

Rare Gallantry Awards To South Africans

Two tardy awards of the Albert Medal for civilian bravery at the armoured train disaster near Chieveley Station, Natal, 15th November 1899

Bill Hibbard

Collectors of the Queen's South Africa medal, particularly those with a keen interest in the early Natal campaigns, will be familiar with the armoured train episode at Chieveley. *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, volume II, provides a graphic story of the ambush of the armoured train by Boer commandos under General Joubert. The account makes interesting reading.

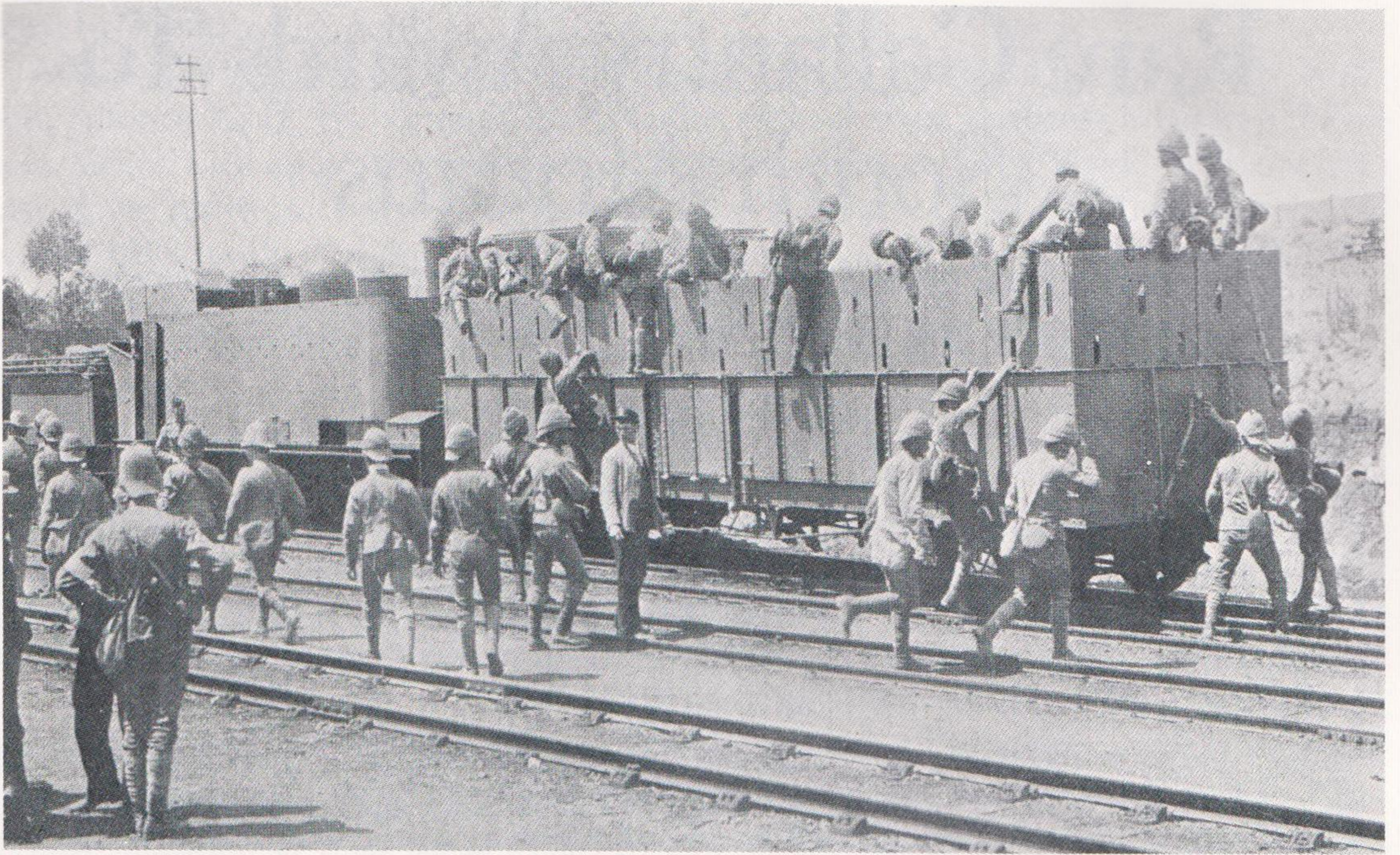
After the investment of Ladysmith a large Boer force moved south in the direction of Colenso. At daybreak on November 15th an advance party nearing the small town of Frere heard the sound of a train puffing away in the distance. Quickly dispersing they watched it clatter by.

