BEING THERE WITH NELSON MANDELA

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By Bill Schiller, The Toronto Star, 11 February 2010

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At street level, things turned messy in Cape Town.

Looting broke out among waiting crowds on Strand St. and the South African police brought out guns, rubber bullets and tear gas. At least two people and possibly four were killed – official figures were vague at the time – and as many as 100 were reported wounded.
I remember crouching behind a line of cars as shotguns exploded and for a moment wondering: is this really going to work out?
As ambulances carted away the wounded, I ran across Peter Hawthorne, a colleague from Time magazine, blood seeping through his pale blue shirt from a buckshot wound.

Seventy kilometres away, Mandela had already walked free from Victor Verster Prison outside Paarl shortly after 4 p.m. – an hour past the announced time.

The crowd of 50,000 in Cape Town, which had been assembling since dawn, was growing impatient.

Just the day before, I'd asked de Klerk whether the state intended to provide Mandela with special security. None had been laid on, he said, nor had any been requested.

"The state will secure the position of Mr. Mandela while he is in the custody of the state," de Klerk

replied. "When he is released, he becomes a free man."

While segments of the crowd smashed windows and started looting, Mandela and his entourage were still battling their way into the city. As they approached the Grand Parade in front of Cape Town's City Hall, where he would address a waiting world, his handlers realized they couldn't let him out of the car: he'd be crushed.

They had to find a way around to the back of the building to smuggle him in. Then – nearly four hours later than expected – Mandela finally appeared on the balcony at city hall.

"Friends, comrades and fellow South Africans," he famously began.

The overall atmosphere was one of unreality: for years his release had been the stuff of dreams. It was difficult to even imagine what Mandela looked like. He had, after all, been locked up for 27 1/2 years. As the African National Congress' best known figure and South Africa's then-most wanted man, he was arrested in August 1962 at a roadblock in Natal – posing as a chauffeur.

Just a week before his release in 1990, I rented a car and with the help of a local, got within 100 metres of the bungalow where he was being kept at Victor Verster Prison. I drove across a series of dirt lanes, shimmied the car through a shallow river, drove across the top of a free-flowing dam, and finally wound my way through fields and trees to the edge of Mandela's bungalow. Situated on the edge of a slight hill that sloped down to a creek, it was surrounded by a three-metre high wall, and an outer compound with a fence topped with razor wire. There was also a watch tower with an attentive sentinel on duty. He fixed me in his binoculars and waved me off.

Later, 48 hours before the release, the government released a photo of de Klerk and Mandela together: Mandela looked older, greyer and thinner than we'd imagined. But as his speech showed that night, he'd lost nothing of his iron will.

He was unbowed: released unconditionally, he called for the continuation of mass action, international sanctions and the armed struggle – until the government delivered on its promises to end apartheid and free all political prisoners.

The government delivered, De Klerk proved himself a principled man and Mandela eventually went on to become South Africa's first black president. It was an extraordinary transition, for few believed Mandela would ever be released. Few, that is, except him.

Tantalizingly offered his freedom in 1985, if he would renounce violence, Mandela – after 23 years in prison – declined.

"**Only free men can negotiate**," he explained in a note smuggled out of prison and read aloud by a daughter to supporters in a Soweto stadium. "Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. I will return."

He did.

Two days after his release, five other journalists and I sat with Mandela in the backyard of his Soweto home. All of us wanted to hear about his pain and suffering while inside. We wanted to know about his bitterness.

He never said an ill word about his captors. He never displayed a hint of bitterness. He was, in every sense, a free man.