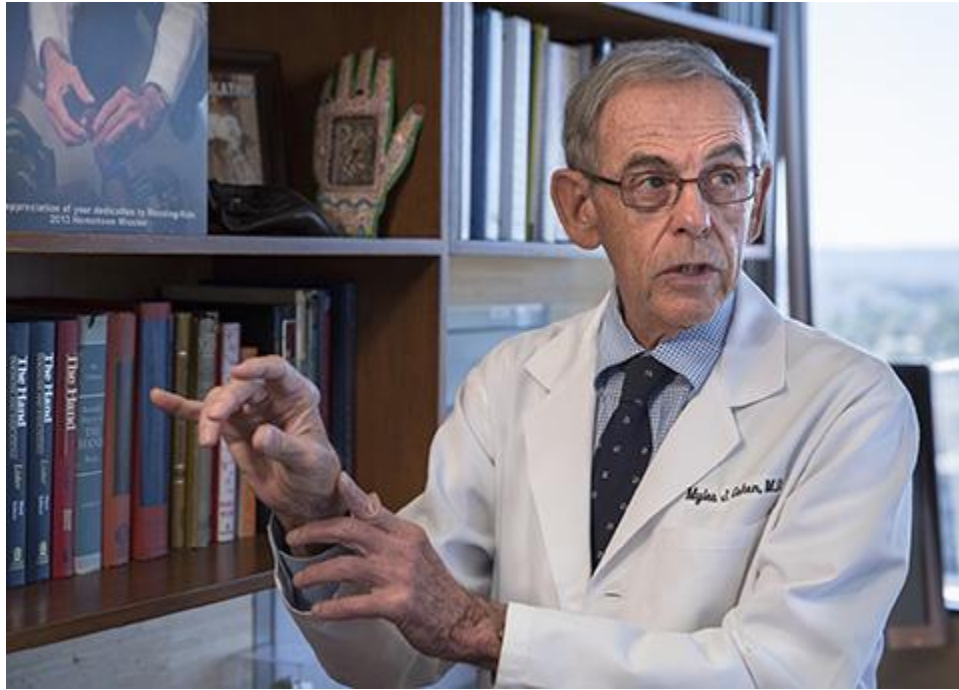


A Fateful Decision Leads to Humanitarian Adventure



Myles J. Cohen, MD, director of Hand and Upper Extremity Reconstructive Surgery in the Department of Orthopaedics.

The airman complained about his feet. Something was wrong. He couldn't walk, he told his physician — Myles J. Cohen, MD, then a new captain — at the Sheppard Air Force Base clinic in Wichita Falls, Texas.

It was the summer of 1969. After years of anti-war protest, the United States had begun its gradual and painful withdrawal from the Vietnam War. Even so, about a half million American troops remained in Southeast Asia, and replacements were still being rotated into combat.

The airman standing before Cohen was one of the replacement troops headed to Vietnam.

Cohen inspected the airman's feet and ordered an X-ray. The airman said he should be declared 4F — medically unfit for military service. But the X-ray film revealed the same results as the physical exam. There was nothing wrong. At least, not physically.

"The airman said to me, 'You have to write that I cannot go to Vietnam,'" recalled Cohen, chair of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Group Board of Directors and director of Hand and Upper Extremity Reconstructive Surgery in the Department of Orthopaedics. "'If I go to Vietnam, I'll be killed.'"

Cohen had volunteered for the Air Force, in part, because he couldn't decide whether he should concentrate on orthopedic or general surgery. While serving his country, he felt the military would give him valuable experience and clarify his choice of surgical specialty.

But in his clinic that summer day, Cohen had only a few moments to decide the airman's fate. He told the airman he couldn't lie about his medical condition. He further explained that if he did so, it would mean that some other young man would have to go in his place.

"I was 29 years old then. I'm 77 now, and that event still haunts me," Cohen said during a recent interview in his ninth floor office in the West Medical Office Tower. "Rarely, a day goes by when I don't wonder to myself what happened to that young man. Did he make it?"