Understandably nervous at all the Boer activity the British had sent this armoured train down the line to reconnoitre. It was manned by a company each of the Dublin Fusiliers and Durban Light Infantry, a naval 7-pounder and crew on an open truck and a few platelayers to repair any possible damage to the line. Altogether about 160 men. Between Escourt and Chieveley the line ran like a switch-back, up and down narrow valleys with little field of view on either side of the track.

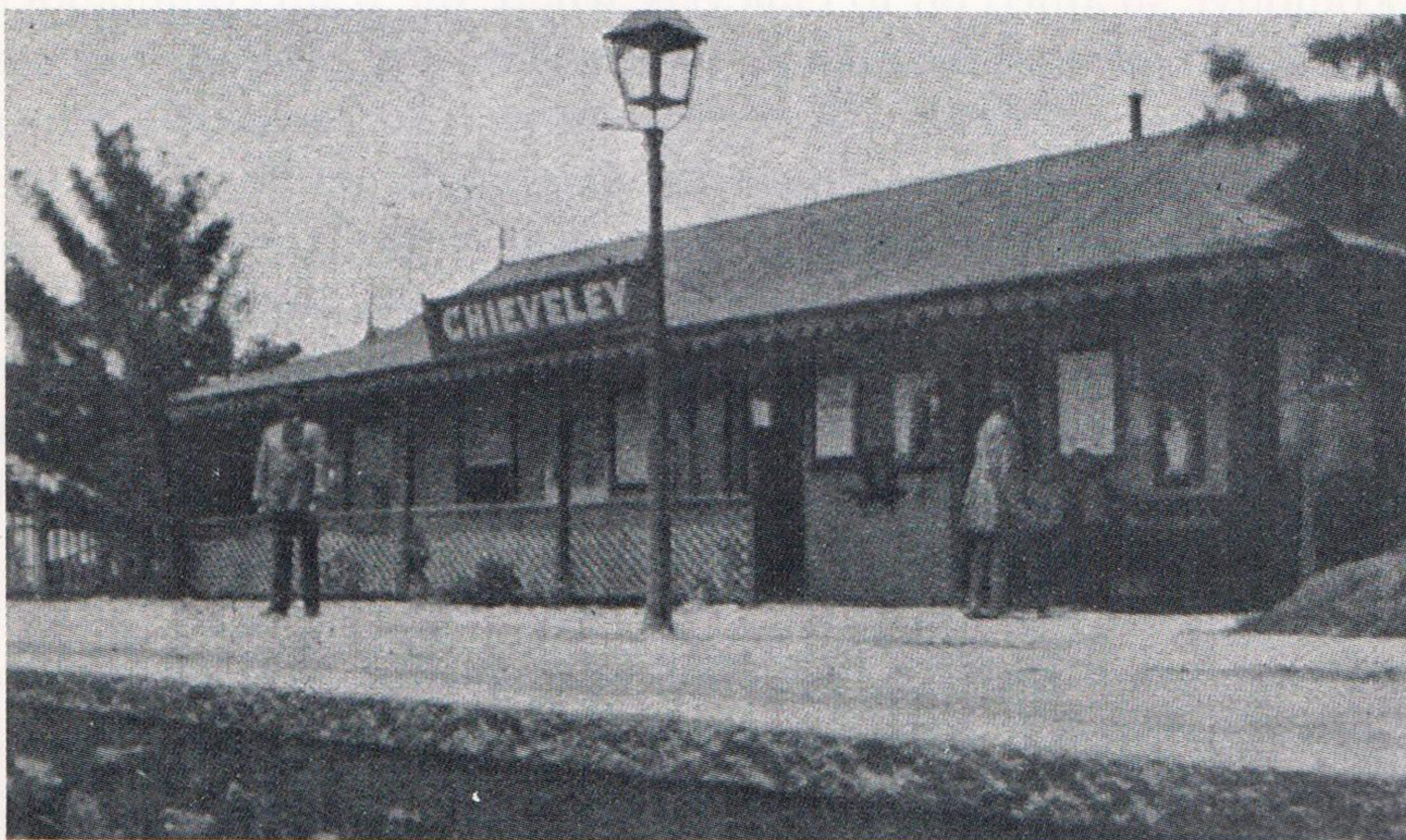
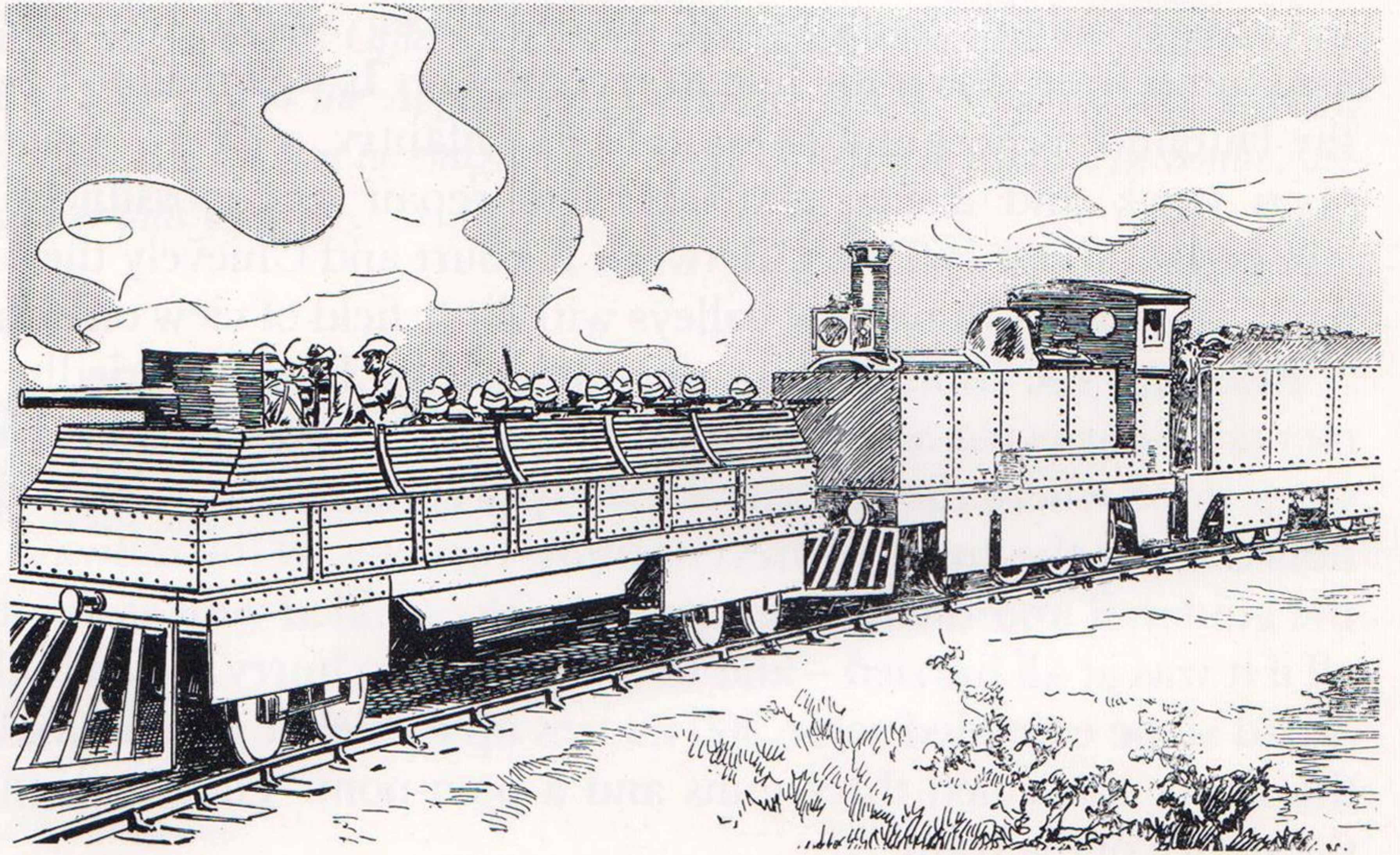
Allowing the train to pass unmolested the Boers hurriedly called up reinforcements and selected a section of the track to be sabotaged near the bottom of a long steep slope where the line curved sharply towards Frere. A guiderail had been positioned along the curve to prevent trains running off the railways. The space between the guiderail and the rail next to it the Boers filled with stones to help the train run off if it was at all hurried – and they intended to hurry it. On both sides of the track a broad slope extended some 500 metres up to higher ground and on the edges of this the Boers concealed three guns and a pom-pom. They then settled down to await the return of the train.

