

Why *Guns of Navarone* is my favourite Book

Note: text in *italics* is directly quoted from the book.

Background: Captain Keith Mallory and his crack team of saboteurs, on a day's notice, are tasked with the impossible job of destroying the 'Guns of Navarone', the most dreaded guns operated by the Germans on the fictional Greek island of Navarone, close to the Turkish seashore, occupied by the Germans – before the Germans slaughter the twelve hundred British soldiers trapped on the (fictional) island of Kheros and reclaim that island from the Allied forces. This story is set in the World War II time-frame.

Of all the hundreds of books I have read till now, why do I like this book, written by *Alistair Maclean*? Well, it's not just his simple, elegant, articulate and very direct language. It's much more than that. It's the humane nature of each member of the 'killer' team, especially the seniors, to be introduced shortly.

The crack team: Captain Keith Mallory from New Zealand, the greatest rock climber of his time, (Lt. Col.) Andrea, Corporal 'Dusty' Miller from California, Petty Officer Casey Brown and Lt. Andy Stevens, the youngest of the lot – hand-picked by Captain James Jensen of Royal Navy, who holds an extensive dossier on each of them.

For Mallory, except Andrea who is a WW I veteran like himself and long-time companion in his long-range missions, all others are new friends whom he gets to know as time passes (by the way the time span of the whole story is just four days – Sunday to Wednesday midnight).

Maclean has the uncanny ability to introduce the characters with a deep understanding of their psyche, though created by himself but borne out of his deep understanding of people from different walks of life and backgrounds.

Andy has been afraid all his life, from his prep school days onwards, ever since his father Sir Cedric Stevens, the celebrated mountaineer, bodily threw him into the swimming pool at home saying that's the only way to learn swimming. When he somehow reached the edge of the pool gasping for breath, he was pushed back by his two elder brothers. Since then, every time he failed in any of the activities they forced him to do, they would laugh at him and gradually the fear of failure grew within him – the fear of failure and the consequent ridicule always at his elbow. Afraid of being ridiculed all the time, he somehow manages to excel in every sport, be it swimming or rock climbing, so that his father and brothers finally stop ridiculing him. But the fear stays back as his constant companion. This fear he successfully manages to hide from everyone but not from Mallory and Andrea who could see through his facade. But later he realizes that it doesn't really matter to them and those two are beyond that, men of great substance and humility. More on Andy later.

How deeply Mallory, Andrea and Miller value human life and how deeply they regret each time they have no choice but to kill soldiers that happen to be on the enemy's side is brought out several times throughout the book. I shall briefly quote some of those incidents by and by.

A few hours after they leave Castelrosso in an ancient caique, dressed as Greek peasants and fishermen, towards their destination, they have their first encounter with their enemy, a German caique that somehow had been tipped off.

When Mallory explains to the team that that wouldn't be kid-glove hands-off inspection but serious one and they wouldn't probably survive such an inspection with all their gear (explosives, detonators etc.) and so, "either they go under or we do", Stevens, the youngest of the lot and the only one with no field experience expresses shock and says, "Sir, but that's murder!", we first get a glimpse of Mallory's cold logic balanced with his humane approach. Here is what he says [page 67]:

*"Lieutenant, the whole concept of directing a successful war is aimed at placing your enemy at a disadvantage, at **not** giving him an even chance. We kill them or they kill us. They go under or we do – and a thousand men on Kheros. It's just as simple as that, Lieutenant. It's not even a question of conscience."*

After the brief action, Mallory notices Andrea staring down at the two dead German soldiers at his feet on their deck and asks if they are dead and Andrea nods and says, with a heavy voice, "Yes, I hit them too hard."

[the most moving, insightful thoughts from Mallory to follow (page 76)]

Mallory turned away. Of all the men he had ever known, Andrea, he thought, had the most call to hate and to kill his enemies. And kill them he did, with a ruthless efficiency appalling in its single-mindedness and thoroughness of execution. But he rarely killed without regret and without the most bitter self-condemnation, for he did not believe that the lives of his fellow-men are his to take: he loved his fellow-man above all things. A simple man, a good man, a killer with kindly heart, he was forever troubled by his conscience, ill at ease with his inner self. But over and above the wonderings and reproaches, he was informed by an honesty of thought, by a clear-sighted wisdom which sprang from and transcended his innate simplicity. Andrea killed neither for revenge, nor from hate, nor for nationalism nor for any other 'isms' which self-seekers and fools and knaves employed as beguilement to the battlefield and justification for the slaughter of millions too young and too unknowing to comprehend the dearful futility of it all. **Andrea killed simply that better men might live.**

Then Mallory looks around and sees *the grotesque picture of the German lieutenant, a ghastly mangled caricature of what had once been a human being like himself, decapitated and wholly horrible*; he feels a sudden revulsion and with great effort turns to his team to check how they were - another glimpse of his humane nature.

