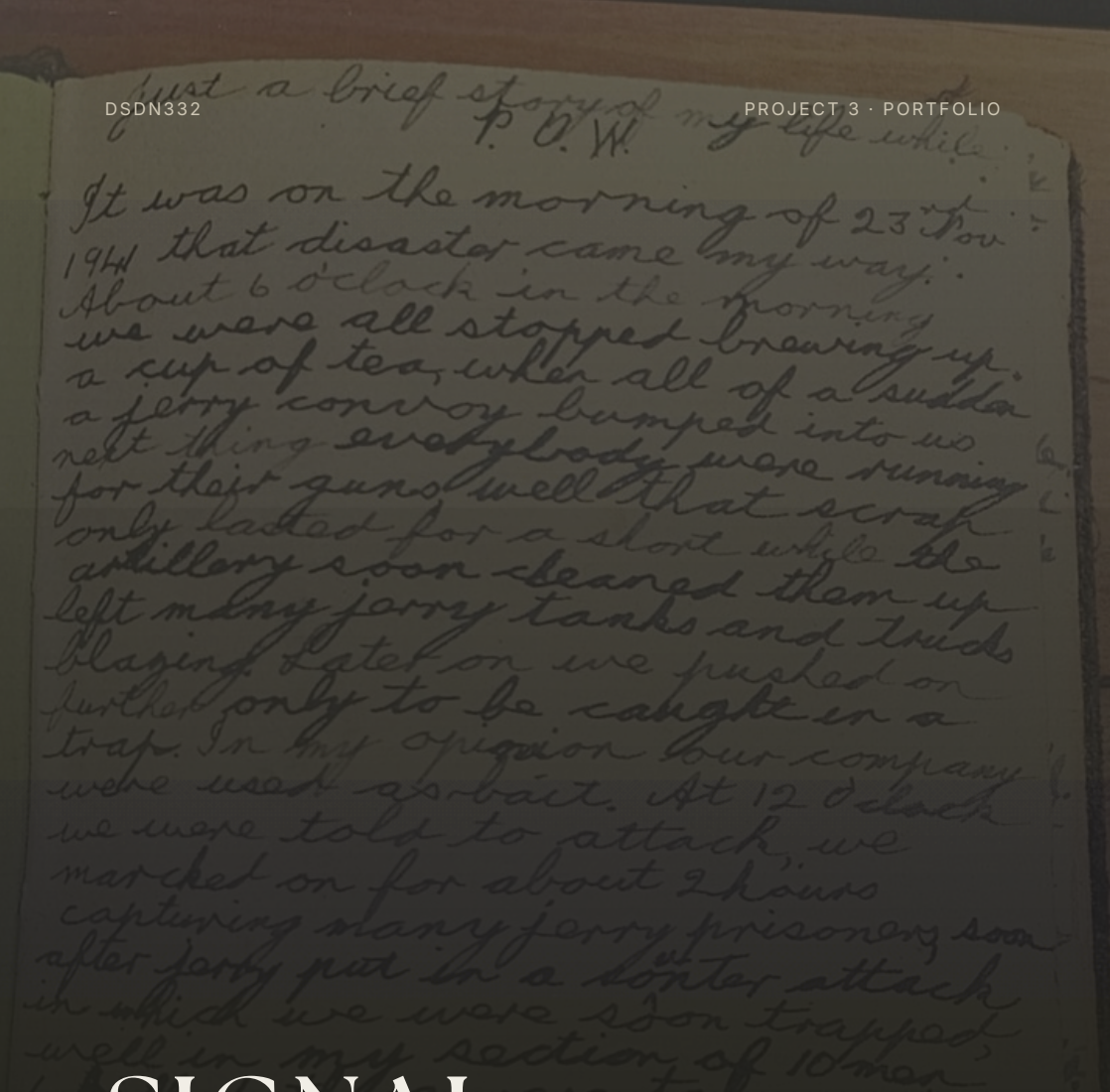


SIGNAL

A family's real words, verified by a human. Not invented by a machine.

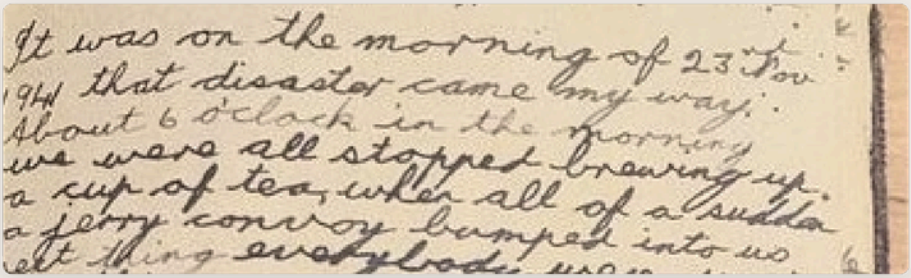
OWNING YOUR FUTURE
BRENDAN DUTTON · 2026

THE PRODUCT

A different answer to AI and the people we've lost

There's a growing industry built around AI chatbots trained on a dead relative's old messages, designed to generate things that person never actually said. SIGNAL goes the other way. It helps a family read what someone truly wrote, and a real person has to confirm it before any of it counts as true.

