

A black rhinoceros is the central focus, shown in profile facing left. It has a thick, dark body and a prominent, spiraling horn. The background is a dark, misty savanna at night, with a train of several dark-colored cars visible in the distance. The train's windows are illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and dramatic.

# TITAN IN THE BUSH

Known for his energy, courage, and resolve, Winston Churchill was determined to bag a black rhino on his one and only safari.

**BY JOHN SEEREY-LESTER**

While Theodore Roosevelt was close to completing his second term as president and dreaming of an African safari, a British aristocrat was just stepping onto the Dark Continent. Like TR, he would go on to become one of the most important political figures of the 20th Century and achieve legendary status as a military leader.

His name was Winston Churchill, and in 1907, at age 33, he would climb aboard the Uganda Railway in Mombasa and take his seat atop the engine's cowcatcher to begin his journey through British East Africa (now Kenya), just as Roosevelt would do two years later.

Churchill had arrived in Africa after traveling to Vienna, Syracuse on the island of Sicily, and Malta, where he was invested in the palace of the Grand Masters of the Knights of Malta. From there, he sailed to Cypress before heading for Mombasa on Africa's east coast.

As with TR, the young Winston was in awe of Africa's vast beauty and its variety of wildlife as he rode through the endless savannah. He was intrigued, and somewhat amused, that his seat was an ordinary garden bench attached securely, he hoped, to the top of the cowcatcher. It could seat four people.

His journey also brought back memories—perhaps not the fondest—of fighting under General Sir Herbert Kitchener in 1898 when the British defeated Mahdist forces defending the Sudan city of Omdurman.

Because of that earlier experience, Churchill was well aware of the Uganda Railway's checkered history and the terrible toll that man-eating lions had taken on the railroad's workers. By the time he returned to BEA, the railway had survived those early years of tragedy and overcome its nickname "The Lunatic Express." The concept of building a railroad through one of the most inhospitable countries in the British Empire—once described as a line "from nowhere to absolutely nowhere"—had been the subject of much debate in the British Parliament.

By 1907 all that was in the past, and the Uganda Railway was paying its way. Indeed, it had become a gleaming example of British stubbornness and determination, becoming a major commercial asset to the British Protectorate. It had also become a useful tool for pioneering hunters of the time.

The wild animals were used to the trains and paid little attention to them. When game was sighted, the hunters would simply slip from the halted train, or travel up and down the line on a trolley to get within range of their quarry.

Africa's searing heat made sitting in front of the engine on the cowcatcher quite unpleasant, and its novelty would soon wear off for Churchill, who decided to move inside the train. There, he could still observe herds of antelope, giraffes, ostrich, wildebeest, and zebras stretching across the plains as far as the eye could see.

Churchill's exploration into Africa was on a much smaller scale than that of Roosevelt's massive undertaking in 1909, which was organized as a scientific expedition to gather plant and animal specimens for American museums. Churchill's primary objective was to examine the potential for future settlers in British East Africa and, of course, to hunt along the way.

When Churchill's party departed from Mombasa, it included shipping tycoon Sir Donald Currie, writer Edward Marsh, Col. D. J. Wilson, and Capt. Sir J. Hayes-Sadler, the British consul for the East African Coast.

When it reached the Thika camp, Churchill was joined by Maj. Riddell; Marquis Gandolfi-Hornoyold, who, like Winston, was a knight of the Sovereign Order of Malta; and Hon. K. Dundas. Their professional

hunter was Arthur Blayney Percival, the ranger for Game Protection in BEA and older brother of the more famous Philip Percival. The party was assisted by a brigade of the King's African Rifles.

As Churchill's party traveled through the varied terrain, its deep gullies, steaming jungles, dramatic volcanic landscapes, and vast plains covered in tall grass, the red roofs of Mombasa soon became a distant memory. Their ultimate destination was Simba Station—"The place of the lion"—where Churchill and his party stayed for three days, enabling him to do some serious hunting.

Churchill's carriage was moved to a siding from which they could travel up and down the line by trolley. Once they spotted an animal, the hunters would jump from the slow-moving vehicle, pursue their quarry, then climb back onto the trolley and return to the siding.