When they hole up in a creek to take shelter from the storm that's threatening to wreck their ancient caique and their mission, Mallory suddenly discovers that there is a 'manned' watchtower with cannons right above the creek and they are in for trouble. After they manage to fool the young sentry, Mallory sends Andrea up to the tower (surrepticiously of course) and when Miller protests that he should have been allowed to go with him as it was one against four German sentries, Mallory gives his team (us and) a peek into the tragic past of Andrea and his phenomenal capabilities as a fighter, saboteur, killer with a kind heart and more.

He starts off with narrating how and when he first met Andrea: Andrea was in the Albanian war then and the Italians went in terror him – *his long-range patrols against the Iulia division, the Wolves of Tuscany, did more to wreck Italian morale in Albania than any other single factor*. Mallory met him later and at that time he was a very junior officer in the Anzac division and Andrea was lieutenant colonel, far out-ranking him. The others get a real shock when Andrea's true rank is revealed and also explains many things about him - *his confidence, his repose, the unerring sureness of his lightning reactions and above all, the implicit faith Mallory had in him. It also explained why Mallory never gave him a direct order and why he sought his advice, which was often*.

Then he goes on to narrate Andrea's tragic past – how he lost his wife and daughters to German bombers and how he lost his parents in the infamous Protosami massacre, that finally led him to go solo as a saboteur wreaking havoc among the German and Italian divisions and how he was captured for treason and finally released and how Captain Jensen of Royal Navy noticed him as a natural fit for subversive operations and recruited him into SoE That's how both went to Crete together, from where they both were pulled out on short notice for this mission.

He also tells them that Andrea doesn't kill unnecessarily. And true to that, when Andrea makes a sudden appearance from the watch tower, he gleefully tells his team how he hardly touched them, well, except for a couple of taps, disarmed them and locked them up in the cellar.

Once they get out of the creek and set out in their ancient caique towards their destination, in the most inhospitable weather, the dedication, the endurance and will-power of each of them is put to test, with the storm threatening to break the caique to pieces and the old Kelvin engine in turn threatening to give up any time. And when Mallory takes a brief break from the killing task of pouring out the sea water being passed to him by the tireless Andrea, he looks at his team and wonders what a terrific bunch of ... and fails to come up with suitable words to describe such men.

Then he gets somewhat philosophical and wonders *savagely why such wonderful men should die so uselessly. Or it wasn't necessary to justify dying., even dying ingloriously empty of achievement. Could one not die for the abstract, for the intangibles and the ideal? What had the martyrs at the stakes achieved? Or what was that old tag – 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori'. If one lives well, what matters how one dies. Unconsciously, his lips tightened in quick revulsion and he thought of Jensen's remarks about High Command playing who's-the-king-of-the-castle. Well, they were right in the middle of their playground now, just a few more pawns sliding into the limbo. Not that it mattered – they had thousands more to play with (page105).*

After they climb the 400-ft sheer south face of the cliff under the most inhospitable conditions, widely known to be impossible to scale with nary a foothold or grip, Captain Mallory suddenly detects the presence of a

sentry close to the edge and curses Jensen and all others for giving wrong Intel that it wouldn't be manned because the Germans wouldn't expect an attack from that end, and immediately regrets and tells himself that he was expecting it all the while – a very mature leader who takes responsibility even when he finds himself in the most adverse situation.

Once he overcomes the initial shock and thinks up a strategy to get past this risk and sends Andrea over the top to create distraction, and as he carefully observes the sentry's panicked reaction to the unexpected sounds from different boulders, *Mallory suddenly catches a glimpse of the white straining face, wide-eyed and fearful, incongruously at variance with the gladiatorial strength of the steel helmet above. God only knew, Mallory thought, what wild and panic-stricken thoughts were passing through his confused mind: noises from the cliff-top, metallic sounds from either side of the boulders, the long, eerie vigil, afraid and companion-less, on a deserted cliff-edge on a dark and tempest-filled night in a hostile land – suddenly Mallory felt a deep stab of compassion for this man, a man like himself, someone's well-loved husband or brother or son who was doing a dirty and dangerous job as best he could and because he was told to, compassion for his loneliness and his anxieties and his fears, for the sure knowledge that before he had drawn breath another three times he would be dead .. (page 127).*

Here is another example of how highly mature leaders like Mallory and Andrea see positive side of grave incidents even in such impossible missions – Andy Stevens who is bringing up the rear, botches up the tying of their supplies – food, fuel etc. - and Andrea who is pulling up the rope from the cliff-top suddenly realizes that it has no load at all. When Mallory learns of it, he is just shocked and his mind really goes blank, thinking how they could survive in that hostile land without food and fuel and without enlisting any locals. But then, Andrea laughs gently and tells Mallory to be happy that they have that much less to carry!

