

Film Reviews

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Lebanon (2009)

The timeless figure of the raw recruit overpowered by the shock of battle first attracted the full gaze of literary attention in Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1894-95). Generations of Americans eventually came to recognize Private Henry Fleming as the key fictional image of a young American soldier: confused, unprepared, and pretty much alone. But despite Crane's pervasive ironies and his successful refutation of genteel literary treatments of warfare, *The Red Badge* can nonetheless be read as endorsing battle as a ticket to manhood and self-confidence. Not so the First World War verse of Lieutenant Wilfred Owen. Owen's antiheroic, almost revolutionary poems introduced an enduring new archetype: the young soldier as a guileless victim, meaninglessly sacrificed to the vanity of civilians and politicians. Written, though not published during the war, Owen's "Strange Meeting," "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," and "Anthem for Doomed Youth," especially, exemplify his judgment. Owen, a decorated officer who once described himself as a "pacifist with a very seared conscience," portrays soldiers as young, helpless, innocent, and ill-starred. On the German side, the same theme pervades novelist Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928): Lewis Milestone's film adaptation (1930) is often ranked among the best war movies of all time. Unlike Crane, neither Owen nor Remarque detected in warfare any redeeming value; and by the late twentieth century, general revulsion of the educated against war solicited a wide acceptance of this sympathetic image among Western

civilians—incomplete and sentimental as it is.

Much of Owen's and Remarque's interpretation is seconded, likewise from experience, by Israeli veteran Samuel Maoz in his debut film *Lebanon* (2009). More than thirty-five years after the events that inspired it, and ten years after it opened to critical acclaim, *Lebanon* is worth a second look now. *Lebanon*—uneven but visceral—examines a condition that seems never ever to go away: violent, multilateral conflict in the Middle East. In this case the struggle, internal as well as external, takes place during the first several hours of Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in June, 1982, to expel terrorists of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Front. When the Israel Defense Forces crossed the border into Lebanon, conscript Maoz was an untried gunner in one of the first tanks across. Like his movie *alter ego* Shmulik (Yanov Donat), the twenty-year-old Maoz was soon ordered to fire a 105mm. round from his tank's main gun into a pickup truck, whose Arab driver was gesticulating and shouting incomprehensibly. No one, including Maoz, could tell whether the driver had been bent on a suicide attack or was in panicked flight from somebody else: on screen there's no doubt of his innocence. At the time of *Lebanon's* release, Maoz was still plagued by memory of the incident.¹ And as the first-time writer-director recalled in 2010, when *Lebanon* won the prestigious Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival (with a twenty-minute standing ovation), "I didn't have a clue what a war is, and then one day I was there."²

The first thing you see in *Lebanon* is a field of sunflowers filling up the screen under a bright blue sky. The camera lingers. And lingers. There are forty-five seconds of barely nodding flowers, in fact, and at the end of the film they're back—except a fifty-ton Centurion tank now squats motionless in their midst. This is blah: Van Gogh's already done sunflowers. But besides making us want the movie to start, the flowers remind us ponderously of beauty

in the world, for the world's beauty mocks the wretchedness of serving, killing, and being killed, in the bowels of a main battle tank. (Or is it serving in the tank that's the mockery?)

Shmulik, his image reflected in a puddle of water, oil, and hydraulic fluid on the floor, slides down through the tank's hatch from the world of air into a damp, stifling, parody of a womb, where we're going to spend the next ninety minutes with the semi-dysfunctional crew. Shmulik meets his loader Herzel (Oshri Cohen), driver Yigal (Michael Moshonov), and the commander Assi (Itay Tiran). All are untried and in their twenties. Maoz uses the real names of his fellow crew members in a realistically plotless series of events. After seeing the film, in middle age, his old buddies assured him, "Yes, that's what happened." But even knowing that, we may still need more insight than *Lebanon* provides before buying the level of bickering and insubordination, poor training, poor leadership, emotional instability, and hysteria these tankers eventually cram into so small a space and so short a time. (If only *all* soldiers were like these, wars would last about twenty-four hours.) One hopes, moreover, that the bizarre sexual experience Shmulik narrates in a slack moment really happened to somebody, because otherwise its telling is just plain pointless.

Lebanon's most serious weakness is undoubtedly that the characters shouldering the drama are almost total innocents, as though from Wilfred Owen or, more appositely, director Keith Gordon's unpersuasive, mawkish *A Midnight Clear* (1992). The interesting exception is the supporting character Major Jamil (Zohar Strauss), who makes brief, severe appearances from outside to relay orders forcefully that he himself can't always understand or believe in. *Lebanon* makes nothing of it, but Jamil's name suggests that he's one of the few Israeli Arabs in the IDF. As the most effective and complex of all the Israelis, it's too bad he's not the focus of the film.

For gunner Shmulik (and us) the nation of Lebanon is just a two-dimensional simulacrum seen through the lens of a gunsight, obscured from the start by the crosshairs of the targeting reticle: and if all you have is a gunsight, everything looks like a target. When the tank survives a Syrian RPG, the sight's malevolent gaze is distorted further by a crack in the lens. All that's ever visible through this optic is confusion, death, horror, and destruction, all believably staged and filmed. It's like watching a shockingly uncensored newsfeed. The sequence of the Maronite family destroyed in the crossfire between masked gunmen and Israeli troops is especially awful.

Added to the close quarters inside the Centurion tank, the shrunken image in Shmulik's sight completes a natural metaphor: the ordinary soldier sees and knows mainly what's around him—and, in fortunate moments, something of what's in front. The constantly traversing tank turret also suggests the hair-trigger fear that comes from knowing the ununiformed enemy could be anywhere. Though the gunsight lens was a genuine fact of Maoz's experience, its metaphorical potential harks back to those grainy (and sometimes *vérité*) periscope shots from submarine movies like *Destination Tokyo* and *Das Boot* that show unsuspecting ships sinking with great loss of life: silently, distantly, harmlessly for the spectators inside and outside the movie. But Shmulik/Maoz is a frightened, unwilling spectator made to *participate* in a reality revealed to him only as radio transmissions and repugnant images, some of them in extreme closeup. All these things amount to an unusually successful unity of style and substance. Military technology has modernized and Maoz has elaborated Stephen Crane's idea that the worried Henry Fleming, advancing to battle, was trapped "inside a moving box."

Maoz's tankers within their armored, confining "moving box" bring to mind Navy

lieutenant John Worden in Herman Melville's poem, "In the Turret" (1866). Worden commanded the untested *Monitor* in its fight with the *Merrimac* in 1862. Instead of the customary quarterdeck, his place was in a recessed 3' x 4' nook in the armored pilothouse at the ship's wavetop-level prow. "Sealed as in a diving-bell," as Melville puts it, Worden could observe the enemy through a barred eye-slit only, and Melville's theme is that only an iron adherence to duty enabled Worden to master fear in such clouded and constricted circumstances:

Duty be still my doom,
Though drowning come in liquid gloom;
First duty, duty next, and duty last;
Ay, Turret, rivet me here to duty fast!

