Government Documents for All: PS or Preventive Maintenance Monthly

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Government Documents for All: 
PS or Preventive Maintenance Monthly

By Tim Dodge, History & Political Science Librarians, Professor, Auburn University 
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One of the more intriguing government documents, in my opinion, is PS: Preventive Maintenance Monthly (D 101.87: ). Published by the Army through the Government Printing Office, later, Government Publishing Office, from 1951 through 2019, PS (also known as PS Magazine, the title varies) was, essentially, a monthly comic book filled with preventive maintenance instructions and tips for everything from guns to trucks to tanks. Before the reader thinks this is simply of interest to military technology enthusiasts, let me note there is plenty here of human interest and that a sociologist or a psychiatrist might have some choice things to say about what was portrayed in PS and how.

When I started working at Auburn University as a Government Documents Reference Librarian in 1992, I quickly discovered PS since one of my duties was processing shipments of government documents as they arrived. Not being a military veteran, PS was new to me. I recall being simultaneously amused and impressed. Amused, because the magazine featured anthropomorphic talking equipment and military personnel characters that featured suspiciously attractive looking females. The magazine also seemed to be straining a bit to include sufficient numbers of non-white characters as well. However, I was impressed by the good advice being presented on how to properly maintain military equipment. This was non-technical but well-phrased advice on how to maintain such equipment: things to watch out for, when to take certain steps (like oil changes, for example), and good precautionary advice in using equipment and vehicles. PS is not the same thing as the numerous and far more detailed Department of Defense Technical Manual series where the advanced mechanic or engineer will find very technical information.

PS was started in 1951 in the middle of the Korean War and in an era rather different from our own. Unlike today’s Army which actively recruits women, and which now includes women in combat roles, the Army of 1951 was overwhelmingly male. I mention this because, the female personnel portrayed in PS in the 1950s were even more blatantly drawn to appeal to the male viewer than those suspiciously attractive female characters I saw in the magazine in the 1990s.

Virginia Commonwealth University has created an online archive featuring images of the magazine covering the period 1951-1971 (see https://digital.library.vcu.edu/islandora/object/vcu%3Apsp). The cover of the third issue available, August 1951, perfectly illustrates this appeal to the magazine’s primary intended audience: it features a shapely woman in a two-piece bathing suit carrying a hose and bucket while behind her is a mad scramble of fully clothed men in Army uniforms frantically trying to be the first to write down his name on a sign-up sheet labeled “Duty Roster: Car Washing Detail” (see https://digital.library.vcu.edu/islandora/object/vcu%3A16910 ).

Not surprisingly, PS changed its approach over the decades. While I have not had the time to look at every issue through November 2019, what I have seen does indicate ongoing societal changes being reflected in the characters who inhabit the magazine. Women take a much more prominent and professional role (although still looking better than average) and, yes, there are some suspiciously handsome men who appear in recent decades as well. There is an increasingly diverse cast of races and ethnicities too. Yes, the military had been desegregated by President Harry Truman’s 1948 executive order but, as we know all too well, significant numbers of African Americans (and other underrepresented groups) do not show up in these early issues and certainly not in leadership roles.
Changing times also have now rendered the print magazine obsolete with the final issue appearing in November 2019. Now called *PS: The Army’s Preventive Maintenance Magazine*, the publication has become a regularly updated website: [https://www.psmagazine.army.mil/](https://www.psmagazine.army.mil/). Gone is the anthropomorphic talking equipment and mostly gone are the comic book human characters. Digital photos have replaced anthropomorphic equipment.

*PS* is now searchable. Perhaps reflecting budget cuts (despite the truly huge sums appropriated for the federal defense budget), there is a notice on the screen that as *PS* staff writers leave, they are not being replaced which means that there is no one available to respond to reader questions concerning the following areas: “Small Arms,” “CBRN [Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear],” “Construction CCE [Civil, Construction and Environmental],” “Missiles,” and “Mine Clearance/Mines/Mine Systems.”

Unintentionally, perhaps, *PS* is as much a reflection of major societal changes that have taken place as it is a source of good advice on maintaining military equipment over the past 73 years.