

The Life and Death of *The Log*

By David Poyer '71

“HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF *THE LOG*?” YOU ASK A MIDSHIPMAN. BLANK LOOK.

“DID YOU KNOW THE BRIGADE ONCE HAD ITS OWN MAGAZINE?” A BLINK AND ANOTHER BLANK LOOK.

“WE HAD OUR OWN MAGAZINE?” THE MIDSHIPMAN ASKS. THEN DEEP IN HIS EYES A QUESTION DAWNS, “BUT WHAT HAPPENED?”

Six years is a century to the Brigade. “Salty Sam” and “Midshiplizards,” gone. “Darior” and the “Company Cuties,” gone. “Professional Notes” and the “Washington Boast” issue and “Playmid,” gone, gone, gone. Even the memory of *The Log*, produced at the cost of so many midnight hours, has vanished from the Brigade. But, as the midshipman asked, “What happened?”

Let’s look back, before we look forward.

The Brigade’s magazine lives now only in the memories and cruise boxes of Alumni around the world...and at Nimitz Library in the Special Collections Room. Heavy cloth bindings seal volume after volume of issue after issue. Archives of *The Log* sit ready for inspection, colors nearly as bright as when they first circulated in Bancroft Hall.

The very first issue of *The Log*—marked “Mk I Mod I”—debuted on 31 October 1913 on heavy pulp paper with a simple blue-on-white cover with the USNA fouled anchor. Its sea poetry, squibs, athletic results, Fleet news and essays on Navy Spirit were accompanied by advertisements from Bailey, Banks, and Biddle and the Navy League. It was only eight pages long, but the magazine had a clear sense of its aim. Its editor-in-chief, Henry P. Samson, Class of 1914, wrote:

In this issue, *The Log* makes its initial bow to the public. It is not a smooth log by any means; there are no

barometric readings, no forces and directions of salty breezes, and no records of courts-martial; but, nevertheless, the editors hope that it will accomplish its purpose—namely, to keep the Brigade informed of the various happenings in our little world, and occasionally to make a smile creep over the features of the saddest among us.

We realize that there are many rocks and shoals ahead. . . .¹

Samson was right. Over the next 88 years there would be rocks and shoals; but for all that time, *The Log* would keep the Brigade informed about “our little world,” and bring many a smile.

The new weekly carried sports results, cartoons, jokes and complaints about traditions fading away. As early as April of that first year Samson had to answer complaints about an article about midshipmen study habits. “Do not take us too literally,” he explained. “*The Log* at times attempts to be humorous and speaks in language that to the uninitiated has a different meaning from that intended . . . this article was written in the spirit of gentle sarcasm and was so understood by the Brigade. Other people misunderstood and trouble followed.”² For the first time, but not the last, trouble came not from the “little world,” but from the great outer one that surrounded the Wall.

In 1916, the December issue carried a note that West Point class of 1918 had

decided to start a “paper” modeled on *The Log*, a precursor to *The Pointer*. It carried a re-telling of Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” set in Bancroft, “Professional Notes”—to become one of the longest-running columns—and sententious advice on conduct of personal affairs. It seemed to be a combination of a literary, professional journal, sports journal and humor magazine.

In April 1917, as WWI continued, the departments were gelling. They included “Professional Notes,” “Athletics” and “The Rhino Department” by “Midshipman Gooph,” a forerunner of “Salty Sam,” but employing such obscure slang it’s difficult to translate. Issues discussed a “land torpedo,” an explosive-packed, cable-controlled Model T. There were reams of moony poetry about “femmes” and mothers. “The Correct Skinny Gouge” parodied typical physics problems. In December, a headline announced “America Enters the War,” and a two-page spread for Murad cigarettes asked, “Everywhere—Why?” Later in the war the first dedicated issues began to appear: the “Red Mike” issue, the “Wood” issue and “The Savvy Number,” for those who pulled high grades.

The Log published all through the Great War and emerged in excellent fettle. By 1924 issues ran 24 pages, with notes on such current events as the Arctic

flight of the airship SHENANDOAH and a mercury boiler invented by a Naval Academy graduate. The athletics section was very large, and there were separate sections for news from each of the classes. The June issue had a beautiful hand-drawn color cover, and another perennial favorite appeared—cartoons.

Starting in the late 20s, the jokes and cartoons began to resonate with a modern sense of humor. By 1930, “Ye Yard Yodeler” relayed Yard gossip. Advertisements proliferated, including Coke, Edgeworth Pipe Tobacco, Horstmann’s Uniforms; a Lucky Strikes spot adorned the back cover. Dedicated issues continued with the December 1933 “Confidential” issue, complete with change pages, and an annual *Femmes’ Log*, written by women from nearby colleges.

“Salty Sam,” the department most fondly remembered by Alumni, developed gradually. Adumbrated as early as 1917, through the 20s and early 30s numerous pens covered Yard gossip columns under a myriad of titles. An untitled 29 April 1932 column is clearly in “Sam’s” anonymous and irreverent tone. But the first “Salty Sam” clearly identified as such, with a strange illustration of a midshipman with a Dixie cup pulled over his face, seems to have appeared on page seven, 21 October 1932 issue. By 1936, despite the Depression, issues ran color covers and 32 pages of high quality printing.

