

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Run Silent, Run Deep’: Examining Right-Wing Extremism in the Military

Amarnath Amarasingam,* Michèle St-Amant, David A. Jones

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Abstract: The threat posed by current or former members of the military joining right-wing extremist groups is an issue of growing concern – evidenced by arrests and disrupted terrorist plots across Western Europe and North America. Using interviews with individuals who are both former extremists and have military experience, this article provides a basis for understanding the ways in which military service intersects and interacts with far-right extremism. By focusing on what we term the operational dimensions of the overlap between right-wing extremism and the military service, this article advances a novel framework for understanding how right-wing extremists navigate military institutions, such as recruitment during and after service, and using both covert and overt measures to reveal or conceal their beliefs, as well as recruit others. This study also illustrates how the timing of military service can impact susceptibility or resilience to radicalisation based on specific unit dynamics and planned or unplanned exits from service. Finally, this article discusses how these findings can produce practical recommendations for military institutions, while highlighting the need for more research on the topic.

Keywords: Far-right extremism, military, radicalization, right-wing extremism, terrorism

*Corresponding author: Amarnath Amarasingam, Queen’s University, email: aa152@queensu.ca

Introduction

The last five years have seen a rapid re-emergence of right-wing extremism (RWE) as a major threat in Western countries. A point of historical continuity between previous waves of RWE and the present is the presence of current or former members of the armed forces in RWE groups.¹ In Canada,² the United States,³ Germany,⁴ and the United Kingdom,⁵ there have been a series of high-profile arrests of violent extremists with military experience. The threat these individuals pose is illustrated by Timothy McVeigh, who, after leaving the US Army, carried out the second deadliest act of terrorism in US history. In addition to the role these individuals may play in perpetrating violence, the issue of radicalisation in the ranks also likely has a deleterious effect on a nation's armed forces' reputation and cohesion within the service, as evidenced by the fallout from racist murders carried out by Canadian peacekeepers serving in Somalia.⁶

Our work contributes to the understanding of the nexus between military service and RWE in several ways. First, although work on this topic has grown in recent years, there has been no research based exclusively on interviews with former members of the RWE movement who also have military experience. This article serves to fill this gap, providing one of the first systematic investigations of the overlap between the RWE and military service using data from interviews.

Second, by interviewing RWEs with military experience across several regions, including North America and Europe, our research presents cross-regional findings with implications beyond much of the US-centric work which has been done to date.

Third, whereas previous research focused on tracing the historical origins of the relationship⁷ or on the demographic characteristics of RWE plotters and attackers with military experience,⁸ we are interested in the *operational dimension* of the nexus between RWE and military experience. By this, we not only mean the ways in which military service affected radicalisation, or vice versa, but also what RWEs did – or did not do – while serving. Did they keep their beliefs covert or share them with others? Did they attempt to recruit others? If the military detected them, how did their behaviours change? How did being discharged from the military impact their beliefs?

These questions and the findings they generated, while atypical for most interview-based research on radicalisation and involvement in violent extremism, are crucial for understanding radicalisation and the behaviour of RWEs in the armed forces. They present a unique opportunity to understand how and why RWEs behave the way they do in the military, how to detect them better, and how best to care for veterans who may be vulnerable to radicalisation by RWE groups once discharged.

Literature on Military Service and Right-Wing Extremism

The literature on the nexus between military service and RWE has grown rapidly in the last five years. While this nexus has a long-documented history, dating back to the end of the American Civil War and the founding of the Ku Klux Klan by ex-Confederate soldiers,⁹ the January 2021 Capitol riots in the US sparked renewed interest. Since then, several reports have been published on the relationship between the armed forces and RWE and how to counter it.¹⁰

However, despite the renewed interest in the topic, there is disagreement about how prevalent this issue is. Most of the literature suggests that the number of individuals who are right-wing extremists and in the military is very low.¹¹ However, recent work, including a 2022 report by the Canadian Minister of National Defence Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination, has found that the movement is growing.¹² Another report on the scale and scope of extremism in the US Department of Defence (DoD) concluded “violent extremism in the [US] military

remains relatively rare,” but that “participation rates for former service members appear to be growing.”¹³ Another study by Jones et al. found the number of US domestic terrorism plots and attacks perpetrated by active-duty personnel increased from 0 percent of all attacks or plots in 2018 to 1.5 percent in 2019, and to 6.4 percent in 2020.¹⁴

Even among online RWE groups, there is conflicting evidence about how members view the military as an institution. In a study of RWE messages on Telegram, Davey and Weinberg found that many users drew inspiration from, or referenced, military history, training manuals, or tactics despite holding negative and anti-Semitic attitudes toward the military as an institution.¹⁵ However, they found that only a small percentage of individuals claimed to be current or former members of the US Armed Forces.

These results, though, must be interpreted with caution. It is notoriously difficult to determine the prevalence of RWE in the military because many of these individuals are so-called “ghost skins,” a term the FBI Counterterrorism Division defines as individuals who “avoid overt displays of their white supremacist beliefs to blend into society and advance white supremacy causes.”¹⁶ According to Nixon, ghost skins suppress their true beliefs while working in the military and other law enforcement agencies, and they use their perceived identity to gather information about security services.¹⁷ In fact, some RWE groups like the Order of Nine Angles encourage their members to enlist in the armed forces, viewing it as an “insight role” to infiltrate and gain information about security institutions.¹⁸

Moreover, much of what we know about the nexus between RWE and military service is limited to specific time periods (e.g., the American Civil War or the period during and after the January 6th Capitol building riots), or a specific geographic region, primarily the United States, Germany, or the United Kingdom. However, there is evidence to suggest that this problem goes beyond the most studied countries. For example, the Canadian military’s international reputation was tarnished for years after two Canadian peacekeepers serving in Somalia beat and killed a Somali teenager in a racially-motivated attack.¹⁹

Despite debates about the prevalence of this issue, even a small number of RWEs serving in the military can create issues, such as the reputational problems caused to the Canadian military by the racist attacks in Somalia. These issues are not limited to institutional reputation, either. For example, van Dongen et al. developed a typology of the internal and societal problems created by RWE members in military service between 2017 and 2021 in twelve Western countries.²⁰ These include: (1) RWE violence perpetrated by military personnel; (2) RWE violence facilitated by military personnel; (3) ideologically motivated hate crimes or violations of rules of engagement while deployed; (4) activities or behaviours which lessen diversity and inclusion; and (5) reducing civilian authority over the military.

