



A 14 by 45-inch diorama created by Jim Hillestad depicts Boers capturing Churchill.

Boers Capture Winston Churchill

James H. Hillestad recounts the larger-than-life icon's escape from captivity

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

In 1899, the British were waging war against two independent and quarrelsome Boer republics. In the autumn of that year, Winston Churchill sailed to South Africa as a war correspondent for London's Morning Post newspaper to cover the Second Anglo-Boer War. He was 24 years old.

Churchill was already a celebrity. The son of a lord, he was a war hero who had won medals while serving as a cavalry officer in the British Army in the Middle East and North Africa. He was also a distinguished writer of two books about those colonial wars.

FORMIDABLE FOES

The Boers (farmers of Dutch descent) had proved to be a surprisingly formidable foe. In Natal, they had surrounded and trapped a British garrison at Ladysmith. Hoping to

reach the besieged garrison, Churchill sailed from Cape Town to Durban. Then he took a train to Estcourt, a British base about 30 miles south of Ladysmith.

On Nov. 15, Churchill was invited to ride in a military train that was

“THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXHILARATING THAN TO BE SHOT AT WITHOUT RESULT.” — WINSTON CHURCHILL

scheduled to make a 10-mile patrol north toward Ladysmith. The train carried a track repair crew and a contingent of infantrymen in armored coaches. The train was propelled by a locomotive, itself armored with chain mail.



War correspondent Winston Churchill in South African Light Horse uniform around the time of his capture.



A British newsboy spreads the latest news from the front in South Africa.

Upon receiving news that about 100 Boer horsemen had occupied the station at Chieveley, orders were given to reverse back to Frere. However, as the train rounded the spur of a hill, Boer forces opened fire on it with artillery.

The engineer accelerated at once. The train ran down the gradient at high speed, only to crash into a boulder with which the Boers had booby-trapped the line. With the line now blocked, the engine and wagons came under fire.

Churchill volunteered to lead a party of men to clear the track and allow the train to escape. After much effort, they were successful. However, half of the British soldiers were left behind.

Upon seeing this, Churchill jumped off the locomotive, telling the engineer, "I can't leave those poor buggers to their fate."

He was quickly surrounded and taken prisoner by the Boers.

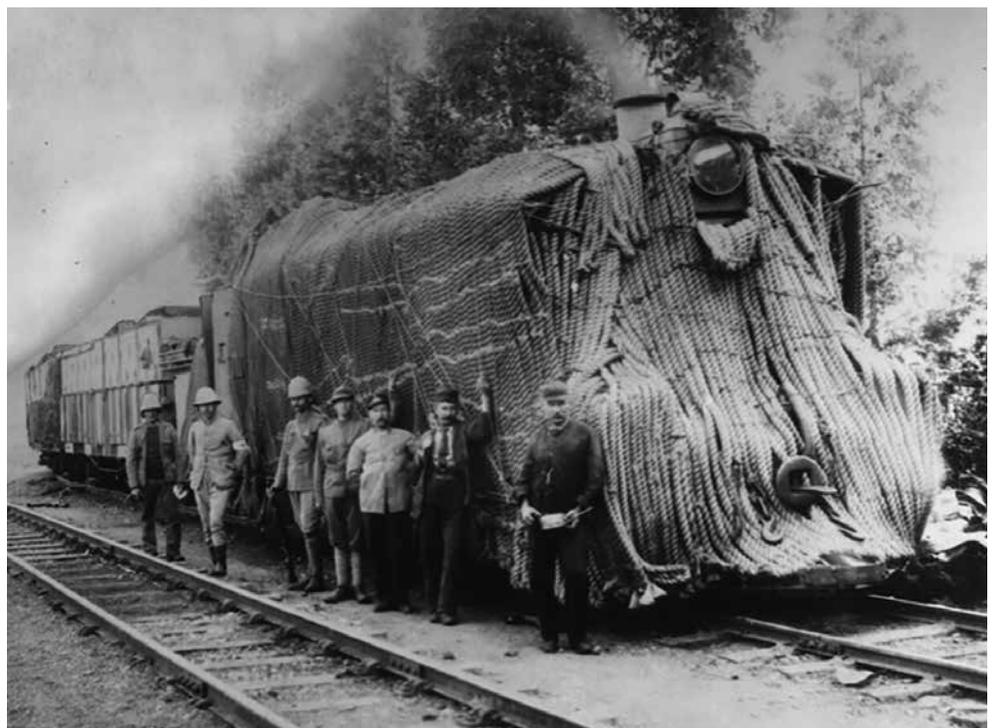
PRETORIA PRISON

Along with 55 other prisoners, Churchill was taken to Pretoria, capital of the South African Republic (also known as the Transvaal Republic). He was housed in a

brick school building. Churchill was allowed to keep his personal belongings and to file dispatches to his newspaper.

