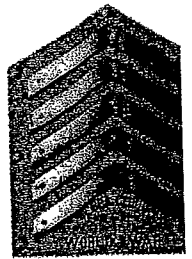


DEMOCRACY I'VE KNOWN"

millionaire's yacht converted for service in World War II,
an experiment in integrating the military

BY MIKE TIDWELL



On a June day in 1944, around sunset, the sonar officer aboard the United States Coast Guard ship *Sea Cloud* told Capt. Carlton Skinner there was a German submarine in the immediate vicinity. With his ship steaming north between Bermuda and Newfoundland, Skinner ordered his 175-man crew to general quarters.

This wasn't an unusual event in wartime, but the men readying the depth charges and uncovering forty-millimeter guns were not just any crew. Nor was Skinner just any captain. On this mild day in a dangerous sea-lane far out in the Atlantic, the course of U.S. military history was about to change forever.

Weapons ready, Captain Skinner stood on the bridge, scanning the sea with his binoculars. A bespectacled white New Englander barely out of his twenties, he was an unlikely pioneer in the saga of American civil rights activity. Indeed, he had given little thought to racial matters until recent service on another Coast Guard ship exposed him to the rigid segregation of crew members that was then official policy throughout the U.S. armed services. Not only was that policy unjust, Skinner felt, but it denied wartime America the ample skills of black servicemen shackled to menial positions.

In the spring of 1943 Skinner had requested permission from the Coast Guard brass in Washington, D.C., to conduct an experiment. He wanted to create a fully integrated ship that would demonstrate not only the feasibility of integrating the Navy but the obvious, urgent necessity of doing so. A few months later, to his considerable surprise, his wish was granted and he was given command of *Sea Cloud*.

So on that June night the officers, petty officers, and seamen scrambling to stations were black and white, working and living side by side. Italian-American New Yorkers and African-

American Southerners readied explosives above deck and tended the diesel engines below.