Meanwhile the locomotive steamed on to Chieveley where the train commander, Captain A Haldane of the Gordon Highlanders, reported by telegraph to Colonel Long back at Frere. After filling up with water the armoured train began the return journey. As it entered the mouth of the ambush the Boers opened fire with their guns and mausers and as they had anticipated the engine driver threw open his throttle letting the train speed pell-mell down the gradient. At the bend at the bottom the leading trucks jumped the rails, two of them capsizing completely, the third remaining jammed across the track immediately in front of the engine, which was in the middle of the train. The naval gun crew at once replied to the Boer artillery with their 7-pounder but almost immediately it sustained a direct hit knocking it off its carriage.

While the Dublin Fusiliers and Durban Light Infantry replied to the enemy fire Winston Churchill, who was present as correspondent of the *Morning Post*, with a few volunteers battled to clear the line in front of the engine. The driver and the fire-



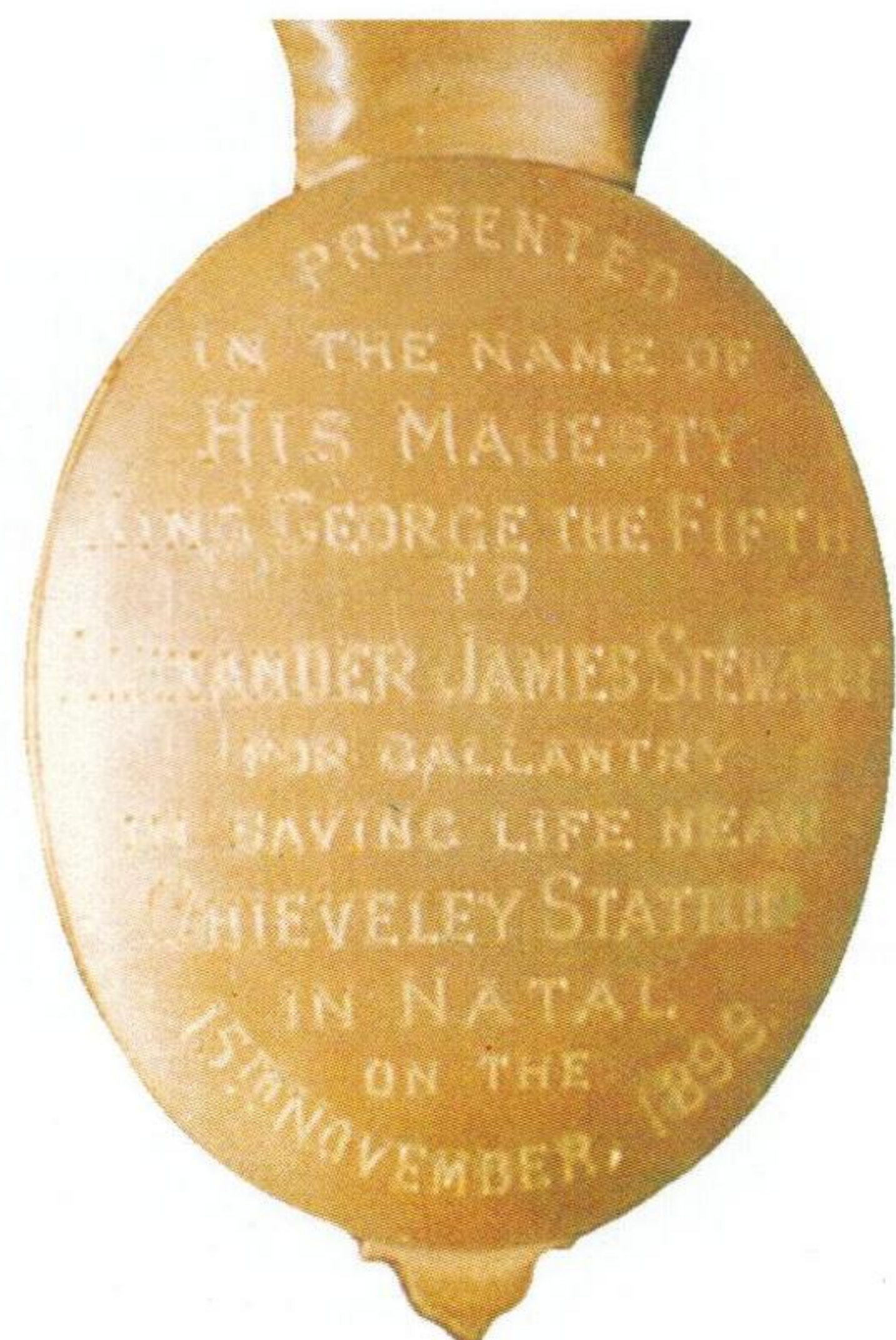
The Royal Dublin Fusiliers boarding the armoured train ambushed by the Boers near Chieveley.



