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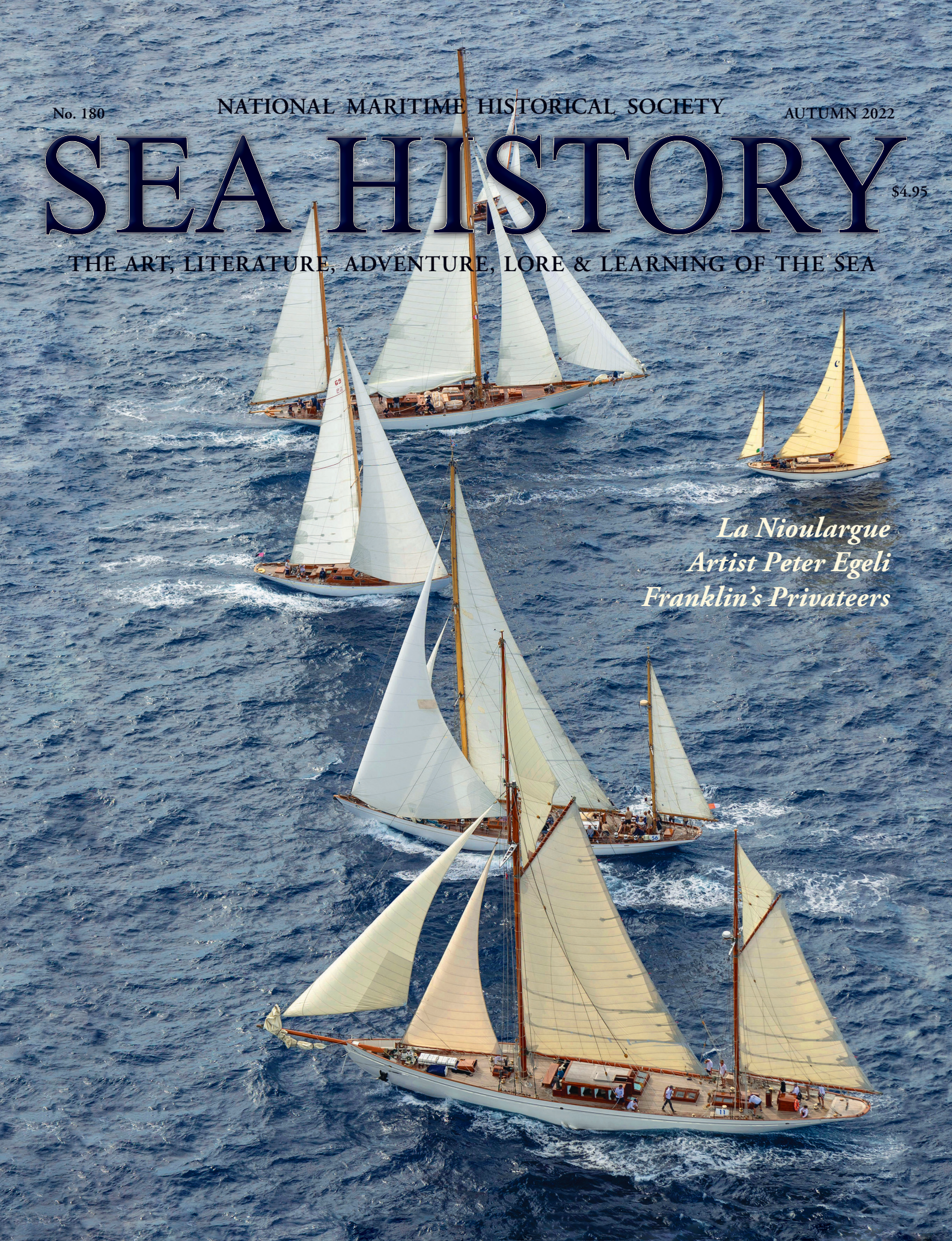
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SEA HISTORY

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THE ART, LITERATURE, ADVENTURE, LORE & LEARNING OF THE SEA

La Nioulargue
Artist Peter Egeli
Franklin's Privateers



La Nioulargue, a.k.a. Les Voiles de Saint Tropez

by Will Sofrin

She was 70 feet of shining elegance, not to mention a thoroughbred racing machine. Her long waterline, flanked by an equally long combination of bow and stern overhangs, was capped by a teak deck with varnished mahogany covering boards and five low-profile deck houses. The polished bronze winches and binnacle sparkled like a crown on a queen's head. Above the deck rose her towering ninety-foot varnished Sitka Spruce mast. Every element of *Onawa* was pristine; I knew this because of the thousand-plus hours I'd spent as one of the shipwrights working to restore the 1928 yacht, America's oldest in the International 12-Meter class at the time.

