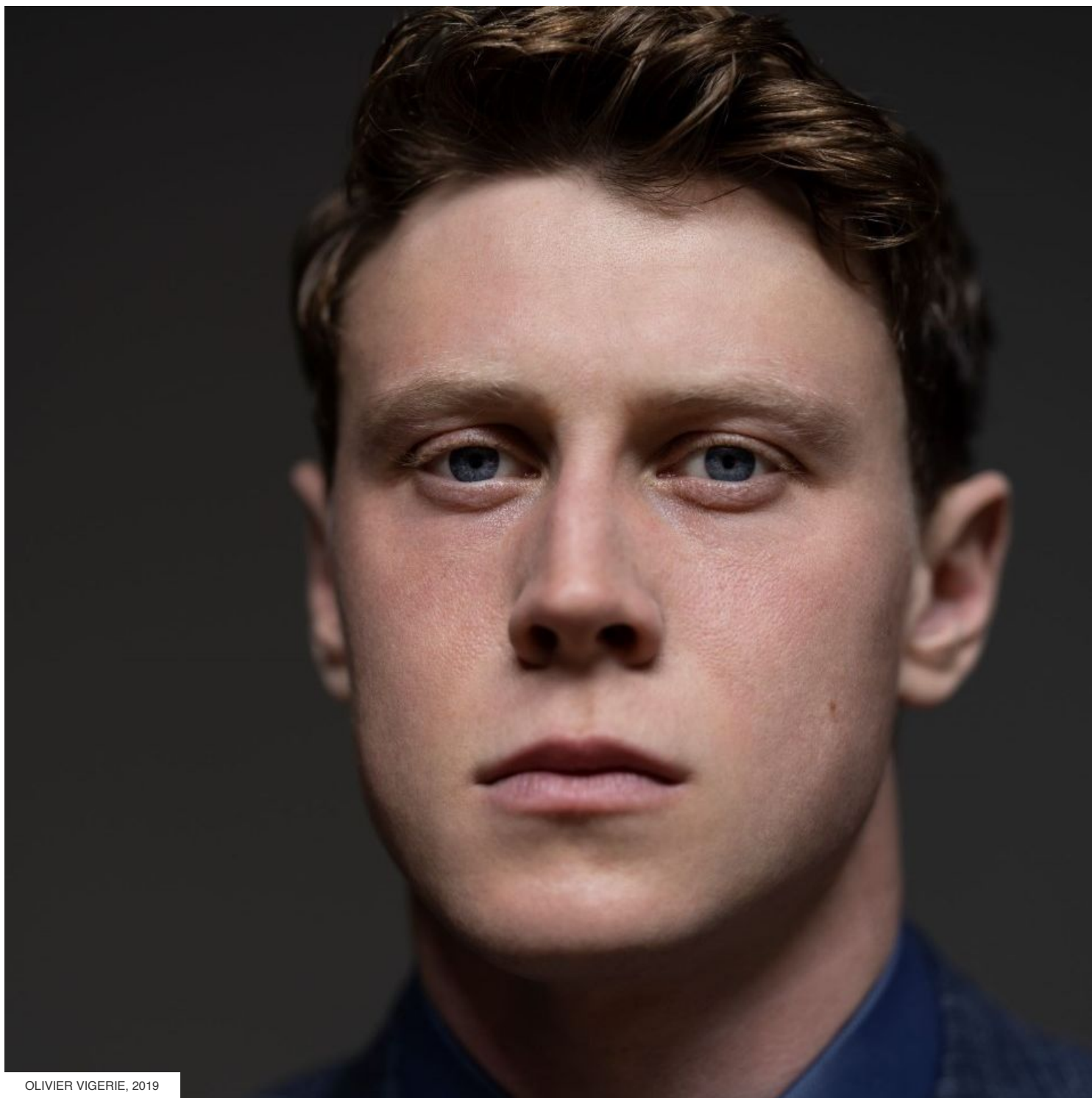


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# George MacKay Isn't Looking Back

**With '1917', MacKay underwent months of WWI infantry training. But the reward may be a stardom he hasn't yet seen this side of the Atlantic.**

BY [JOSH ST. CLAIR](#) JAN 9, 2020



OLIVIER VIGERIE, 2019

**S**top holding it like you're in Afghanistan. George MacKay, only days into a six-month training stretch for a \$100 million World War I production—his largest acting project yet, by far—was standing before a military supervisor and trying to naturally, accurately carry a rifle.

