



ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 61



SUMMER 2026

CONSTANCE HARVEY, SWASHBUCKLING DIPLOMAT

By Bob Keefe

IT'S HARDLY AN OVERSTATEMENT to say, as several of her biographies do, that Constance Harvey's life seems to have come right out of the movie *Casablanca*.¹ An American diplomat before, during and after World War II, she scammed and tricked enemy military planners. She helped Jews and Belgians escape from the Nazis. She was a war prisoner of the Germans for 13 months.

In peacetime, President Truman awarded her the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor of that era, for the help she gave the French Resistance in the war. By

the time she retired from the Foreign Service, she had become the U.S. consul general in Strasbourg.

Then Constance Harvey moved to Lexington, and here she lived for 30 more years.

CONSTANCE RAY HARVEY grew up in the Buffalo, N.Y., suburb of Kenmore, about five miles from the home of her future good friend Elizabeth Becker. When Constance was eight years old she traveled with her parents to her father's 25th class reunion at Harvard, and the family had plans to visit Smith,

1. See, for example, "Telling Our Stories: The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection," in *Foreign Service Journal* (American Foreign Service Association, Washington, D.C.), March 2014, p. 24.

Above: Constance Harvey's dog tags, which she received in 1944 or 1945, while stationed in Zurich.

Vassar and perhaps other colleges on the way home. The Harveys got only as far as Smith, because young Connie decided that Smith would be the only place for her.

Indeed it was. She graduated in 1927 with a Phi Beta Kappa key and remained a loyal Smithie for the rest of her life.

She earned a master's degree at Columbia University in 1930 and joined the U.S. Foreign Service that same year, only the sixth woman to be accepted into that agency. Her first assignment took her to Ottawa. She was subsequently posted to Milan, Basel and Zurich, and then, in 1939, to Bern, Switzerland.



Constance Ray Harvey in her 1927 Smith College yearbook photo

In Bern she met General Barnwell Legge. They were a formidable team, and it was Legge who in 1947 handed her the Medal of Freedom. The citation initially said, correctly, that her support for the Allies had begun in January 1941, but the U.S. was officially neutral then, so the reference was changed to read, falsely, that she had arrived in December of that year.

In June 1940, Germany defeated France, and on New Year's Day 1941, Constance Harvey arrived in the U.S. consulate in Lyon, in Vichy France, a region the Germans



Barnwell Legge

had allowed to remain free of occupation. She was immediately put in charge of the interests of Belgium, which Germany had also defeated. Her mandate was to do all she could to assist the Allied cause, and she began surreptitiously funneling vital information to General Legge back in Bern (as one example,

a secret map of all the German anti-aircraft stations around Paris).

The wartime consulate in Lyon became the place for Belgians, including the government-in-exile, to seek help in escaping. Soon passports signed by "C. R. Harvey" popped up. There was even one for the Belgian attaché in Vichy itself. (Much later, she received a letter from General Douglas MacArthur, signed "Doug," passing along praise and thanks from the wartime Belgian minister of state in exile.)

Harvey smuggled documents out of Vichy — locking them in her Ford automobile's glove box and hiding the key "around my

neck, under my dress," with other keys left dangling conspicuously in the ignition, so the Gestapo border guards would assume this demure woman had nothing to conceal.

She also helped send British pilots who had been downed in France to safety. Industrial diamonds (vital to the war effort because South African diamonds were embargoed) made their way with her from Lyon to Bern. So did British gold coins. These transfers would occur right after Harvey, who controlled the diplomatic pouch, said for the record that she absolutely couldn't deliver such things into Switzerland.

She told an interviewer in 1988, "I must say that there were quite a few things I won't go into now." Considering what she did "go into" in the interview, one can hardly imagine what those other things must have included.

ON ARMISTICE DAY in 1942, at the behest of the Germans, the Vichy government arrested Harvey and some of her U.S. colleagues. They had been given two days' notice before the authorities arrived and were privately treated to a last banquet, complete with champagne.



Left: Constance Harvey's Medal of Freedom, the federal government's highest civilian honor. Right: General Bramwell Legge and Miss Harvey at the medal presentation in 1947. The medal recognized her ingenuity and courage in thwarting the Nazis, often with Legge as her accomplice.