Brave men versus cowards. That's how it's always, isn't it? Most of us are in awe of those who are considered 'brave men' who are not 'afraid', and look down upon those who are not and label them as cowards. But see the philosophical maturity of Mallory and Andrea – after they climb the impossible south face of Mount Costos and reach the cliff, overcome the sentry and disappear behind the boulders into their first hide-out after landing on Navarone, Andy who was the last to reach the top, bringing up the rear, tells others how *scared to death he was, every step up the way*. By the way, Andy gets severely injured just before reaching the top – loses grip and falls to the base of the chimney just below the ledge, breaks his right leg into pieces and loses consciousness. Andrea and Mallory bring him up with great difficulty and Miller plays local doctor and fixes up his leg.

That's when Mallory lets him in on a most profound truth of life. He states that he, Andy, was not the only one scared. Both he and Andrea were scared to death each step up the rock face, which Andy refuses to believe: *"Andrea was afraid? I can't believe it!"*

"Andrea was afraid." The big Greek's voice was very gentle. "Andrea is afraid. Andrea is always afraid. That's why I have lived so long." He stared down at his great hands. "And that's why so many have died. Because they were not so afraid as I. They were not afraid of everything a man could be afraid of; there was always something they forgot to be afraid of, to guard against. But Andrea was afraid of everything, and forgot nothing. It is as simple as that."

He looked across at Andy and smiled.

"There are no brave men and cowardly men in the world, my son. There are only brave men. To be born, to live, to die – that takes courage enough in itself, and more than enough. We are all brave men and we are all afraid. What the world calls a brave man, he too is brave and afraid like all the rest of us. Only he is brave for five minutes longer. Or sometimes ten minutes, or twenty minutes – or the time it takes a man sick and bleeding and afraid to climb a cliff."

Andy Stevens said nothing, with his head bent. He seldom felt so happy, seldom so at peace with himself. He had known that he couldn't hide things from men like Mallory and Andrea. But he had not known that it wouldn't matter... [pages 166-167]

After Andrea leaves their cave to draw off the Alpine Corps that are searching for Mallory & co, Andy begs Mallory to leave him behind and carry on with their mission, as he is going to be a *millstone around their necks...* and Miller flatly refuses and goes to the extent of saying that Andy is insulting them (mock). Then we get another peek into Mallory's own troubled conscience. He orders Miller to shut up and declares the matter closed. *He feels the self-loathing and shame well up within him, shame for the gratitude of a sick man, who did not know that their concern didn't stem from solicitude but from the fear that he might betray them...* [pages 185-186].

High up on the western slopes of Mount Kostos, wedged in the V between two great boulders, Andrea gazed down the darkening mountainside over the depressed telescopic sights of his rifle, pumped another three rounds into the wavering, disorganized line of searchers. His face was quite still, as immobile as the eyelids that never flickered to the regular crashing of his Mauser, and drained of all feeling. Even his eyes reflected his face, neither hard nor pitiless, but simply empty and almost frighteningly remote, a remoteness that mirrored his mind, a mind armoured for the moment against all thought and sensation, for Andrea knew that he must not think about this thing. To kill, to take the lives of his fellows, that was the supreme evil, for life was a gift that was not his to take away. Not even in fair fight. And this was murder. [page 189]

Couple of important characters, outside this killer team, to be introduced before I proceed further – Louki and Panayis, Louki having been the steward of long standing for Vlachos family. Monsieur Vlachos was former consul and owner of the island of Navarone until the Germans invaded and took it over. Panayis is his long-time friend. Both are trusted by Monsieur Vlachos and these are the only two islanders he lets Mallory contact, that too only when the situation is absolutely desperate. Mallory & Miller quite accidentally meet both in an abandoned hut in the valley while going down in search of food and fuel.

