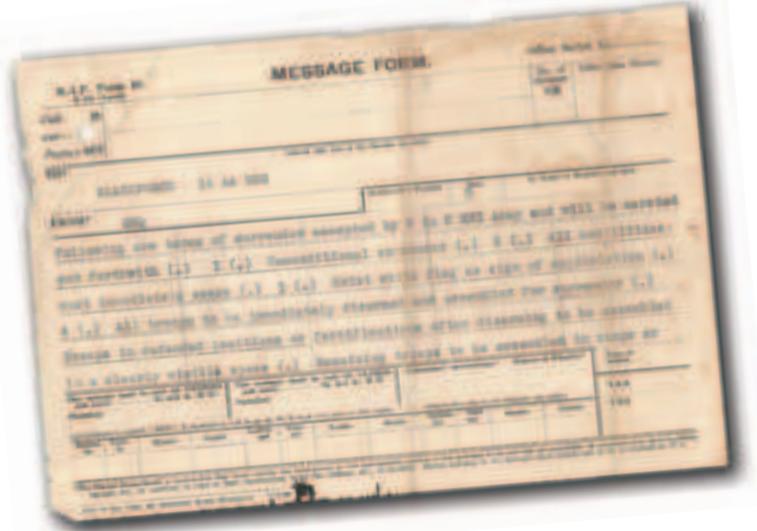


Cobras, camps and coincidences

One man's wartime story by Edward Peak



Flouting all the rules of service he kept a carbon copy of the message. All prisoners of war knew that keeping any form of record was strictly forbidden and to be found with a diary would invite immediate and dire punishment. Captain Duncan kept a diary throughout the next three and a half years of captivity in the jungles of Java and, later, the coalmines of Japan.

Fast-forward to earlier this year. Captain Duncan's amazing story had never really gone away; I had often thought about it and wondered if I could bring it to wider knowledge.

The original radio version had been received so well that I was thinking that perhaps we could produce something similar but in a different way. We are fortunate in having a wealth of talent in our area and one of the luminaries of the theatre is Ann Warr. Well-known as director of many productions by the Hillbark Players and as an actor and teacher in her own right, Ann was the obvious choice to bring in.

Within moments of explaining the remarkable story of Captain Duncan's captivity and secret diaries, Ann's unerring theatrical sense could already see how it could be translated into a live event, using a small team of young actors.

Leading this team is Adam Stubbs, no stranger to the stage with experience from the Bard to Broadway already in his CV. Adam is set to play the part of Atholl Duncan and the play tells the remarkable tale by a combination of scripted and led improvisation.

Dr Duncan, as he later became, was such a well-known figure in the area, running a GP surgery with his wife (always known as Mrs Duncan) in Moreton – many people will remember them well.

The perfect vehicle for the play to be widely seen is in the shape of the Wirral Arts Festival. Now in its eighth year, the Festival has events across the whole of Wirral. As Ann Warr has written this to be performed in an intimate and rather confidential style, large auditoriums are definitely out. Instead, they have opted for smaller, local locations.

Catch the show; it's called Captain Duncan's Diaries, on a number of days during the Festival. For your diary, it's on tour and can be seen on:

3 October – Church of the Good Shepherd, Heswall

5 October – West Kirby Arts Centre

10 October – Birkenhead Town Hall

12 October – St Mary's Church, Upton

The final venue in Upton is rather appropriate, as this is Atholl Duncan's own parish church.

It was just an ordinary morning. It was about 20 years ago and Radio 4 was on in the background as I breakfasted and made ready for work. I heard John Humphreys chatting with a lady – there was a brief mention of 'Wirral'. I started to listen.

A remarkable story emerged of how her father, having been captured in the Far East during WWII, had managed to keep secret diaries throughout his captivity. The lady, Meg Parkes, had transcribed the diaries into book form and she and Humphreys were discussing it.

The next sentence really made me sit up and take notice. Meg mentioned that her father had been a GP and his name was AA Duncan. WOW! This was just too amazing. Dr Duncan had been my own family doctor and I had seen him from time to time over the years.

A couple of days later, I was passing my local bookshop only to see Meg's books in the centre of the window. At the time I was engaged in making arts-based features for BBC Radio and the story had intrigued me, so I went in and left my card hoping that I could get to speak with Meg.

Within two hours Meg phoned – she lived just down the road in Hoylake and was instantly in tune with the ideas I had about a radio feature. We met and I had a fascinating time hearing about the story. We collaborated on what turned out to be an amazing series of radio programmes in which two young actors told the story and Meg herself took the part of narrator.

Atholl Duncan was a second lieutenant in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders employed as a cipher officer, coding and decoding messages. As the newly promoted Captain Duncan, he had the job of decoding the order for British Forces to surrender in March 1942.