Chieveley Station – the armoured train took on water here prior to its return journey to Frere.



*Mr Alexander James Stewart fireman of Armoured Train
wrecked by Boers near Chieveley Station, November 15th 1899.*



*Albert Medal Second Class, Alexander James Stewart
Natal Government Railways*

man used the engine to butt its way past the obstruction. After almost an hour's struggle with the wrecked truck the locomotive managed to scrape past. All this while, they were under heavy and accurate fire, with the added danger of the engine's boiler exploding from a direct hit. With the cab and tender crowded with dead and wounded the engine made its escape back to Frere but there was not enough clearance for the remaining part of the train; the couplings snapped and it had to be abandoned leaving Winston Churchill, the officers and most of the infantry in the hands of the Boers.

So ends the official account of this gallant affair, the telling of which added yet another colourful incident to the already crowded canvas of events in Natal during the early months of the war.

The bravery of the train driver and his fireman would have been totally forgotten had it not been for the memory of one man who also had played an important role in the escape of the train. The outstanding bravery of these two men made such a profound impression on the mind of Winston Churchill that he tried to obtain awards for them at the time but he was unsuccessful. Later, when he became Home Secretary in 1910, he succeeded in having his recommendation for the award of Albert Medal to the two men accepted. On his return to South Africa some years later Mr Churchill stopped at Maritzburg to see Stewart who was then working as an engine driver. Mr Churchill was told that Stewart was too oily to see him; but he said, "I do not care how dirty he is; I want to shake hands with him."

Following upon the official notification of the awards this report appeared in the *Natal Witness* in July 1910:

MARITZBURG RAILWAY MEN RECEIVE TARDY RECOGNITION FOR HEROIC CONDUCT

Heroes of Armoured Train Disaster Awarded Medals After Many Years

In a cablegram last week we announced that the Albert Medal of the First Class had been awarded to Charles Wagner and of the Second Class to Alexander Stewart, both of Maritzburg, who were respectively driver and fireman on the armoured train which met with a memorable disaster at Chieveley on November 15th 1899. The London Gazette in an article describes the incident of the bravery of the two men who stuck to their posts under circumstances of exceptional danger, thereby saving the lives of over 60 persons. The story of the affair is retold in our columns today, and will be read with renewed interest in view of the belated recognition of the heroism of the principal actors eleven years after the event.

