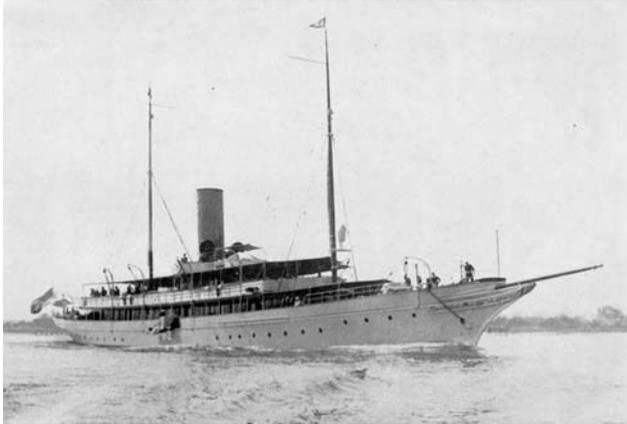


“The Venetia”

Skipper Spreckels was happy: he now had a yacht large enough to go wherever he had a fancy to go, comfortable and luxurious enough to enable him to entertain his chosen friends in his own big-hearted way.

--H. Austin Adams, *The Man John D. Spreckels* (1924)



In the early 1900s, the ultimate status symbol for a business tycoon in America was a luxurious, ocean-going yacht. A personal mark of opulence in San Diego was the 226 foot steam yacht *Venetia*, owned by John Diedrich Spreckels.

The city's leading businessman—owner of the local water supply, the streetcar system, the Hotel del Coronado, the *San Diego Union*, and many other properties--acquired the yacht in 1910 from Philadelphia financier

William W. Elkins. The seven-year-old, Scotland-built *Venetia*, had gone through four owners before Spreckels' purchase. He would enjoy the yacht for the next sixteen years, minus a dramatic nineteen-month period when the *Venetia* went to war for the U.S. Navy.

Spreckels decided to bring his new purchase to California himself. Leaving New York harbor on October 3, 1910, Spreckels and his family and guests began a leisurely six-month passage to San Diego with detours to New Orleans and the West Indies before reaching the Pacific via the Straits of Magellan.

It was a comfortable voyage. The steel-hulled yacht with hardwood lined quarters featured ten staterooms with adjoining bathrooms (and taps for both fresh and saltwater). The main deck house contained a smoking room and library in the forward compartment, an elegant dining saloon came next, followed by the pantry and galley. In the social lounge in the after end the passengers listened to music from a Weber Pianola, sometimes played by Spreckels himself. The rooms were connected by an inside passageway, central steam heat kept the passengers warm in colder latitudes, and a crew of thirty attended to every passenger whim.

The *Venetia* docked in San Diego on March 5, 1911. After a few days, the yacht continued on to San Francisco, where Spreckels made a few modifications to his prize. The coal-burning engines were converted to run on oil. California oil was cheaper than East Coast coal and with new, 1,200-barrel oil tanks the *Venetia*'s cruising range was increased.

In the next several years, Spreckels used the *Venetia* for frequent business trips to San Francisco—as often as every two or three weeks, according to his biographer, H. Austin Adams. After moving to San Diego following San Francisco's great earthquake and fire of 1906, Spreckels had usually commuted by train between San Diego and his offices in San Francisco. But Spreckels loathed travel by land. The *Venetia* allowed travel by water, which he loved. The two-day runs at sea “washed his mind clean” and “refreshed his heart,” according to Adams.

Spreckels would give up his much-loved yacht with America's entry into World War I. Leased to the Navy as a patrol craft, the *Venetia* was commissioned at Mare Island, San Francisco, on October 15, 1917. The Navy remade Spreckel's pleasure boat into an armed gunboat. Torpedoes were added along with four, 3-inch guns, and two anti-aircraft machine guns.

With a crew of 69 officers and men, the *Venetia* reached the Mediterranean Sea in March 1918. For the remaining months of the war the armed yacht would protect merchant convoys against U-boat attack.

The first combat action came on May 11. Covering a convoy bound for Gibraltar, an enemy torpedo streaked past the *Venetia*'s bow and struck a French steamship, the SS *Susette Fraisinette*. While the merchantman slowly sank, the *Venetia* drove off UB-52, dropping 13 depth charges on the submerged U-boat. Only days later, the *Venetia* and another gunboat fought off another U-boat that sank a British freighter.



John D. Spreckels

Another major battle came in July. With four other escort ships, the *Venetia* helped screen a convoy of seventeen freighters bound for Genoa, Italy. Three days into the cruise, a U-boat torpedoed the British ship SS *Messidor*. While another patrol boat picked up survivors from the *Messidor*, the *Venetia* searched for the U-boat, dropping depth charges. The convoy safely reached Genoa two days later.

