

## 1917

The cinematic year of 2019 has been book-ended by two extraordinary films featuring the grim, gritty presence of the British infantryman in World War I. In January came director Peter Jackson's "They Shall Not Grow Old," a masterpiece of revived silent footage shot by British photographers which brought that conflict back to vivid, palpable life through modern cinematic techniques. Now comes director Sam Mendes' thrilling story of two selfless English soldiers trying to send a warning to units headed into a German ambush. While the documentary treats the whole of the infantry symbolically in one generic battle, the new film focuses pointedly on the struggle of single infantrymen against resolute time and twisted geography to save their fellows in a great example of the military "tick-tock" thriller.

"1917" wastes no time, showing the two soldiers, Lance Corporal Schofield (George MacKay) and Lance Corporal Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) getting their ominous orders from a apprehensive Gen. Erinmore (Colin Firth). Their mission requires them to leave their semi-calm trench life to first traverse a sector of no man's land—intelligence indicates that it has been abandoned by the Germans—then reach a river that leads to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devon division and, possessing written orders from the general, get the planned offensive called off by commander Col. MacKenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch). They traverse treacherous territory rife with sniper fire, wayward aircraft, river rapids, destroyed villages, and enemy redoubts, along with sudden death.

The fact that the urgent message is delivered caps the story in one furious, hellbent race to the finish—but not before we observe the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devon Division recumbent just before battle, listening to a soldier sing a dulcet version of Yeats' poem "Down By the Salley Gardens." That race culminates in a command quietly given, and an exhausted soldier left in total languor, his heroic actions only a blip on the vast canvass of the Great War.

Director Sam Mendes, most recently known for his big-budget Bond movies ("Skyfall"), here turns ample production resources to mount a movie massive in scale but highly personal at its core. The acting, led by the valiant MacKay, is lovingly understated in the best Brit way. The production is enhanced by brilliant photography from the great Roger Deakins and aided by a stirring score by Alexandre Desplat.

There could hardly be a stiffer upper lip.  
(*The film is rated "R" for battlefield violence and runs 119 minutes.*)

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