It was 2001 and I was a twenty-one-year-old deckhand onboard, the lowest-ranking member of *Onawa's* three paid regular crew. My responsibilities included polishing the bronze, cleaning the head, keeping the winches in perfect working order, and rigging the boat so she would be ready to host our sixteen-member daily race crew. We were in Saint Tropez for Les Voiles de Saint Tropez, the final stop of a decadent European racing tour that had begun in England with the America's Cup Jubilee in Cowes before continuing to Puerto Cervo, Monaco, and Cannes.

The week began with *Onawa* arriving from Cannes in a mixed-class feeder race. A twelve-knot headwind was blowing from the southwest, offering us a rare opportunity to cross tacks with the gaff-rigged boats normally sailing on separate racecourses.



Gaff-rigged cutters on the race course are a sight to behold.



The Saint Tropez waterfront is packed with boats during the regatta.

We took in the beautiful French coastline as we approached the once-small fishing village named for the Roman Christian martyr Caius Silvius Torpetius. The Citadel of Saint Tropez, positioned prominently on the hillside protecting the Gulf of Saint Tropez, grew as we neared our destination. I soon sighted the iconic Italian baroque-style church bell tower of Eglise Notre Dame de l'Assomption, built in 1784. The ochre- and sienna-colored tower stood tall like a beacon over our final destination's tightly packed clay-tiled roofs.

Onawa was the only American-flagged 12-Meter offered a berth in the crowded Vieux Port ("old port"), putting us in the center of the historic waterfront. There were more yachts than water in the harbor, and one could simply walk around the harbor just by stepping from boat to boat. The streets were loud and filled with a mix of racers, spectators, and tourists speaking a dozen different languages. The inner harbor was lined by a series of single-story restaurants set beneath the side-to-side wall of five-story pastel-colored buildings adorned

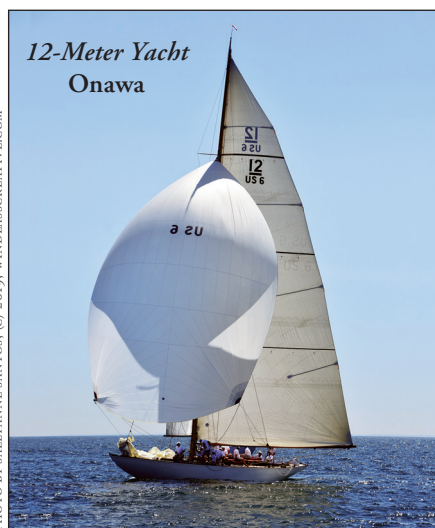


PHOTO BY SALLYANNE SANTOS, (c) 2019, WINDLASSCREATIVE.COM

PHOTO BY GILLES-MARTIN RAGET, COURTESY LES VOILES DE SAINT-TROPEZ

PHOTO BY GILLES-MARTIN RAGET, COURTESY LES VOILES DE SAINT-TROPEZ

by shutters and wrought iron lined balconies overlooking the harbor. We moored stern-to on Quai Jean Jaurés, the eastern waterfront street that transitions to Quai Suffren at the heart of the port. There, standing tall and keeping watch over the activities along the waterfront, was a bronze statue of French admiral Pierre André de Suffren. Most notable of his many accomplishments were his contributions that helped the Americans win the Revolutionary War and the unique tactical strategies he employed when fighting the British in the Indian Ocean.