The German captors eventually moved their consular prisoners to Baden-Baden. There the detainees spent 13 months. It was, fortunately, "diplomatic internment," not the awful kind we know from newsreels and movies. Miss Harvey recalled that diplomatic internees were allowed to receive packages from the outside twice a month. The women diplomats went to the hairdresser every week, Cigarettes were better currency than

currency. "It was like being in a strange kind of boarding school," she said.

The diplomatic captives ate pudding, mostly, but they were allowed to walk in the woods where they picked berries and once scooped up lemons that had apparently fallen off a truck destined for military leaders. They all felt guilty about their special treatment.

In 1943 the Baden-Baden internees were traded for German diplomats and businessmen who, she recalled, had been held in apparently similar condition at, of all places, The Greenbrier.

ONCE BACK IN Washington, Constance Harvey, whose derring-do had become well known in the Foreign Service, was put in charge of returned political prisoners. In 1945, just before the war in Europe ended, she was posted as vice consul to Zurich. Her mandate was mainly economic. But she wanted to be in a political world.

Next, she was assigned to Greece. She loved Greece — more the setting than the work, which in those post-war years remained focused mostly on the economy. The

SEXISM IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE?

Constance Harvey didn't have a problem being a woman in a the mostly male Foreign Service. She said she found that an effective response to excessive friendliness was laughter. One supervisor had a crush on her, she remembered, but "he got over it." His wife told Miss Harvey: "He's terribly susceptible."

In fact, she told her interviewer, if she had been a man she might not have joined the Foreign Service at all, because she wouldn't have had the chance to be a trailblazer, and it was partly the excitement of that chase that energized her. "It was a challenge, and I liked that."¹

1. Ann Miller Morin and Milton Colvin, interview with Constance Harvey, 1988, p. 148. Transcript in the Library of Congress and on its website, www.loc.gov.



Strasbourg Mayor Pierre Pflimlin and Consul General Constance Harvey on a visit to Boston in 1963.

Her new assignment took her to Bonn, where she finally achieved her goal of becoming a political officer, and also head of the consortium of the Allied nations' career diplomats in Germany. Then, briefly, to Edinburgh, then back to Washington for several years.

At last, in 1960, she was assigned to Strasbourg. Here her portfolio was sharply focused on political matters. She reported on the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and even, at first, the Commission for Navigation on the Rhine, a pit of diplomatic intrigue involving "the French versus the Belgians and the Dutch, for instance — quite a different kettle of fish."

She stayed for six years. By the end, she was the doyenne of the Strasbourg consular corps, a considerable distinction because the city was home to important embassies, thanks to all the pan-European organizations there. She recalled:

land captivated her — the countryside, ancient buildings, antiquities, and particularly the little volcanic island of Patmos, which she visited three times. "When they said I finally had to leave Greece, I couldn't bear it. Everybody I knew felt the same way." Even after she was sent on to her next post, she returned there twice more on vacation.

"It was wonderful to have my own post. I really felt at home in it. I never tend to think I'm the administrative type; I'm not really. But I enjoyed it."

Constance Harvey retired from the Foreign Service in 1965. Soon she bought her first permanent home in Lexington.

THE CONSULAR HOUSE IN STRASBOURG

"It was a house that had been purchased a few years before by the [U.S.] government, and it had been built at the turn of the century. . . . The garden was on two levels—with steps and a balustrade. And a fountain on the upstairs. . . . The most wonderful variety of different shades of green trees — the trees—even without any flowers — were stunning."¹

1. Ann Miller Morin and Milton Colvin, interview with Constance Harvey, 1988, p. 184. Transcript in the Library of Congress and on its website, www.loc.gov.



WHEN SHE ARRIVED at Smith College in 1923, young Connie Harvey found herself to be a classmate of Elizabeth Becker. She and Betty Becker became the closest of friends and were among the first Smith students to study abroad, at the Sorbonne in Paris. The friendship lasted the rest of Connie Harvey's life.

Years after Smith College, Betty Becker and her retired U.S. Army officer husband, Cary Tucker, moved to Lexington, where Colonel Tucker was appointed to the electrical engineering faculty at Virginia Military Institute. Their son, Spencer (who followed his father onto the VMI faculty), recalls that when Miss Harvey left the Foreign Service, it was his mother's influence that convinced her to settle here.