Once they get some wood and light up a fire in the cave, all the members who are already dog-tired, fall asleep and Mallory being the leader looks around assessing the situation. Stevens, he knows, wouldn't last long. Here we get glimpse of Mallory's deep understanding of human psyche: *He (Andy Stevens) is dying. But dying is a very indefinite term. When a dying man decides to live, he became the toughest, most enduring creature on earth. Mallory had seen it before. But maybe Stevens didn't want to live. To live, to overcome these desperate injuries – that would be to prove himself to himself, and to others, and he was young enough and sensitive enough and suffered so much in the past that that could be the most important thing to him: on the other hand, he knew what an appalling handicap he had become to the rest of the team; he had heard Mallory say so; he knew also that Mallory's primary concern was not his welfare but the fear that he could be captured, crack under pressure and reveal everything – he had heard Mallory say so and he knew that he had failed his friends. It was all very difficult, impossible to say how the balance of contending forces would work out eventually...[page 226].*

Another example for Mallory's innate goodness, warmth and fundamental respect for fellow men, even if they are on the enemy side....

Mallory & co are taken by surprise, while sleeping in their cave, by the German patrol led by Lieutenant Turzig. Just as they were about to be led out of the cave, Andrea surprises his friends by completely turning against them, saying he is not one of them and reveals every fact to the German lieutenant that they could have figured out anyway. As he eagerly offers to betray his friends some more, the German stops him and asks Andrea to save the rest for his boss Hauptmann Skoda. And when he resumes his story with Skoda, suddenly Mallory thinks he is going overboard and fears he could be shot by Skoda. To avert Skoda's attention, he tries a trick or two and compares him with a honey buzzard. That really proves too much and when Skoda takes out his gun to shoot him, Turzig rushes forward and pins his hand with gun to the table and pleads him not to kill him as their Commandant in the fort wants the leader alive. At that moment Mallory realizes he owed his life to that young lieutenant – *how easily one could respect, forge a friendship with a man like Turzig if not for this damned, crazy war – and on the other hand Skoda was utterly evil ... [page 265]*

And after the mastermind Andrea takes all the enemy men by surprise, overpowers the guards, shoots Skoda and as his friends take care of the rest of the guards and tie up Turzig, Mallory asks him where their transmitter is. When Turzig refuses to reveal that information and Mallory threatens to kill him, Turzig smiles and says, *'Given certain circumstances, you would kill me as you would a fly, but you wouldn't kill a man for refusing such information.'* Mallory smiles and replies appreciatively, *'you don't have as much to learn as your late and unlamented captain thought'*. Wonderful intuitive mutual respect from both men, isn't it?

After they get bombed out of one of their last hide-outs, the 'devil's playground' as Louki calls it, and move up the slope beyond the carob grove and out of reach of the receding bombers which were unable to locate them anyway as the daylight is fading, they face a fresh threat – armoured cars and army trucks mounted with special long-range field guns. And the Alpine corps hadn't given up, despite the loss of some of their comrades. So, Mallory gathers his mates and explains his plan to tackle the advancing enemy, though reluctantly. Miller takes a look at those soldiers and comments that *they are picking the stupidest way to commit suicide*. Mallory agrees and says they probably also know it. And when Miller asks why on earth they are doing it, Mallory explains the various unviable options they have and the only viable option of frontal attack, which is suicidal especially against this killer team and then comes to yet another philosophical insight into the whole game of war – what is at stake for the Germans if Mallory & co blow up the guns and Kheros

is evacuated right under their noses and lose face with the Turks whom Hitler badly needs as ally in this region. So, explains Mallory, *the Germans have no compunction about thirty or forty of their finest corps cut to pieces. 'It's no trouble at all when you are sitting behind a desk a thousand miles away...'* When Miller complains he doesn't like it one bit, Mallory assures him that he doesn't like it either – *'Slaughtering men forced to do a suicidal job is not my idea of fun – or even of war. But if we don't get them, they will get us.'* A deeply moving experience relating to characters, though fictional, such as Mallory, Andrea and Miller.

After the first round of *pitiful massacre* of the defenseless soldiers marching towards their hide-out behind the boulders up the slope, they, Mallory & co, briefly stop the fire and as they are closely watching the remaining soldiers, Mallory hears Miller murmuring something and hitting his fist against the rough pebbles unmindful of the bleeding it's causing, Mallory asks him what the matter is. Though Miller sidesteps it, Mallory could sense the anger in Miller against those who sent these poor devils to certain death. And Miller asks if they shall leave the rest be, Mallory echoes his thoughts and says, *'leave them be'*. *The thought of any more slaughter made him almost physically sick.*