Churchill was eager to hunt any big game, but particularly black rhino. He was aware of his physical limitations and modest about his abilities as a shooter. He wanted to get as close as possible to his target, which can be difficult in the African bush.

On their second day at Simba, Churchill's party found rhino sign within their first hour, but soon discovered that following the beast was easier said than done. Carrying his heavy .450 double, Churchill struggled to push through the thorny tangle. After several hours of walking, the hunters had no idea how far they had traveled or in what direction. When they finally emerged from the dense scrub, they were less than a quarter-mile from their trolley where, thankfully, a welcome luncheon and ice cold sodas were waiting.

Winston now realized they would have to proceed into more open country, if they were going to have any success at bagging a rhino.

The next day they got an earlier start and headed out while it was still dark. As they stepped down from the trolley, a glittering mosaic of stars cast an eerie, silvery light over the vast savannah, sprinkled with the dark shapes of various animals.

The men marched in a big circle, carefully scanning their surroundings for a rhino. Then, as the sun began to break the horizon and they were on the verge of heading back, they came across a large antelope with long, curled horns. It was an oryx, and soon two more appeared.

Hunched over, the hunters traced the edge of a deep gully as they slipped toward the small herd, which was headed for the brow of a hill. Winston's party split into two groups: one in pursuit of two oryx, the other, led by Churchill, pursuing the animal with the tallest horns.

Churchill followed the beast up and down the rocky slopes, then around the steep shoulder of a hill. As he moved in for a shot, he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

There, not 500 yards away, was the dark silhouette of a rhino in the middle of an open plain—"like a prehistoric creature from another time," he would recall. Behind the rhino was the snow-covered dome of Mount Kilimanjaro standing proudly in German East Africa (then Tanganyika, now Tanzania). To young Winston, it looked like a scene unaltered since the dawn of time.

There were no large trees, only a few sparse bushes that Churchill could use to screen his approach. He was well aware of his dangerous situation, particularly if his first shot was not fatal. He knew that rhinos were known to charge blindly and furiously when confronted.

Churchill, along with his trackers and two other hunters, had crept to within 200 yards of the beast when one of the natives pointed out two more rhinos behind some bushes to their right. The men immediately halted, fearful that if they continued they would soon be

upwind of the other rhinos.

Keeping a constant eye on their prize, the hunters carefully backtracked to the hill and skirted 'round it so as to emerge closer to the rhinos, but still remain hidden. After taking careful aim, Churchill fired, then heard the bullet hit home with a loud thud.

Shocked by the impact, the rhino stumbled slightly and turned to look straight at the hunters. Then, with remarkable speed, it bore down on the men like a runaway freight train.

Everyone began to fire, but the bullets had no effect; the great beast seemed unstoppable. As the distance between the men and the monster quickly vanished, Churchill reflected that whatever the end result, he and his party were the cause of the conflict and bore the blame.

Churchill looked on in horror as the men fired their final shots, yet the monster kept coming. Just as Churchill was about to accept his fate, the rhino suddenly swerved to the right and raced broadside across the line of hunters. Before they could shoot again, the beast crashed to the ground, dead.

Reloading his rifle, Churchill decided to pursue the rhino's companion farther across the plain. He then spent the next half-hour stalking and then bringing down the animal, providing himself with another hide and horns for his trophy room in England.

After their hunt Churchill and his party boarded the train heading toward Uganda to continue their expedition on the Dark



At the safari's Hippo Camp, Churchill would climb atop his ten-foot observation tower to look for rhinos in the tall grass and brush. The ladder was badly damaged when a rhino charged Churchill's party, forcing the native coulees to drop the makeshift device as they raced to safety.

Continent. It would be after they reached Lake Victoria that his safari would depart from the route Roosevelt would take two years later.

As they readied themselves for the next leg of their journey, Churchill was recovering from a severe intestinal infection (traveler's diarrhea), which he had suffered for many days. Still, it would not dampen his irrepressible enthusiasm for the expedition.