Earlier, when first putting on their uniforms, MacKay and his co-star, Dean-Charles Chapman, had to buckle and tighten and pull each other's sleeves. They could barely sit without their bayonets sticking up, knocking about. Even when they stood, they were holding everything all wrong.

“There was a lot of walking around, going into rooms like *this*,” MacKay remembers, imitating a broad, sweeping motion with a pretend gun, checking pretend corners. “Or walking down like *this*,” he continues, back erect, trigger hand to his chin, pretend-gun shouldered, pointing at his feet. “We're walking around, you know, looking like *American Sniper* or *Black Hawk Down*,” he says laughing. Which was not how a WWI soldier, carrying his gun, was supposed to look, not at all.

MacKay spent the majority of last year training and shooting for this role. The film, *1917*, directed by Sam Mendes (*Skyfall*, *American Beauty*), follows MacKay and Chapman for over two hours as they attempt to run a message across No Man's Land, warning a neighboring division of attack. The film was nominated for three Golden Globes (winning two) and is expected to charge into Oscar season, which will give the film's leading man, MacKay, a surge of critical attention.

Today, MacKay is in Soho, exchanging the frigid fields of Salisbury where the team filmed for the frozen streets of downtown Manhattan. He's had a “mad week.” After crossing the pond for early screenings here in New York, the English actor flew to L.A., then London, then Berlin, and then, just this week: Toronto, Chicago, Dallas, D.C., San Francisco, L.A. again, and finally New York again. In a few days, he'll head home to London for the holidays. He's on so many timezones he has to continually shoot coffee and then run to the bathroom, and he repeatedly apologizes for yawning, because “there's no excuse.” He's taken the last few months of 2019 off for this. No new projects. No readings or auditions. Just travel and promotion.



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“I’ve never done one of these,” he says, referring to a multi-city film tour, his previous promotions lasting only four days at film festivals. “It’s lovely.” Mostly because MacKay still burns with enthusiasm for his role, Schofield, a quiet British infantryman. MacKay has soldiered in movies before when he was younger (*1917*, which will be widely released on Jan. 10, is, in fact, his third WWI role; he’s also played a soldier returning from Afghanistan, which explains the early gun-handling anachronism). But his approach has changed since, he said. He’s fallen in love with the research, getting every detail right—no excuses.

Which meant not just carrying a rifle correctly—not up and down, but on one’s hip, perpendicular to the body, almost like a police battering ram, bayonet out—but also every

minute piece of garb. *Getting it right* meant lacing his boots the way soldiers would lace their boots, so as to easily cut through the laces with a knife should their foot get stuck in mud. It meant carrying ammunition in one's breast pocket, which he would need to button and unbutton, removing ammunition as casually as "looking at your phone, in the way that you just pull out and you know your pass code." (This action took MacKay and Chapman weeks to learn. In the morning, military advisor Dave Crossman would have the boys march, screaming "Load up!" and then, "Don't look! Don't look!" admonishing the two for glancing down at their buttons.)

The attention to detail was important. When Mendes conceived the project, he meant for the film to imitate a single shot, one continuous 2-hour take. MacKay and Chapman would be onscreen for the entire movie; the camera would never leave their sides. And so every time they filmed, they had to get scenes perfect. No fumbling with buttons, no dropping bullets, no letting their guns awkwardly slip off their shoulders. Unlike a typical film where an editor could cut, *1917*, would look more like a theater production. Any mistake that wouldn't derail the take would be left in. MacKay's challenge: not to look incompetent, but like a soldier who has been making these movements for years. Like taking out his phone.

And so, every day, on went MacKay's cotton trousers, his undershirt, his dog tags, his scarf, his tunic, his leather jacket, his boots, his putties—strips of wool worn over the boots—his "webbing and gear"—ammunition, food, mess tin, entrenching tool, stick for the entrenching tool, bayonet—and his helmet ... and his watch. Though there was no aesthetic requirement for MacKay or Chapman, both knew carrying and running with gear would be exhausting. "There was a gym nearby the studio," MacKay remembers, grinning. It was a bodybuilding gym. "They were very friendly to us. But we were there with lighter weights, trying to get a base level of fitness. And we're surrounded by all these huge men and women. We were just these two straggly kids." Two straggly kids leading a \$100 million film.