London papers covered their front pages with inspiring accounts of Churchill's heroism. He became a national hero.

Encouraged by the publicity — which he felt would enhance his journalistic and political ambitions — Churchill nevertheless felt somewhat ashamed of having surrendered without a fight. To "make amends," he decided to attempt an escape from the prison camp.



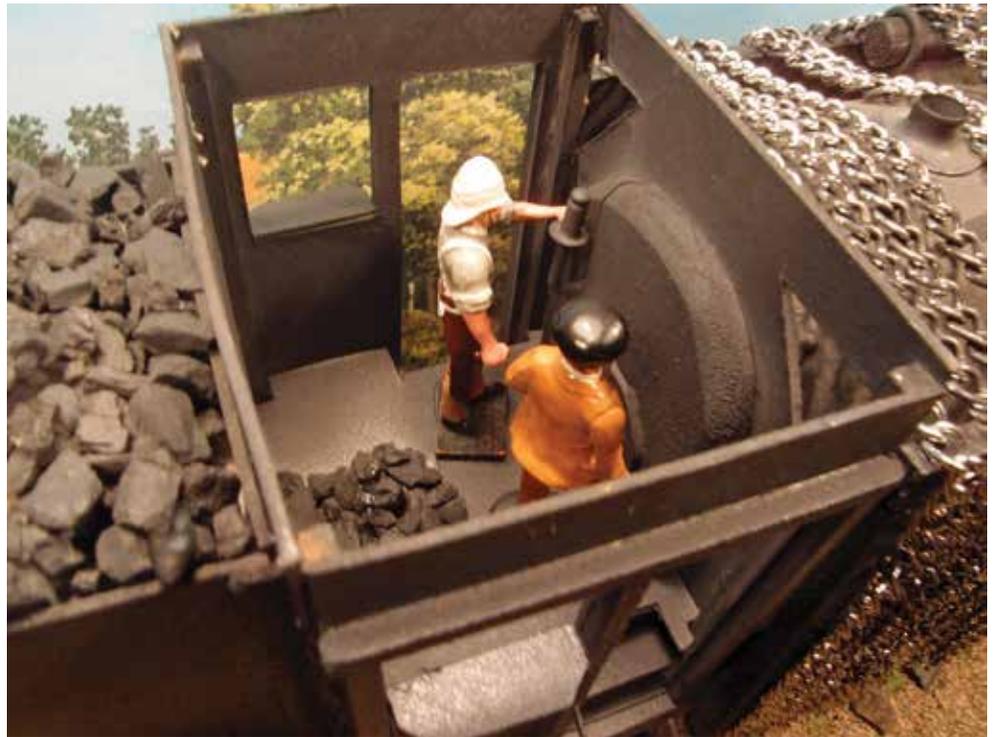
"Hairy Mary" armored train locomotive during the Siege of Ladysmith.



Queen Victoria South African medal with campaign bars for service in the Boer War.

On the night of Dec. 12, when the Boer sentries were distracted, Churchill climbed the surrounding prison wall and lowered himself silently into an adjoining garden.

The streets of Pretoria were full of civilians, but they paid him no attention as he set off on foot. Churchill followed the tracks of the Delagoa Bay Railway. After walking for two hours, he came to a station. Hearing a train whistle, he crouched by the track. The train waited five minutes at the station, then started again.



In the locomotive's cab are engineer Charles Wagner and his stoker.

Churchill made a dash, hurtled himself onto one of the freight cars full of coal sacks and burrowed himself among them. Exhausted, he fell asleep, lulled by the clatter of the train which was carrying him at 20 mph away from the enemy's capital.

ENGLISHMAN'S AID

Churchill awoke before daybreak. Fearing that the train would be searched during the day, he jumped off and resumed walking along the railroad line. He came upon a cluster of houses near a coal mine.