To illustrate the extreme end of this typology, the second-most deadly terrorist attack in the United States – the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 – was organised and perpetrated by Army veterans Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. Michael Fortier, an accomplice named later in the case, was also an Army veteran. According to interviews after the attack, McVeigh exhibited overt signs of his extremist beliefs even while in the military. For example, after purchasing a “White Power” t-shirt at a Klan rally, he was reprimanded by the military.²¹

Given the outsized potential impacts the intersection between RWE and the military can have on society, scholars have set out to better understand how the radicalisation process and military service intersect. Some have argued that military life itself can represent a transitional point in an individual’s life, causing some to enter RWE groups and others to exit.²² McCristall, Hofmann and Perry investigate RWE among the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and propose

several push and pull factors including trauma, seeking a sense of belonging, and the perceived courage of military service, which may make radicalisation to RWE more salient among current or former CAF members.²³ Koehler examined the dynamics within special military and police units in Germany, Canada, Australia, and the US, and found that the subculture within these units, as well as a lack of diversity and cognitive rigidity, make service personnel potentially more vulnerable to radicalisation.²⁴

Related work has investigated the dynamics of military training and lifestyle on recruits and their connection to RWE movements. For instance, Haugstvedt and Koehler argue that there are parallels between the process of radicalisation and the psychological process of becoming a soldier, such as a sense of vicarious justice, indoctrination, and group solidarity.²⁵ Similarly, some scholars suggest that the military provides the social context where soldiers learn aggression and violence.²⁶ However, most scholars have investigated the intersection between military service and RWE amongst those exiting the military – either voluntarily or involuntarily. For example, Haugstvedt and Koehler agree that while there are some cases where active-duty military personnel are radicalised towards violent extremist acts, it is more likely to occur during a veteran's transition to civilian life.²⁷ Simi et al. similarly finds involuntary release from the military can lead to identity incongruence and a perception that achievements are unappreciated in civilian life.²⁸ Other scholars expand on this, suggesting veterans may place a heavier emphasis on re-establishing a collective identity and group dynamics.²⁹ As we show below, the risks of radicalisation during the transitional period to civilian life can also be made greater due to other factors, such as untreated PTSD.³⁰

While the studies above have investigated the specific timing of military involvement in relation to radicalisation, none have examined how military service and RWE beliefs differ across an individual's lifecycle in the military. However, there are numerous reasons to investigate this further. For example, there may be differences between those who already hold RWE beliefs and join the military compared to those who only developed these beliefs following discharge. For those who already hold RWE beliefs before joining, their reason for joining the military may be to obtain weapons training. Indeed, Boutilier argues that white supremacists actively encourage their members to enlist in the military.³¹ As a result, they may spend a shorter time in active service, and may be more likely to operate as “ghost skins”. Despite this, there may be opportunities to detect these individuals earlier, as some might have tattoos, memorabilia, online histories, or criminal records.

On the other hand, veterans with sympathetic views may be more likely to be sought out for recruitment by RWE groups. For example, right-wing extremists – both those who join and those who recruit veterans and service members – see numerous benefits to military service. A Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies briefing note explains that the combat and weapons training received in the military makes it an attractive institution for potential recruits,³² while an FBI Counterterrorism Division report explains that the white supremacist movement gains expertise with firearms and explosives, tactical skills, and intelligence when they recruit current and former military members.³³

Boutilier and Bell both report that white supremacists in Canada are actively recruiting individuals with current or prior military experience, as well as those with law enforcement backgrounds.³⁴ RWE groups not only view veterans as high-value recruits for their skills but also for their ability to train an extremist organisation's personnel, conduct surveillance, and practice operational security.³⁵ Similarly, Hall et al. suggest that this recruitment also offers the benefit of “integrating military human capital”.³⁶

The benefits for RWE groups of recruiting current or former service members are well known. For example, Tebbutt explains that the military training personnel receive makes them significantly more deadly and dangerous than civilians who join RWE groups.³⁷ Overall, veterans and current military personnel who are or have become members of RWE groups significantly increase the respective organisation's potential for lethality. Indeed, an FBI Counterterrorism Division report notes that although only a small number of RWE members have military experience, they also often hold leadership and training roles because of their expertise.³⁸

When right-wing extremists do decide to join the military, this raises concerns regarding how they can successfully circumvent screening during the enlistment process. Several scholars have suggested that since 9/11, recruitment and retention standards in the armed forces have noticeably dropped, allowing white supremacists to infiltrate the military more easily.³⁹ For example, Hall et al. explain that the increase in foreign military deployments after 9/11 coincides with internal concerns regarding attrition rates.⁴⁰ As a result, recruiters faced strong incentives to meet enlistment goals and would face punitive measures if they failed, and thus accepted servicemembers who would have otherwise been rejected.⁴¹ Similarly, Chin explains that in 2005, US senior commanders decreased attrition by letting those who should have been discharged from the military remain.⁴² Kennard quotes an American public affairs officer who explained, 'A Swastika would trigger questions, but ... if the gentleman said, 'I like the way a swastika looked,' and had a clean criminal record, it's possible we would allow that person in.'⁴³