The reception was grand. I felt like I had just arrived at a great family reunion, as I recognized the many faces of the other sailors who had been touring with us for the past two months. The following morning, reunited with our full racing crew, we joined the grand procession of yachts that slowly poured out of the harbor for a practice day before the official start of Les Voiles de Saint Tropez. The newly named regatta was re-established in 1999 after a three-year hiatus to take the place of the famed La Nioulargue, a regatta that had run from 1981 to 1995. Named for a shoal near Pampelonne Beach, La Nioulargue was conceived, like many regattas are, in a challenge between skippers of two boats. In 1981 Dick Jayson, the owner of a Swan 44 named *Pride*, was in port at the end of the summer racing season when the 12-Meter *Ikra* arrived, skippered by Jean Laurin. A friendly challenge ensued, and the race would get underway the next day.

The two skippers agreed on a simple course with the starting “line” just outside the harbor in front of Tour du Portalet, a medieval fort built in the fifteenth century. From there, the two boats sailed out to the buoy marking the Nioulargo shoal before finishing in front of Le Club 55 on Pampelonne Beach. The crews of both yachts then enjoyed lunch together at the famous restaurant where *Ikra*, the winner, was awarded a silver compote that would become the “Club 55 Cup” from Patrick de Colmont, owner of Le Club 55.

Maxi series, race day 5 at Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez 2021. The popularity of black sails has grown with the adoption of carbon fiber in high performance sails.

A second race was held the following year, with more entrants, concluding with an award ceremony that included a medal awarded by the mayor and a humble pumpkin for a prize. Motivated to solidify the event as a proper regatta, de Colmont wooed the famed Maxi yachts, eventually succeeding by having the Nioulargue added to the 1983 Maxi yacht race calendar. In 1984, class categories such as “sea-explorers,” “tropéziens-travail,” and “tropéziens-marconi” were established to include boats of all kinds. Galas, parades, and shoreside festivities were added to the fun-filled end-of-summer regatta.

The list and pedigree of participants grew as the event attracted famed yachts and sailors from around the world. The regatta was officially canceled in 1988 due

to a Mistral, a seasonal northwesterly wind that blows from southern France into the Gulf of Lion in the northern Mediterranean. Eager to sail despite the strong winds, John Parkwright IV, the owner of *France II*, challenged other boats, resulting in the establishment of the “Florida Cup,” now called “Défis Jean Lorrain.” The list of distinguished participants grew to include classic schooners such as *Altair*, *Aquarius*, *Créole*, *Fleur Je*, *Mariette*, *Raphaelo*, and *Shenandoah*; J-Class Yachts *Endeavor* and *Velsbeda*; Maxi yachts *Coriolan IV*, *Gitana*, *Helisara*, *Matador*, and *Mephisto*; classic yachts *Pen Duick*, *Tuiga*, and *Kentra*, to name a few. La Nioulargue ran for fifteen years until 1995, when the Herreshoff schooner *Mariette* collided with the 6-Meter *Taos Brett IV*, resulting in the death of



PHOTO BY GILLES-MARTIN RAGET, COURTESY LES VOILES DE SAINT-TROPEZ



From classic yachts to modern high-tech racing boats, spectators can see it all from shore.

one of *Taos Brett's* crew. The regatta was suspended while the accident was investigated, but with the event now well-ensconced in the Mediterranean yacht-racing scene, skippers and owners were chomping at the bit to bring it back. The city of Saint

Tropez had also become accustomed to the regatta bringing in critical tourist dollars, and welcomed the opportunity to revive the series. With the investigation and judgment completed, in 1999 the Société Nautique de Saint-Tropez, with full support

of the city and the participating yachts, brought back the race under the new name, *Les Voiles de Saint Tropez*.

I can say with confidence that the week of racing lived up to the hype. Each morning I was awakened by a man playing Scottish bagpipes from a dinghy roaming the harbor, offering complimentary breakfast sandwiches to anyone interested. Soon, sail covers were off and boats were rigged as crews lined the decks eager to get out to the racecourse. *Onawa* had a mixed performance in the series. The wind was a strong 15–20 knots easterly on our first day of racing, and we did not fare too well, having tucked a reef in our mainsail before the start. Despite our tactics, we slipped back in the fleet due to some lulls and finished last. On another day of racing, we were fouled by rival 12-Meter *Gleam*, causing us to miss a gate on the course and disqualifying us from the race. We did find success on our final day of racing with Mike McCaffery, husband of Elizabeth Meyer, at the helm driving us to a first place finish in the last race of the classic 12-Meter class division.