The prototype has three screens. The first lets you add a page, a photo of a diary entry or an old letter. The second is where the real work happens: SIGNAL drafts a transcription, but nothing counts as fact until a person checks it line by line against the original. The third is a timeline, where every verified entry is credited to whoever confirmed it.



The first lines of Norman's diary, as he wrote them.

THE OTHER PATH

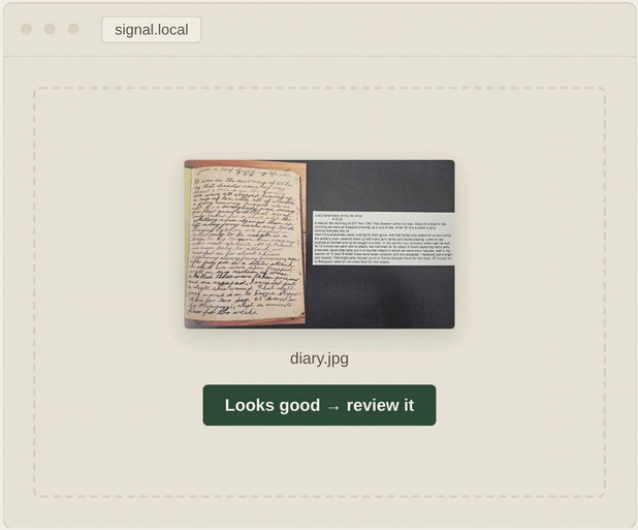
Trains an AI on someone's digital footprint to keep generating plausible new things they might say, on someone else's server.

SIGNAL

Uses AI once, to help transcribe what a person actually wrote. A human confirms it. Then the AI's job is done.

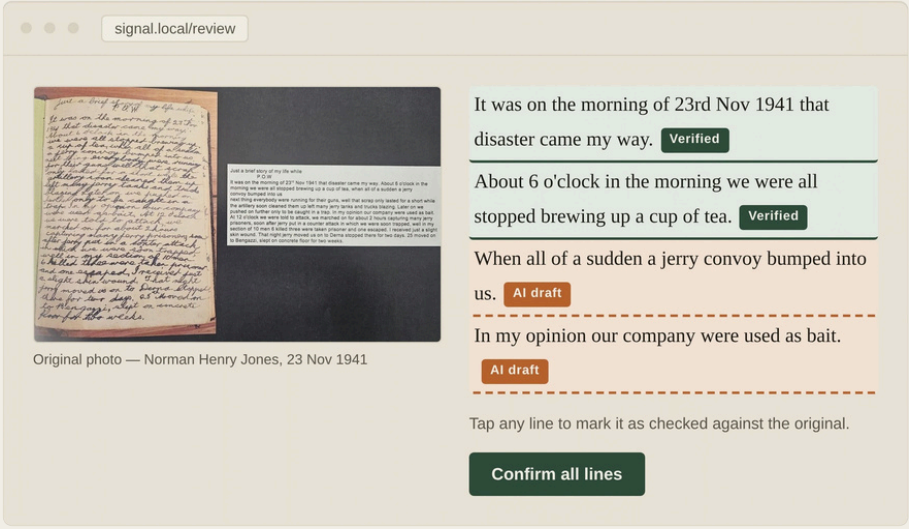
HOW IT WORKS

01 · ADD A PAGE



A real photo goes in. This one is a page from Norman Henry Jones's WW2 diary.

02 · CONFIRM WHAT'S TRUE



Orange lines are AI drafts. Green lines have been checked by a person against the handwriting. Nothing is fact until it's green.

03 · THE TIMELINE



Every entry carries the name of whoever verified it.

WHERE THE PROTOTYPE IS AT

REAL RIGHT NOW

- The upload screen accepts and previews an actual photo you choose or drag in.
- The review screen's verify toggle is fully interactive.
- Everything runs in your browser. No account, no cloud, no ads.
- It runs on your own machine with Docker.

NOT BUILT YET

- Real AI-assisted transcription of an uploaded photo.
- A persistent, multi-user timeline (currently sample data).
- A backend: file storage, a SQLite database, transcription through the Claude API.
- The animation idea, kept as a future vision on purpose.