Even before these increasingly lacklustre standards, some scholars criticised enlistment screening into the US military. For example, Flacks and Wiskoff argue that screening is insufficient for five reasons: (1) different levels of conscientiousness among recruiters, (2) lack of guidance to enlistment personnel, (3) wide variation in service-specific policies, (4) lack of coordination, and (5) limited access to background information, such as Juvenile Court records.⁴⁴

While much of the literature on recruitment standards has focused on the US, this is not an America-specific issue. In recent years, the CAF has also needed to address a shortage of personnel, including the need for thousands of new reservists.⁴⁵ In tandem with this recruitment pressure, several public incidents of CAF members with links to RWE groups, such as Patrik Matthews, have led some in public to question the CAF's recruitment and retention standards.⁴⁶

The nature of an individual's service may also play an important role in explaining the overlap between the military and involvement in RWE. In Canada, a CASIS report suggested that right-wing extremists were more likely to be found in the reserves than in the regular force. This is likely because reservists do not have the same time constraints and can more easily leave the military than those serving in the regular force.⁴⁷ Additionally, involvement in RWE organisations can impede career advancement in the military, but this is less likely to be an issue for reservists, especially those who joined primarily to receive some baseline level of training in order to advance themselves within the RWE movement.⁴⁸

While some areas of research into the links between the military and RWE are fairly extensive, there are still notable gaps. As noted above, this study is interested in the *operational dimension* of this area of research, which is underexplored in other research on the relationship between RWE and the military. Similarly, much of the existing research has relied on secondary sources, such as media and government reports. Our research seeks to fill these gaps by providing an overview of the intersection between RWE involvement and military service using primary data through interviews of former RWE members.

Methods and Sample

Interviews with Former Extremists

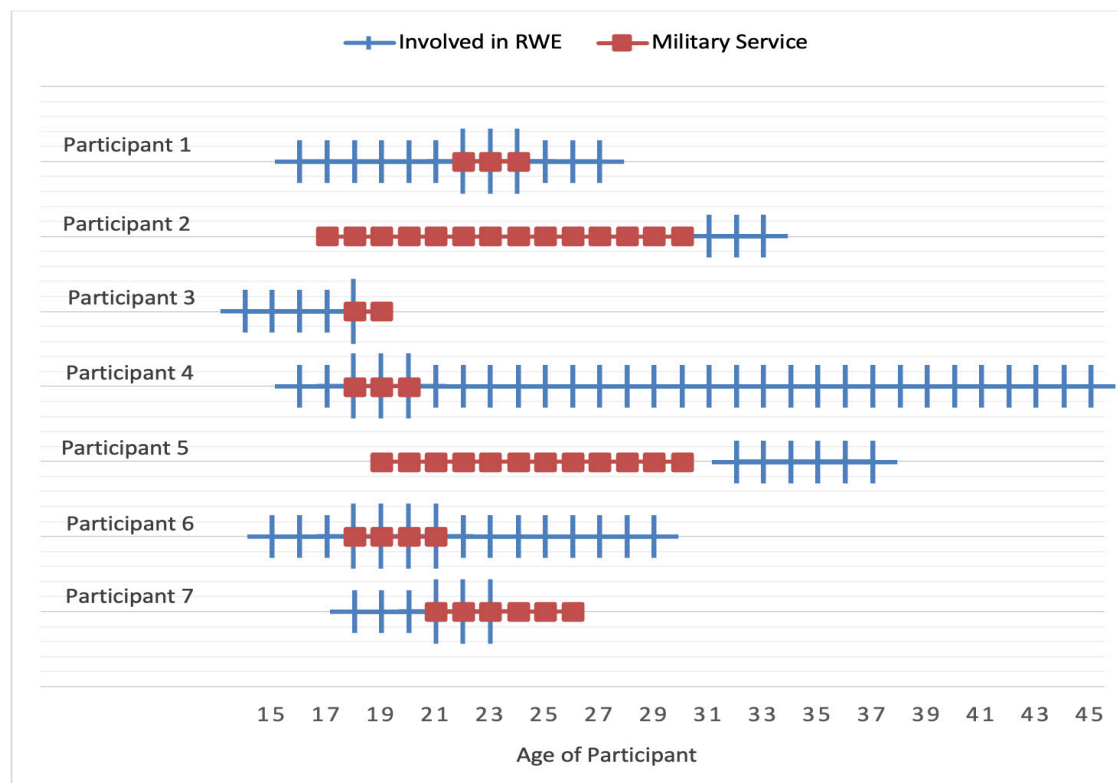
Former members of extremist movements, or ‘formers,’ are frequently thought to possess unique insights into violent extremism – they are, after all, speaking from first-hand experience. While there remains a lively debate over the reliability and accuracy of formers’ accounts of their involvement and the relative salience of different factors in explaining their radicalisation,⁴⁹ we were primarily interested in their answers to the operational questions discussed in the literature review above.

Before beginning the interview process, the research team compiled 23 open-ended questions designed to gather information on four broad categories of the respondents’ experience: their early childhood, the process of their radicalisation, the process of their disengagement and finally, a series of questions specifically related to their time in the military. Participants in the study completed the interview with us over video calls, which were then converted to audio recordings and transcribed. Participants were granted anonymity and we have undertaken measures to ensure that nothing included in this article could potentially be used to identify those we spoke with.

Recruiting participants for this research project was a challenge. Many formers were hesitant to engage in any type of research activity for a host of reasons, including concerns about being identified, or the emotional challenges associated with reliving traumatic events from their past. While some formers are willing to speak in the media or engage in prevention and intervention work, this is not the case for many individuals who have disengaged from RWE and seek simply to move on with their lives. Added to this, the requirement that these individuals not only be a former but also have previous military experience considerably restricted the population from which we could draw participants. Finally, as discussed above, reporting on the Capitol riots of January 2021 drew considerable attention to the overlap between service and RWE involvement that we were seeking to study. As a result of this attention, several individuals declined to be interviewed out of concern it was presently ‘too hot’ for them to speak about their experiences.