Designed by William Fife III and launched in 1912, The Lady Anne is one of the must-see classic yachts racing at Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez.



The morning following our last race was sad and quiet as the harbor mourned the end of the season. I struggled to begin my morning routine of polishing the bronze winches as I was profoundly hungover, having gotten only a few hours of sleep the night before. I had finished the night at Les Caves du Roy, which left me feeling like a useless sack of bricks reeking of expensive champagne and dance floor sweat. My expectations for the day were low, other than breaking the boat down and chipping away at a long, tedious work list.

The good thing about low expectations is that the best days often show up with no warning. With barely any notice or planning, we loaded the boat up with our ensemble crew and set out to sail the original racecourse used in 1981 for Le Club 55, or, as we came to know it, HEAVEN ON EARTH! The weather felt like a warm and humid late August day on Nantucket. The impromptu 10:00 AM departure meant we had plenty of alcohol but almost no food onboard, since we usually provisioned every morning but hadn't that day because we weren't racing. Our treasure trove of cold beer, wine, and champagne flowed heavily amongst our relaxing companions/passengers as we got underway.

The wind was on our beam, making me feel sure the sea gods approved of our debauched plans, thus granting us a swift and easy passage around the peninsula to Pampelonne Beach. The sky was a beautiful celeste color and was clear, except for a few small clusters of cirrus clouds dotting the distant horizon. We arrived around noon with the majority of our crew quite intoxicated and ravenously hungry. Our arrival appeared to amuse the gorgeous, tanned onlookers scattered across the edge of the long, so-beautiful-it-looks-fake sandy beach; many of them watching and pointing fingers at us as we sailed in and dropped anchor.

Shortly afterwards, a large inflatable dinghy came up to us from the beach and began shuttling our crew to shore. Casey (our fearless captain), Todd (the dreadful mate), and I (the lowly deckhand) stayed on board to tidy up the boat, and then took the third and final ride to shore. Stepping into that dinghy meant I could relax a bit and immerse myself in some of the fun being had by the rest of our raucous crew.

I looked around, taking in the spellbinding scene as we headed towards the sandy shore. We hopped out just before the dinghy's bow touched the white sand beach, grabbed the bowline, and helped run it up out of the water onto a dry patch of sand well beyond the reach of the small lapping waves.

We made our way, barefooted, up towards the restaurant, and I realized I had never been to any sort of place like this in my life. Le Club 55 is an open-air watering hole situated in the middle of Pampelonne Beach and was described by *Gentleman's Journal* as "the world's most exclusive restaurant." The story goes that in 1955 the restaurant was founded when the unassuming de Colmont family, owners of three modest beach cottages built on the sand with no running water or electricity, had been called upon to feed Brigitte Bardot and the rest of the *And God Created Woman* film crew. The family founded a restaur-

ant in the wake of that project and, combined with Bardot's fondness for the place and the film's success, a legend was born. This restaurant became a playground of the rich, overflowing with obscene amounts of beauty and wealth. It was the kind of place where you could expect to find A-listers like Leonardo DiCaprio, Bono, or Beyoncé sitting at the table next to you.

The restaurant was situated in an enclave of mature Tamarisk trees lining the edge of the iconic beach. Despite its exclusive pedigree, the restaurant maintained a breezy, unpretentious charm. There was no floor, only sand. Above were simple wooden structures overhung with thatched roofing, occasional white linen awnings, and strings of small French and American flags softly fluttering in the warm sea breeze. Each table was set with a light blue gingham tablecloth and delicate china plates with floral patterns. There were no bad seats; from any of them, you have a view of the



COURTESY PATRICE DE COLMONT, LE CLUB 55

Le Club 55 in its early days and (below) during the 2001 regatta.



COURTESY WILL SOPHIN

ocean or the gleeful people mingling throughout. The place was packed, and the white-linen-dressed wait staff hustled at an Olympic relay team's pace to meet the energetic patrons' demands. Spread among the dining tables were occasional sofas and lounge chairs to help encourage pleasant commingling.