But then, these foot soldiers were being assisted by a set of new 'eyes in the sky', couple of fresh fighters and couple of armoured cars with field guns and mounted machine guns. That sends our team into a hide-and-seek chase in the Devil's Playground, among the honey-comb of caves that Louki claims to know like the back of his hand. But then, Mallory, after noticing that the remaining soldiers are doggedly following them and they themselves are not able to progress fast enough as they are carrying their wounded member Andy, stops to take stock of the situation to decide their next crucial step. And when Louki informs him that the only cave, among those hundreds of caves, that leads to the coast is at the very end of the tunnel, Mallory feels lost and almost gives up hope of escape. This is where we see the steely resolve of a dying man come out. After Mallory explains their predicament to him, which he couldn't figure out himself, he pleads with Mallory to leave him behind and proceed further. When everybody vehemently refuses his request and start debating with each other, Andy very calmly intervenes, with a machine gun in his hand that he picks up from the cave floor without the knowledge of anyone else, and asks Mallory, *"Sir, the gangrene has spread up above the knee, isn't?"* Despite Miller pleading him, Mallory, with his eyes to say no, he says yes, to the horror of Miller. Andy profusely thanks Mallory and says, *'there is no need to explain all the advantages of me staying here'*. This takes all of them by surprise and none of them have any words to say or respond to him. Finally, without a word all of them leave one by one, and when Andrea whispers something in his ear, it brings a smile to his lips, for the first time. And for the first time in his life, Andy Stevens is completely at peace with himself and with no fear at all. Sad that he could find his peace only on the last day of his life, but at least he died in peace.

Couple of more brief accounts of the exemplary nature of the members of this mission, before I wind this up.

As if it's not enough that they are being constantly harried by the Germans, Miller discovers a traitor and double agent just a few hours before they execute the final act of their mission. In their final hideout in the carob grove, the Devil's Playground, while escaping from the Alpine corps, Miller somehow gets suspicious of Panayis, Louki's friend, and he finds his behavior very odd in at least three other occasions after that and when they finally get into the town of Navarone and into an abandoned house, he discovers to his horrors that the detonators in his rucksack have been destroyed by some slimy character and shares his concerns with Mallory who was going with him into the fortress. And then, the two along with Panayis, go down the valley to get their explosives from where they hid them. That's when Miller tricks Mallory into stepping into a hut and then in his cool, inimitable fashion, goes on to show all the evidences to prove that Panayis is that slimy, double-crossing traitor. Mallory has no option left. Miller becomes the judge, jury and executioner.

'How does it feel to know that you are goign to die, Panayis, to feel like all the poor bastards who had felt just like you feel now, just before they died – all the men in Crete, all the guys in the sea-borne and air bombings on Navarone who died because they thought you were on their side? How does it feel, Panayis?'

Panayis said nothing. His left hand clutching his torn right arm, trying to stem the blood, he stood there motionless, the dark evil face masked in hate, the lips still drawn back in that less than human snarl....

'The prisoner has nothing to say,' Miller sounded very tired. 'I suppose I should say something, give out a long spiel about me being the judge, jury and executioner. But I don't think I will bother myself. Dead men make very poor witnesses...mebbe it's not your fault, Panayis, mebbe there is an awful good reason why you came to be what you are. Gawd only knows, I don't and I don't much care. There are too many dead men, and I am going to kill you, Panayis, and I am going to kill you now.' Miller dropped his cigarette, ground it out and waited for Panayis to say something and when he said nothing, he nodded as if in secret *ujnderstanding*. Carefully, accurately, he shot Panayis through the heart twice, blew out the candles and was half way to the door of the hut before the dead man crashed to the ground. [pages 347-349]

Well, why did I quote this incident? Not to show how sharp Miller is but to show the empathising side of him that could relate to how Panayis, who almost ruined their mission and nearly got them into the hands of Germans, could have turned out to be a traitor.

The last one: Just a few hours before they get into the fortress and just a few minutes before the curfew, Mallory and Miller check into a dim-lit tavern, on Louki's suggestion, to get German uniforms from the German soldiers who visit the tavern everyday. Over there, Mallory, tense with taut nerves and waiting for the right moment to strike, notices a bunch of youngsters consuming hashish and making a racket – *Mallory looked at the bunch of youngsters in the corner clustered around a young man playing a **bouzouko** – a long-necked mandolin – singing the haunting, nostalgic 'rembetica' songs of the old hashish smokers of the Piraeus. He supposed the music did have certain melancholy, lotus-land attraction, but right then, it jarred on him. One must be in a certain twilit, untroubled mood to appreciate that sort of thing; and he had never felt less untroubled in his life.*[pages 363-64]

Well, that's it. I hope you enjoy reading it and get an idea of why this is my favourite book :-)