Nevertheless, we interviewed seven former members of the RWE movement who also had military experience, all of whom were male. Six individuals served in the US or Canadian militaries, and one served in a European military. At the time of our interviews, the respondents ranged in age from their late 20s to their late 40s. All participants had left both the movement and the military several years prior to our interviews. Their experience in the military ranged from short-term membership in the National Guard or Primary Reserves to multiple combat deployments in the Middle East. As shown in Figure 1 below, which graphs the variation in timing of RWE and military experience by age, five were involved in RWE prior to joining the military (participants 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7), and three of those five remained involved in RWE during and after military service (participants 1, 4, and 6). Two individuals who joined the military while involved in RWE exited the group midway through their military tenure (participants 3 and 7). Meanwhile, two individuals (participants 2 and 5) became involved in RWE as veterans.

Figure 1. Timeline of RWE Involvement and Military Service



Data gathered from interview participants also provide nuanced insights to complement the public discussions of the overlap between military service and RWE involvement. Internet forums that have been studied by other scholars, like Iron March or Fascist Forge, provide essential insights into RWE and the military.⁵⁰ However, there are limitations to these inferences because users' identities are obscured, which lends itself to creating a space where individuals can embellish, or outright fabricate, their experience and credentials. This is likely a particularly acute issue with respect to military service, given that most RWE groups view military experience – and the presumed operational capability it imbues – as highly desirable. Therefore, individuals participating anonymously in online spaces have an incentive to misrepresent the nature of their military service. As a result, media reports or academic studies which rely solely on data from social media sites or forums may not accurately reflect the true scope or nature of the problem. We hope that focusing on data from interviews provides a more well-rounded complementary assessment of the phenomena.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings of our interviews. First, we present a framework of overt signalling that RWEs can use to selectively reveal themselves to their military colleagues. This framework is based on patterns of behaviour identified during the interviews with participants. Following this, we discuss the findings from our interviews – the operational dimensions of the intersection between RWE and military service as it relates to this overt signalling. These sections include (1) how and why RWEs enlist in military service; (2) RWE activities during military service; (3) detection of RWE activities by military authorities; (4) life after military service; (5) RWE group views of veterans; and finally, (6) how the timing of RWE involvement and military service might impact racist beliefs.

Overt and Covert Displays of Association with Right-Wing Extremism

Throughout our interviews, some participants admitted to a variety of ‘signalling’ behaviours which they used to reveal their RWE beliefs or affiliations to colleagues in the military suspected of being sympathetic to their views. Adopted from the theory of costly signals in the international relations literature, signalling is a form of costly behaviour that increases one’s credibility with others.⁵¹

Signalling can come with a host of benefits to the signaller. If the individual receiving these signals is receptive, they can become a potential sympathiser, collaborator, or even a future recruit for the RWE group or movement. It may also provide a sense of comradery to know there are others implicitly sympathetic to, or outright supportive of, these beliefs.

Based on the data gathered from the interviews, we identified two types of signalling behaviours. This includes overt signalling behaviours designed to verbally or non-verbally reveal RWE beliefs to colleagues in the military. For example, our interviews described wearing symbols, modifying their appearance, or ‘testing the waters’ using verbal cues with others whom they suspected of holding views sympathetic to their own. Table 1 distinguishes between two types of overt signalling behaviours active military members can engage in – verbal and non-verbal.

Table 1. Approaches to Signalling Right-Wing Extremist Affiliation

Signalling	(1) Verbal	(2) Non-Verbal
Definition	Verbal confirmation or self-identification as a supporter or member of an RWE group.	Any non-verbal cue or signal which is designed to attract the attention of others who share similar political leanings, support, or membership.
Behavioural Examples	Telling a colleague(s) about one’s political leanings, membership in, or support of an RWE group. Active recruitment for an RWE group.	Wearing or otherwise displaying symbols, insignias, logos, flags, or tattoos of RWE content or groups.

However, the very act of signalling RWE beliefs or affiliations to uninvolved colleagues can be risky. The nature of RWE is to be secretive and avoid detection. As our participants noted, when a signaller reveals him or herself to others, this is often based only on a hunch that the other person may be sympathetic. Meanwhile, determining whether a colleague is sympathetic to or outright supports RWE beliefs can be difficult or impossible beforehand. If an individual mistakenly reveals their beliefs or affiliations to an unsympathetic receiver, this can result in facing so-called instalment costs, meaning costs that will be incurred in the future as a result of signalling.⁵² For RWEs in the military, this can include discipline and punishment for the signaller, discharge from the military, or even criminal investigations and charges.

As a result of these potential future costs, some interview participants described consciously keeping their beliefs and affiliations to themselves. Known colloquially as ‘ghost skins,’ these individuals do not disclose their beliefs to ‘blend in’ and further their own agendas. For example, if an individual in the military wishes to keep their support or membership in an RWE group secret, they can engage in covert behaviours, which can include creating fake social media and

online accounts to follow and engage with RWE content anonymously; destroying, hiding, or otherwise covering up RWE symbols; or consciously avoiding discussions where their political leanings could be revealed. While this strategy is advantageous to reduce the likelihood of detection by authorities, it also makes recruitment, gaining sympathisers or otherwise spreading the message near impossible.

As discussed above, there are costs and benefits to both signalling and remaining as a 'ghost skin.' While it is difficult to assess whether the decision to 'signal' to others is commonplace within the military, by identifying these patterns of behaviour in the data collected from interview participants, we hope to pave the way for future avenues of research to aid investigation and detection.

