

## The Rat Patrol: WWII TV Series That Sparked Backlash

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When it comes to Hollywood portrayals of war, accuracy often takes a backseat to entertainment. Few examples highlight this tension more clearly than *The Rat Patrol*, a World War II action-adventure series that aired in the United States from 1966 to 1968. While it found an American audience eager for high-octane battles against Nazi forces, the program drew sharp criticism abroad, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia, for its misrepresentation of wartime history.

Created by director Tom Gries, *The Rat Patrol* followed a small commando unit modeled after the real-life Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), a British Army formation active in the North African campaign. Known for daring raids behind enemy lines and vital intelligence-gathering missions, the LRDG played a crucial role in Allied operations. However, in bringing the story to American television, producers altered the composition of the unit in a way that alienated Commonwealth nations.

Instead of showcasing the historically accurate makeup of the LRDG composed primarily of soldiers from Britain, New Zealand, and other Commonwealth countries the series featured three American soldiers and just one British officer. The move was designed to appeal to U.S. audiences but effectively erased the contributions of Commonwealth veterans who fought and sacrificed in North Africa.

The show's formula leaned heavily on fast-paced action, machine-gun-mounted jeeps, and dramatic desert battles. With Sergeant Sam Troy, played by Christopher George, leading the charge, the series often resembled a Western transplanted into the Sahara. To American viewers, this blend of wartime heroics and cinematic spectacle proved entertaining. To many overseas, however, it was regarded as inaccurate and even insulting.

The backlash was swift. In Britain, the BBC canceled the series after only six episodes despite having purchased rights to 13. A *Sunday Times* reviewer called the program "an insult to the Eighth Army," while the British Legion and even a field marshal who had fought in the campaign voiced strong objections. Veterans and their families saw the show as diminishing the sacrifices of those who had endured the desert conflict.

Australia, too, registered discontent. Local broadcasts added disclaimers to episodes, and particular frustration emerged over the depiction of Sergeant Troy wearing a slouch hat with the Australian Army's badge. To many Australians, this was seen as an inappropriate borrowing of national symbols for a Hollywood invention that bore little resemblance to the truth.

The controversy underscored a larger debate about how war is remembered and who controls its narrative. While American producers sought to craft a commercially viable series for domestic audiences, the historical liberties they took carried unintended consequences abroad. For Commonwealth nations that had lost thousands of men in the North African campaign, *The Rat Patrol* was more than just television—it was a distortion of national sacrifice.

Although the series lasted just two seasons, its legacy remains as a cautionary tale about entertainment's role in shaping public memory. Hollywood may excel at dramatizing conflict, but as *The Rat Patrol* demonstrated, when accuracy is sidelined, the result can be cultural backlash as fierce as any battlefield skirmish.