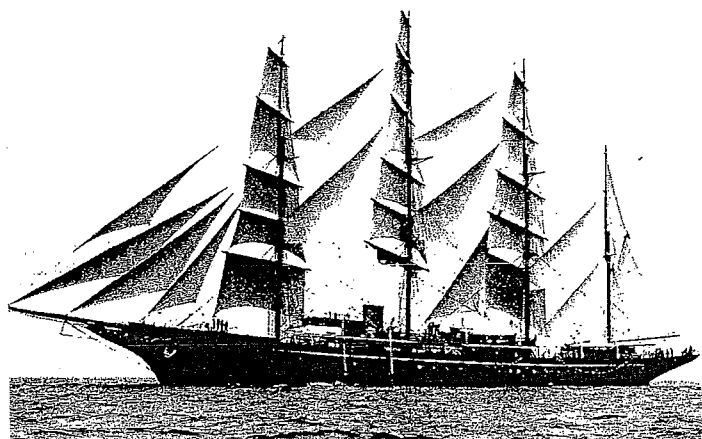
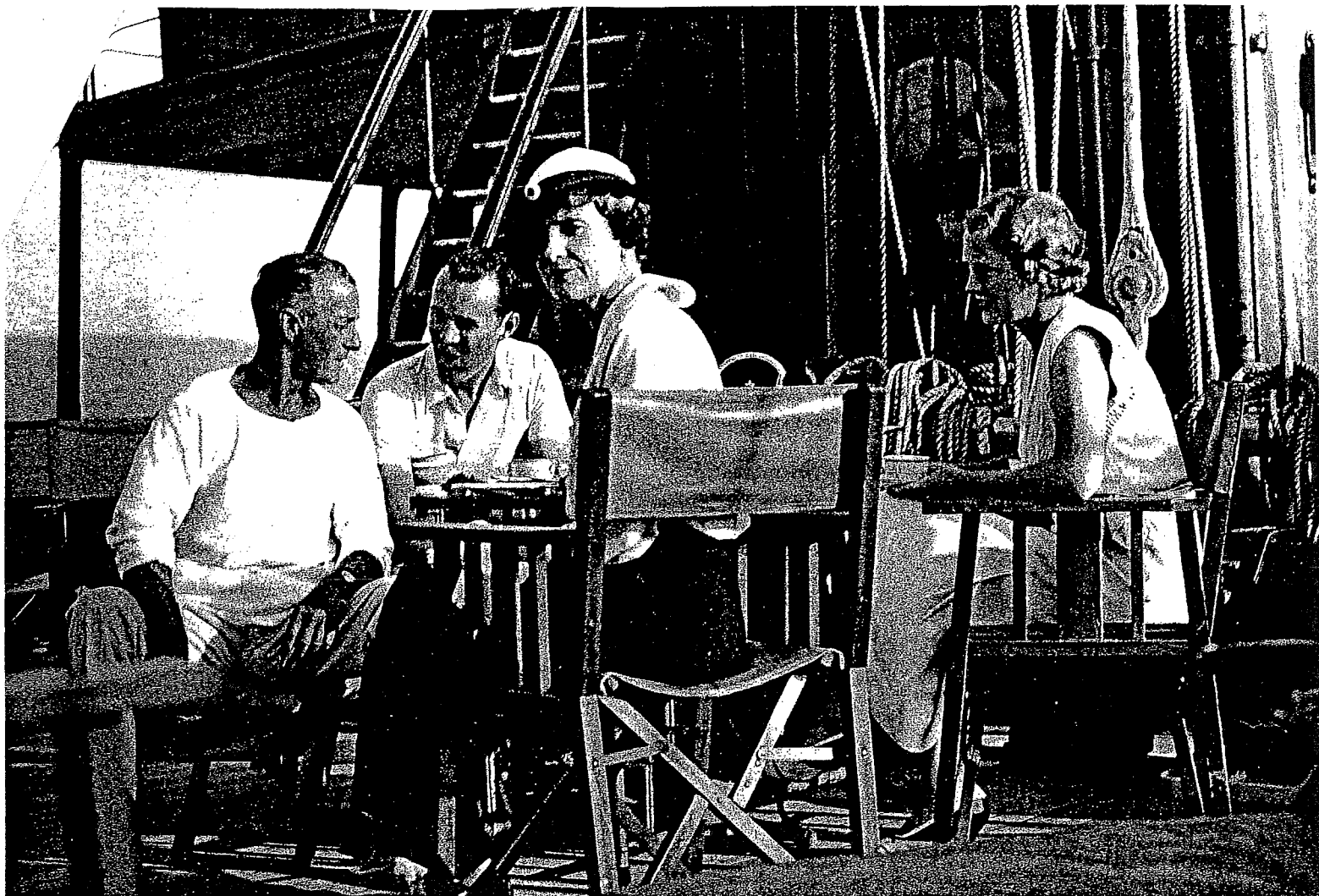
By chance the crew included a most gifted chronicler. Struggling below deck that evening, hoisting steel boxes of forty-millimeter bullets toward the surface, was a twenty-six-year-old steward's mate and painter named Jacob Lawrence, already on his way to becoming one of the nation's best-known African-American artists. Lawrence's whimsical watercolor portrait of Captain Skinner hangs today at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.

But on *Sea Cloud* just then, Lawrence was simply one link in a black and white chain supplying munitions to the deck. He was too busy, he recalled later, to feel fear even as depth charges exploded in the water around the hull, seeking out an enemy now directly beneath *Sea Cloud*. The explosions reverberated against the hull like thunder, rocking the ship.

That ship, engaged in full attack, was no cruiser or destroyer. She was a wooden yacht with a ten-story mainmast and a handlaid teakwood deck, built in Germany thirteen years earlier for E. F. Hutton, one of America's wealthiest Wall Street tycoons. Hutton and his wife, Marjorie Merriweather Post, who was heiress to a cereal fortune, had long dreamed of owning the largest, most expensive, most luxurious private yacht in the world. So German shipwrights in Kiel, among the last of the world's great builders of wooden vessels, designed and built *Sea Cloud* as a magnificent four-masted brigantine clipper with thirty sails. She made her maiden voyage in 1931.

A decade later, after divorce proceedings, the boat was all Post's. With no sons to send off to World War II, she lent it to the nation, accepting a dollar a year

Jacob Lawrence's *Painting the Bilges* (opposite) makes an ordinary scene remarkable by the presence of a black and white crew. Above: *Sea Cloud's* war stripes.



in payment. The Navy promptly stripped the yacht of all luxuries, armor-plated her hull, took down her sails, and converted her to diesel power. She was then turned over to the Coast Guard, which is how Skinner came to captain perhaps the most unusual ship in the U.S. fleet.