How and Why RWEs Enlist

A concern identified in the literature is that some RWE groups, like the Order of Nine Angles, encourage their members to infiltrate state-led institutions like the military to gain insider insights.⁵³ Others have found that RWE groups may encourage their members to enlist to acquire weapons and tactical training.⁵⁴ In our interviews with individuals involved in RWE prior to enlisting, we asked what motivated them to join the military and how they evaded screening during the enlistment process. Our interviewees provided evidence from their own experience, which corroborates the notion that their respective RWE groups often encouraged enlisting to gain tactical and weapons experience. For example, participant 3 describes his motivation for enlisting:

I was very motivated to [join] the military service. I saw it as part of the course. It was a preparation for the coming revolution. We [in the RWE group] talked a lot about the military, [we] had a very militarised way of clothing and idealised militarism. So I was really motivated and prepared to do this...⁵⁵

Participant 1, also a member of an RWE group before, during and after his military service, describes the same reason for joining. When asked what made him interested in enlisting, he replied: "weapons training."⁵⁶ However, participant 1 also actively encouraged other RWE members to enlist. When advising others in the movement about enlisting, he described recommending a series of covert behaviours on how to 'ghost skin' and gave them advice for doing so without raising suspicions during screening:

I'd been encouraging people to join the military. And I said, 'I don't want to know who you are. Just go get your training, keep to yourself, run silent, run deep. And don't get tattoos. Don't do any of that.'⁵⁷

Participant 3 similarly recalls strategically distancing himself from the RWE movement to appear 'clean' during the enlistment process. He explains,

Going into the military meant that I kept a low profile. For the half year before, I also realised that the [military] do not want to train people to do violent revolutions. They weren't really up for training neo-Nazis. So, I tried to keep a very low profile and to distance myself a bit from the activities of the group and didn't participate in different types of events.⁵⁸

According to participant 2, despite joining an RWE group as a veteran, he similarly recalls conversations with the leader of his group encouraging members to enlist:

One of the things I suggested, while I was involved [with the leader of the RWE group,] was that we need to get our younger members to enlist in the military and get that training. And it was so easy to slip through the cracks. You've got a criminal record? No, alright, enlist in the Army, get through basic training... [and] bring back that training to the movement. I already had that training, so that's why I was so valuable to them.⁵⁹

While most participants recall military service being encouraged by their respective RWE groups, participant 6 explained that the RWE groups he joined were more agnostic about military service. These groups did not actively encourage members to enlist because of the perception that the military was run by Jewish interests, though they certainly did not discourage members who did enlist from sharing their training experience:

"They don't mind their members [enlisting] because they want you to get training for their movement, so you can train other members and stuff, but they weren't [pushing for it]... [the leader] used to be like, 'why would you want to join? You're fighting for the Jews.'"⁶⁰

RWE Activities During Military Service

Once successfully enlisted, there was significant variation in the activities of our interviewees. While some recall overtly signalling their beliefs to their colleagues in the military, others kept a low profile. For instance, participant 6 recalls being very overt:

I was pretty open. I mean, I had swastika flags. I had tattoos that were overtly racist. I had literature [that] would be sent in all the time, and I was very well known.⁶¹

Others expressed similar overt patterns using verbal cues. Despite not becoming involved in RWE until after leaving the military, participant 2 recalls the process of meeting people in the military whom he suspected of holding extreme far-right views. He describes selectively choosing where and when to discuss his beliefs, and how the process of choosing when to be overt also inadvertently groomed other participants in the conversation:

You know who you can talk about it with... You're not going to talk about [the] roach-like infestation from Mexico, [or] illegal[s] jumping the border with your Hispanic Second Lieutenant. You're going to talk about it with the other white guy in your unit that thinks the same way you do, and you're going to groom each other, and you really don't realise that you're doing it. There's a lot of unintentional grooming that goes on because birds of a feather flock together... if [someone is] constantly challenging my ideologies and views, it's going to build this animosity with [them]. And I don't want to talk to you about how I feel. I want to talk to that guy who's going to be like: 'Yeah, man. Yeah, you're right.'⁶²

This pattern of selective reinforcement and overt signalling is also confirmed by other interviews. Participant 4 recalls that after joining the military and finding like-minded colleagues, they began to attend events together, alter their appearance, and eventually joined an RWE group together:

I signed up for the Navy... I did my boot camp. And then I was stationed [for] training. While I was there, I met some guys that were listening to like hardcore speed metal and stuff like that. I started hanging out with guys on the base that were, you know, punk rock, hardcore, that kind of stuff. And we started going to the hardcore shows and stuff. And because of the fact we were in the [military], the only real option for a

haircut for us was to shave your head. So, we shaved our heads. [I'm] hanging out with guys, shaving our heads, going to punk rock shows. And it just developed from there into like full-fledged skinhead stuff. [W]e were living together as roommates, and we met some local white power skinheads and started hanging out with them. We were running amuck and committing a lot of violent crimes and stuff.⁶³

In the case of participant 4, his overt actions led to an open investigation by his branch's investigative service. While the investigation apparently did not stop his colleagues from continuing to overtly recruit within the military, participant 4 became more covert in his actions as a result:

We were surreptitiously recruiting on base, not so much myself, but there was another one of the roommates who was doing it a lot more actively than I was. And we were also making contacts with other military personnel who were already sympathetic or involved. But, because the [military] started investigating us pretty soon after we started this, we were pretty careful about not doing anything overt on base that we could get caught for. [Instead, we would] listen to what they're saying, you know, and listen for cues. And then when you start to get a feeling like maybe [someone is] sympathetic or even outright involved, [we would] find the right time and the place where it's not going to be overheard or marked by anybody else and be a little bit more overt about what [we're] getting at. If they respond to that level, then maybe even move to the point of having them come to meetings or being pretty explicit about what it is [we're] doing.⁶⁴