"Take care of yourself," Mendes had told the young actors before shooting. "It's gonna be a marathon."



MacKay as Ned Kelly in the upcoming film, *True History of the Kelly Gang*

IMDB


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**M**acKay was born in London, his mother a costume designer, his father a lighting and stage manager. He landed his first role at ten, on *Peter Pan*, where he traveled to Australia to film on a pirate ship. He went back to school, scored more roles, took time off, accomplished enough for casting directors to keep calling, remained anonymous enough to stroll Oxford Street without harassment; he says even now he's rarely ever stopped. Stateside, MacKay is probably best known opposite Saoirse Ronan in *How I Live Now* (the two briefly dated afterward) or as Vigo Mortensen's eldest off-the-grid son in *Captain Fantastic*.

In 1917, MacKay, 27, is partnered with an even younger actor in Chapman, 22, someone who perhaps *only* knew big-budget, face-recognizing roles; Chapman spent four seasons on *Game of*

*Thrones*. The two actors first met at their third audition in London. They read in front of Mendes before shaking hands and departing. The two later saw each other across the square in Covent Garden. Both were on the phone—MacKay with his agent, Chapman with his mom. They awkwardly waved. Two weeks later, they were both cast as the leads.

Before shooting and training, to get to know their characters, to get to know each other, the boys took a road trip. They woke in London before sunrise, rented a car, and drove four hours, past Dover Beach, Past Dunkirk, into Belgium. Their destination was Ypres, a small town and a strategic British position along the Western front. They arrived early, carrying leaflets, having marked museum times, looking unabashedly like English tourists.



MacKay and Chapman at the premier.

KEVIN WINTER

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Ypres had witnessed some of the most violent battles of the war. Close to half a million people were killed in and around the town over the course of three battles. In the woods of Ypres, grassy pits, like dents, mark locations of artillery shells. Still snaking across the town too are trenches. They were, MacKay remembers, “like scars in the land, slight divots underneath, where you can see the crooked shape of the lines.”

Earlier, in France, MacKay observed grave sites along the roads. He was taken aback by the dates. “When I was learning about [WWI] in school, when I thought of soldiers, I thought of *men*,” the actor explains. “You think big burly men.” But the average British infantrymen would have been 24, making MacKay’s character more of a veteran, a man who was really just a boy, but a boy who had seen and done terrible violence.

For Mendes, MacKay fit the role like a glove. “Early on I thought: what a dignified, old-fashioned, gracious polite, quite introverted, fellow,” Mendes told us over the phone. “And there’s something about that in the role as well, you know: an old-fashioned hero, who keeps his cards close to his chest, very internal, perhaps a bit wounded by his experiences.”

In Belgium, MacKay wanted to better know Schofield’s wounds, his “way of being,” which the actor describes as a kind of containment. “He holds onto himself for fear of unraveling.” At the time, MacKay understood the instinct. He had just finished filming *True History Of The Kelly Gang* where he played the murderous Australian thug Ned Kelly. He hadn’t had time to fully decompress from the role—which he says was his most emotionally extreme job. Instead, he bottled those feelings and used the bottling to capture Schofield: a man on the verge of unraveling.

One of the nights in Belgium, MacKay and Chapman attended the ceremony at the Menin Gate. Each night, the town gathers at the monument to honor the fallen, their names written across the stone. Buglers and bagpipers play the “Last Post,” a British infantry song often performed at military funerals, which has been echoing along the Belgian archway each night for almost one hundred years. It was the most moving experience of MacKay’s preparation.



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“We're surrounded by choice rather than need,” MacKay says, reflecting on his trip. “I was born when my country was in peacetime. We're perhaps not as in touch with what means most. We're in touch with what we want. But I think extremes teach you what you want most: where you root yourself and who you love.”

He had been reading accounts from young soldiers in the war. In a forest in Belgium, he had seen a pond, almost 60-feet across; it was the impression of a bomb. MacKay thought of men running through the crater. One of the scariest things he had been told was the concussive force of such a blast, which could kill a man by forcing air down his lungs. It wasn't the



shrapnel, but the shockwave; a soldier, a boy, could be choked and killed simply by a blast of air.

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**I**n 490 B.C.E., Athenian and Plataean forces repelled the advancing Persian armies just outside a small Greek town. Before the battle, an Athenian soldier, Pheidippides, ran a message 140 miles from that town to Sparta, asking for military aid. The name of that town from which he ran: “Marathon.”