Shortly after the appearance of this report the General Manager

South African Railways, Johannesburg, received the following letter from the Governor-General's Office, Pretoria, dated 4th August 1910.

"Sir,

By the desire of the Secretary of State for the Colonies I beg to inform you that His Majesty has been graciously pleased to bestow the Albert Medal of the 1st Class on Mr Charles Wagner, and the Albert Medal of the 2nd Class on Mr Alexander Stewart for gallantry of which particulars are given in the enclosed extract from the London Gazette.

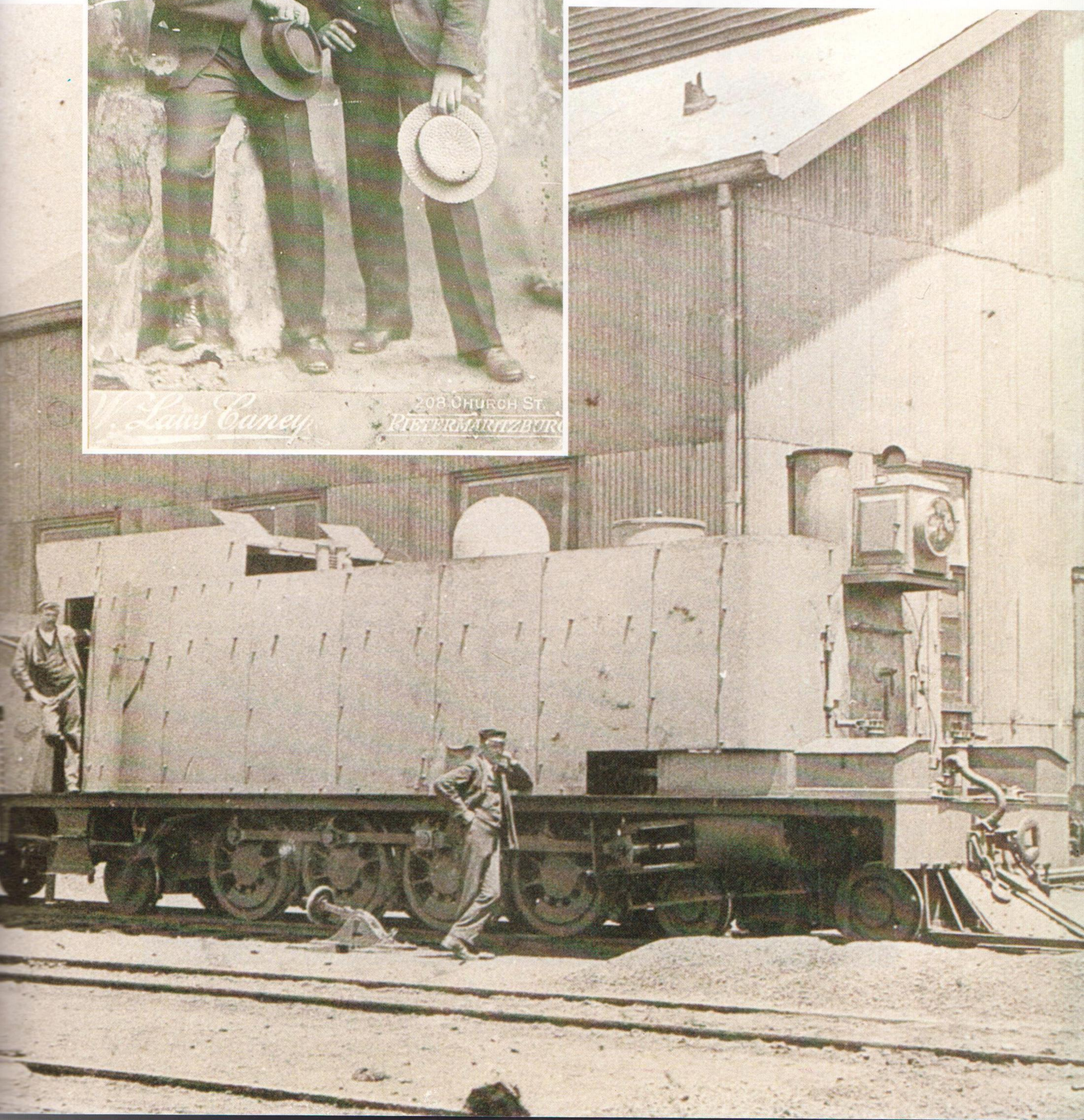
As it is not possible for me at present personally to present the Medals, I shall be glad if you will be good enough to read this letter to Mr Wagner and Mr Stewart, and to present the Medals on my behalf.