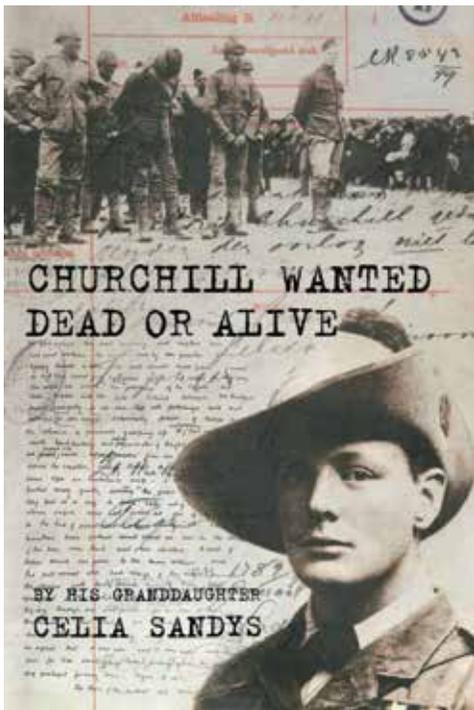
Churchill boldly walked up to the biggest house and knocked on the door. Luck was with him when the door was opened by an Englishman: John Howard, manager of the Transvaal Collieries, from whom Churchill received a joyous welcome.

Churchill spent the next several days hiding underground in a coal mine. Meanwhile, the British newspapers were treating the daring escape as a great psychological victory. Boer newspapers were treating it as a major setback. The Standard and Digger News even reported that

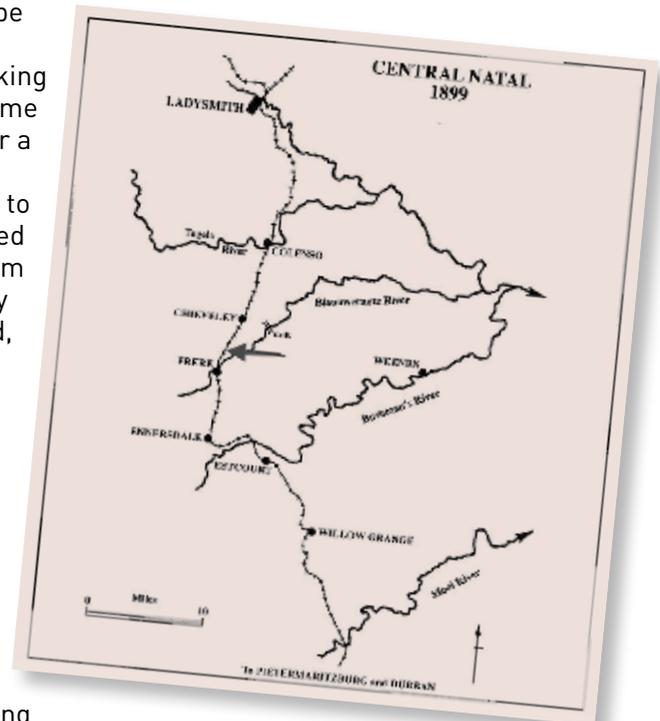
Churchill had escaped disguised as a woman!

With help from Howard and his British friends, Churchill was smuggled in a goods train across the border to the Portuguese settlement of Lourenco Marques Dec. 19.

Two days later — weary, dirty and hungry, but free once more — Churchill arrived by steamer at



Churchill's granddaughter, Celia Sandys, penned the book "Churchill Wanted Dead or Alive."



Map of Natal showing the approximate location of Churchill's capture.



A bare-headed Winston Churchill reaches for his Mauser pistol that he carried at the Battle of Omdurman. Standing to his left is his friend Capt. Alymer Haldane commanding the infantry escort.

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DID YOU KNOW?

