

This Bridge - is it anything like Whist?

Jim Corbett recalls a fateful night at sea

One evening, looking around Bath Bridge Club whilst sitting out, I began to wonder how members from all walks of life, young and old, came together to play this fascinating game of ours. How did they all start?

My own inadvertent introduction to the game came just after the war in late '46. The 6th Airborne Division had fought its way from D-Day to the gates of Berlin, supposedly to meet up with the Russians, but before we could draw breath or celebrate our victory, many of us found ourselves on a boat en route to India to learn how to fight the Japanese. A month later, we found ourselves in Madras, slithering through monsoon-mud on a three-week jungle course.

At the end of the first week, the Americans dropped the first A-Bomb. Hostilities were at an end, but (in a typical piece of Army logic) we were informed that we still had to finish the jungle course, and it wasn't until I had spent a further 18 months in Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong that my 'demob' number finally came up.

So it was that early one September morning, I was standing on the quayside of Hong Kong Harbour, gazing down at the old steam-bucket of a ship that was going to convey demobilised personnel back to civilisation and, hopefully, a civvy job - and even more hopefully, back to meeting English girls again. To me, it seemed ironic that even though we had spent most of the war fighting in the air, there were no luxuries like aircraft to take us home. Instead, it was a six-week junk-boat journey, crammed to the last inch with military personnel. We were allotted approximately two square feet per person, and that was it. The organisers called it a 'Cruise Home', but at the time, we had grave doubts as to whether the ship would even manage to get out of the harbour.

Not long after we sailed our fears were justified, for the ship's steering suffered a breakdown in the Mediterranean. Fortunately, before this occurred, a course had been set for Malta, and there seemed a good chance we would steam straight ahead and either bump into that island or carry on into the Atlantic to drift forever like the *Marie Celeste*. However, the steering was eventually repaired, and the resultant three days in Malta was a welcome surprise bonus.

But I digress.

On the first night out from Hong Kong harbour, the bar was opened and troops poured into the main lounge, which served as a mess for officers and NCOs alike. As I went through the door, I noticed three young officers sitting at a table and shuffling a pack of cards. We all rushed to the bar intending to get gloriously drunk as soon as possible, and with the intention of staying that way for the rest of the voyage. Amidst the clamour for drinks, one of the young officers left his chair and stood behind us. In a sort of Noel Coward *Anyone for Tennis?* type of voice, he said, 'I say, you chaps, anyone heah play Bridge? We require a fourth.'

We turned from the bar and gazed at this creature with undisguised disbelief.

Bridge? Bridge? wasn't that some game that the aristocracy played at London's top Clubs? We - macho fighting NCOs to a man - played Nap, Solo, Poker, and other wild and raucous gambling games. In unison, we shouted obscene suggestions as to where he should look for his 'fourth', for at that stage officers no longer bothered us. The Noel Coward chappie gulped and slunk back to his companions, and their 'fourth' failed to materialise - just yet.

Later, when sufficiently paralytic not to care, I wandered across to the officer's table, and uttered

the immortal words, 'This Bridge - is it anything like Whist?'

In my misspent youth, I had attended Whist Drives and vaguely remembered the basic play of drawing trumps and third hand playing high, which I thought would be sufficient to get me by for an hour or two, but I was sadly mistaken. The Noel Coward guy jumped up and, pulling an empty chair forward, drawled, 'Sit down, there's a good chap, make yourself comfortable - it's basically the same, but we'll soon bring you up to 'snuff' and then, if you like, we can play for money.'

In my inebriated condition, that last statement, whilst noted, didn't particularly worry me: after all, I reasoned, wouldn't I soon have a small fortune of £25 coming to me as a reward for five long years fighting for my country? Clement Attlee (Labour) had just ousted Churchill, and this was the Government's generous offer. Needless to say, six weeks later and absolutely skint, I disembarked at Southampton having paid dearly for a great deal of knowledge about finesses, squeezes and end plays ...

Once in 'civvy street', I bought a book by a gentleman called Reese and soon taught my family and in-laws the intricacies of the game on a social level. It was not until the middle sixties that I realised the extra pleasures that were to be found in Duplicate as against the prevalent Contract Bridge.

I began to join Bridge Clubs. Clubs like Saltford, Trowbridge, Devizes, and then, in 1968, Bath Bridge Club; which, come to think of it, is over forty years ago.

I must say, it has been a long and pleasurable journey, with many highlights.

For an example, winning the Bournemouth Cup gave me great pleasure, and then I went on to come first in the Wiltshire Championship three times, representing the County nationally on each occasion. However, I think my best moment came in the Epson Worldwide Competition . . . with many electronic prizes donated by the famous Japanese industrial giant. In a Devizes heat, with Barry Partridge as my partner, we achieved a score of 76.9%. I remember that all the results had to be telephoned through daily to

Omar Sharif in Paris, as he was in charge of the European side of the World Competition. Of course, there were no quick computer records in those days, and as the results had to be verified and forwarded by 2am, we kept the Director up most of the night. We had a vision of dinner with Omar at The Ritz in Paris - one of the many prizes - but alas, it was not to be, as 76.9% proved to be sufficient only to earn the 5th spot in Europe, but eventually we finished up 29th in the World! I understand that 88% by an Asian pair took first prize ... which made me think. How on earth can one get 88% in this game?

Nowadays, most competitions are beyond me, simply because I appear to be in the habit of mislaying tens of thousands of memory cells on almost a weekly basis. But it has been a pleasurable road to travel, and I've made the acquaintance of numerous delightful friends and, more importantly, many tolerant partners, along the way.

And it's all down to that young Noel Coward guy who, 60 years ago, stood up in the bar of a rusting excuse for a ship and asked, 'I say you chaps, anyone heah play Bridge? We require a fourth.'

Mind you, 29th in the World, isn't *too* bad. At the start of my Bridge life, I would have settled for much less than that!

Jim Corbett

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