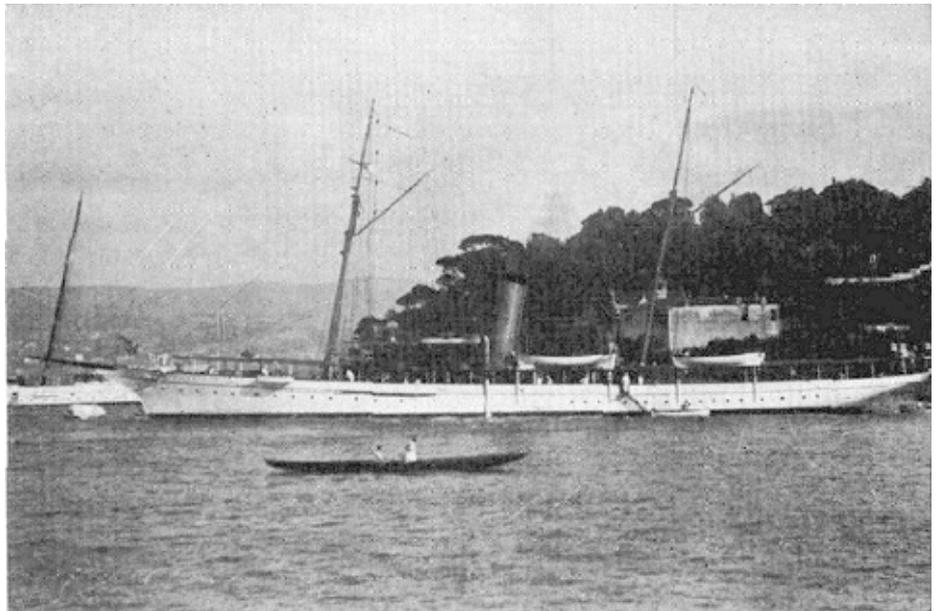


The bridge game with the biggest ever stake: the saga of USS Scorpion

By Pietro Campanile



"The USS Scorpion in the port of Istanbul - 1914" (US Navy Archives)

In the early years of the 20th century, bridge was becoming more and more popular across the world and occasional bridge games would flourish in the most unlikely of circumstances.

Costantinople, April 1917. The first world war had already entered its fourth year and the Turkish Empire, which had sided with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had already suffered huge losses at the hands of the Allied fleets in the Mediterranean while Allenby's armies were slowly making their way up through the Gaza-Beersheva line, methodically destroying anything the Turks would throw in the way. In the middle of all this mayhem, Lt Cmdr Herbert Babbitt, captain of USS Scorpion, which had been based in the Bosphorus since 1911 as station ship to support the humanitarian relief work of the US Embassy in Turkey, had little time to pursue his favorite card game: bridge. Over the years of his stay in Costantinople, Babbitt had succeeded in befriending many of the local dignitaries who could help him to bypass the obsessive bureaucracy which held up most of the Embassy's initiatives. The most important of his contacts was Talat Pasha, the powerful Ministry of the Interior who would later become infamously involved with the Armenian genocide and who happened to be a bridge addict himself. On April the 11th 1917, the USA declared a state of war with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire but curiously enough not with Turkey, which was their ally. In such cir-

cumstances all ships in enemy ports or en route to them are given fair warning by the local Embassies to give them the chance to get out of the way. However, because the USA was not going to be at war with Turkey, nobody bothered to inform the USS Scorpion of the impending hostilities. Naturally, as soon the local German mission heard about the declaration of war, they immediately requested the Turks to seize the American ship and hand it over to German hands. The Turkish War Minister was in a quandary: on the one hand he could not afford to antagonize the powerful ally, on the other it seemed ill advised to breach neutrality by seizing a ship of a country Turkey was at peace with. Eventually, the Minister solved the problem by declaring it a matter of internal security and passing the hot potato over to the Ministry of Interior to deal with. Talat Pasha cannot have been overjoyed at having to sort this mess out. The following day he decided to visit Babbitt on his ship to warn him of its impending seizure. The American captain, however, was made of sterner stuff and was not going to give up his ship so easily. Realizing that Talat Pasha was not too happy himself about having to submit to the German request, he offered him an interesting wager: they would play a rubber of bridge and if Talat was the winner then Babbitt would deliver the ship to the Germans, if Babbitt won, then the ship and his crew would be safely interned in Turkey for the duration of the hostilities.

Talat Pasha readily agreed and so it was

that a few hands of bridge would decide the fate of USS Scorpion, a gunboat which had been re-commissioned in 1902 and was worth an estimated \$280.000, equivalent to half a billion in today's money. Alan Truscott, the recently deceased bridge columnist of the New York Times, reports the final, decisive deal in his "The NYT Bridge Book", both sides needing a game to clinch victory. Dealer East – Nobody Vulnerable (since vulnerability had not been invented yet!!)