Maoz's tankers do their duty, as best they can, with none of the idealism Melville credited to Worden, a career naval officer, a hundred and twenty years earlier. (The alliterative and ambiguous force of "Duty be still my doom" should be appreciated.) In their heavily armored, heavily armed Centurion, with the firepower to obliterate anything they can see, Shmulik and his team remain frightened, confused lads dumped, as by teleportation, into battle against unafraid, merciless killers. (The Christian Phalangist shows there are some on the Israeli side as well.) Shmulik's gunsight teaches what, for so many soldiers, is combat's darkest secret, overlooked by Crane and Owen and so many others: next to getting shot or seeing your buddies die, the two worst traumas are one, killing someone, and two, watching hell served up to the innocent, sometimes unintentionally by you. Many things you see in a

combat zone you wish you hadn't—and Maoz includes several such things, all of them self-evidently true to life.

A glib motto, "Man is Steel, the Tank is Only Iron," embellishes Shmulik's control panel. As a booster of morale, this goes beyond the saying that the deadliest military weapon is the "person behind the gun." The brute fact is that the tank is really is steel and people aren't, and Maoz shows the effect of the right weapon on both.

When the tank loses its way completely in a bombed, unnamed, but still violently resisting town, headquarters radios Major Jamil that he'll have to call on the doubtfully trustworthy Phalangists to guide him out. "You have to trust them," says the headquarters voice. It follows up with the scary, blandly delivered suggestion, "Off the record, feel free to improvise. Be creative." This and the nightmarish actual escape make another highly effective sequence.

Maoz spent three years making *Lebanon* a populist anti-war statement frankly aimed, like so many others, at ignorant civilians: "I would rather change the mind of one mother than impress 100 intellectual journalists."³ In a fragmentary preface to his own work, Wilfred Owen famously wrote his belief that the truest "poetry" of war "is in the pity." *Lebanon*, a suspenseful, intermittently memorable take on modern street fighting puts Maoz in essential agreement.⁴

Notes

¹ Rachel Cooke, "Samuel Maoz : my life at war and my hopes for peace," *The Guardian* (May 1, 2010):

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/may/02/israel-lebanon-samuel-maoz-tanks> .

² Jenni Miller, "Inside Lebanon with Samuel Maoz," *Tribeca* (Aug, 10, 2010):

<https://www.tribecafilm.com/stories/512c00a31c7d76d9a9000150-inside-lebanon-with-samue>

³ Cooke.

⁴ Writer-director Ari Folman's semi-documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) is another Israeli veteran's look back on the Lebanon War. *Waltz with Bashir* was the first animated film honored as Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globe Awards. Folman's concern is with the massacre of hundreds (perhaps thousands) of civilians by right-wing Christian Arab militiamen in the Shatila refugee camp and the Sabra neighborhood of Beirut in September, 1982. Folman was a witness, a member of the IDF forces that ringed the area, failed to prevent or end the massacre.

The Unknown Soldier (2017)

The name of the Finnish writer Väinö Linna (1920-1992) is not well known in the English-speaking world, but he's considered Finland's greatest modern novelist. When in 1993 the Bank of Finland placed his portrait on a national currency note, it added Linna to the similarly honored company of Sibelius, composer of the symphonic *Finlandia*, and the nineteenth-century philologist Lönnrot, assembler of the national epic, the *Kalevala*. Linna's third novel, *The Unknown Soldier* (*Tuntematon sotilas*, 1954), grew largely from his own Eastern Front experiences in the Finnish Army during World War II, and it sold more than 300,000 copies in Finland within three years: roughly one copy for every fourteen Finnish citizens. Translated into more than twenty languages, *The Unknown Soldier* has never been out of print. It has probably been read more widely in Finland than any book other than the bible.¹

The latest of no fewer than three credible screen versions of Linna's novel came in 2017 from director Aku Louhimies and a triple alliance of Finnish production companies. The first film, directed in black and white by Edvin Laine in 1955, has certainly been the nation's favorite native-born movie, shown for decades on Finnish TV every Independence Day. Though set during Finland's unsuccessful 1941-44 Continuation War with the Soviet Union, the novel in Laine's screen adaptation has come to symbolize the spirit of Finnish independence and the national ideology of *sisu* (an amalgam of pluck, rectitude, and indomitable will).² Laine's, with some exceptionally skillful integration of documentary footage, was the Finnish film industry's first realistic depiction of war, and a few unfortunate moments of "comic relief" in the style of the day can't detract from two or three scenes of battle that

are as tough to see as anything from Hollywood between Milestone's antiwar *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and Cornel Wilde's antiwar *Beach Red* (1967). A more decidedly pacifist remake, in Eastmancolor, came from Rauni Mollberg in 1985, and surpassed Laine's film as the costliest Finnish production to that time. Now both efforts are outspent by Aku Louhimies's absorbing 2017 version with its reported €7,000,000 budget. By the end of the year of its release, the new *Unknown Soldier* was already the highest-grossing domestic screen venture in the history of Finnish cinema, having sold nearly one million tickets in Finland alone.³

Louhimies's *Unknown Soldier* boasts some fine players, but the focus and star is actor Eero Aho, well cast as the individualist Corporal Antti Rokka, an older veteran of the 1939-40 Winter War against the Soviets. He doesn't show till half an hour into the movie, which he then proceeds to dominate. Rokka is an independent, unconventional person, and Louhimies implies he is the ideal Finnish citizen-soldier: a diligent farmer and steady family man, tough, good natured, sensible, insistently (if disarmingly) insubordinate, proficient, protective, nearly imperturbable, wryly humorous, a remorseless killer of the enemy but an amiable host to a Russian prisoner who, minutes before, had been trying to do him in. That makes Rokka the antithesis of the malign Lehto (Severi Saarinen), who escorts a miserable POW to the company command post just so he can shoot him in the back.

