

# Who was .....Paul Alfred Cullen?

*Major General Paul Alfred Cullen, AC, CBE, DSO and Bar, ED, was a citizen-soldier. A member of the then Royal United Service Institution of New South Wales, after concurrent distinguished military and civilian careers, he became the first Regimental Colonel of the Royal New South Wales Regiment.*

Paul Alfred Cullen was born as Paul Alfred Cohen in Newcastle on 13 February 1909, the youngest of three children of the notable Jewish businessman Sir Samuel Cohen and his wife Elma. He was raised in Sydney where his father became a leader of the Jewish community and was educated at Cranbrook School. As an 18-year-old in 1927, he enlisted in the Militia (ORs) – 1<sup>st</sup> Heavy Brigade, Australian Garrison Artillery. He was commissioned on 22 May 1931. In 1935, he was promoted to captain and appointed Officer Commanding 16<sup>th</sup> Battery, Royal Australian Artillery.

Following the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, Cohen enlisted as a captain in the 2/2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 6<sup>th</sup> Division, Second Australian Imperial Force, on 30 October (Army Number NX163). He arrived in the Middle East on 13 February 1940, his 31<sup>st</sup> birthday. Promoted to major on 15 November 1940, he served as a company commander during the advance into eastern Libya and the capture of Bardia and Tobruk in January-February 1941. He was Battalion Second-in-Command during the Greek campaign in March-May 1941, including the withdrawal from Veria, the battalion's final gallant stand at Tempe (Pinios) Gorge (south of Mt. Olympus) on 19 April and the subsequent escape back to Egypt via Crete. In Greece, he converted much of the battalion's cash to gold which proved valuable in obtaining rations and support from the local populace during the withdrawal. Given the German attitude to people of the Jewish faith, he officially changed his name from Cohen to Cullen on 25 September 1941 as a precaution in case of capture.

Now as Major Paul Cullen, he sailed from the Middle East in March 1942 to return to Australia but was diverted to Ceylon for its defence until July 1942. There he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and appointed Commanding Officer of the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade, a post he held from 11 June 1942 to 28 August 1945. In Papua between September 1942 and January 1943, he led the battalion with great distinction during the counter-offensive advance along the Kokoda Trail to the Japanese beachheads. He earned a reputation as fighting commander. Later, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for "continuous distinguished service in New Guinea, South West Pacific" as Commanding Officer, 2/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

In 1944, while his battalion was rebuilding and training in northern Queensland, he served on secondment in Papua on Headquarters 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade and Headquarters New Guinea Force before resuming command of the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion for the Aitape-Wewak campaign – the culminating campaign in the liberation of Australian New Guinea between December 1944 and August 1945. He was sub-



sequently awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Service Order for gallant and distinguished service in the Aitape-Wewak campaign as Commanding Officer of the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

Post-war, on the raising of the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in 1948, Cullen was appointed Commanding Officer of the 45<sup>th</sup> Battalion (The St. George Regiment) on 1 April. He was promoted to brigadier and appointed Commander 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade on 2 July 1955. He served on the Officers Staff Group, Eastern Command, from 2 July 1958 until appointed as Deputy Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Division on 1 July 1960. On 1 December 1961, he was promoted to major general and appointed Commander Communications Zone. He became the Citizen Military Forces Member of the Military Board in 1964 before retiring on 2 December 1966. As the CMF Member, Cullen was instrumental in enabling CMF officers to undertake familiarisation visits to the war in Vietnam. Following his retirement, Cullen was appointed as the first Regimental Colonel of the Royal New South Wales Regiment which had been formed on 1 July 1960. Cullen's post-war military service was recognised by his appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1965 and award of the Efficiency Decoration (ED) for efficient service as an officer in the CMF.

In civil life, Cullen was an accountant, businessman, merchant banker, cattle grazier, noted philanthropist and refugee advocate. He created the first unit trusts in Australia, and was the founder of the nation's first merchant bank, Mainguard (Australia), in 1950. In 1967, he founded Austcare (Australians Caring for Refugees) to assist refugees overseas; and, in 1969, the Citizen Military Forces Association, the forerunner of today's Defence Reserves Association. In 1981, he founded the Refugee Council of Australia and was its inaugural president. He was also president of both the Australian Jewish Welfare Society for Refugees and the Royal Blind Society of New South Wales.

His civilian service to the nation was recognised by his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1978 in recognition of service to the community of ex-service personnel and their dependants. In 1988, he was raised to a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) for service to the community, particularly to the welfare of the blind and visually impaired. Internationally, Cullen was awarded the Nansen Refugee Award in 1981 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for his support of refugees through Austcare and Australian Jewish community organisations.

Cullen died on 7 October 2007 aged 98 years and was accorded a full military funeral at Victoria Barracks, Sydney<sup>1</sup>.

**David Leece**

<sup>1</sup>The portrait of Cullen is by artist Mathew Lynn. It was painted in 2002 when Cullen was 93-years-old. The original hangs in the National Portrait Gallery of Australia.