Constance Harvey had known Lexington before moving here, visiting Betty Becker Tucker several times, and Mrs. Tucker returned the favor in 1963, staying for five weeks in Strasbourg when her friend was consul general. When Spencer Tucker taught at Texas Christian



Elizabeth Becker, later Tucker, 1927
Smith College photo

University, the two women, accompanied by Constance Harvey's poodle, made a road trip from Lexington to visit him in Fort Worth. In 1956, Miss Harvey had attended the wedding in Lexington of Mrs. Tucker's brother-in-law, and in 1958 she gave a talk on problems in modern diplomacy to the Lexington Woman's Club.

In short, having visited Lexington, Constance Harvey, "like so many who do the same, simply fell in love with the place," Spencer Tucker says.

Once established in Lexington, Connie Harvey involved herself in local life as a member of R. E. Lee Memorial (now Grace Episcopal) Church and became part of an informal group that called itself the Golden Girls. They went to Richmond for the arts and to Garth Newel in Warm Springs for the music.

One of those Golden Girls, and a great friend, was Betty Tracy, whose daughter, Lisa Tracy, recalls a typical visit from Constance and "a couple of other friends . . . I see her now perched bird-like on the far end of the



The Ignorance Club in 1992. Constance Harvey is in the middle, indicated by a red star.

Chippendale sofa, perhaps with a martini in hand, ready to pounce on an interesting tidbit of conversation. Her fashion style reflected the years of her career: impeccable but without frills, her silver hair cut short . . . a cordial but penetrating gaze. She didn't suffer fools gladly, yet could and did listen generously and laugh whole-heartedly when someone had a good story to tell."

In short, Lisa Tracy says, "she was home now."

Miss Harvey entertained friends in her home and belonged to the Ignorance Club. She supported Lexington's two colleges — donating to Washington and Lee University's capital campaigns in the 1970s and '80s and helping Virginia Military Institute in 1975 launch its summer study-abroad program in the Greece she loved.

Constance Harvey remained devoted to Smith, her alma mater, which had awarded her an honorary doctor of laws degree in 1952, and she faithfully attended class reunions. She spent not a small amount of her Lexington time being interviewed by awed diplomatic historians.

And she was devoted to her very large poodle, whom she named C'est La Vie, after her own motto. C'est La Vie would ride in the car, "head held high" in the passenger seat, next to Miss Harvey, recalls Spencer Tucker.

Short and "a wisp of a woman," Miss Harvey could "skewer with wit," the Rev. David Cox, then pastor of (now) Grace Episcopal Church, recalled. Mr. Cox, with the late Rev. D. Holmes Irving, presided at Constance Harvey's memorial service in 1997, when she died at the age of 92. She was buried in her family's plot in Buffalo.

Beverly Tucker remembered a "vivacious, captivating" figure who led a rich life here, centered on entertaining, writing, travel, art and music, universally admired for "grace and charm . . . bravery, courage, perseverance," and for her devotion to nation and friends.

IN 1988, CONSTANCE RAY HARVEY reflected on her diplomatic service and said, both proudly and modestly: "I was part of it — doing what I could."

LEXINGTON AND THE FOREIGN SERVICE

Constance Harvey wasn't the only senior Foreign Service officer to settle here in retirement. Readers of a certain age will remember at least two others.

Alta Frances Fowler (1925-2006) was a Lexington native who studied at Northwestern, Tufts and the National War College. She began her diplomatic career as a clerk in the U.S. embassy in London before being assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency. She was commissioned a Foreign Service officer in 1957 and had postings that took her as far as Tunisia, Ireland and Australia. She ended her career as the American representative to

Caribbean nations, notably Curaçao and the Dutch Antilles. After retiring to her hometown in 1983, she became an officer of the Rockbridge Historical Society.

Fred Latimer Hadsel (1916-2010) joined the State Department in 1946,



after earning his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Soon he developed a focus on African affairs and became head of the department's Office of Inter-African Affairs. He became deputy mission chief in Ethiopia and then the U.S. ambassador to Somalia (1969-71) and Ghana (1971-74). He also taught at Columbia, Rutgers, Johns Hopkins and George Washington universities. When he retired in 1974, he and his wife, Winifred, settled here, where he became the head of the George C. Marshall Foundation and she president of the Rockbridge Historical Society and author of two entertaining and useful books about local road names.

