask me how I was feeling or how my results were coming along. They wanted to be involved, which was the best thing they could have done because I’m not sure if I would have managed if I felt alone during the process.”

When it came to diet and exercise, many options were available to Salb. Bodybuilding.com even offered plans to contestants though personal trainers online, but the final choice of what plan to follow was left up to each competitor.

“Through the years I’ve accumulated enough knowledge through sites like Bodybuilding.com to create my own plan,” said Salb. “I ate the same things at the same time of the day for 12 weeks.”

Eating almost 200 pounds of chicken breast during the competition, Salb said he never quite got used to eating chicken and brown rice for breakfast.

“The competition is over for now,” said Salb. “They notified all the winners via email and will eventually update the Bodybuilding.com website. I won first place for the Navy, but I was notified that I was not the overall winner.”

Still, being selected the best in the Navy is no small feat and Salb hopes his achievement will inspire and motivate other to reach their fitness goals, too.

“It’s never too late, and it’s never too hard for anyone to get involved with bodybuilding,” he said. “It’s what you make of it, and if you feel you don’t have the body type for it you’re wrong, you just have to push yourself.”