

COLYN COHEN'S BRAILLE POCKET WATCH

A new addition to the National Museum of Australia's collections has provided the opportunity to illustrate the story of remarkable Australian ex-serviceman Colyn Adrian Keith Cohen (1896–1983).

Cohen was 20 years old and studying law at the University of Sydney when he was called up for active service in the Australian Imperial Force in April 1916, two years after the outbreak of World War I in Europe. In a scenario distressingly familiar to many families of the time, he sailed on HMAT *Marathon* for England almost immediately. After training he was sent to the Western Front in France to work with Allied communications as a signal officer with the 33rd Battalion.

After almost two years away from home, Cohen was wounded during the Allied defence of Villers-Bretonneux in April 1918. This battle was a critical encounter which ultimately repelled the last significant German offensive, albeit at the cost of 1200 Australian lives. Although he survived severe shelling, Cohen was admitted to the field hospital suffering the effects of gas poisoning. This was a new form of biological warfare employed by both German and Allied forces throughout World War I. Permanent or partial blindness through corneal ulceration and respiratory damage was a common fate of those exposed.

For Cohen, the war was over but a new challenge had begun. He was sent for treatment at London General Hospital and discharged from there for rehabilitation at St Dunstan's at Ovingdean. This was a pioneering respite centre for blinded war veterans where specialist training and research was carried out. He was then repatriated to the Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney only a few months before the Armistice was signed in November 1918. He then joined the ranks of 170,000 Australian ex-servicemen and women who had survived the war but suffered from wounds or illness which impacted on their later lives.

The availability of innovative medical practice and rehabilitative systems appears to have been a highly beneficial force in Cohen's management of his disability throughout the rest of his life. He was a resilient character determined not to let his impaired sight deflect him from his chosen career, and undertook to manage his blindness so as to



Colyn Cohen in his Army uniform.
Photograph R. Walter Barnett, Hyde Park Corner SW



Colyn Cohen's Braille watch
Photo: Jason McCarthy

ameliorate its impact on his life. He returned to university and completed his legal studies, married and pursued a highly successful career as a solicitor. For many years, he held senior partner and consultant positions within a prominent Newcastle law firm and was well-known in community affairs. Notwithstanding his war injury, Cohen continued an affiliation with military intelligence and served in the Australian Military Intelligence Corps and Defence Security Bureau in Canberra during World War II. A conservative character with a roguish sense of humour, Cohen died in 1983 – an old man who had lived a rewarding life. His Braille pocket watch was recently donated to the National Museum of Australia by a great friend who received it as a memento from Cohen's widow.

This intriguing object offers a rare insight into an ex-serviceman's complex experience of disability and the impact of war on ordinary lives. Cohen is thought to have obtained his Braille pocket watch from the Sydney Industrial Blind Institution during the 1930s. As detailed in the 1933 *Annual Report*, useful items including 'Watches, Ladies' and Gents', Silver and Nickel' were provided for sale at cost price to blind persons. Produced by the Tavannes Watch Company of Switzerland in sterling silver, the glassless enamelled dial is fitted with robust hands that direct the fingers to the Braille numerals. An attached fob chain secured it to a waistcoat or lapel and a spring-hinged lid protects the movement when closed.

Although Cohen retained some residual vision, he likely had little intuitive sense of time and as such, personal routine and the management of time were considered important.

Known to have had something of a penchant for punctuality, Cohen treasured this object and its contribution to his independence for the remaining 50 years of his life. By the 1970s, he also had a 'talking' wristwatch which spoke the time. However the Braille pocket watch triumphed over technology and was kept beside his bed for use at night – no doubt at his wife's request.

Cohen was a courageous man who suffered an horrific injury during one of the most significant events of the 20th century. The Braille pocket watch helped him to meet the challenges imposed by his disability and contributed to his life of achievement and success. Now a part of the National Historical Collection, this unusual object enables the Museum to tell this truly inspiring Australian story.

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