Participant 6 similarly notes that he selectively signalled to others about his beliefs while avoiding outright recruitment, which he says would have raised suspicion:

I passed out literature and stuff, gave people stuff to read, but... you're not allowed to recruit anything in the military like that. So, I just kind of stayed away from that. But I think that was something they were afraid of. And I was passing out CDs. I mean, I was getting people to believe some of the same stuff, but not actively like: 'Hey, here's a membership', you know, stuff like that.⁶⁵

Likewise, participant 1 – who encouraged others in the movement to enlist but otherwise maintained covert during his service – notes that recruitment would have raised too much suspicion:

I didn't go in there at all with the idea of recruiting. Because that would bring attention to myself.⁶⁶

Despite his overt actions, when asked whether he believes other RWEs in the military are as overt as he was, participant 4 responded:

These days, I think the majority of people that are in right now that are active white supremacists are very underground and low-key about it. There are, I'm sure, exceptions, but what they've been telling these guys is go in there and hide and wait for stuff to happen.⁶⁷

Like participant 4's assessment above, participant 7 recalls being covert about his beliefs even when others signalled their beliefs to him:

I never said a single racist statement or anything off colour in my entire military career. No one would know people would share their views with me, but I never shared it back because I was just trying to be careful about keeping it a secret.⁶⁸

Detection by Authorities

Every participant that we interviewed whose involvement in RWE either came before or during their military service mentioned that, at some point, law enforcement (including local or federal police or the military's own investigative service) became aware of their membership. The consistency of this theme across our interviews suggests that contrary to how the military's ability to detect such behaviour is often characterised, organisations are often adept at detecting extremism within their ranks. A common thread among the experiences of the participants was the media attention of RWE groups which led to suspicions about their involvement. However, while detection was commonplace, responses and punishments were either non-existent or ineffective. In some cases, the military's response to the individual's involvement led to deeper and escalating commitment to RWE; meanwhile, in other cases, lax punishment led to disengagement from RWE.

For example, participant 1, who was involved in RWE before, during and after his 3-year tenure in the military, recalls remaining covert during his military service. However, once the RWE group he was involved in began garnering media attention, he exited the military. Despite this, he recalls receiving a visit from his branch's investigation unit:

[The RWE group I was in] started to become high profile and draw media attention. And I could see that it was going to, so I quit [the military] before any of that happened. And it was after that when I got the visit from [the investigation unit]. [But], because I was no longer part of [the military], they were limited in their scope. But I said, "I [have] respect for the unit. I didn't try and recruit anybody there." And they said, "We know." There was not much they could do or say at that point.⁶⁹

Participant 3, who exited the RWE group during his service, similarly recalls:

I wasn't [open with others in my unit about my beliefs.] I understood that it wouldn't work to be open on this. And I was really motivated to finalise the military and even thought that this might be a career. So, I was very careful with revealing any of this. But what happened is that there was an event at that point with a very violent crime. [It] made the military look for individuals with connections to these groups. So, what happened is that halfway through [my] military [service], I got identified and was moved from my service to a different service where I wasn't allowed to be around guns or weapons.⁷⁰

Despite being moved to a different service in what might be considered by some to be a lax approach, participant 3 recalls this being an important catalyst that contributed to his disengagement from RWE:

I think what was good is that I got to stay. I wasn't discharged, but I got to stay and I still had involvement and activities [in the military]. I had a specific responsibility that I could continue with even if I was separated from the [RWE] group. I was still motivated to change and to, at least, not go back to the [RWE] movement. It wasn't a dishonourable [discharge]. It wasn't done in a way that was shameful... I think that really helped. I think in that sense, it was still a positive experience because I had a lot of time on my own where I could reflect on what I wanted to do.⁷¹

In the case of participant 4, his involvement drew media attention and a subsequent branch investigation. However, the investigation never resulted in any punishment, and he was not deterred from RWE activities. Instead, he was simply told not to tarnish the reputation of the branch with his RWE activity:

[My involvement] was brought to [the branch's] attention. [The] Investigative Services opened up a case on me and my two roommates. And they were snooping around our house and taking flyers out of our trash cans and stuff. So, they called us in, they interviewed us, all three of us just kind of lied through our teeth saying we weren't white power. And the [branch] just kind of threw Holy Water at it and said, 'well, you guys, aren't doing anything on base and there's no threat to you. So, you're good.' No repercussions whatsoever, no punishment, no trouble. They closed the case.⁷²

Participant 6, who recalls having swastika flags and racist tattoos during his time in the military, was also investigated. However, rather than receiving media attention, it was only after the outward projection of his beliefs caused fights between him and other members of the unit that he was forced to leave the military with an honourable discharge, though he was encouraged to simply re-enlist within a 12-month period:

It wasn't until I started getting into fights over it... I didn't get a dishonourable discharge, but I was given an honourable discharge because I was not a screw up by any means. I was pretty squared away. I mean, I had the highest PT score in the company. I was an expert marksman. I was doing the right thing except for the [RWE] aspect. Because I didn't get a dishonourable discharge, they just said, 'Hey, you have to come back within a year and you can re-enlist here' and [I] was able to just get right back in.⁷³

However, participant 6 notes that his honourable discharge did little to sway his beliefs. In fact, it may have even strengthened them:

I was [young] and [the military] just released me... I had no job skills. I just felt my life was over. So, I was like, 'Well, I'm just going to go on a hate crime spree.'⁷⁴

Finally, although participant 7, like participant 3, had exited the RWE group during his military service, media attention again led to the discovery of his past involvement:

Eventually, [after the investigation], I was suspended and reinstated, and then suspended again and kicked out.⁷⁵

Life After Leaving the Military

For individuals leaving the military, inadequate access to transitional services, or an inability to create a new positive identity, can create risk factors that could facilitate radicalisation. The identity and personal instability associated with a significant change in a person's role brought on by an event like leaving or being forced out of the military could possibly play a role in generating this type of instability. This was a shared thread for the two interview participants who joined an RWE group after leaving the military.