		♠ 7654	
		♥ 2	
		♦ 87652	
		♣ AKQ	
♠ 102			♠ J983
♥ J9743			♥ AK85
♦ 94			♦ KJ3
♣ J1087			♣ 65
		♠ AKQ	
		♥ Q106	
		♦ AQ10	
		♣ 9432	

West	North	East	South
		Talat	Babbitt
		1♥	1NT
2♥	2NT	Pass	Pass
3♥	Pass	Pass	3NT
4♥	4NT	Pass	Pass
Pass			

Naturally 4♥ could have been doubled but, for those readers who are unfamiliar with rubber bridge, a penalty, however big, would not have counted towards the end of the game and, more importantly, would not

have saved the ship. So Babbitt and his fellow officer bid on, trying to take advantage of the high cards in their possession.

The lead was the ♥4 and Talat tried to deceive declarer about the position of the remaining high cards, by winning with the ♥A and returning the ♥5. Babbitt did not fall for it and put up the ♥Q. When that held he could count nine tricks, since the diamond finesse was bound to work. His tenth trick could come from a double finesse in diamonds or much more likely, if either of the black suits split 3-3, since unfortunately it was not possible to combine both chances for lack of entries. Babbitt continued by cashing his three top spades, finding that East had started with four of them. Then he moved on to dummy and cashed two top clubs, reaching this position.

♠ -		♠ 7		
♥ J9		♥ -		
♦ 94		♦ 8765		
♣ J10		♣ A		
	W	N	E	
		S		
		♠ -	♠ J	
		♥ 10	♥ K8	
		♦ AQ10	♦ KJ3	
		♣ 94	♣ -	

Still unwilling to try the double finesse, Babbitt continued with his original plan and cashed the third club. Talat discarded the ♥8 and declarer had now only one chance left to make his contract: he played a diamond to the ♦10 and exited with the ♥10 to Talat's bare ♥K. The Turk

was now forced to return a diamond into declarer's ♦AQ. This spectacular ending saved the ship and secured for the skilled American officer the nickname of "Four NoTrump" Babbitt!



Talat Pasha

Around the world with 52 cards

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so I took my ♠A and played a heart to my ♥Q. Surprisingly...it held. This may be easier than I expected, I thought, as I continued with a heart to the ♥10, small from East, ♥J from West! I was not a happy bunny now and soon had to make another guess: West played back the ♠Q, overtaken by East with the ♠K and the ♣3 hit the table.

Coming from a competent player the club switch could be from anything, including KJx. However West had already come up with seven points and was known to be rather a free-spirit where light openings are concerned, so I assessed the chance of her holding the ♣K and not opening 1♠ at green vs red as remote. Should I then put all my declarer eggs in the club double-finesse basket or was there a more appealing alternative?

What would you do?

West so far had shown six spades and three hearts and by taking the "safe" club finesse I could probably find out more about her minors. So I played the ♣Q which held and then the ♠A, on which West played the ♣J. It looked like she started with a 6-3-2-2 shape and that is just what the doctor ordered for a speedy recovery of my 4♥ contract!

Can you guess what happened next?

One of the most treasured bits of advice that I give to my pupils is: "Do not play the Ace of Trumps unnecessarily early, as then you will have relinquish control of the hand". As always, however, all rules have their exceptions and this hand proves how holding on to the ace too long can be equally fatal. This is the position we have reached:

♠ -		♠ -		
♥ 93		♥ 9		
♦ AQ5		♦ -		
♣ 109		♣ J873		
	W	N	E	
		S		
♠ 10865		♠ 9		
♥ A		♥ -		
♦ 42		♦ J873		
♣ -		♣ K7		
		♠ -		
		♥ K4		
		♦ K1096		
		♣ 5		

After I cashed two rounds of diamonds and exited with a heart, West had no choice but to give me a ruff-and-sluff which took care of the club loser.

Here is the complete hand:

♠ -		♠ 73		
♥ 93		♥ Q932		
♦ AQ5		♦ AQ5		
♣ 109		♣ 10986		
	W	N	E	
		S		
♠ Q108652		♠ K94		
♥ AJ6		♥ 85		
♦ 42		♦ J873		
♣ J4		♣ K732		
		♠ AJ		
		♥ K1074		
		♦ K1096		
		♣ AQ5		

Naturally a sharper defender could have insured my defeat my cashing first the ♥A and then playing the ♠Q, but such a play is far from automatic at single dummy and certainly not as obvious as one needs to have the power to break a rule so deeply ingrained.