

The Guns of Navarone



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced and written for the screen by Carl Foreman. Directed by J. Lee Thompson. Based on the novel by Alastair Maclean. Production Design by Geoffrey Drake. Cinematography by Oswald Morris. Original Music by Dimitri Tompkin. Edited by Alan Osbitson. Costumes: Monty Berman & Olga Lehmann:

Cinematic length: 158 minutes. A Columbia Pictures Presentation. Cinematic release: 1961. DVD release 2001. Check for ratings. Rating 85%. All images are from the public domain, or *Wikimedia*. *The exceptions are the last two portraits which are from Wikipedia and are covered by the creative Commons Attribution License*

Cast

Gregory Peck : Captain Mallory

Corporal Miller: David Niven

Colonel Andreas: Anthony Quinn

Brown: Stanley Baker

Major Roy Franklin: Anthony Quayle

María: Irene Papas

Pappadimos: James Darren

Anna: Gia Scala

Commodore Jensen: James Robertson Justice

Australian Squadron Leader: Richard Harris

Captain Cohn: Bryan Forbes

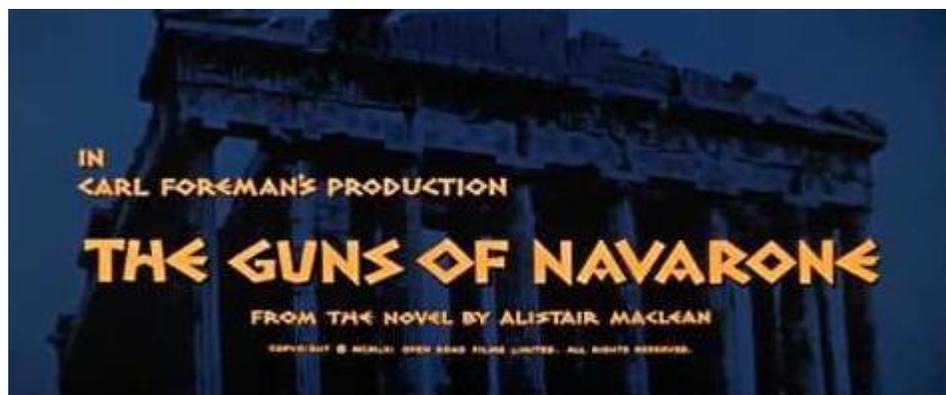
Major Baker: Allan Cuthbertson

Sergeant Grogan: Percy Herbert

Sessler: George Mikell

Muesel: Walter Gotell





Review

Fifty years on *The Guns of Navarone* remains is one of the great adventure films. It is one of those films that engrosses because everything works so well. Cinema's magic makes everything come together seamlessly. There are no moments when plot holes appear, when actors falter, the action meanders, the wrong camera shots are used...

The story in its broad outlines is a familiar one. A superior officer puts together a select and rather unorthodox group who must go on a highly dangerous but important secret mission behind enemy lines. In this film they must blow up two heavily guarded Nazi guns on the island of Navarone in the eastern Aegean. This must be done so that two thousand British troops nearby will not be killed or forced to surrender, a defeat which could influence Turkey to join the Axis.

James Robertson Justice plays the designer of the mission, Commodore Jensen, as always seemingly unperturbed, even when almost alone in a grimy dilapidated mess hall full of very angry Australian airmen supporting their squadron leader (Richard Harris) threatening to take him flying so they can drop him from ten thousand feet. It is only in his last scene in his run down headquarters where his second in command (Bryan Forbes) asks him what chance does the mission have and he says what he really thinks that we see the humane man beneath the formal surface. Jensen believes he has probably sent six good men to their deaths, but he can do nothing else, they are his last chance and such an effort is expected of him.

In that scene and the scene with the Australian flyers in the mess the viewers are given the first scenes where *The Guns of Navarone* reveals its superiority to most secret mission films. Usually cardboard characters wear new finely pressed uniforms while located in headquarters so immaculate Hilton hotels would be envious. Casts behave as fearless heroes or gleefully sadistic villains; either way

These three stills show the effective use of settings



they are talky in a self-confident way and everybody is a killing machine who never worries, falters or regrets what they do.

This film reverses all those tendencies. Clothes are worn and grimy. Except for the anal retentive Germans everybody looks like they need a shower and a shave and a restful night's sleep. The dingy sets peel off centuries old plaster and if they have electrical wiring it is obviously newly installed over the plaster. Furnishings match, stark iron beds with torn dirty mattresses and battered scratched cheap furniture: welcome to authentic 1940s Greece. The wedding celebration in the plaza also appears as authentically Greek and has not been overdone or made more glamorous than it would be: the music, food, dances clothes and settings are like being there.

The characters are more subtle, rounded and believable than is usual in secret mission films. The German commander at Navarone Hauptmannfuehrer Muesel (Walter Gotell) tries to avoid torturing his prisoners, apologizes for the SS officer's brutality, gives one prisoner medical care and when he corners the resistance fighters, walks forward and suggests that as they are known and cornered, they should surrender as the Greek civilians around them could be killed in a useless gun battle.