When I sat down, I found before me an abundant offering of bread and cold wine in silver buckets. A cold glass of crisp rosé was thrust into my hand. I don't know when or how it got there, but I eagerly drank it down and refilled it. A toast was made by all of our loud and rowdy companions celebrating our arrival. Service began with crudités, a colorful array of raw vegetables so fresh and full of flavor and served on what looked like a large section of bark pulled from a tree. Toasts of praise continued to be shouted from nearly all present throughout our meal. This constant toasting became more frequent as time went on, so additional wine buckets were set up, ensuring we all had a bottle within arm's reach. I was careful not to drink too much—technically, I was working.

Eventually, the center of the table began filling up with lavish platters featuring salads, loaves of bread, pâtés, cheeses, roasted vegetables, fish, and steak. It only took minutes for the platters to be emptied, prompting a call for a second and even a third round of food for the table. The wait staff doubled up when the second round of food arrived, all rushing to replenish the empty platters and bottles with new full

ones. I had never seen so much food consumed so quickly in such a refined setting. My taste buds exploded from the rich and intoxicating French cuisine I had become accustomed to during our tour. The whole meal was breathtaking, but the Tarte aux fraises, a buttery pastry lined with fresh, ripe strawberries, stole my heart — I have not since tasted strawberries so sublimely perfect.

We sat at our table for over three hours, enjoying France's best. I can't imagine how many bottles of wine and champagne were demolished by our never-ending thirst. The stories recalling the racing and evening parties continued to digress into outrageous confessions of romantic encounters as the sun moved across the afternoon sky. Eventually, we had to make our way to the boat to sail back to St. Tropez before darkness set in.

Casey, Todd, and I were on the first launch back to *Onawa*. We quickly rigged up the sails and were ready to weigh anchor when the last load of the crew was delivered by the shore boat. It took some coordination to get everyone to hoist the sails. Setting an eighty-foot tall mainsail after an afternoon like that was no easy task, but we got it up much faster than I thought we would have. The party continued with the same vibrant energy; we even picked up a couple of stray crew members for the return sail to the harbor at Saint Tropez. The wind and weather were just as ideal as our morning sail to the beach. The soft, warm wind had clocked around and was now coming

from the west, pushing us back towards the inner harbor on a single tack. There were no swells, thus helping to extend the ever-deepening platinum and gold sparkles reflecting off the surface of the lightly rippled water. The music was turned up, and the champagne flowed once more.

We made it back to the harbor just before dusk. All hands pitched in, and we quickly got *Onawa* cleaned up and put to bed for the evening. Even after a day like that, washing the boat down, coiling lines, and stretching on the sail covers is an absolute must on a classic yacht.

The story should probably have stopped there, but the timing of our return to St. Tropez marked the beginning of a new evening of festivities that were just kicking off all around town. I had been working since 8:00 AM, and with my chores finally completed, I quickly jumped out of my polo and shorts and into a pair of khaki pants, a white linen shirt, and flip-flops. By local standards, I was dressed up and ready to take on the town.

It has been more than twenty years since my unforgettable European sailing tour aboard *Onawa*. Since then, the event has continued to evolve. The Nautical Society of Saint-Tropez carries the tradition of the regatta on under the leadership of President Pierre Roinson. I hope to find my way back to Les Voiles de Saint Tropez soon. ⚓



The author, with Onawa behind him, during Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez in 2001.

Will Sofrin is an author, artist, designer, builder, and, of course, a sailor. After completing an apprenticeship at the International Yacht Restoration School of Technology & Trades (IYRS) in Newport, Rhode Island, he worked as a professional sailor on classic yachts and traditional sailing ships throughout Europe, New England, the Caribbean, Central America, and California. In 2002, Will sailed in "HMS" Rose (now "HMS" Surprise) on its voyage from Newport to the West Coast to deliver the ship to 20th Century Fox for its filming of Master & Commander: Far Side of the World. It was not a simple delivery; Rose got caught in a violent storm en route and was dismantled on another leg—the tale is now being told in Sofrin's new book, All Hands on Deck: A Modern-Day High Seas Adventure to the Far Side of the World, published by Abrams Press with a scheduled release in April 2023.