Other significant characters are also strongly sketched, though admittedly we never get very far into their minds. Corporal Hietanen (Aku Hirviniemi) is an awkward country boy who shares rations with Russian children, but is nearly paralyzed in the presence of an attractive Russian woman. As the one doing the paralyzing, Diana Pozharskaya delivers a brief but energetic turn. Private Rahikainen (Andrei Alen) is a con artist, looter, seller of Russian icons to Finnish officers, and finally a pimp; his platoon dislikes but accepts him. The unsmiling and

reliable Lieutenant Koskela (Jussi Vitanen) contrasts with his younger friend, the untried right-wing idealist Lieutenant Kariluoto (Johannes Holopainen), whose baptism of fire in a marshy meadow is beautifully realized. (Equally well made is a scene in which a Russian tank swings off a dirt road and tears through birch saplings like a wild boar.) Many of the film's lesser personalities are sharply drawn as well: unusually for a combat movie with so many unfamiliar faces, the characters soon become distinguishable without broad stereotypes—though, as in the novel, the soldiers' speech reportedly represents various regional dialects of Finland. (That puts them into the representational tradition of national types that Tay Garnett solidified in *Bataan* [1943], and which is now often groaned about as an obvious cliché.) Kukka Louhimies as a nurse-auxiliary has a splendid moment: her clothes smeared with blood, she stares at the dead and wounded lying outside an aid-station tent. Instead of emoting, she smokes a cigarette almost impassively and goes back to work. *The Unknown Soldier* depends on chronological episodes rather than plot (making its three-full-hour run-time a bit much), but nobody is likely to be confused about what's going on. Louhimies keeps the blood and gore to a minimum, but he nonetheless conveys the fearful chaos of battle.

From its opening sequence, mingling a lyrical past with a shocking wartime present, much of *The Unknown Soldier* is magnificent to see, as cinematographer Mika Orasmaa conveys the northern vastness in every season, from a summer buzzing with insects to the frigid snowscapes of winter. The snow is not always as deep nor the winds as surly as in Joseph Vilsmaier's German-language *Stalingrad* (1993), but imparted instead is the claustrophobia of seeking out the enemy amid the giant trees of mist-shrouded forests: it's bad enough when trees are standing, worse when they're knocked down for defense or being felled by artillery. Long, widescreen shots—and permission from the army to film within sight

of the bombardment of a real forest on an artillery range—give *The Unknown Soldier* a nearly palpable sense of both place and actuality.

The strenuous portrayal of World War II infantry in *The Unknown Soldier* often transcends borders. Finnish enlisted men, strongly bonded with each other, grumble about food and officers (and officers' access to women), express few political opinions beyond the idiocy of politicians, make coarse, unsubtle jokes, get drunk, rob enemy dead, regard young women (Russian and Finnish) from a primal perspective, are seized with fear or impulsive courage, and do what they can to survive with a remnant of their self-respect. Except for one sizeable ambush, a live enemy soldier is rarely seen. To say that much of the military action is familiar from other movies is merely to observe that Second World War infantry tactics were broadly standardized and the effects of commensurable weapons on flesh are much the same everywhere—facts that can make screen combat look routine instead of shocking. (It's as though we're being taught what we already know.)

But the Finnish perspective reveals much that's different too. Unlike fictional and cinematic Americans, Linna's dogfaces, on paper and on the screen, know, sing, and cite plenty of religious and nationalist anthems. But except for a ceremonial outdoor chorus of Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," their vocalizing, like their quotes from propaganda and from J. L. Runeberg's schoolroom epic *Tales of Ensign Stål* (1848, 1860), is either drunken or ironic. (It's hard to recall GI's in any movie singing a hymn or quoting a patriotic poem.) Media characterizations of Finnish soldiers as "our deep-forest warriors" rolling back the Bolshevik tide arouse their derision as much in the advance as in the inevitable, bitter retreat. In contrast, Kariluoto's fiancée writes to inspire him to fight boldly for that pipe dream of a "Greater Finland." When Rokka is home on leave, his little daughter says

about the same thing. Her map fancifully shows a huge chunk of northwestern Russia under future Finnish control.

Among the officers, the sixtyish Captain Kaarma is positively avuncular. His successor, the younger Lammio, is a cold but not entirely inflexible disciplinarian. The right-wing platoon-leader Kariluoto, otherwise a sympathetic figure who never talks politics, joins other drunk junior officers in singing the Nazi "Horst Wessel Song"—including relevant lines in which the souls of comrades killed by Communists march with them. Next come verses memorized from Viktor Rydberg's "Athenian's Song" (1876):

Splendid is death, when courageous, the first in battle, thou fallest,
Fallest in war for thy land, dying for city and home.

In the captured city of Petrozavodsk in Russian Karelia, renamed Äänislinna by Greater Finland optimists, a squad of young Finnish women with shovels marches past Rokka, Heitanen, and the company clown Vanhala (Hannes Suominen), singing over and over,

Between the eyes! Between the eyes!
Aim at Russkies between the eyes!

(Linna identifies them as college students who've volunteered to help the army with the clean-up; the implied *naïveté* is painful.)

The soldiers, of course, know nothing of what's happening except that they've crossed the well-marked border to strike at the Soviets. By the end of 1941 the front stabilizes into

trench warfare much as in World War I: the biggest difference is that Russian loudspeakers constantly harangue the Finns, "Kill your fascist officers and join us!" Much later, the practical-minded Rokka is the first to say that the war will be lost no matter how many times the Finns are ordered to hold indefensible terrain: the Russians have too many tanks and too many big guns. In the final retreat of June, 1944, the company dumps its machine guns into the lake and comes close to mutiny as the raging battalion commander threatens to shoot any man who walks to the rear. A few weeks later, the war is over.

The title *The Unknown Soldier* (suggested by a friend of Väinö Linna's) implies a post-1944 desire to banish memory of the Continuation War. Equally to the point is that both official and popular culture in Finland during the war romanticized the Finnish soldier as a high-minded, endlessly heroic individual like the self-sacrificing Sergeant Dufva in Runeberg's nationalist *Ensign Stål*. And perhaps the country's most popular movie genre in the '40s and '50s was the army farce, akin to American productions like *Buck Privates* (1941) and *See Here, Private Hargrove* (1944). It's revealing of the postwar national temper that the odd humorous elements of Laine's 1955 film were those most admired by Finnish audiences.⁵ In depicting a three-year campaign instead of the usual few days or single battle of most combat films, Louhimies's *The Unknown Soldier* is free of gimmickry, most hokum, and all imitation profundity. It's been pigeonholed as "antiwar," but what it implicitly condemns are the naive imperial expectations of the Continuation War and civilian illusions about the character of combat soldiers and the realities of front-line service. Linna's novel ends ambiguously with the suggestion that the country is done for, but the Finnish soldier's sacrifices and sense of duty have made him "rather dear."⁶

The futile Finnish campaign in Russia came to an end with the battle of Tali-Ihantala, in

Finland's lost Karelian Isthmus, in July 1944. Tactically it was a Finnish victory; strategically it enabled Helsinki to sue for an armistice from the strongest position it could hope to achieve. But Finland's ordeal was not yet over. The provisions of the September 4, 1944, armistice with Great Britain and the USSR required the Finns to drive all German troops from Finland. This led to the seven-month Lapland War against Germany (September 1944—April 1945). It resulted in the devastation of northern Finland, and some 4,000 casualties on each side, as the 200,000 German troops in country withdrew toward occupied Norway, waging a ruthless scorched-earth campaign against their erstwhile Finnish allies.^{7r}

Remarkably Finland fought three wars between 1939 and 1945: the Lapland War was the only one that ended victoriously. The cost to Finland of the three wars was some 300,000 killed, wounded, or missing—or about eight per cent of the population and about sixty per cent of the Finnish Army and Air Force. Of the total casualties, some 85,000 Finns—nearly all of them soldiers and airmen—had been killed. The existential struggle of the Winter War had been forced on the nation against its will. Its military alignment with Germany may have been necessary to save it from outright Nazi rule. Finland in the end was unique: the only nation that, under its democratic pre-war government, fought both with and against Germany and Russia in World War II. Neutral after 1944 in accordance with the peace treaty with Russia, and despite Soviet pressures, Finland throughout the Cold War miraculously remained unoccupied, democratic, and politically independent—unlike any other nation that had bordered the USSR in 1939.