For example, participant 2, who only joined an RWE group as a veteran, was discharged from the military following an injury, during which time he became addicted to opioids. He recalls looking for a replacement community to fill the loneliness:

The paranoia [from the drug addiction] led to looking for this replacement community. As a soldier, there's always this perception of the 'fight.' Like, there's still a fight to come. They still need us. I came out of the military, a couple of months goes by, I'm using [opioids] heavy. I started to notice that all my friends that I was in the military with were vanishing. They're just disappearing and they're going and doing their own lives. I've become [as un]important to them as I once was. There was this emptiness, and it was really emotional. It was a very dangerous period in terms of grooming and recruitment. And it's always during these timeframes in a person's life when they're open and susceptible to it and vulnerable. And that's why we only hear about it when it's too late.⁷⁶

Although participant 2 had no previous links with RWE groups, his experience in the military post-9/11 and subsequent unplanned exit helped to facilitate his transition to the group:

I think that at the end of the day, it boils down to trauma sustained through the military. I don't remember hating Muslims until I encountered combat with Muslims. I remember thinking of 'em in a negative bias through the training that I had in the military, which we've established it's necessary for a soldier to be able to go and take [a] life. You have to dehumanise your enemy combatant. We're injecting our soldiers with this serum, hypothetically, that creates radicalisation, extremist ideologies, traumas, [and] grievances, [that] without resolving lead[s] to trauma, [and] trauma leads to action. And that's what we're seeing. We're seeing prior service members that have come out of the military without the help of the military to de-radicalize storming [the U.S.] capitol.⁷⁷

Participant 5 recalls similar feelings of emptiness and difficulty finding employment after service, which contributed to his RWE involvement:

Basically, when you get out of the military, unless you have a job lined up the day you get out, you're going to have a ton of extra time to let your mind be your own worst enemy. And there's a void you got to fill somehow. If you don't have anything better to do you can get down some pretty bad paths. That's what happened to me. I tried getting a job... [but] since the economy was so bad, every time a civilian position opened, they give it to a military guy because they didn't have to pay nearly as much money to fill it with a military guy. In between being out of the military and getting [a] job, that's when I kind of fell down the path of white supremacy. The military has got a rank structure and you're like, 'Hey, this [RWE group], they got a rank structure. Maybe that'll fill the void a little bit.' Next thing you know, you're [promoted] and you haven't done anything.⁷⁸

The timing of joining a RWE group after military service may depend, in part, on whether the individual experienced an 'unplanned' exit (i.e., a release due to injury, etc.), though it should be noted this is a small sample, and generalisations are difficult beyond these interviewees. Nevertheless, participant 2 experienced a discharge due to injury and quickly fell into the group just months after his discharge. He recalls the timing of his exit from the military and entrance into the RWE as being "almost too perfect."⁷⁹

Meanwhile, participant 5 did not experience an unplanned exit from the military and recalls it took about a year and a half before he joined the RWE group. More research is needed to determine whether these differences hold amongst a larger sample and how this information can be utilised to amend discharge and aftercare policies.

RWE Group Perceptions of Veterans

Given the high premium that RWE groups place on military service, it should be no surprise that interview participants who joined a group after leaving the military rose through the ranks quickly once leadership discovered they were veterans.

Participant 2, who had an ‘unplanned’ exit from the military due to injury, recalls that at the beginning of his involvement with an RWE group, he was not considered particularly special. However, when the group learned about his prior military experience, he was ‘promoted’ quickly, which served to solidify his identity and his perceived ‘value’ to the group:

When I first started, I was a [foot soldier]. I was just a [regular] member who showed up to the meetings and got high, did the drugs, and spouted the rhetoric. But after they realised that I was a veteran and I had combat experience and access to guns and firearms, they were like, ‘Higher-ups want to meet with you.’ I was offered a second-in-charge position. I took that. At that point, I was in charge of security for functions. I was in charge of taking care of members who would leave the group and not return their memorabilia. You know, it was just a lot of violence in that position.⁸⁰

Participant 5, who experienced a planned exit from the military, also recalls being promoted quickly, partially because of his military experience and training:

[My military experience] had something to do with it... [the RWE group was] like, ‘he’s a trained killer. He was in the military.’⁸¹

Having trained members is not only important as a strategy for the RWE group, but it also serves as a form of identity formation for the veteran experiencing loneliness, isolation, and frustration. Fast promotion may renew their sense of self-esteem and worth, while also instilling a sense of purpose and need within the group. It also demonstrates that, without their skills, the group would be worse off. On the other hand, this may in turn solidify membership in the group and make disengagement from RWE more difficult, because the veteran may fear re-experiencing the same loneliness and frustration they felt after leaving the military in the first place.