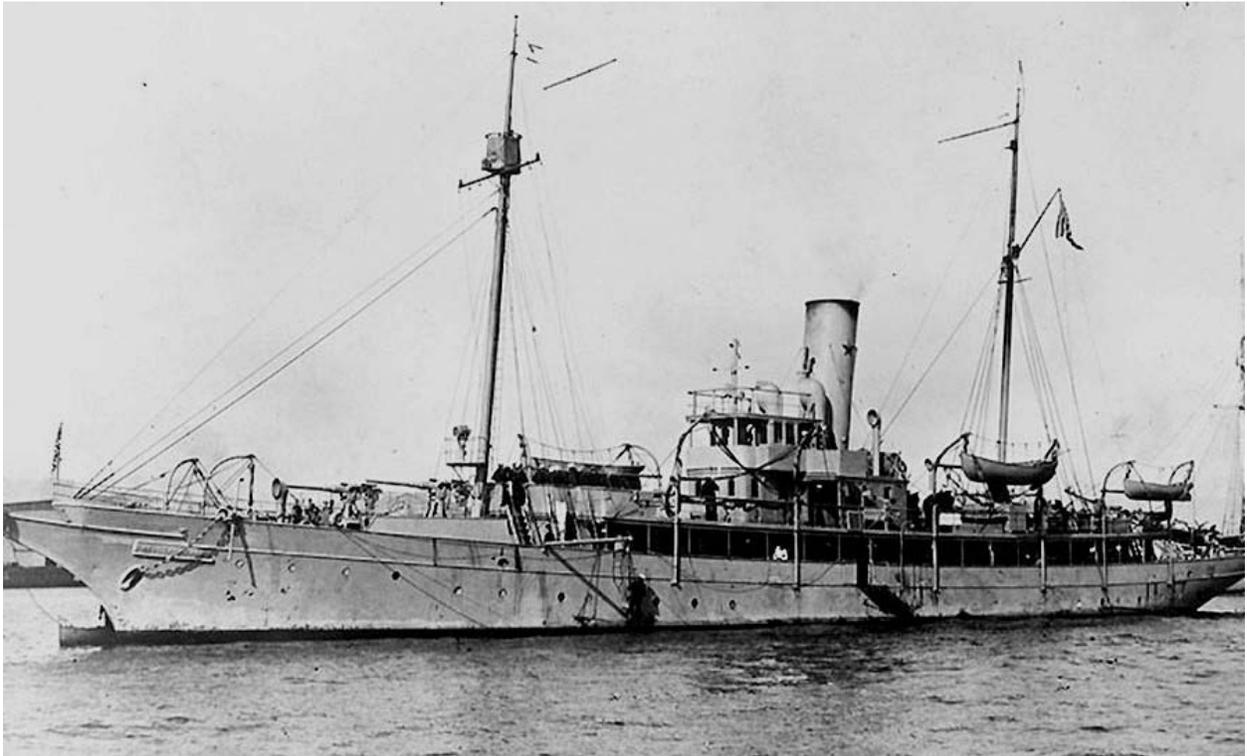
Several more round-trip convoy escort missions in the Mediterranean followed for the *Venetia* before the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, ending World War I. With a gold "star of reward" decorating her smokestack, the yacht steamed for the United States a month later.

As the yacht passed through the Panama Canal on February 3, the *San Diego Union* announced to its readers that "the *Venetia*, battle-scarred and hero of four encounters with U-boats" was San Diego-bound. When the *Union* heralded the yacht's arrival in port two weeks later, a mythology appeared to be developing. The newspaper chronicled in colorful detail the many successful combat exploits by the converted yacht, including a surprising tale of the *Venetia*'s "crippling of the U-39, the German submarine that sank the *Lusitania*."

The story of the *Venetia*'s victory over the infamous submarine that had sunk the RMS *Lusitania* would be repeated endlessly, even though U-20, the submarine that had actually claimed the liner on May 7, 1915, was destroyed in November 1916. John D. Spreckels would cement the myth in 1919 when he sponsored the printing of a heroic biography of his ship called *Venetia: Avenger of the Lusitania*.

The *Venetia* was decommissioned at Mare Island and returned to its owner Spreckels on April 4, 1919. Spreckels received a government check for \$76,331.83 to pay for restoration of the yacht to its pre-war condition. With the refurbished interiors and new furnishings, Spreckels continued to use the *Venetia* until his death on June 7, 1926.

After Spreckels' passing the *Venetia* was sold to a Canadian shipping merchant, James Playfair. On March 31, 1928, the yacht steamed out of San Diego harbor for a new career on the Great Lakes. Remarkably, the *Venetia* would operate for another 40 years, even returning to military service with a stretch in the Royal Canadian Navy. In November 1963, the 60-year-old yacht was towed to a small shipyard on the northeast shore of Lake Erie, where it sat for five years before it was dismantled for scrap.



The battle-scarred USS *Venetia* (SP-431) in San Francisco after her return from service in World War I. The star on the smokestack honors her anti-submarine record. *U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph.*

A briefer version of this article was published as “Spreckels Yacht Sailed into World War History,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, on September 9, 2010, p. C2