As WWII approached, *The Log* began publishing issues parodying mainstream publications, a practice that would lead to one of its greatest pratfalls decades later. The April 1941 “Washington Boast” issue was printed in tabloid format, including the comics, each parodied with amazing skill and rapier wit. Along with the amateur talent, comic artist Frank Martinek was brought in for a special “Don Winslow” adventure set at the Naval Academy, ending with the warning: “At the Academy, ‘Never blind drag’ is a time-honed tip . . . Espionage can be more destructive than gunfire!”²³ The November ’41 “Trydent” issue poked fun at the *Trident* magazine (then the USNA literary magazine, much like *Labyrinth* today). A David Lynch-like photo essay was followed by a pretentious takeoff on an Evelyn Waugh short story that was sure to inspire helpless laughter in the readers. H.A. Dorr’s wonderful cartoon “The Box Lunch That Hatched” is one of the hundreds of fantastic drawings published over the years by midshipmen whose talent outpaced that of most artists on today’s comic page.

During WWII, classes were graduated early and the Academy began training Reservists. Officered by USNA strippers detailed by the Executive Department, the V-7s lived in the Fourth Wing for four months and graduated as engineer officers.





The Log included them on its staff and even produced a special issue for them. The parodies of mainstream magazines continued. The March '44 “Squire” issue, with a clay-art cover portraying a popeyed sailor ogling a girl from the well of an LCVP, had *Esquire*-style columns and D. Webb-look cartoons. The next issue pilloried *The New Yorker*, with “The Talk of Bancroft with Salty Sam,” Peter Arno- and James Thurber-style cartoons, and paintings by C. Ward Cummings '47. On the back cover, Ernie Pyle endorsed Chesterfields.

By 1950 *The Log* was printed on glossy paper and ran to 40 plus pages, crammed with full color advertisements including: RCA, Western Electric, Allis-Chalmers, Esso, Moly, Philip Morris and TWA. The huge *Time* magazine spoof issue of 17 March was followed by imitations of *Esquire*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and even a story that seemed to be straight out of the pages of *Male*.

By the mid-1950s the typical issue was priced at 25 cents and had about 32 pages. The magazine looked very much like a slick commercial monthly, indeed nearly as good as the *Proceedings* of that day, and with many of the same advertisers, along with local jewelers, mens' shops, Wildroot Creme Oil and Kodak. The covers were either black and white photos of life in the Yard or color drawings. The articles, short stories and drawings were of an astonishingly high polish for an undergraduate publication.

By the end of the 1950s the magazine had transitioned to a monthly format.

The 1960 *Log* was still printed in Baltimore, 32 pages long and only 25 cents, though annual (September through June) subscriptions were available for \$3.50. *The Log* was described as a “complete covering of Navy sports, features on the Academy and the Navy, Salty Sam, and plenty of pictures of life as a midshipman, all seasoned with a liberal sprinkling of jokes!”

The typical 1965 *Log* had gone up to 35 cents, but for that, you read 42 pages. The ads were still from aerospace companies, local tailors and jewelers, but cigarettes were off the back cover at last. James “Mike” Steussy '68 was drawing his inimitable cartoons, and “Company Cuties” were a feature, their photos apparently taken from high school yearbooks.

The year 1970 began well, with 48 pages for 50 cents including ads from Capitol Motors, poems and a photo essay on the Army-Navy game. There was a surfeit of amateur poetry, but the midshipmen's taste for jokes seemed to have gone away. “Professional Notes” were still a feature, by now the longest-running one except for “Athletics.” The “Dear John” letters were a hoot, especially bookended with “*The Log* Advisor,” and articles about '72's POW write-in campaign, the Plebe system, and Professor Russell in the History Department. But the first of three titanic shocks that would hole and ultimately sink *The Log* was at hand.

Unfortunately, the 21 November issue also included some not so well thought out remarks about

Mrs. Marshall, then the Academy's revered Social Director.

Unfortunately, the reference attracted the attention of Senator Margaret Chase Smith. The subsequent publicity led to the firing of the officer advisor, apparently the first to have been so sacked in the magazine's history. Continued scrutiny from outside now found something to be outraged about in almost every issue, though to a modern eye the pieces and cartoons seem tame; a cartoon of a Marine hanging grenades on a Christmas tree, a favorable review of the movie “Woodstock.” But the crowner was a cartoon in March that showed an older woman reading *The Log* at her desk while problems of poverty, pollution and the economy piled up around her. This time the reaction was swift as a guillotine, with the new advisor (Major Constantine Albans, a decorated Marine loved by his students, but who spoke on the record against censorship of *The Log*) being relieved in his turn, both the editor and the features editor being forced to resign⁴, and a drastic tightening of official oversight of the magazine.⁵

The Log was under a microscope now, but the presses still ran. †

Look to a future issue of *Shipmate* for the second part of *The Life and Death of The Log*.

¹ *The Log*, Oct. 31, 1913

² *The Log*, April 10, 1914

³ *The Log*, April 1941

⁴ “Relevance and the Navy,” *The Evening Sun*, Baltimore, July 23, 1970.

⁵ Email communication from Eric Benson '71 dated July 29, 2007