Notes

¹ Nummi.

² *Sisu* is held by the Finns to be a defining quality of the Finnish character. As one Finnish-American woman told sociologist Eleanor Palo Stoller in the 1990s, "My mother pounded sisu into my brain as a child, that you had that strength, you had to go on, you had to endure....Because you are a Finn,...you must show your sisu": Stoller, 151.

³ Pajunen; Abbatescianni.

⁴ Sihvonen, 144.

⁵ Sihvonen, 146.

⁶ Linna, 466.

⁷ The battle is the subject of the low-budget but historically respectable *Tali-Ihantala 1944*, dir. Åke Lindman and Sakari Kirjavainen; the Finnish-Soviet War of 1939-40 is the setting of a dramatic and truthful combat film, *Winter War* (*Talvisota*) (1988), directed by the prominent writer Antti Tuuri and adapted from his 1984 novel. Expanded by additional footage to four-and-a-half hours, Louhimies's *Tuntematon sotilas* ran as a miniseries on Finnish TV in 2018-19.

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They Shall Not Grow Old (2018) and *1917* (2019)

Likely the earliest published verses in English about watching a motion picture of war were Florence Ripley Mastin's two-stanza "At the Movies" (dated "January, 1916"). Mastin describes the silent newsreel image of soldiers on the march months earlier "into the grey/Of battle." One turns to wave to the camera, "[t]he picture quivers into ghostly white," and the speaker shivers bone-deep because the man she sees alive may now well be dead.¹

Contrast Englishman Henry Newbolt's devout verses on "The War Films," printed in the *Times* some months later.² Newbolt, a popular writer of manly, character-building verse, must have been inspired by *The Battle of the Somme*, the pioneering feature-length documentary by Geoffrey Malins and J.B. MacDowell, which premiered in August, 1916: before long it had been seen by an estimated twenty million people, many of whom had relatives in France. Against modern expectations for a propaganda film, nearly 15% of *The Somme* (whose simulated battle scenes were made in England) displays actual dead and wounded—animals and men—including one man clearly dazed by shellshock. But Newbolt never registers Mastin's sense of shock. Instead he gives pious thanks that "in a gleam" the flickering images of suffering and death have brought him—and the nation—closer to God.

Arriving in the wake of Saul Dibb's admirable 2017 adaptation of *Journey's End*, two recent films seek to convey the British soldier's combat experience on the Western Front during the First World War. Both are worth seeing for very different reasons.

The first to be released was the feature documentary *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), a virtuoso feat in an unaccustomed genre by Peter Jackson, director, co-writer, and co-producer of

The Lord of the Rings (2001-2003)—the trio of blockbusters punctuated by screen-filling fantasy battles among men, hobbits, and orcs—and those are only the major combatants.

Though no one now alive experienced it, World War I combat was all too real for four long years.³ Director Jackson, long a Great War buff, presents some of what that experience was like as vividly as he can. *They Shall Not Grow Old* was created by a team of hundreds of technicians, who expertly edited and restored one hundred hours of silent wartime footage and topped it off by adding color and ambient sound. Additionally they've overlaid the result with the off-screen voices of men who served, recorded fifty years later by the BBC. Jackson has no interest in kings and kaisers: he looks instead at the war of the British mud soldier. In Jackson's words, "I wanted to reach through the fog of time and pull these men into the modern world, so they can regain their humanity once more. ... You don't really notice them when they're all sped up and jerky, but [now] suddenly they just come into focus."⁴ The visuals are remarkable, and so is the commentary by the veterans. Most all these 115 ex-soldiers of the 1914-18 British Expeditionary Force are English, most of them, according to the end credits, enlisted men and junior officers.⁵

The bulk of the raw film came from the archives of the Imperial War Museums. Little of it has been seen by the public in a century, and surely never in a feature film made to be viewed, like this one, partly in 3D. What was damaged and gray and grainy now is crisp, colorful, and clear. In startling cases, lip readers have helped Jackson reconstruct speech, which is convincingly dubbed in by actors ("Follow me!", "Hullo, Mum!"); more often, though, the spoken words may be only approximations—though highly appropriate and believable: "Smile, so your mother thinks I'm looking after you," "I will go over with the first wave and you will be in the second wave. And as soon as the curtain fire starts, we'll move." And the commentary (it is only incidentally a real "narration") is beautifully matched to the images.⁶

For the first half hour, ancient monochrome footage dances across a squarish screen to the background whirr of an old projector. But eventually the puppet-like motion, a regrettably distancing artifact of later projection equipment, slows down. When the 3D and color appear the screen blossoms with a time-travel effect as in James Cameron's *Titanic*, when the ship transforms before our eyes from an old black-and-white photo into a bustling "real" ship in 1912.

The ex-servicemen's recollections, culled from six hundred hours of recordings, line up into several natural sequences: enlistment, training, arrival in France, trench life, combat, and a coda on the war's aftermath. (Conscription was instituted for the first time in 1916, but none of the voices seem to mention it.) Every speaker adds something new. Indeed, the personalities of the off-screen commentators may best be felt a second or third time through, maybe with eyes shut. ("Radio" can still be powerful medium.) The voices blend into one voice, if not of the "average" British squaddie, at least of a typical one.

About why he joined up, one man says, "It was from the patriotic point of view, and from the general excitement of the whole affair, I suppose," Minimum age was nineteen, but some enlisted at seventeen or eighteen (or younger) by lying about their age, occasionally with the connivance of the recruiting sergeant.⁷ The unspoken inquiries that brought out the soldiers' memories are implicit in their replies: Are you sorry you went? "I don't regret having experienced it. I wish I hadn't, but I don't regret it. *Because I'm safe!*" How did you feel heading to France? "In my mind I wondered, 'Shall I ever come back?' I didn't think I would at the time. I didn't worry about it." And then? "I was twice wounded and gassed, but it was just war and you made the best of it." Maybe it's a selection effect, or self-selection, but none of these speakers—alternately wistful, humorous, and stoic—criticizes the cards life dealt them. Says one, "It would

be a fallacy to say that one enjoyed it, but one got afterwards a nice, warm inner feeling that one had been of some use."