Cohen was a captain in the Air Force during the Vietnam War.

War was not an abstract notion to Cohen. His father fought in World War II and survived his position being overrun by Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. His father had been awarded a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

It was his father's military service and his family's decision to leave eastern Europe for the opportunity of America that had supplied another major reason for enlisting.

"I thought about what my grandparents and great-grandparents had left when they came to this country. I thought about what my dad had given, and I felt my being in the service was something very worthwhile and important," said Cohen. "I wanted to pay this country back for what it had done for me and my family."

That evening after denying the airman's request for a medical exemption, Cohen returned home to his wife, Cita. He said he wanted to go to Vietnam. He said if he, in effect, was sending someone to Vietnam, then he had to be willing to go himself.

Cohen and his wife had grown up in El Paso, Texas, and had been high school sweethearts. They already had a 10-month-old and another child was due in a few months.

Cita said absolutely not.

Cohen stayed in the service for another few years. During that time, he provided medical care for patients from 10 nearby air bases and also performed orthopedic and reconstructive surgical procedures. His work included treating badly wounded servicemen from Vietnam.

"These kids gave of themselves and paid a tremendous price for doing what their country had asked of them," said Cohen.

Cohen was honorably discharged as a major from the Air Force in 1971. Within four years he had made his way to Cedars-Sinai, where he has been a leading surgeon for more than four decades. He is

credited with being the "father of hand surgery" at Cedars-Sinai and recently had an endowed chair established in his honor — the Levin/Gordon Distinguished Chair in Orthopaedics in honor of Myles J Cohen, MD.

The memory of that airman, however, never left Cohen. In 1986, an unexpected opportunity arose to lessen its burden.

A friend, also a physician, called Cohen looking for doctors to travel to Peshawar, Pakistan, to train mujahedeen to be paramedics. The Islamic fighters were taking high casualties as they sought to repel the Soviets from Afghanistan and used nearby Peshawar as a refuge.

The humanitarian mission would be dangerous. Again, Cohen checked with his wife. He was nervous about her reaction.

"You better hurry up and call him back before he gets someone else to do it," Cita said, well aware of the motivation.

Within six weeks, Cohen landed in Peshawar, about 50 miles from the Afghan border. He spent the next month teaching basic medical training in primitive conditions and becoming accustomed to the security guards with AK-47 assault rifles.



In 1986, Cohen volunteered to help train mujahedeen to be paramedics during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

One of Cohen's primary tasks was leading medical courses for mostly 18- and 19-year-old men. In the classes, he demonstrated basic surgical techniques by operating on a goat. He taught them how to use donkey tail hair for sutures. He showed the students how to make casts for broken bones out of mud and straw, and how to make traction equipment out of bamboo.

In addition, Cohen helped screen casualties for further treatment in nearby countries, and he operated with local surgeons in makeshift hospitals. During one complicated procedure, he received an unexpected inquiry from a surgeon, who was an Afghan refugee.

"Are you Christian?" the surgeon asked in the middle of the procedure with Cohen.

"No," answered Cohen.

"Are you Jewish?" the surgeon replied.

Cohen replied that he was. The response led to a heated discussion about Israel, said Cohen. After completing the procedure, the two surgeons went outside to talk. They came to an understanding and worked together afterward without any trouble.

"He said to me, 'Look don't tell anyone else here you are Jewish,'" recalled Cohen.

About six weeks later, Cohen was back home in his Los Angeles when he received a letter from Pakistan. It was from the Afghani surgeon.

"The impression of Jews on me is now totally changed," the surgeon wrote in a one-page typewritten letter in English. "A lot of patients are repeatedly coming and asking about you. I congratulate you that all of your cases operated by you are completely all right. You have done a great job that is [of] great service to humanity."

Cohen still keeps a copy of the letter, dated Feb. 15, 1987.

"That's how I tried to pay back this kid who I sent to Vietnam," he said.

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