In fact, by the time he reached the Kingdom of Uganda, his excitement had increased tenfold. Being greeted like royalty at every stop no doubt served to spur his enthusiasm. Later Churchill described Uganda as "a fairy tale garden kingdom, which you arrived at by train instead of a beanstalk." But he also observed that the kingdom had a growing problem.

"So far as a human force is concerned, the British power in these regions is at present beyond challenge," he said. Then, in true Churchillian fashion, he added: "But a new opponent has appeared and will not be denied. Uganda is defended by insects.

"It would even seem that the arrival of the white man and the increased movement and activity, which his presence has involved, have awakened these formidable atoms to a realization of their powers of evil!" Churchill noted. He was referring to "sleeping sickness," which a few years earlier was found to be carried by the tsetse fly and had become a significant problem for the British settlers.

Churchill had traveled by the new train, which cut through the African wilderness from the east to the center of British East Africa. The British had also opened up the north by laying lines from Alexandria to Cairo, on to Wady Halfa, then from Berber to Khartoum (where he had fought years before), and continuing to Gondoro via Fashoda. In all, more than a thousand miles were being served by the steam locomotive.

At Ripon Falls, Churchill's party would leave the "iron road" and paddle, sail, and march their way back toward Mombasa. This would mean navigating the Nile and a series of big lakes. Going with the current, they could reach their destination in a matter of days.

Winston realized this would be the most arduous part of their journey. It involved three separate marches through the forest to Kakindu, then three days of canoeing the Nile with its stretches of dangerous rapids, followed by many treks through the African bush toward Lake Albert, formerly known as Lake Mobutu Sese Seko. At each stop along the way, the porters had to carry their 65-pound loads overland from one navigatable stretch of water to another.

Churchill was impressed with the beautiful, yet sinister surroundings of the African bush. He was amazed how much wildlife seemed to be lurking beneath the lush, green canopy.

At the end of each day, camp was a welcome sight to the weary travelers. Their camp usually comprised two rows of tents, with a large central rest house (*banda*) made of bamboo and thatched with elephant grass. The British Union Jack flag flew prominently at each camp.

Every morning the hunters were awakened by reveille played by buglers of the King's African Rifles. Everyone would rise and dress by candlelight, eat a quick breakfast, then the porters would grab their burdens and set off for another long trek through the bush.

At Kakindu they marched along the narrow track to the banks of the Nile. Awaiting them was a series of dugout canoes and a small steam launch, the *James Martin*, to carry them onward on their journey. After the long task of loading the dugouts, the little steamer set off, towing the flotilla of small boats through a labyrinth of tall papyrus where the river spread out into a complex web of small tributaries.

Sometime after reaching Fajao and Murchison Falls the party arrived at a small circular bay where they docked at Hippo Camp. From there, Churchill planned to hunt hippo, elephant, and the illusive Burchell's white rhino.

The light was fading fast, so Churchill decided that with less than four hours of daylight remaining, there was no time for a serious hunt. Instead, they decided to scout for game within marching distance of camp. The party split into three groups, each guided by an officer of the African Rifles and taking a different route.

One of the groups, led by Colonel Wilson, had an exciting encounter with a lone bull elephant. As they started to stalk the bull, it suddenly decided to turn the tables. With ears outstretched, the massive animal spun around, raised his trunk, trumpeted, and then charged the men at a furious speed.

As it barreled toward them through the marsh, the men scattered, some firing at the beast as it rumbled by. The party followed its tracks until last light, but never caught up with him.

Churchill's group, meanwhile, had been struggling through tall grass for almost an hour when the hunters spotted a large, dark shape. Churchill was sure it was the much sought-after white rhino, but he wanted to get a better look, so he climbed up a makeshift 10-foot observation tower, which the natives had faithfully carried through the bush. From the top he could glass his surroundings.

Churchill noticed the dark shape seemed to triple in size as it filled his view. It was not a rhino, but a magnificent elephant that was ambling straight toward them, leisurely swinging its trunk. The bull was followed by ten more mature animals and three calves. As he watched from his tower, Churchill's attention was suddenly drawn to a sound behind him. To his amazement, it was a white rhino.