Some of their words are surprisingly forthright: "You had to wipe your behind with your hand. ... I personally became very badly infested and chatty, as we used to call it, with these lice. ...Every town of any size at all had a brothel. ...There was I, a young lad, knowing nothing about this, and off we go ... up to see the girls. I was very keen. " No single engagement is specified in the unflinching descriptions of battle, sometimes in clouds of poison gas:

As soon as [our] bombardment started, the German retaliation came. For four hours, we had to sit there and take everything they slung at us. ... All of a sudden, one of our fellows started crying, really screaming and crying, the officer in charge telling the sergeant, 'Find that man and shoot him, shoot him!'... The line of British troops, fixed bayonets, walking quite steadily behind the barrage. It is a sight I shall never forget. ...A hare crossed my path with eyes bulging in fear, but I felt that it couldn't have been half as frightened as I was. ...You could see your mates going down right and left, and you were face-to-face with the stark realization that this was the end of it.

But it would be unfair to quote further from these horrific, especially well integrated accounts. Little or no footage exists of actual Great War combat, so the old films are supplemented with fierce, heroic magazine illustrations, slow-motion *reprises* of clips of laughing Tommies, and still photos of the mangled dead—with powerful effect. When the Armistice came at 11 a.m., November 11, 1918, many felt it an anticlimax:

At 11 o'clock, the noise of the gunfire just rolled away, like a peal of thunder, in the distance. ...Never heard it being quiet. Now it was dead silent. ...There was a feeling of relief and gladness, I suppose, but no celebration. [The Armistice] was one of the flattest moments of our lives.... For some of us, it was practically the only life we'd known. What was one going to do next? It was just like being made redundant.

Back home, the images shrink and dim to the old black and white, the projector whirrs, and the people become puppets once again, as though nothing had been as real to these old men as their time at war. Jobs were scarce: "It was a shame, the way ex-servicemen were treated. You weren't wanted. Some places said, 'No ex-servicemen need apply,' and that was the sort of attitude you were up against." Personal relations had changed too, in ways that are familiar to veterans a century later:

Every soldier I've spoken to experienced the same thing. We were a race apart from the civilians, and you could speak to your comrades, and they understood, but the civilians, it was just a waste of time. ... However nice and sympathetic they were, attempts of well-meaning people to sympathize reflected the fact that they didn't really understand at all.

It was a war that should never have been fought, but once started should have been rapidly negotiated to a conclusion. It grew instead into a monstrous world struggle and an

ominous fissure in European history. Peter Jackson's stunning illumination of the most notorious theater of that struggle must surely be one of the most compelling full-length documentaries yet made on any historical topic.

They Shall Not Grow Old takes its name from a line in Laurence Binyon's 1914 elegy "For the Fallen," an iconic poem known especially through its musical settings.⁸ Jackson dedicates the film to his grandfather, Sergeant William Jackson of the South Wales Borderers, recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Similarly, director Sam Mendes dedicates his own very different act of remembrance, 2019's absorbing, episodic *1917*, to his paternal grandfather, Alfred Mendes, awarded the Military Medal for service in that year with the King's Royal Rifle Corps.⁹

Lance Corporal Mendes was decorated for bravery after volunteering to run messages, under fire, between battalion headquarters and three companies that had become separated from his own.¹⁰ The incident inspired grandson Sam (of *American Beauty*, *Skyfall*, and *Jarhead*, for example) and co-writer Krysty Wilson-Cairns to devise an adventure story with a conscience, designed to honor history by guiding us through the harrowing conditions of the Western Front. "Guiding" is used advisedly: the movie's big selling point is masterful editing by Lee (Dunkirk) Smith to make it look (almost) like a single epic take. (The screen twice goes black while the hero is unconscious.) In the "one-take" illusion, *1917* follows in the steps of several earlier features like Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) and [Alejandro G. Iñárritu's](#) *Birdman* (2014). At least three films have actually been shot in one take: Sebastian Schipper's *Victoria* (2015), and Alexander Sukorov's *Russian Ark* (2002); the gimmick of the first and most radical, Mike Figgis's daringly directed *Timecode* (2000), is the use of no less than four related single-take streams on a screen split four ways. In *1917* the artifice is more successful if you haven't been warned: but if, like millions, you've heard the hype, the illusion may seem like an affectation and a distraction.

Paralleling Christopher Nolan's assurance that his *Dunkirk* (2017) is "not a war film...[but] first and foremost a suspense film," Mendes says he used the single-take look to add suspense to often unsettling verisimilitude: "Why don't we lock the audience into the men's experiences in a way that feels completely unbroken, in a movie that resembles a ticking-clock thriller in which we experience every second passing in real time?"¹¹ The "real-time" is another illusion: it's easy not to notice that many hours of supposedly real time have been magically compressed into just two. Moreover, the *1917* experience was allegedly enhanced, in a score of U.S. theaters, by its showing in 4DX format, which is 3D with cheesy effects like shuddering seats, fog, wind, drizzle, strobing lights, smells, and so on. (No lice or poison gas.) That's entertainment.

1917 opens with Lance-Corporals Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) and Schofield (George MacKay, who sometimes resembles silent cowboy star William S. Hart) in a peaceful meadow just behind support trenches on April 6, 1917—two days before the battle of Arras.¹² The pair are improbably summoned before a brigadier (Colin Firth) for a desperate mission: German troops have suddenly withdrawn, and two isolated British battalions—some 1,600 men—are to attack the new positions the next morning. Aerial reconnaissance, however, has found (at the last minute) that the Germans now sit behind impregnable new fortifications, smugly preparing to wipe out their unsuspecting foes. Those two battalions are nine miles away, phone lines have been cut, and only runners can carry the order to call off the attack. To sweeten the plot for people bored by deadly danger alone, Blake has a brother among the soon-to-be-slaughtered Brits, so he'd better get that message through.

Schofield and Blake move past the carcasses of a pair of artillery horses, recently killed between the British parapet and the barbed wire defenses. Wait: how'd they get there? Maybe from *War Horse*. But enough pedantic skepticism (though it really is tempting to keep at it):

more important is that *1917* excels technically and aesthetically, if not thematically. Notable are Niall Moroney's meticulous art direction and Dennis Gassner's production design. The trenches and no-man's-land look like photos of the real thing, and Roger Deakins's ace cinematography makes *1917* the best-*looking* combat drama produced since Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998); Deakins's daytime images have the clarity of a brightly overcast day, and his nighttime scenes in town have a nearly apocalyptic quality. (Thomas Newman contributes an expressive score.)

Past the wire, almost the first thing Blake and Schofield do is head deep into an underground German barracks. This—as the audience might have told them—proves to be a big mistake, even though it's deserted. But you can't have an adventure story without plenty of adventures, and *1917* has its share. The hero survives more shapes of death in twenty-four hours than anybody has a right to in a week. Down in the barracks, for example, there's a brilliant moment with a trench rat, at once horrifying, grimly ludicrous, and totally believable.