WHO IT'S FOR

A shoebox, or someone else's cloud

Most family history lives in one of two places right now. A shoebox nobody opens, or some tech company's cloud storage that might not exist in ten years. Cowbird didn't make it. That was Jonathan Harris's project, a beautiful attempt at the same kind of thing SIGNAL is trying to do, and it shut down in 2017. (https://jonathanharris.org/cowbird)

FAMILIES

A family gets an afternoon of transcribing turned into something everyone can actually read and keep adding to, without one person being stuck as the keeper of the physical pages.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

A community group gets something else out of it. Marae, migrant community associations, local museums: they're sitting on oral histories and documents that matter but are hard to search or share. Running their own self-hosted archive means they're not handing it over to a platform that answers to someone else.

> The archive should outlive the app it lives in.

Free to own. Paid for help.

An employer isn't going to be satisfied with "a nice student project," so here's the actual model. The core tool stays free and self-hosted forever, because that's the whole reason SIGNAL exists.

Self-hosted Free, forever	Run it on your own computer or home server. Your archive, your machine.
Hosted Smallpaidplan	For people who don't want to run a server themselves.
Setup & support Paidservice	For libraries, museums and community groups without in-house IT. You pay for the help, never for access.

The archive itself always belongs to whoever's running it.

ALREADY PROVEN

Ghost and Plausible Analytics already run this exact model: open source you can host yourself, with a paid hosted version for everyone else. So it isn't hypothetical.

WHAT'S NEXT

One thing built, one thing left as an idea

Two directions came out of a conversation with my lecturer. One was realistic to build before hand in. The other is a good idea that will take a lot longer.

BUILT

Most of the friction in "just run it yourself" is the setup, so the prototype already ships with a working Docker configuration:

1. Install Docker Desktop (free, any OS)
2. Download the SIGNAL folder
3. Run one command: `docker compose up`
4. Open localhost:8080 in a browser

That's it. It runs entirely on your own machine and nothing leaves it.

FUTURE VISION, NOT BUILT

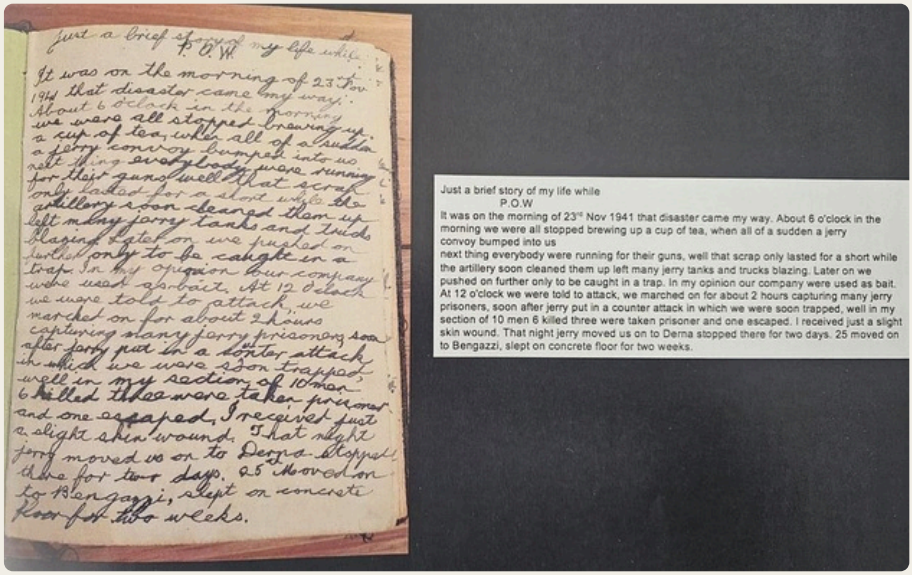
An animation generated from a verified story, with a family member recording the voiceover themselves. It's moving to think about. It's also staying an idea, because the real questions under it don't have answers yet. How do you animate a real moment without inventing details nobody wrote down? Would it hold up across a whole diary, token limits and all?

SIGNAL's whole position is that AI doesn't get to fill gaps with something plausible sounding. That has to apply here too.

WHY THIS MATTERS

It started with one diary

SIGNAL started as a way to finally make sense of my great grandfather Norman Henry Jones's WW2 diary. He was captured in North Africa on 23 November 1941, spent time in Italian POW camps, escaped after the armistice, joined the partisans and made it home to Wellington in 1945. He wrote a lot of it down.



Norman's entry for 23 November 1941, next to the family's typed copy.

Somewhere along the way the project turned into an actual position on AI and memory.

> AI can help you read what's real faster. It doesn't get to decide what's true.

That's the part I want to carry into how I design things going forward.

SIGNAL · Brendan Dutton
DSDN332 Project 3: Portfolio, Owning Your Future
Diary photographs: Norman Henry Jones, family collection