Mendes’ advice to MacKay—that filming would feel like a marathon—wasn’t just an apt metaphor. Over the course of four months, shooting chronologically, MacKay would cover no small amount of turf, as his character bore another wartime message. He would walk miles through trenches, crawl through mud, leap into a river, and finally sprint three hundred yards through four hundred attacking infantrymen as thousands of dollars worth of explosions erupted to his right and left. That famous scene, referred to by cast and crew as “Schofield’s Run” would be the culminating moment for the character and the film, the most selfless act on screen. When the time came, MacKay would have only few takes to get it right.

But the marathon began with simply carrying a rifle, the first day on set, which MacKay remembers as one of the hardest. “You have to come in emotionally and physically one hundred percent, because you're setting the speed,” the actor explains. Since Mendes couldn’t cut, everything would play out in real time. And since any single take could be the final cut, MacKay couldn’t dog it. “Sometimes we did twenty takes. Sometimes we did over forty-five, just for a five-minute scene.” The feeling, like running sprints: “I don't know when this will finish.”



MacKay with Saoirse Ronan in 2013's *How I Live Now*.

IMDB

MacKay says that after 20 takes, everything became muscle memory and he was “free to just be in the emotion of the scene.” And the scenes, like the Menin ceremony in Belgium, required a different sort of endurance. Walking across No Man’s Land—the set so hauntingly rendered: horse carcasses, bones, gear swallowed in the mud—MacKay found himself, during the filming, often perturbed. “It's not gore, necessarily; it's the idea of what was there before,” he remembers. Like noticing someone's shoe sticking up. “Something so domestic like that is often all the more disconcerting.” After they finished filming one scene, Chapman, still in character, continued crying uncontrollably as MacKay held him in his arms.

“Life, to be sure, / Is nothing much to lose, / But young men think it is, / And we were young.” Mendes included this stanza from 19th century English poet A. E. Housman as an epigraph on the script’s first page. The stanza’s sarcasm he reflects in the age divide between his generals (Colin Firth, Benedict Cumberbatch) and his two leads, a younger generation betrayed by the apathy of the older, for whom life perhaps isn’t as precious.

**“I really appreciate being in a coffee shop now. *This coffee tastes so good. I'm warm today. I'm sitting down.*”**

## ***I'm seeing my family this afternoon. Simple stuff. "***

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If MacKay ever shared that apathy, working on the film granted him a bit of soldierly insight. "It's made me notice," he says. "I really appreciate being in a coffee shop. *This coffee tastes so good. I'm warm today. I'm sitting down. I'm seeing my family this afternoon.* Simple stuff like that."

MacKay says this mindfulness was also a lesson that Mendes helped instill on set—whenever he found the young actor rushing, playing Schofield's emotions too early. "He'd say: *just play the moment. Because sometimes it all happens too quickly in life to realize,*" MacKay remembers. Playing the moment also proved to be an important lesson in fame, when it came time to promote the film, the biggest of MacKay's career. "It was a very healthy way of being able to let go of the production," MacKay explains. "*This has been a year of my life, this has been one of the best jobs ever, when when will a part like this come again?*" MacKay didn't want to get caught up in these thoughts. Just: play the moment.

Mendes says he first underestimated MacKay's abilities. There's a near-30-minute stretch during the film where the actor, who's on-screen the entire time, doesn't say a word. Mendes, an actorly director who's known for eliciting strong performances on screen and stage, was blown away.



## "Schofield's Run"

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When it finally came time for Schofield's Run, the moment of moments, the last big leg of the marathon, three hundred yards, four hundred extras, explosions, catharsis, MacKay was ready. By then he had been running and gunning for over three months, crying with Chapman take after take after take. He'd buttoned and unbuttoned his pocket hundreds of times. Hundreds of times loaded and hip-carried his rifle. All for his Pheidippides moment.

And so on went MacKay's cotton trousers, his undershirt, dog tags, tunic, leather jacket, boots, putties, and his wool socks. And MacKay ran. He ran toward the camera across four-hundred charging men, pyrotechnics exploding around him. Twice, MacKay collides with attacking soldiers, film extras, which wasn't supposed to happen. In the end, Mendes decided to leave the mistake in.

"We just kept going, and it added to the moment," MacKay laughs. "Afterwards one of those guys guy came over: *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.* But I went: *That's fine. That's fine. We made it through!*"

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