As the duo heads further east, the film eventually alludes to the ruthlessness of the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917 in "Operation Alberich" (named for the evil dwarf king in Wagner's *Ring* cycle): they slaughtered livestock, polluted wells, burned farms and towns. The writers don't explain, though, just why the town of Écoust is nearly deserted: it's because, in a foreshadowing of some of the future *Wehrmacht's* behavior in the Second World War, the Germans rounded up some 125,000 French townspeople during Alberich and whisked them off to work virtually as slaves. Then they destroyed the towns. If Schofield's cellar interlude with a terrified young woman (Claire Duburcq) and an orphaned baby seems mawkish, the contrast with Deakins's eerie vision of the historical insanity outside more than makes up for it.

After a long Hollywood-type shootout with a German sniper, followed by a vertiginous

fall, the surging rapids of a providentially placed river rush the nearly drowned Schofield over a waterfall and straight to his destination. There's a dreamlike tableau as he meets a rifle company in a misty pine woods listening mesmerized to one of their number singing the American revival hymn "Wayfaring Stranger"—all about death in a "world of woe." (The scene seems like an *homage* to the schmaltzy—or is it deeply moving?—final sequence of Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* in which Christiane Kubrick's plaintive German folksong reduces a saloonful of hard-bitten *poilus* to tears.) And the near-conclusion of *1917*, with Schofield sprinting through shellfire to get the countermanding order to Colonel Mackenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch, in a big-star cameo reveal), is like a riff on the last act of Peter Weir's character-driven *Gallipoli* (1981), when Mel Gibson was the runner.

When you get down to it, *1917* is a handsome, heroic adventure and not much more: you learn little about the characters or about World War I, except that its front lines were bad, bad places to be. Besides having a brother in peril and a mother who owned a cherry orchard, Blake is a cipher, and except for Schofield's disdain for his own Military Medal (which he gave away for a bottle of wine) so is he. Cumberbatch's Colonel MacKenzie and Mark Strong's Captain Smith evince more depth in a couple of lines than is ever displayed by the protagonists.¹⁴ But the technically polished *1917* makes the grade as high-tension story-telling through fluent direction, good performances, moody intensity, and an unconventional setting that may shock some of those who haven't seen *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

Critics routinely deplore battlefield adventures (fictional or otherwise) for supposedly desensitizing audiences to war's true horrors instead of finding new ways to expose and condemn them. While Mendes's fictionalized Great War is thematically slight, it shares this much with Jackson's thought-provoking historical take: the filth, violence, desperation, explosions,

destruction, rats, and floating corpses in evidence might dissuade anyone from yearning for a replay.

Notes

¹ Mastin (1886-1968) taught for many years at Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High School; one of her students was the future novelist Bernard Malamud: "Florence Ripley Mastin" <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/florence-ripley-mastin> (Accessed February 5, 2020).

² October 14, 1916, 7.

³ English private Harry Patch, wounded at Passchendaele in 1917, was the last known survivor, in any nation, of battle on the Western Front; he was 111 at the time of his death in 2009. The last surviving American veteran, rear-echelon truck driver Frank Buckles, died in 2011 at the age of 110. Royal Navy seaman Claude Choules, who died at 110 also a few months later, was the final surviving combat veteran of the First World War. And surely the last literary figure to have seen combat in the First World War was Prussian Captain Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), author of the idealist, war-glorifying memoir *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*, trans. 1924 and 2003).

⁴ Adam White, "Digital effects, lip-readers, and artistic licence: how Peter Jackson made *They Shall Not Grow Old*," *Telegraph* (London) (Nov. 12, 2018): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/digital-effects-lip-readers-artistic-licence-peter-jackson-made/>. (Accessed February 3, 2020.)

⁵ Various headgear helps identify Australian, New Zealand, and Indian contingents on screen, but one listens in vain for a non-English accent; nor is even one female nurse represented. Presumably the original interviews were less inclusive than they'd be today.

⁶ *They Shall Not Grow Old* is not the first successful normalization of frame-rate and colorization of First World War film: at least two multi-episode documentary TV series (with modern narrators) preceded it: Isabelle Clarke & Daniel Costelle's French-made *Apocalypse la 1ère Guerre mondiale* (2014, shown in America as *Apocalypse World War I*) and Jonathan Martin's British *The Great War in Color* (2003). Those efforts at adding color were a revelation in themselves, and cover the entire war in some detail, but Jackson's tints, engineered by Park Road Post Production, are brighter and clearer.

⁷ Novelist John Brophy, author of the source novel behind World War II's *Immortal Sergeant* (1943, dir. John M. Stahl), got in at sixteen.

⁸ The correct form of the frequently misquoted line is "They shall grow not old":

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.

⁹ The Distinguished Conduct Medal (D.C.M.) was roughly equivalent to the later U.S. Silver Star or Distinguished Service Cross. The Military Medal (M.M.) decoration was roughly equivalent to the current U.S. Bronze Star.

¹⁰ Alfred H. Mendes, *The Autobiography of Alfred H. Mendes*. Ed. Michèle Levy. (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), 61.

¹¹ Sammy Nickalls, "Christopher Nolan says Dunkirk isn't a war movie." *Esquire*.

<http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/news/a54310/christopher-nolan-dunkirk-film/> (accessed Oct. 5, 2017); Tatiana Siegel, "Making of '1917': How Sam Mendes Filmed a 'Ticking Clock Thriller,'" *Hollywood Reporter* (Dec. 26, 2019): <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/making-1917-how-sam-mendes-filmed-a-ticking-clock-thriller-1263469> (accessed Feb, 15, 2020).

¹² The movie's landmarks "Croisilles Wood" and the hamlet of "Écoust-sur-Mein," are on the Arras battlefield; less appositely, April 6 was also the date when the United States declared war on Germany.

¹³ MacKenzie: "There is only one way this war ends. Last man standing." Smith: "If you do manage to get to Colonel MacKenzie, make sure there are witnesses.... Some men just want the fight."

¹⁴ Sam Mendes and *1917* have been recognized with more than one hundred prestigious awards, among them the 77th Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture Drama and for Best Director. The British Academy of Film and Television Arts bestowed no less than seven including Best Film and Best Director. At the 92nd Academy Awards Presentations, *1917* received three Oscars for technical excellence, one of them going to Roger Deakins for Cinematography; not to mention Oscars for Best Achievement in Directing, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Motion Picture of the Year: "*1917* (2019) Awards," <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8579674/awards> (Accessed February 28, 2020). Probably so many awards have never before gone to a combat drama.