Churchill was so involved in whispering directions to the natives and directing other members of his party that he lost sight of his prize. Just when he finally picked it up again in his binoculars, the beast caught his wind and disappeared into the dense cover. Frustrated and embarrassed, Churchill and his group returned to camp.

It was stifling hot when the entire party headed out the next day at the crack of dawn, full of anticipation for a better hunt. The going was tough as they navigated their way through a mix of marsh and scrub. It was prime rhino habitat, so the men were very cautious as they waded through the tall grass and thornbrush. Churchill sensed danger and suspected every thicket might contain one of the white monsters. The men carried their rifles at the ready, and Churchill was soon feeling the strain of lugging his heavy double through the swamp and reeds.

As the sun began to rise, the sweltering conditions worsened. They came upon a group of warthogs, but Churchill's sights were set on a bigger game, and he had no intention of revealing their presence by shooting a warthog. Even a dozen splendid waterbucks browsing at the crest of a small hill couldn't deter him from his chosen quarry.

Eventually they came upon several rhinos standing in the shade of a large tree only 60 yards away. The nearest rhino stood broadside to Churchill, who hit him hard with both barrels. The giant fell, but scrambled to its feet and headed directly for Churchill. Winston quickly reloaded and fired twice more to drop the animal for good.

One of the other rhinos charged the natives who were carrying Churchill's observation tower, which they dropped as they scattered in all directions. None of the natives were hurt, but the viewing tower was damaged.

Undaunted and still focused on his mission, Churchill arranged for

his tower to be fixed, then he eagerly climbed to the top and began glassing the swamp. Within seconds he had found four more full-grown rhinos about 300 yards away on the other side of the swamp.

So, before celebrating his first rhino kill and with the carcass still lying in the reeds, the men set off after the other animals. Conveniently situated between them and the rhinos was a tall anthill that provided sufficient cover for them to advance single file.

Two of the rhinos managed to slip away, but one raced right through the middle of the hunters. No one was hurt, though amazingly, no one was able to put a bullet into the charging monster.

Over the next two hours, the hunters continued to pursue two of the rhinos and finally succeeded in bagging both of them before returning to camp.

Churchill remained at "Hippo Camp" for a few more days, traveling from lagoon to lagoon before re-boarding the launch and continuing on his African exploration. In the days to come, he would trek inland in search of a great herd of elephants . . . but that's another story. ■

## ADDENDUM

While researching this story, I was amazed by the similarities between Theodore Roosevelt and Churchill. Apparently the two men did not like each other, though it's believed they only met once. But in my research I discovered that their careers ran an uncanny parallel course.

Churchill and Roosevelt, after being initially doubted by their respective voters and having to cope with a negative media, went on to reach the pinnacle of their careers—Roosevelt as America's 26th president and Churchill as Britain's 59th prime minister.

Both men also garnered acclaim for their accomplishments on the battlefield. In July 1898 Roosevelt became a hero after leading a charge up an obscure hill on the island of Cuba. Then, in September of that same year, Churchill helped to lead a successful cavalry charge in the battle of Omdurman in the Sudan.

Even in Cuba there was a link between the two men. Churchill was a young officer in the 4th Hussars when he went to the island seeking some action, a full three years before TR's arrival. That in itself must have caused friction between the two titans.

Both men were prolific writers who received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Churchill left a treasure chest of books documenting the little-known history of England for future generations. Roosevelt, meanwhile, had recorded his adventures as an outdoorsman and his political career in some 37 books.

Roosevelt and Churchill met only once, at a very private dinner meeting in 1900. During one of his visits to America, Churchill traveled from Manhattan to Albany with the sole purpose of meeting TR, who was then vice president. Although there was no official report of their discussion, nor photographs taken to record the event, it seems evident that the two men were not fond of each other. Some researchers believe that TR was taken aback by the young, brash Winston, but Churchill's opinion of Roosevelt remains unknown.

TR later confided in a friend: "I saw the Englishman, Winston Churchill here, and he is not an attractive fellow."

TR also degraded Winston's father, Lord Randolph, as a "cheap character."

TR's daughter, Alice, was once asked why she thought the two men didn't like each other. She answered, "I would have thought it was obvious—they were too much alike."

