



British Army Corporal Peter Peel

Having enlisted at Pontefract barracks early in 1940, Peter Peel subsequently joined the 2nd Battalion York & Lancaster Regiment in Egypt. The Battalion was sent to Crete and in the attempt to hold it against German attack in 1941 Peter was slightly wounded and captured. His journey to Central European captivity ended at Stalag 8B in Silesia, a huge marshalling camp supplying prisoners to numerous work places in the Sudetenland. Peter was sent to a quarry as a labourer but deliberately wrenched his ankle as an excuse to return to the camp. He gained an interview with a Regimental Sergeant Major in charge of all camp activities for prisoners awaiting despatch to Arbeitsplätze. These activities included a 600 student school with 43 tutors, a 500 seater theatre, a symphony orchestra and dance band and international football, cricket and athletics, which were encouraged by the Germans as good publicity for Red Cross inspections. Peter Peel's educational background helped secure him staff jobs as teacher of English and Art in school, designer and painter of theatre sets and actor in the Repertory Company.



Self-portrait as Macduff

Peter played Sebastian in 'Twelfth Night' (opposite the late Denholm Elliot who played Viola), Macduff in 'Macbeth', and Freddie in 'Pygmalion' with Elliot as Eliza! The theatre group made all their own props, costumes and scenery, except for the costumes for 'Twelfth Night' which came from costumiers at Red Cross expense. The Germans were so impressed with the Shakespeare that they arranged a tour to other large Stalags for 'Twelfth Night' complete with scenery!

As well as his involvement in the theatre, he became a keen card player and he and a friend soon became known as 'players', amassing a 'camp fortune' which consisted of various goodies from the Red Cross and private parcels. He also put his talent to practical use when he was recruited by the Escape Committee to forge symbols, signatures, display lettering for letter-headings, tickets, passes and travel permits.

To cap what he describes as an "absorbing five years", Peter was able to study for, sit and pass his professional intermediate exams via the Red Cross. After he was demobbed he passed his professional finals gaining the qualifications MCIM, MAA and MIPA and became Creative Director of the then largest Advertising Agency in the North East.



'Stalag Dance Band' by Peter Peel



The Second World War Experience Centre
Reproduction of an article from the Centre's website
<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/land/alliedbrit/peel/default.asp>

During his years at Stalag, this soldier was permitted to send sketches and photographs back to England. The photographs include Denholm Elliott and all the 8B tutors in the Stalag school. The Centre is delighted to preserve Peter's artwork and photographs alongside his tape-recorded interview. His artwork beautifully exemplifies the fact that artistic creativity could sometimes flourish under conditions of captivity.



1941 in the mountains, Crete, before capture



Group photograph from one of the theatre productions, set designer, Peter Peel, pictured on the back row, far left

More examples of Peter Peel's Second World War artwork feature in the second issue of the Centre's Journal: [Everyone's War: Issue 2](#)

Inventory of the Donation

- Photographs
- Tape-recorded
- 20 pieces of original artwork - including set designs for POW camp productions



Peter Peel is pictured with hat and pipe, third from the left standing



The cast of 'Twelfth Night'. The set designer, Peter Peel (third from the left on the front row), played Sebastian opposite the later celebrated actor, Denholm Elliott (front row, centre) who played Viola



An 'action shot' from 'Twelfth Night' with Peter Peel as Sebastian on the right



'Behind the Delousing House' by Peter Peel



Ballet Set - The Eye - by Peter Peel



Transcript of Audio Clip

Asked by [Peter Liddle](#) about Denholm Elliott, Peter Peel goes on to talk about activities in the camp and the possibilities for escape:

[Peter Liddle: Denholm Elliott too was in the ranks?]

He was just a Private in the camp, as I was, yes. But because of his acting ability he didn't go out on working parties, he was kept in by the sheriffs or the organisation like I was and I got all these jobs and I was doing all this work and so on, teaching in the school, painting and designing all the sets, costumes, playing in some of the productions, all sorts of things you see and then I was in the escape committee or whatever they called themselves, there was forging documents. . . so my stay in Stalag was justified as being useful and the Germans allowed this sort of thing - they didn't know about the escape committee but they allowed the symphony orchestra, the theatre and the school and so on - they were proud of these things and when the inspectors came from Switzerland they would show us off, all this business you see, as though "aren't we wonderful?" you know "what a marvellous time these prisoners are having with every opportunity to further their education and to occupy their minds and so on". But I was extremely busy and never had a dull moment because I was writing a book as well at the same time on reproduction, printing reproduction and I had my name down as a volunteer to escape which I liked to do on the one hand, which I wanted to do, but on the other hand I never worried about it because I had plenty of other things to occupy my mind and eventually it was explained to me that there were very rigid priorities and at this time in the camp the priorities were airmen, particularly pilots and navigators and they were the only people who were given the chance actually to escape through these tunnels that were built and so I had to content myself with forging documents.