The Outpost (2020)

The *Outpost* is set in Afghanistan, but you've seen bad things like it unfold elsewhere: at Thermopylae and the Little Big Horn, for example, or on Bataan, at Roarke's Drift, in Mogadishu, and, of course, at the Alamo. The *mis-en-scène* is the outnumbered band besieged by faceless attackers in very vast numbers, with massacre or near-massacre the only outcomes on offer. Often, as in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), *Bataan* (1943), *The Alamo* (1960), and *The 300* (2006), the good guys are destroyed, though occasionally, as in *Zulu* (1963), some or most manage to survive. In *Sahara* (1943), Bogey's squad of international castaways and a single M3 tank force a whole German battalion to surrender (with a little help from the desert sun); in *Fury* (2014), Brad Pitt's tank crew needs no help from the climate to delay swarms of *Waffen-SS*.

The Outpost, director Rod Lurie's first feature since his 2011 remake of *Straw Dogs*, lacks entirely the jaunty, adventure-flick vibe of many of its thematic cousins. It draws in part on CNN anchor Jake Tapper's eponymous nonfiction "novel," a massive account of Combat Outpost Keating, placed by the U.S. Army in 2006 on a valley floor deep in Afghanistan's Hindu Kush. This is the region (now officially the Kamdesh District of Nuristan Province) that John Huston imaginatively dropped in on in his film version of Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" in 1974.¹ But unlike Kipling's ambitious English rogues, the GI's in *The Outpost* were real: by telling it much like it must have been, Lurie pays tribute (a recurring war cinema function) to the courage of fish-in-a-barrel grunts marooned at COP Keating, most of whom did manage to survive an all-out Taliban assault at odds of about six to one.

Tapper's book mentions scores of Americans by name, and Lurie goes as far as he can in that direction. But it may be too far because, though the names float by on the screen as the characters are introduced, there are too many to keep track of; and many parts are played by unknowns—all clad in the same pixel-patterned battledress and, regrettably, sometimes introduced in the dark. (This sameness of appearance was an unavoidable obstacle in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*.) One of the relative knowns is Scott (*Fate of the Furious*) Eastwood, Clint's son, as Sergeant Clint Romesha, and another is Caleb Landry Jones (of *Get Out*) whose impersonation of Specialist Ty Carter, to judge from the real Carter's moment beside the end credits, borders on the uncanny. Carter and Romesha emerge eventually as the movie's focal points, as each received the Medal of Honor for valor shown during the assault on Outpost Keating. Orlando Bloom, the biggest name in the cast, excels as Keating himself, if you disregard an ersatz American accent you might hear in Boston, S.C., if there were such a place. Milo Gibson (son of Mel) and Kwame Patterson (of *The Oath*) convey authority as, respectively, Captains Robert Yllescas and Melvin Broward. The one female to be seen is Celina Sinden as Captain Katie Kopp, the brigade psychologist to whom, at the end of the film, Carter begins to unburden himself. She adds a coda of normality to the craziness and violence that dominates much of the film.

Lurie jams three years into two hours, merges units, situations, and some characters for the sake of dramatic coherence, but he doesn't mess much with the remaining salient facts. Among them are the presentation of two Medals of Honor, eight Silver Stars, one Distinguished Service Cross, more than twenty bronze stars, and twenty-seven Purple Hearts and other decorations for the defense of the outpost against some 350 Taliban on October 3, 2009. Six army aviators and one Air Force pilot were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Nearly half

of the American defenders were wounded, and eight were killed. The number of awarded decorations was likely unprecedented for a group of fifty-three GI's.

Uniquely among name directors, Rod Lurie is a West Point grad (Class of '84), and uniquely too, he once manned a desk in the Defense Department office that determines just which scripts merit the support of the Pentagon. For a booster shot of expertise, Lurie turned to Janiko Denman, a former Army Ranger and veteran of Afghanistan, for the role of technical advisor. What they were "going for," Lurie has said, was to convey a maximal sense of authenticity, something he calls "actualism."²

If *The Outpost* looks low-budget (not always a bad thing), so did the real one. Wretchedly located, inadequately manned and fortified, it was not much snazzier than the Alamo in 1836, which, like COP-Keating, also lacked a decent landing zone for resupply. The reason for sticking such a fat target in a deep valley, Tapper has said, was just that "most of the helicopters were in Iraq, and they didn't have many helicopters in Afghanistan. So in order to set up a base, it needed to be by the road, and the roads are in the valley, not on the top of the mountain. So it was that simple really": geography as destiny.³

One night in 2006, a troop of modern-day horseless cavalry flies into PRT Kamdesh (the outpost's original designation), a place described by one American as "the dark side of the moon" and another as a "shithole." Cinematographer Lorenzo Senatore swings his camera through 360 degrees next morning to show the summitless scarps that ring the base, making every move, even to the latrines, plainly visible to jihadi snipers and mortar men. Besides the task of securing a road against two-way Taliban traffic from Pakistan, the small force of soldiers is to provide security for nearby villages, while building up the area's infrastructure and

economy. To do these things, the Army had to “connect with the locals,” whose elders think the Americans are Russians back for a second try.

Counterinsurgency is the plan, winning hearts and minds the chief, if uncertain, method. More than a few of the local young men are with the Taliban. “Lay down your arms,” Yllescas says, “and watch your communities flourish with the help of the United States and Allah.” Money for roads, schools, and hospitals is displayed, but you can tell the village leaders think it’s all pretty bizarre. As Tapper put it, “Why would conquerors want to help those whose country they are occupying? It made no sense.”⁴ Regardless of the fluctuating goodwill of the civilians, the mountains, dotted with natural hiding places, make Outpost Keating nearly indefensible. The garrison lives on a dartboard for little purpose but to guard the bullseye. The Taliban uses it for target practice all the time.

Like a Ken Burns documentary, *The Outpost* comes with chapter headings. These take the form of a succession of CO’s: Keating, Yllescas, Broward (not, in this case, his real name), and Bundermann.

Of the four, Lieutenant Benjamin Keating (for whom the base would be renamed) died when the truck he was driving on a switchback road at night plunged into a canyon; Captain Robert Yllescas was killed by a sniper. Captain Broward alone is an unsatisfactory leader, forcefully pretending he isn’t burned down by his time in Iraq. But neither is he the corrupt or thoroughly unfit commander favored by American story tellers since the clueless tyrant Captain Matlock of William March’s *Company K* (1933). (A more amusing case is Captain Morton in Thomas Heggen’s Navy novel *Mister Roberts* [1946].)