Another cliché gone is the hero who leads the mission. This walking cliché always shrewdly knows what goes on, knows how the future will unfold and always makes the right choices. Gregory Peck plays this leading character Captain Mallory, initially second in command to Major Roy Franklin (Anthony Quayle). Both officers, like Jensen and Muesel, do not waste time pondering matters and reluctantly make choices that are sometimes wrong, cost lives or cause pain. Once the decisions are made they are fast, and bold - if not always decisive. The film shows that the officers are essentially right to be like this. One of the band pauses, ponders and by doing so loses his nerve and nearly gets himself and others killed. He dies later because he hesitates. Another lambasts Mallory as a manipulator and a cold blooded killer – and then says that he does not care about the two thousand British soldiers facing death or capture if they do not destroy Navarone's guns, he only cares about his friend Major Roy.

This gives some idea of the tensions within the group. Brown, who Jensen says can supposedly be relied on to be a cold blooded killer, the famous butcher of Barcelona' is a remorseful, introspective, battle fatigued legend with feet of clay. His opposite is the laconic Pappadimos, unreliable for the opposite reason, a

reckless unthinking killer, his attacks endanger the mission. Corporal Miller, the explosives expert is insubordinate, querulous and makes his hatred for Mallory known at every opportunity. Andrea Stavos blames Mallory for his family's death and says he will kill him when the time becomes right, so Mallory cannot even look forward to the mission's completion. The most reliable of the men, Major Roy, soon becomes incapacitated and delirious and cannot command. That leaves the two Greek women the resistance fighters, Maria (Irene Papas) and Anna (Gia Scala) as Mallory's only non-problem people - seemingly.

There are subtexts. One that works overall through the film's length is that war and people are much more complex than this genre and similar storybook adventures usually suggest. There are no purely good choices or purely bad people. Miller who supposedly hates authority, manipulators and killing, ends up being responsible for more deaths than anyone else in the film. He also reveals a latently homosexual and misogynistic streak when he hectors Mallory about his lover, paying Mallory back through the woman for Mallory's treatment of Major Roy. He does this by going into sadistic, repulsive bullying and after ripping half her clothes off, he gives sanctimonious if officially correct incitements to kill her.

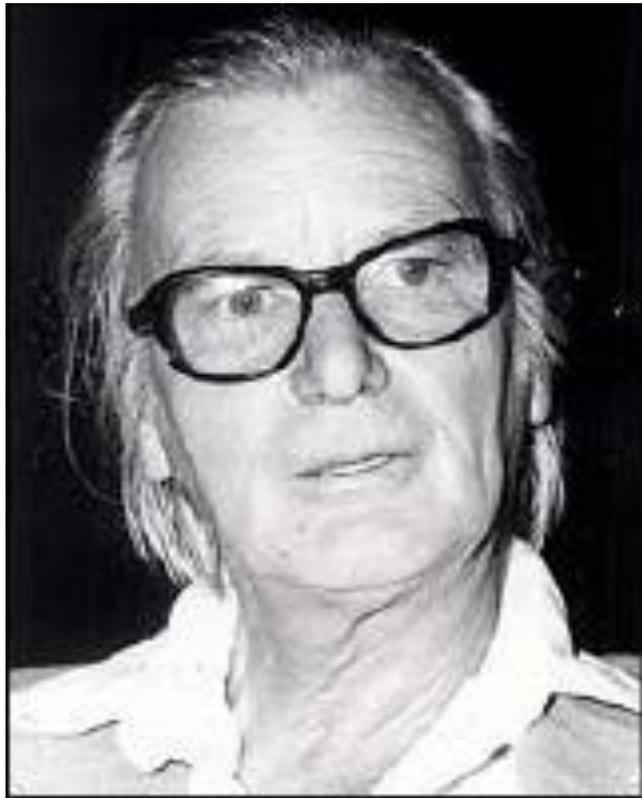
The complex interactions between these characters, the way their characters change under pressure, their difficult choices, the way unexpected things go wrong, and the skilful, often subtle use of settings all contribute to making the film original and a success.

The film was almost cancelled for insurance money when David Niven was so badly injured in one scene that he nearly died and was hospitalised for weeks. However he bravely filmed his last scenes while still recuperating. Some of those scenes required much physical effort. Another odd thing about the film was the casting of Anthony Quayle as Major Roy. In World War Two Quayle had really been a major involved with underground resistance work in Albania, although he never said much about it.

The film was a commercial and critical success. Peck and director J. Lee Thompson would work successfully together again three times in the 1960s, once with Carl Foreman serving again as producer/writer. Quinn and Thompson would make another similar World War Two adventure film *The Passage* (1979) yet for all four men involved in *The Guns of Navarone* this film would be a peak achievement.



Carl Foreman (1914-1984)



J. Lee Thompson (1914-2002)