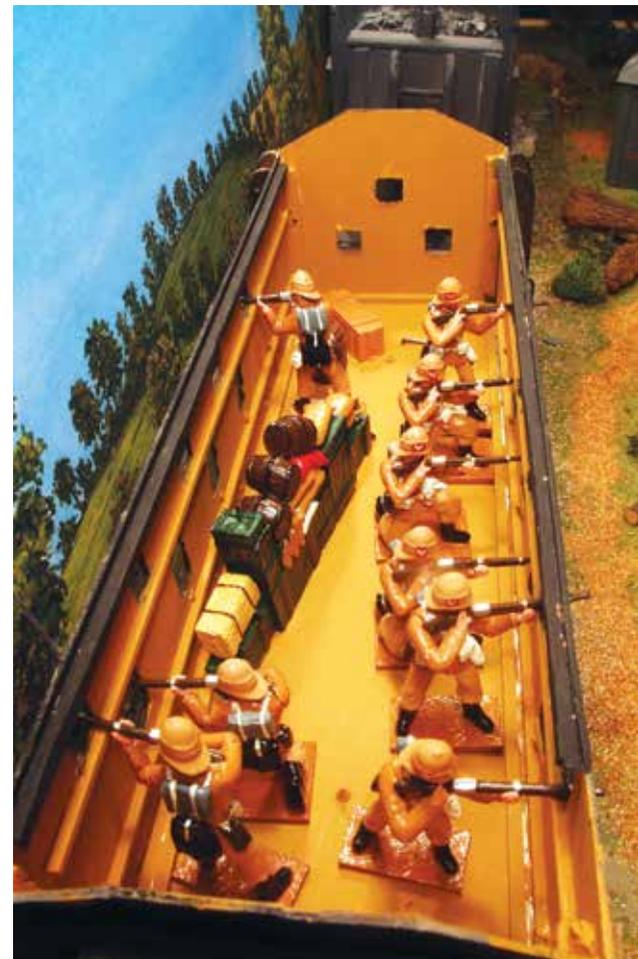
Inasmuch as the British in South Africa were fighting in a hostile territory, it was felt that security for Boer prisoners of war would be better managed if they were transported to remote, escape-proof facilities.

As a result, 24,000 Boer men and boys were interred on the islands of St. Helena, Bermuda and Ceylon as well as in India. The youngest POW was 6 years old; the oldest 80.

To pass the time and earn pocket money, the prisoners were allowed pocketknives to make curios for sale in local shops to tourists. For materials, the Boers used bone, ivory and wood.



Hand-carved napkin rings made by Boer prisoners from the writer’s collection. The one in the middle from St. Helena is of cow bone. The two made of wood are marked Bermuda and Ceylon.



Soldiers of the Durban Light Infantry and the Dublin Fusiliers provide covering fire.

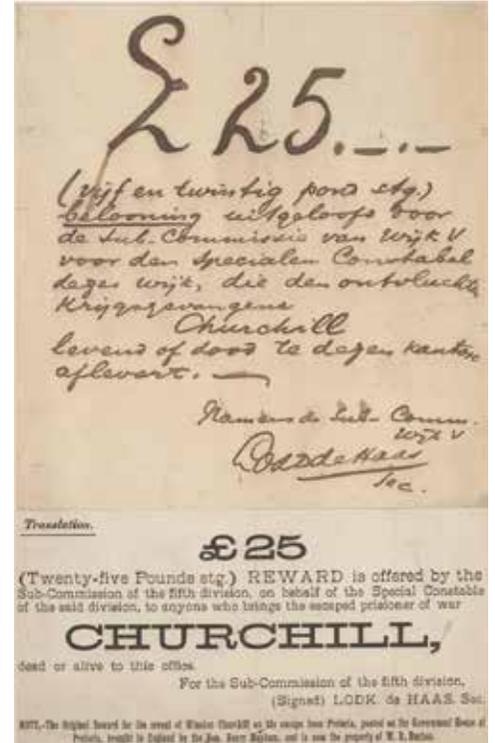


“Hairy Mary” takes a hit from Boer artillery.

“CHURCHILL SPENT THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS HIDING UNDERGROUND IN A COAL MINE. MEANWHILE, THE BRITISH NEWSPAPERS WERE TREATING THE DARING ESCAPE AS A GREAT PSYCHOLOGICAL VICTORY. BOER NEWSPAPERS WERE TREATING IT AS A MAJOR SETBACK. THE STANDARD AND DIGGER NEWS EVEN REPORTED THAT CHURCHILL HAD ESCAPED DISGUISED AS A WOMAN!”



The British armored train comes under attack from Boers.



Though attention-getting, this famous wanted poster offering “£25 Dead or Alive” for Churchill’s capture was a forgery. Churchill was not to know that, however, and took personal pleasure from it in later life.

Durban in the English colony of Natal. He found the harbor decorated in his honor with bands playing on the quay when his ship docked.

In the summer of 1900, the future prime minister returned to England, where Churchill was elected to Parliament.

AMBUSH DIORAMA

Reflecting on his youth at the time — just age 24 — I was moved by this dramatic episode in Churchill’s early life. To re-create the “ambush,” I used 54-mm figures from Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd. and the late Walter Dineen. The train was crafted by the late Hicks Atwell.

I was guided by the writings of Celia Sandys, Churchill’s granddaughter, who wrote “Churchill Wanted Dead or Alive.” ■



ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is a military historian and proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.