(Sgd) Gladstone"

HEROES OF THE ARMOURD TRAIN DISASTER.
Charles Wagner and Alexander Stewart driver and fireman respectively of the armoured train
ambushed by Boers near Chieveley Station, Natal, November 15th, 1899.
Photograph taken shortly after the event.



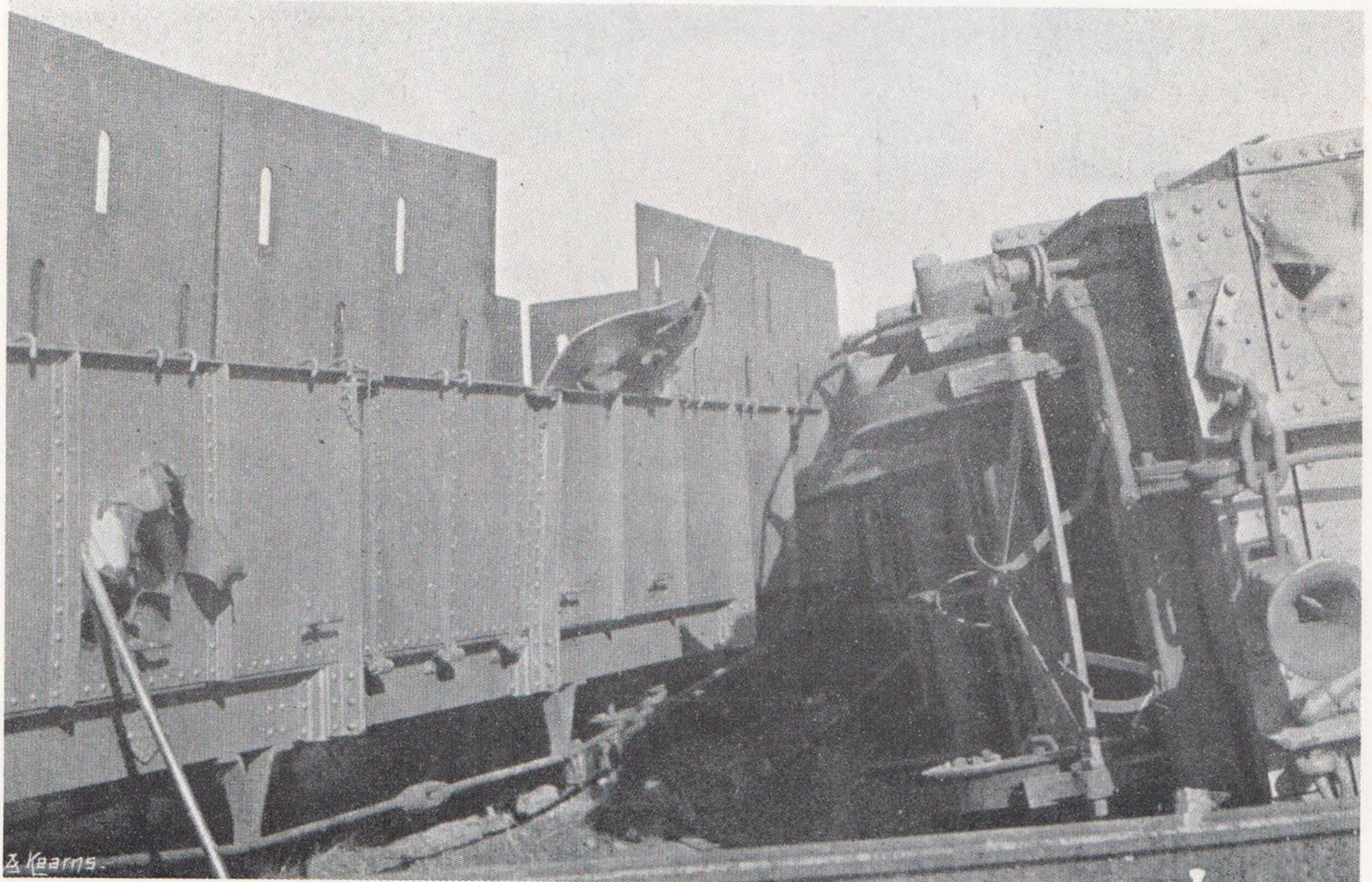
Engine and tender of the type crewed by Mr Wagner and Mr Stewart and used in the armoured train disaster at Chieveley.