Now the unorthodox crew on the unorthodox warship faced the supreme test as dusk gave way to darkness, and still *Sea Cloud* hunted the German submarine. After the first depth charges exploded without a hit, *Sea Cloud* lost contact with the sub and began maneuvering urgently to relocate the enemy

before becoming its prey. For several tense hours, the German-built, newly integrated American vessel continued to stalk an adversary from a nation committed to history's most extreme version of racial hatred. With contact finally re-established, *Sea Cloud* again dropped depth charges. She had been fighting for eight hours when an American destroyer squadron reached the scene and took over. The submarine, damaged in part by *Sea Cloud*, eventually came to the surface, where the Germans fought it out, killing one destroyer's captain before being subdued. Months later, in the Navy's official report on the incident, *Sea Cloud* was given an assist in destroying the submarine. America's first racially integrated warship now owned a decoration.

Equality, of course, was the last thing *Sea Cloud* was meant to stand for when her construction began in 1926. For the then very steep price of \$1 million, Hutton and Post had commissioned a floating palace that would show just how unequal—in wealth and status—they and their friends were.

Once launched, *Sea Cloud* required no less than eight miles of Manila rope to secure her vast complexity of miz-

Above: Marjorie Post (in cap), her husband, E. F. Hutton (left), and two fortunate guests aboard *Sea Cloud* in the mid-1930s, when the four-masted bark (at left) was one of the largest, most luxurious sailing ships in the world.

zen; spanker, main, and staysails across the four towering masts. Her glossy black wooden hull displaced 2,323 tons, and she measured 316 feet long.

Post was a scrupulous planner with a mind for details. "If Marjorie were left on a desert island, she would organize the grains of sand," her father once said. Before *Sea Cloud*'s completion, she rented a Brooklyn warehouse and in it chalked out on the floor the exact dimensions of the ship's spiral staircase and its master suites, salons, smoking rooms, library, and galleys. On the floor plan she arranged her antique furniture, later brought on board the *Sea Cloud* along with porcelain vases, Minton bone china, and bronze mantelpiece clocks for each of the eight marble fireplaces.

The ship's seventy-two-man crew took Hutton and Post to Europe, Tahiti, Alaska, the Galápagos Islands, and North Africa. Among their guests were prime ministers, movie stars, the Queen of Norway, and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Hutton stayed on top of business during long stops in New York, but the born adventurer's favorite pastime was exploring uninhabited islands with his young daughter Nedenia, who later made a name for herself as the actress Dina Merrill.

Yet this great maritime toy couldn't ensure complete family happiness, and in 1935, after divorcing Hutton, Post married Joseph E. Davies, a close friend of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Two years later the President appointed Davies the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, and *Sea Cloud* became a floating (and bug-free) diplomatic outpost, moored in Leningrad.

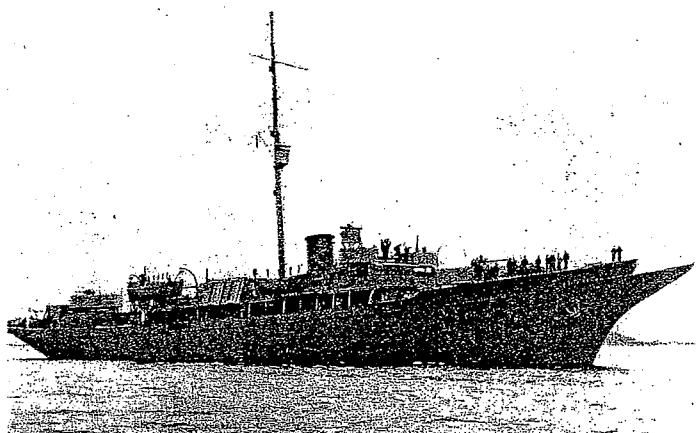
For World War II service, three of the ship's four masts were removed in a \$318,000 refitting that equipped the vessel for both weather-data collection and submarine patrol. In the spring of 1942 she joined the Atlantic Fleet's Task Force 24. When Skinner took the helm the next year, little remained of the ship's former amenities

save some sweet fragrances emanating from the officers' quarters. As part of the original decor, Post had had the wallpaper in the main cabins saturated with perfume, a different scent in each room, and no amount of stripping and repapering could drive the odor away. After a while each officer's clothing took on the specific fragrance of his cabin. "It was so strong that at night on deck you could identify the officer next to you by his smell even if you couldn't see his face," Skinner recalls.

