

Sam Mendes, director. *1917*. Dreamworks, 2019.

1917, directed by Sam Mendes, is a story inspired by his grandfather, Alfred Mendes, who served in World War I when he was a twenty-year old British soldier. The single-shot filming technique helps viewers follow Mendes's perspective as he witnessed events. The historical background of the movie is important, as *1917* is the story of a British soldier's perspective in World War I offering audiences a chance to see in real-time what some soldiers experienced. As with most stories of war, the fighting scenes focus on famous generals like John Joseph Pershing. *1917* is a depiction of what soldiers went through in the war, a perspective rarely seen in film. Mendes tells us how gruesome and traumatic everyday life was, which is important because it sheds light on the sacrifices he and millions of people made during the war.

The first scene shows soldiers sleeping as the camera pans throughout the space and finally settles on two named Lance Corporal William "Will" Schofield and Lance Corporal Thomas "Tom" Blake. The two are given the task of delivering a message to stop the upcoming battle as it will lead to unnecessary deaths. The journey takes them through France, No-Man's Land, and through the Western Front. During this mission Thomas Blake is killed and William has to complete the mission alone. William is successful but he is told, "the fighting will continue, until the last man stands." This movie depicts how horrific World War I was, even though the men were saved, but many more soldiers would die another day.

Some reviewers have criticized *1917* for trying to make war "beautiful." This skewed and misleading perspective was certainly contrary to the way soldiers at the time perceived the war.¹ Historians have also pointed to the historical inaccuracies; *1917* depicts British soldiers together with Sikh soldiers when the two groups actually never fought together in the war.² The climax has issues too, as war generals would not let soldiers run into the enemy camps without support, considering how dangerous the front was

¹ David Sims, "1917 Is a Visual Feat and a Bad Movie," *The Atlantic*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2020/01/1917-review/604318/>

² Meilan Solly, "The True History Behind the 1917 Movie," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 17, 2019. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-history-behind-1917-movie-180973800/>

according to Alfred Mendes.³ The scene does add a “dramatic” ending that movies need, however, historians point to it as being misleading. Despite those issues, *1917* is a realistic representation of war, as the story is based on the memoir of the director’s grandfather, with some fabricated events for added drama.

1917 is a social history, depicting a human perspective of history by focusing on the soldiers rather than on the battles. As the men see death, devastation, and war, as they experience it, creating a bond among them. The scenes towards the end offer a glimpse of the Western Front. Death is pervasive throughout, especially how survivors lived with the trauma for the rest of their lives. Thomas Blake he dies from a stab wound, slowly and painfully.

1917 is dedicated to the people who fought in World War I, especially Alfred Mendes. It is also for war film enthusiasts as *1917* dives into the Great War, appealing due to a realistic depiction of harrowing conditions and overall depiction of war. This film is also appropriate for college students, more specifically first-time historians as most would only know wars from dates and names. This film offers a visual of the war through the eyes of regular soldiers. Portraying the realities of early twentieth century combat is intriguing. At the same time, the film clearly illustrates how the horrors of war transform men, and how they can still find hope even in those desperate times.

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³ *Is the War Film 1917 a True Story?* WW1 History | CWGC.” Commonwealth War Graves Commission, September 18, 2023. <https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/blog/the-true-story-behind-the-war-film-1917/>.