*General Joubert,
Commander of the Boer
forces in the field.*

*Effects of the Boer shells on the wrecked armoured train
– the plating torn like paper.*



EXTRACT FROM THE LONDON GAZETTE WHITEHALL, JUNE 13, 1910

The King has been pleased to approve of the Albert Medal of the First Class being conferred upon Mr Charles Wagner and the Albert Medal of the Second Class upon Mr Alexander James Stewart, both of Pietermaritzburg, for gallantry in saving life as detailed below:

On the 15th November 1899, near Chieveley Station, in Natal, an armoured train which had been sent out on patrol was intercepted by the Boers and three carriages were thrown off the line. These vehicles lay between the rest of the train and the track over which it must travel on its homeward journey, and until they were removed the train, the engine and its escort – about 150 men – were exposed to a severe converging fire of rifles and artillery from the surrounding hills.

The sole means by which the line could be cleared was the engine, which moving to and fro butted at the wreckage until after about 50 minutes' work it was heaved and pushed off the track. The part played by the driver of the engine, Charles Wagner, and by the fireman, Alexander James Stewart,

was therefore indispensable to the rescue of the wounded with whom the engine and its tender became crowded. The working of the engine itself was a difficult matter, because at each collision with the wreckage at which it was butting it might easily have been derailed.

The danger was exceptional. The heavy fire of shells and bullets inflicted many casualties, and more than one quarter of all in the train were killed or wounded. The shells repeatedly struck the engine and at any moment might have exploded the boiler. The driver, a civilian, under no military code, was wounded severely in the scalp by a shell-splinter almost immediately. Although in great pain he did not fail during the whole of this affair to manage his engine skilfully, and by clearing the line saved from death and wounds a proportion at least of the 50 or 60 persons who effected their escape upon the engine and its tender.

Both the driver and his fireman are still in the service of the Natal Government Railways."

By happy chance the existence of Mr Stewart's Albert Medal and his Queen's South Africa Medal was recently discovered with the heirs still living in Natal. Mr Stewart died in Durban in the 1950s. By courtesy of the family the accompanying photographs are reproduced.

Sad to relate no trace can be found of any survivor of the family of Mr Charles Wagner, the driver of the train.

It is interesting to relate that although eleven years were to pass before official recognition was given to the heroism shown by these two railwaymen they were still remembered by men who had been witness to the event. The Stewart family still possess letters of appreciation and congratulations on the award of the Albert Medal, including one from Captain F S Reeves, The Buffs, who had been the Railway Staff Officer at Escourt who sent off the train on its fateful journey.

"Bill" Hibbard, a past president of The South African Numismatic Society, has been honoured with a Fellowship for his original researches into the medals awarded for service in the South African War 1899-1902. A specialist in medals of South African interest he is the author of the definitive book "Boer War Tribute Medals", a work highly acclaimed both in South Africa and overseas. His numismatic interests include the coins of the Ancients and the money that circulated in the Cape of Good Hope during the 18th and 19th centuries. Educated in England he came to South Africa during the war years and at the end of hostilities joined the staff of the University of Cape Town, retiring in 1980.