

“A staggering *tour de force* – but an opportunity missed”: a historian’s review of the film *1917*

Directed by Sam Mendes, the Oscar-nominated film *1917* has arrived in cinemas across the US and UK. How does it deal with the realities of war and what does it show about the real events of 1917 – the retreat by German forces and life in the trenches? Writing for *History Extra*, military historian Jeremy Banning gives us his take...



It’s awards season and Sam Mendes’s *1917* has already picked up prizes at the Golden Globes, plus 10 Oscar nominations. Set on 6 April 1917 amid [the German retreat to the Siegfriedstellung](#) (dubbed the Hindenburg Line by the British), its story unfolds over ground many battlefield visitors overlook – straddled between the Somme and Arras. Early 1917 was a time of great flux for the Allies as the wastelands of the Somme were voluntarily vacated by an enemy who’d spent the winter constructing a new, far stronger defensive line many miles behind their front on ground of their choosing, replete with machine-gun posts, concrete pillboxes and underground accommodation and communication.

Towards the end of February, the British had noted an absence of German activity across No Man’s Land, pushing out patrols to investigate. A striking account of one patrol into the recently vacated

village of Serre is provided by the French painter Paul Maze in his book *A Frenchman in Khaki* (1934), which notes: “Every yard I took forward marked a moment. Was I walking into a trap? I felt the enemy must be watching us all the time.” It is this sense of dread, of being watched, of being prey to a cunning and ruthless foe, that Mendes’s film skilfully conveys.

[Operation Alberich: the story of Germany’s retreat in 1917](#)
[The real trench runners of WW1](#)

The film’s plot is simple – to my mind, lamentably so. Lance Corporals Blake and Schofield are instructed by a taciturn general (played by Colin Firth) that two battalions designed to assault enemy positions the next morning are walking into a carefully laid German trap. To attack would mean the annihilation of both units, some 1,600 lives needlessly wasted. The assault must be halted, but with field telephone communication cut, only messengers stand a chance of getting through. The stakes are further raised by the fact Blake’s brother is serving in one of the attacking battalions. And so it falls to our two main characters to stop a massacre. And that’s it – a longer, more elaborate version of the last few minutes of Peter Weir’s 1981 film *Gallipoli*.

Mendes’s film demonstrates British difficulties in following the enemy in their withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line. The Germans adopted a ‘scorched earth’ policy as they withdrew, flattening villages, destroying railways and roads, mining key crossroads, blowing up bridges, felling trees and even poisoning wells. Booby-traps were sown in their thousands, all in an effort to kill, maim and slow down the British advance, buying time for an orderly retreat. And it worked. A Fifth Army report in mid-March 1917 noted: “Roads in the shelled area have practically ceased to exist.”

The herculean task of reinstalling some kind of infrastructure along with safely clearing booby-traps fell to the Royal Engineers. Yet despite their efforts, British progress through March and into April 1917 remained painfully slow as village by village, ridge by ridge, the Germans withdrew under the protection of rearguard units and long-range machine gun fire.

Our heroes’ journey into this wasteland ticks every box – booby-trapped dugouts, wanton destruction and random violence from rearguard enemy troops until a crashing German aircraft paves the way for the most shocking scene of the film. It’s cleverly done and the twist is unexpected. Roger Deakins’s cinematography and use of a continuous shot works brilliantly, drawing the audience into the action. As the credits rolled I was conscious I hadn’t been breathing properly for the film’s duration, such was the suspense created. Much of that is due to the filmmakers’ skill.

The film is not perfect, let down by a weak plot and overreliance on clichés

So far, so good, but the film is not perfect, let down by a weak plot and overreliance on clichés: Andrew Scott’s deranged lieutenant, reduced to cynicism, sarcasm and swearing; the breakdown of a captain under shellfire; Benedict Cumberbatch’s manic colonel with an almost irrepressible blood-lust for action; and a lone Frenchwoman tending a baby stood out as prime examples.



(Image by Universal Film Studios)

How plausible is the story of 1917?

This is the first big-budget First World War film released in an era of mass social media, and online reaction has been fascinating to read. Some decry its message that war is hell or, more mundanely, the use of modern weapon handling. Neither of these concerns me but, as I write this the day after watching the film, I'm still frustrated – not at the film-making, which is a staggering, technical *tour de force* – but at the opportunity missed. A movie is no documentary, it's designed to entertain and relies upon its story, yet this story was so implausible.

It made no sense, as the film depicts, to have some battalions nine miles beyond the former German line and others seemingly unaware of whether this line was manned. When the Germans withdrew, they did so in a coordinated manner, evacuating villages and retreating to predetermined temporary positions, often on ridges behind. Our heroes' journey across No Man's Land was nerve-wracking to watch but, by early April 1917, any enemy would have been many miles away. It simply made no sense. Neither did the clearing of the farm (if you've a mission to deliver a vital message then you'd skirt all areas of possible conflict) or its immediate aftermath where a convoy of lorries inexplicably trundles by. You're either alone in enemy territory or you're not.

As for the assault by the Devons, no unit would attack without adequate artillery support – so we're led to believe infantry, artillery and even medical personnel and equipment have reached beyond Ecoust, deep into what had been German territory, but in nearby sectors the British have no idea if

the Germans' line is manned? It's a great shame, as other aspects of the film are brilliantly executed, notably the terror inside the German dugout.

The film is a tribute to Sam Mendes's grandfather, whose wartime stories apparently inspired the script. In my work I am wary of relying solely upon using veterans' accounts or family lore, many of which are embellished, either consciously or not. In my opinion, if only Sam Mendes had considered this, he may have crafted a more coherent storyline, thus making *1917* the perfect war film and a true tribute to that incredible generation.

1917 is less an old-fashioned war movie and more a story of friendship and duty with the First World War as its backdrop. Despite its imperfections I left the cinema having enjoyed many aspects of it. But films billed with such fanfare should live with you for days afterwards – I have vivid memories of the gut-wrenching feeling as *Schindler's List's* closing credits rolled, the audience stunned and moved into silence. It had managed to tell a story whilst being part of something much larger. For me, *1917* fails to manage this feat, let down by a questionable plotline – but as a technical piece of cinema it shines brightly.

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1917, directed by Sam Mendes.

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