In November 1943 the ship's complement of black crewmen began to arrive, dressed smartly in white sailor caps, bell-bottoms, and kerchiefs. Among them was Jacob Lawrence, a

All but its main mast stripped away for wartime service, *Sea Cloud* (right) retained its sleek profile.

Below: the captain and some of the crew for whom he demanded, as he recently wrote, "equal treatment and equal opportunity."



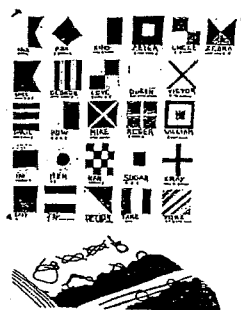


and served food, although they also manned battle stations when called upon to do so. But under Skinner, *Sea Cloud* was integrated at every level. Blacks worked as machinists, gunners, and signalmen, forming roughly half the crew. Black officers even had whites under their command, something the Navy had thought white seamen would never accept.

The results were nothing short of remarkable. After the war Lawrence was quoted as saying the ship was "the best democracy I've ever known." Of his eight months on board, he could not recall a single significant incident of racial prejudice. "I think everyone was really relieved that integration had finally come. Segregation was such a burden to everyone, really. We were like a family on that ship."

In 1949 Skinner told a presidential commission on integrating the military that he never lectured his men on racial harmony or gave special treatment to anyone. Instead, he remarked, "the

major policy that men were to be treated and used as sailors, not as colored or white, was controlling—and little else was needed. On this basis, men very soon became carpenter's mates or boatswain's mates or signalmen, not white or colored."



Top: Coast Guard friends greet Lawrence (left) at a 1944 museum opening.

Above: His portrait of Captain Skinner, and a photo of one of the *Sea Cloud* workers that is now lost.

shy and serious draftee from New York City who had sketch pads and brushes stuffed inside his duffle bag. Says Nicholas Rossi, a white seaman just then rotating off *Sea Cloud*, "It was a complete shock to us to see them coming. We'd never, ever seen a black crew before and didn't know how they'd make out."

Lawrence's seafaring career had gotten off to a rocky start. He was first stationed in St. Augustine, Florida, where, he later recalled, you could "see and feel the prejudice everywhere." In the Hotel Ponce de León, where servicemen stayed, the black steward's mates were housed in the attic, and Lawrence's wife, Gwendolyn, was snubbed by some of the whites who attended a Christmas party. Lawrence responded with a series of what one critic called "bitter, satiric" drawings, depicting life in segregated St. Augustine.

Yet remarkably such affronts ceased entirely the moment Lawrence set foot aboard *Sea Cloud*. Prior to this experiment, blacks in the Navy (of which the Coast Guard was officially a part during the war) went to sea only in segregated teams of steward's mates, essentially as servants who made beds

Y et living at sea in cramped quarters for days on end with never-before-mixed officers and crew created inevitable friction. "One of my early problems," says Skinner, "was that Negro seamen in a division headed by a white officer would refuse to go to him with their problems and would insist on going to a Negro officer who headed another division." But such wrinkles were ironed out, leaving Skinner to assert, "It is amazing how rapidly the artificial distinction of race or color can disappear."

Things were different during regular calls at the Boston navy yard, *Sea Cloud*'s home station. For about a month at a time, the ship sailed the North Atlantic, sending up weather balloons and gathering data in an area bounded by Newfoundland, Greenland, Bermuda, and France. Stopping in Boston for provisions and refitting, Skinner more than once encountered hostile white navy-yard workers unwilling to service a ship with black crewmen on it. To make sure the job would get done, the captain bought off the longshoremen with butter, sugar, and other rationed wartime products. "I'd say, I guess, I bribed them that way. I had no other options," says Skinner.

After leaving Boston, *Sea Cloud* would pursue operations in the dangerous heart of German wolf pack submarine territory. Just a year before she began, her companion ship, the USS *Muskeget*, was torpedoed in the North Atlantic with all 121 hands lost. *Sea Cloud*'s slow speed, barely fourteen knots, made her one of the most vulnerable ships in the Atlantic Fleet. But she never came under torpedo attack.

