

## SATURDAY OBSERVER

# OUR woman in Tehran

The 'unflappable' Laverna Dollimore's role in the Iran hostage crisis was just a chapter in her remarkable career, writes **ROBERT WRIGHT**.

In the dog days of summer three years ago, I had the rare pleasure of spending a leisurely afternoon with Laverna Dollimore. Then 87 years old and living in a quaint two-storey house in Brighton, Ont., she had agreed to be interviewed in connection with some research I was doing on Canada's role in the Iran hostage crisis. What ensued was not so much an interview as a sprawling conversation about her extraordinary life in Canada's External Affairs Department. Here was a woman, I quickly realized, who had quietly, but resolutely, opted out of a life of conventional domesticity in order to take the path less travelled. As she put it herself, she wanted to see the world. And see it she did.

Laverna — she insisted that I use her given name — was born in January 1922, part of a cohort that endured the Great Depression as youths and turned draft-age just as the Second World War was engulfing Europe. Her parents and older brother had been born in England, emigrating to Canada in 1915 on the *Lusitania's* second-last voyage before it was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. She and her older sister were born in Toronto.

Like many young women in the Dirty Thirties keen to make their own way in the world, Laverna enrolled in a business course in 1937 and went to work in Toronto as a secretary and bookkeeper. In 1942, she enlisted in the Women's Royal Naval Service, the Wrens, and was posted to *HMCS Cornwallis* in Halifax, then the largest naval training base in the Commonwealth.

After the war, when many of the young women around her were leaving (or were forced out of) paid employment, getting married and starting families, Laverna returned to private-sector work. In 1956, she took the public-service exam, passed, and joined External Affairs at the height of its "golden age."

Her first foreign posting was a secretarial job in the Canadian Embassy in Cairo. She arrived in Africa in May 1957, just in time to witness the fallout from the Suez Crisis — and to get a bird's-eye view of the international peacekeeping formula for which Canada's Lester B. Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was her good fortune, Laverna later recalled, that the older, more senior secretaries at the embassy had been told to evacuate during the crisis, and that most had no desire to return. Her willingness to travel to the world's hot spots gave her a leg up, then and later, and she rose quickly through the ranks of the bureaucracy.

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Most of Laverna's service to the diplomatic corps was spent within Canada's embassies abroad, and almost always as secretary to the head of mission (HOM). As "secretary to the ambassador," a job description we would today call "executive assistant," she co-ordinated the HOMs' professional lives, taking dictation and typing, but also drafting correspondence, organizing their calendars, getting them to meetings, screening their calls, and dealing with people they could not or did not want to see.

Laverna's former colleagues recall her as indispensable to the smooth functioning of the embassies to which she was posted. In those pre-computer days, virtually everything that was written or discussed in an official capacity crossed the secretary's desk, and virtually anyone who had business with the HOM passed in front of it. One retired foreign-service officer recalled recently that when he was briefed for his first posting abroad, he was told by his superior, "If you ever have to choose between throwing an ambassador's secretary and a junior officer under the bus, throw the junior officer!"

Laverna worked directly for Ambassador Robert Ford in Moscow and Gen. Stewart Cooper of the International Commission of Control and Supervision in Laos, as well as other foreign-service luminaries including Charles Ritchie and James Bartleman. When she was not serving abroad, which was rare, she sojourned in Ottawa or the Trenton area. In the mid-1960s, for example, she was seconded for a year to the National Arts Centre.

In 1977, after a stint at the Canadian Mission to the European Union in Brussels, Laverna was posted to the Canadian Embassy in Tehran, then headed by Ambassador Ken Taylor. According to Roger Lucy, Taylor's first secretary, Laverna was a "a key part of the embassy establishment."

"Nothing was ever forgotten or neglected," says Lucy. "She had her finger on the pulse of the embassy."

Like Taylor and Lucy, Laverna got to Tehran just as the Iranian Revolution was exploding in the streets. In this lawless and incendiary atmosphere, she demonstrated the same grace under pressure for which her superiors would later become famous. "Laverna was fearless," recalls Ken Taylor, "cool and serene, always prepared to take any risk in the interests of others."

She was "unflappable," adds Lucy, always a "calming influence," ever ready to lend a "steady hand" to the embassy's young staffers.

One of those young Canadians was Cpl. Pierre Bertrand, who was just 22 when he was posted to the embassy as an MP.

"Laverna was like a mother to me," Bertrand recalled recently. This was a sentiment that Laverna reciprocated. She reminisced warmly in retirement about the selfless courage of the young soldiers who had been sent to secure the embassy and its personnel, herself included.

On Nov. 4, 1979, Iranian students loyal to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini occupied the embassy in Tehran, taking 54 American diplomats hostage and setting in motion the 444-day Iran hostage crisis. Six Americans evaded capture and went into hiding in the residences of



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Taylor and John Sheardown, the head of the embassy's immigration section. On Jan. 28, 1980, with the help of the CIA, the Canadians abetted the escape of the six U.S. diplomats, for which they were roundly feted by Americans up to and including president Jimmy Carter.

Laverna knew about the six American "house guests" from the outset and, like their Canadian hosts, did whatever she could to make their time in hiding as comfortable as possible. This meant occasional meals, and Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations, always convened in complete secrecy. As part of his planning for the house guests' escape, Taylor had embassy staff fly out in small groups over the month of January 1980, so as not to attract the attention of Iranian authorities. On the day the house guests finally flew out of Tehran to their freedom, Laverna was one of only four Canadians left at the embassy. She flew out of Iran later the same day, along with Ken Taylor, Roger Lucy and Sgt. Claude Gauthier. For her role in the rescue of the Americans, Laverna was awarded the Order of Canada.

After Tehran, she accepted a posting at the Canadian Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It would be her last. Laverna retired from External Affairs in 1983. In 2005, she hosted a reunion of her Tehran comrades and their American guests at her Brighton home, evidence of an intense sense of camaraderie in the group.

Reflecting on Laverna's career, Lucy observed that if she had been born in 1972 instead of 1922, she would likely have become a career diplomat. She would certainly have passed the foreign-service exam, says Lucy, but more than that, she had the makings of a fine officer — common sense, shrewdness, a sharp sense of humour and, above all, a great capacity

for discretion.

It did not work out this way, of course. Laverna played the hand she was dealt. The cloistered world of External Affairs (now Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada) is without question that of an elite group, but until very recently, it has not been terribly hospitable to women. Prior to 1947, women were not permitted to write the foreign-service exam, and not until 1971 could married women serve as foreign-service officers. To date, a woman has never served as undersecretary of state for external affairs nor as deputy minister. Women are among the most accomplished and celebrated Canadian diplomats serving today but, as almost everyone agrees, they are still too few in number.

Laverna Dollimore died on Monday, Oct. 24, much to the sorrow of her family, friends and former colleagues. The outpouring of grief among her old comrades from Tehran has been particularly heartfelt.

One of the questions that I had planned to put to Laverna when I met her was whether the life she had chosen, as an unmarried and childless Canadian woman in the era of the feminine mystique, was worth the many sacrifices it had undoubtedly exacted.

I never did get around to asking her that question. I did not have to.

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