Screenwriters Eric Johnson and Paul Tamasy are determined to sidestep clichés, a goal that the complexities of today’s world may be making easier. None of these soldiers is a

doomed youth with a small-town sweetie, a comic caricature, or a philosopher stand-in for a sentimental audience. The buildup of stress, tedium, and homesickness in camp is such that the men, when not being shot at or burning barrels of human waste, amuse themselves by waterboarding each other. (The endurance record is eight seconds.) In quieter moments, they strum guitars or pass around a pair of white panties donated by a lady tennis star. These often crude hijinks will ring true for anyone who's lived in a men's dorm in the modern age—where conditions are laughably less trying and the risk of death zero. In a more serious vein, a soldier on the phone from Nuristan explains to his young daughter in America, "It's my job to take care of the bad guys. [*Pause.*] To find them and to kill them, sweetie." Sergeant Gallegos (Jacob Scipio) explains in a thoughtful moment that he's remarrying his ex-wife, "and she's pregnant by some other dude. But I'll raise that kid like my own." Romesha suggests that "If God was real, then these guys wouldn't be trying to kill us every goddamn day." These carefully chosen one-liners do quite enough to "establish character."

When one man cracks after a Taliban bullet blows a piece of an officer's brain into his mouth, he twitches like a shellshock sufferer in a 1916 medical short. General Patton's treatment of choice would have been a sharp slap in the face, but Lurie shows a different ethos: "You gotta get your shit together," the sergeant threatens, "or we're gonna get you outa here!" The man can barely speak, but he doesn't want to go. They have to make him, with a ritual assurance that he'll be back. Almost anything is better than reassignment as a "staff bitch [who's left] his men."

Romesha later wrote a memoir called *Red Platoon*. "If we were a band of brothers," he writes, "our brethren included a private who had once attempted...suicide by drinking carpet cleaner, a soldier who was caught smoking hashish in a free-fire zone while on guard duty, and me, a man so keen on going to war that he never bothered to consult his wife before

volunteering to be deployed to Iraq.”⁵ Johnson and Tamasay include these characters and more, when pre-1970s screen tradition would have banned any mention of such private difficulties and failings as box-office poison. Even if we don’t “get to know them” in depth (any more than we really “get to know” most of our acquaintances) the American enlisted men of *The Outpost* may be more truthfully sketched than those in any previous dramatization.⁶

With long takes and a shaky camera, the last forty minutes of *The Outpost* depict the all-out Taliban assault of October 3, 2009, the day before the misconceived post was slated to be abandoned. The screen fills, as in all serious combat films, with an assortment of largely sympathetic characters facing the worst, and in some cases last, crisis of their lives. This extended sequence is jolting.

“I need volunteers,” says Romesha, as motivated Taliban soldiers sweep through the camp under cover of small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, antiaircraft machine guns, and recoilless rifles. “We’re taking this bitch back!” It sounds like a cheap dose of formula gung-ho, but that’s what he remembers saying.⁷ It’s the shouting into the face of the audience that makes it fake, a melodramatic hook, but it’s the only moment in *The Outpost* that feels that way.

“As far as I’m concerned, if we all stay alive out here, we win,” Romesha says early on. That bar is low, and not all stay alive: despite the victorious defense of the seemingly indefensible COP Keating, the mood of *The Outpost* is decidedly downbeat. Lewis Milestone’s *A Walk in the Sun* (1945) concerned a rifle platoon whose cocky catch-phrase was “Nobody dies!”: the mottos in *The Outpost* are a fatalistic “Everybody dies” and a self-punishing “Embrace the suck.” The mournful end-credit song (composed by Larry Groupé and sung by Rita Wilson) is appropriately haunting, its lyrics less vapid and irrelevant than what’s usual in such things.

The real "battle of Kamdesh" as it's called, was the costliest American fight of its nineteen years in Afghanistan. The Taliban attacked at 6:00 a.m. and broke through the camp's perimeter within sixty minutes. The fight raged on for another ten hours before the enemy fell back, after enduring a pummeling from American air support and an estimated 30% killed in action. Their leaders proclaimed a victory for "faith and belief in one God."⁸ Though seven of more than fifty soldiers of the Afghan National Army stationed at the outpost were killed in its defense, most deserted. Their two Latvian NATO advisers stayed to fight.

Following a schedule worked out long before, Combat Outpost Keating was shut down forever within a few days, its surviving garrison flown out minutes (at least in this version) before U.S. airpower blew it to bits to deny its remaining equipment to the enemy. The cinematic time compression allows the survivors (and us) to see the far-away shellacking from an Olympian perch and to consider, if we will, the point, if any, of all the proceedings.

The Outpost adds to the genre tradition of loyalty among unreflective, working-class realists trained to violence and exposed to danger. Its grim and granular texture matches the astringent realism of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (Somalia in 1991) and Saul Dibb's more recent *Journey's End* (the Western Front in 1918). It resembles these sober films in its blunt tone as well. As for the American-led campaign in Afghanistan, the book is not yet completely closed. An Army investigation reprimanded four officers for failure to properly fortify or support Keating; then came a memorandum "For the Record" from General Stanley McChrystal, the theater commander, stating that he and other generals bore responsibility for positioning the base where it was in the first place.⁹

If Lurie's work lacks the in-your-face cinema flair of Sam Mendes's semi-satirical *Jarhead* (2005), set in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, it's still an honest and conscientious movie about a

fight that should never have been fought. When Jake Tapper visited Afghanistan in 2011, he was told by an Army public affairs officer that “Nuristan has no strategic value.”¹⁰ Perhaps the tale of COP Keating—an ill-considered plan followed ambiguously by either a symbolic defeat or a Pyrrhic victory—will stand for it all.

Notes

¹ (Tapper; 1888; 1975)

² Todd Gilchrist, “The Crafts on [sic] Putting Together Rod Lurie’s ‘The Outpost,’” *Variety* (July 3, 2020) <https://variety.com/2020/artisans/news/rod-lurie-the-outpost-military-advisor-1234697571/>; Sarah Knight Adamson, “Interview with Rod Lurie,” *Sarah’s Backstage Pass* (July 4, 2020) <https://www.sarahsbackstagepass.com/interview-with-rod-lurie-director-the-outpost/> (Both accessed July 7, 2020). Lurie did not seek assistance with *The Outpost*: as he says from experience, “in your best-case scenario, the military does not [truly] assist you, because they do assert some level of control to force your cooperation, and you lose flexibility in changing the script along the way.” (Adamson). The extent of Pentagon influence on war cinema, and the legitimacy of its motives, has often been discussed and censured. If a lack of Pentagon aid weakens any facet of *The Outpost*, it isn’t immediately evident.

³ Ted Johnson, “Jake Tapper Talks About ‘The Outpost,’” *Deadline* (June 26, 2020) <https://deadline.com/2020/06/jake-tapper-the-outpost-movie-rod-lurie-1202970746/> (Accessed July 10, 2020).

⁴ Tapper, 301.

⁵ Romesha, 14.

⁶ Warts-and-all documentaries like *Restrepo* (2010) and *Korengal* (2014), both created by journalists [Sebastian Junger](#) and [Tim Hetherington](#), helped lay the foundation for this approach.

⁷ Romesha, 223.

⁸ Tapper, 598.

⁹ Tapper, 594, 595.

¹⁰ Tapper, 604.