There were other perils, of course, like the enemy ship

reaming straight at *Sea Cloud* one icy, pitch-black night, somewhere between Newfoundland and Greenland. According to the radar screen, the enemy's course of attack was very strange; it followed a perfectly straight line, and its speed was constant. Just before engagement, Skinner ordered a searchlight switched on, only to see an iceberg "the size of the Empire State Building" on a collision course with his ship. He ordered "Full astern!" and *Sea Cloud*'s bow nearly touched the iceberg before somehow sailing clear.

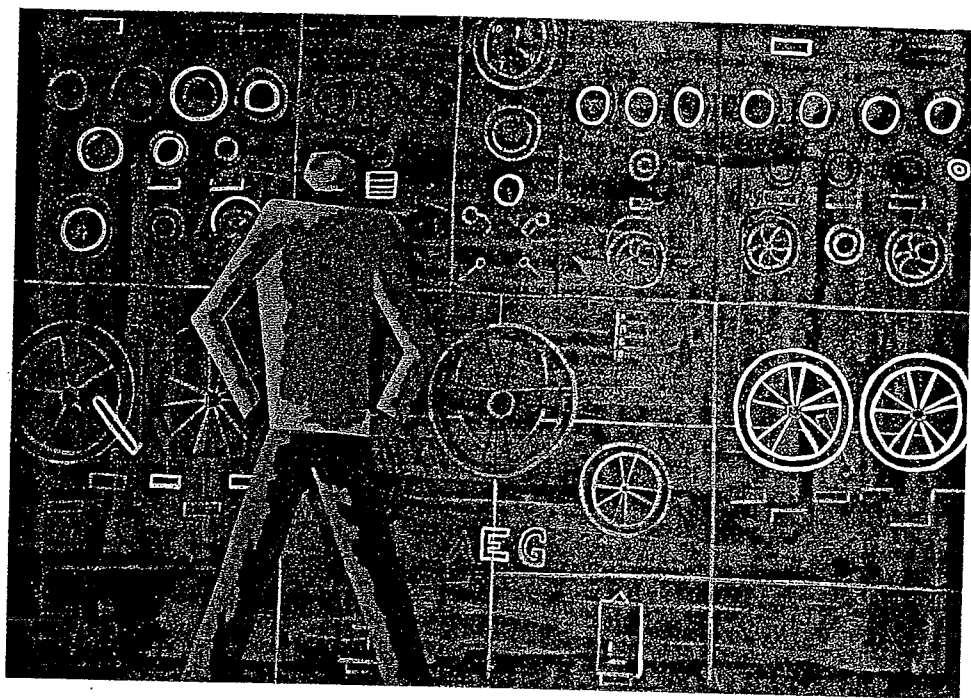
Meanwhile, during his eight-month hitch on board, Jacob Lawrence busily recorded many of the ship's daily operations. Lawrence had established himself before the war as the first African-American painter to be represented at a major New York gallery and the first to be included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. His powerful pre-war series on the migration of American blacks to the North employed distorted images, stark colors, and a liberal use of symbols to convey, as he says, the "bitterness, anger, and hopefulness" of people seeking freedom and opportunity.

Captain Skinner, whom Lawrence recalls as "an intellectual who could discuss what was happening on Broadway," obtained for him a special public-relations rating, third class. With this, Lawrence could work half days as a steward's mate and then roam the ship the rest of the day painting.

Mirroring life on the ship itself, the artist's work from this period lacks the racial tension of his earlier paintings. He shows black and white crewmen engaged together in daily activities, swabbing the deck, on watch in the crow's nest, or attending shipboard church services. Both races face the same fundamental issue—the war—and the dominating color in these works is blue, the blue of the sea.

"I was a correspondent (on *Sea Cloud*)," says Lawrence, "and all I saw were servicemen on board, period. I brought back images of what *servicemen* do." He grew fond of the intimacy of shipboard life. "It would get hot below some nights so we'd go above deck. We'd just sit there and talk into the night, cooling off in the breeze. We were a relatively small crew, so everyone got to know each other really well. It was such a harmonious integrated environment."

Sea Cloud made history again when, at port in Boston, Skinner escorted three of his black officers to a previously all-white Naval officers' club. "Heads turned like at a tennis match when we walked in," says Skinner. But there were no incidents, and the four men made repeat visits over the next five days. On the sixth day, Skinner suggested that the



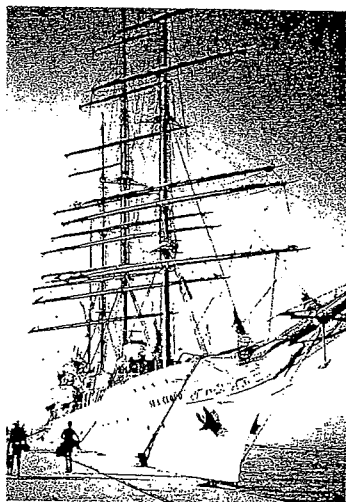
Lawrence depicted a crew member in the *Sea Cloud*'s engine room; at right—unheard of aboard any other ship in 1944—two black officers stand their watch on North Atlantic patrol.

black officers go by themselves—and the club was integrated.

During its year under his command, *Sea Cloud* made brief sonar contact with several German submarines, but it never saw combat save the dramatic chase of June 1944. Still, his ship finished the war with a record distinguished by any measure. She completed numerous weather patrols, some in punishing gales, and excelled in her Atlantic Fleet inspection, scoring Excellent or Very Good in every department. The Coast Guard's experiment had clearly succeeded.

Throughout her year at war, repair parts for the German-made *Sea Cloud* were very difficult to obtain, and that was why in November 1944 she was decommissioned. Skinner was then assigned to integrate another wartime ship operating in Alaska's Aleutian chain. After the war he served as the U.S. governor of Guam. Lawrence was transferred to a segregated troop carrier ship until the war's end, and then he resumed his painting career, earning many of the nation's highest awards and honors including, in 1990, the National





ping of a marble mantelpiece by a few officers' errant darts. By the late 1950s Post grew weary of the luxury yacht's

Medal of Arts. Today his Coast Guard work is held by several major museums.

As for *Sea Cloud*, in 1944 she was returned to her owner, Marjorie Post, after massive refurbishing at a Boston shipyard. Her gray paint was peeled off and all her guns and armor removed. Before long her interior was again awash with lavish antiques and her exterior returned to full square-rigged magnificence. The only permanent wartime damage was the chip-

An ornate guest room of the 1930s, above, and, at left, Mrs. Post's bedroom, restored for today's seafarers—some of whom are shown below, boarding in Turkey.

ranks. This, in turn, became a step toward President Harry Truman's historic executive order of 1948 desegregating the entire armed services.

In 1949 Captain Skinner was invited to testify before the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. He modestly yet convincingly declared that *Sea Cloud*'s seminal success "was not because of my skill as a leader or my toughness as a disciplinarian. It was because the problem [of segregation] was basically artificial and could invariably be solved by reason. You don't need race relations officers or inspectors going around to see if somebody's rights are being abused or denied. Treat the sailors as sailors and the officers as officers."

A simple plan with revolutionary results. ★

Mike Tidwell's article on the Peace Corps appeared in the Spring 2000 issue. For more information on Jacob Lawrence, look for fall publication of a major two-volume set, The Complete Jacob Lawrence, edited by Peter T. Nesbett and Michelle DuBois, University of Washington Press. A comprehensive exhibit of Lawrence's work will open at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., in summer 2001. To find out about cruising on the Sea Cloud, call their offices toll-free at 888-732-2568.

crushing expense, and she sold the ship to Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic. Within a decade *Sea Cloud* was lying idle, anchored on the Ozana River with moss creeping across the mahogany woodwork and blades of grass poking between the planks of the formerly white teak deck.

German buyers restored her in the late 1980s, converting her to a sailing cruise ship on which an oak-paneled stateroom goes for as much as seven hundred dollars a night. Today, carrying three thousand square yards of white-cloth sails, she winters in the Caribbean and summers in the Mediterranean, drawing admirers from around the world.

Most of her passengers pay scant attention to a small plaque with five brass chevrons, fastened to the front of the ship's bridge. The marker denotes *Sea Cloud*'s two and a half years of World War II service. What it doesn't explain is that because the vessel's black and white crew performed so well, in February 1945 the Navy, drawing directly upon *Sea Cloud*'s experience, declared for the first time that blacks could make up 10 percent of its general