Among participants who were members of RWE groups during military service and discharged due to their involvement, the perceived disgrace of their discharge – coupled with the loss of structure and identity – caused these individuals to double down on their involvement. Participant 6 recalls feeling ‘lost’ after being discharged, which quickly led him down a criminal path:

I love the army, and when I was discharged, I was lost, and that’s what ended up for me going out and going on a hate crime spree and going to prison eventually afterwards. I just felt my life was over. So, it was like, ‘well, I’m just going to go on a hate crime spree.’⁸²

Participant 6 adds that he did not initially plan to go on a crime spree. However, when he lost his sense of identity and duty through the military, he leaned heavily on the RWE group and their ideals to recover that lost sense of identity:

I didn’t have that plan initially, but after I got out, because my involvement was brought up to [law enforcement agencies], [they] started showing up at my work. It got me paranoid, and I just got tired of being pushed and I just felt like, ‘well, I’m gonna’ push back.’ [This was] a month and half after [leaving] the army. I was thinking, ‘I want to be like Bob Matthews.’⁸³ I want to be a hero for my race because now I can’t be a

hero for this country because the military kicked me out.' I wanted to give my life for something bigger than me. And since I didn't have the army, the movement was the only thing I had in life.⁸⁴

Timing of Military Service and Involvement in Right Wing Extremism

Evidence from our interviews also highlighted the possibility of military service serving as a moderating influence on individuals involved in the RWE movement, or some cases, promoting disengagement. Some participants who joined RWE groups before their military service said the military tempered their views about diversity. This could be because military service often requires individuals to interact and coexist with a diverse range of people. Participant 2, who only joined an RWE group as a veteran, recalls having a 'healthy' mindset during his time of service:

I had a really healthy military mindset. Like, 'I'm a soldier, I represent [my country] and everybody in it, and I need to be professional, courteous, respectful at all times and be a good ambassador to my country.'⁸⁵

Similarly, participant 5 recounts that, despite his later involvement in RWE, he did not necessarily hold or express racist feelings during their service. Instead, the view he held was that diversity in the ranks was not a negative factor:

I wasn't raised in a racist family or anything like that. When I was in the military, I didn't have any racist feelings or anything. I mean, especially on submarines, you got people of all different walks of life. I mean, if you have a fire or a flood on a submarine, you gotta' help out your shipmates... it doesn't matter what colour they are. If one guy can't put the fire out, everybody's screwed. So, you count on everybody. You're all brothers out at sea.⁸⁶

The gap between these participants' views on the acceptability of racism while serving in the military compared to their conduct after their release speaks both to the difficulties of readjusting to civilian life after service, as well as the difficulties of proactively identifying individuals who may experience a 'cognitive opening' to radicalisation after they leave the armed forces.

Conversely, for others who joined the military while involved in RWE, military service helped them to disengage from the movement by replacing the gap in their lives that involvement in the movement filled. For example, participant 3, who was a member of an RWE group before enlisting to gain training for the impending race war, recalls how his mentality abruptly shifted. Instead of hardening his views, he began to distance himself from the RWE group because military service provided much of what he sought from the movement in the first place:

Once I was in the military, I think that shift came quite fast. I had this feeling that [the RWE group] was not good enough for me. This is not what I want to achieve with my life. I want something different... I think [the military] really built self-esteem, confidence and helped me to see that I could move on from the movement. A few months into the military, I somehow realised I just won't go back to the movement because it just doesn't really offer me what I need anymore. I think in that sense, I just grew out of it. I quickly realised this is what we talked about in the movement, but [the RWE group] couldn't really live up to it... [things like] order, discipline, pushing your boundaries, evolving, developing, growing...all these things that we were kind of idolizing and talking about, but couldn't really manifest.⁸⁷

Given these variations in the timing of RWE involvement and military service, more work should be done to understand if and how military service could be a protective factor against future radicalisation or serve to promote disengagement and ideological change among individuals involved in, or sympathetic to, RWE. Specifically, this work can build upon contact theory, a hypothesis in the field of psychology which purports that increased intergroup exposure and contact can, under the right conditions, reduce prejudice toward minority members of the group.⁸⁸ In the cases identified above, contact theory may help explain the tempered racist views during service due to specific circumstances within the units themselves.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Using a unique set of interviews, this article aimed to advance the understanding of the ways in which military service and involvement in right-wing extremism interact with each other. As military institutions work to define their policy responses to extremism within their ranks, an improved understanding of the mechanisms by which military service may create an openness to radicalisation, and the ways in which radicalised service members negotiate their daily duties is an essential foundation.

Our findings demonstrate the complexity and contingency of the relationship between military service and radicalisation, but simultaneously identify some key patterns that emerge from the interview data we gathered. For instance, the value RWE groups place on members with military experience, approaches to overt signalling of affiliation, and the openness to radicalisation that occurs after a planned or unplanned exit from the armed forces are often assumed but underexplored issues within the existing literature.⁸⁹ This study has attempted to develop a framework which can be used to inform future understanding and research on the topic.

Admittedly, the largest limitation of this study, like many studies on extremism, is its small sample size of interviewees. Finding individuals who were not only willing to speak to us but also had both experience in the far-right and the military is naturally a small sample size to draw from. Future research should focus on finding methodological ways to increase the validity and accuracy of their findings, such as validating their findings of online forum discussions with interviews or historical data (and vice versa). With the current wave of RWEs moving deeper online, researchers should also attempt to find unique ways to validate and connect real-world incidences of violence with online interactions, such as language analysis of publicly available forums like 8kun.

There are several findings from this study which warrant further investigation. The first is whether contact theory can be applied in specific military units, and whether the specific dynamics of certain units do produce increased resilience to radicalisation (as was seen in some of the cases presented here). While the sample here is not large enough to produce any reliable conclusions about the *type* of unit structure which might be conducive to this, it is likely a fruitful future avenue of research.

A second fruitful future avenue of research is the temporal component of service in relation to radicalisation and involvement in RWE. Although limited by a small sample size, our findings indicate that unplanned exits and identity crises immediately following military service can lead an individual down an accelerated path toward radicalisation, whereas planned exits, while still leading to radicalisation in the case of our interviewee, took much longer. If these findings hold true in larger samples, this has important implications for military institutions across North America and Europe, the most important being reviewing the policies in place for wellness checks and post-discharge social support services.

A third fruitful avenue of research is to further investigate the ways in which military members with ties to RWE employ covert and overt measures to signal to others in the military. Even though we applied the signalling framework after completing our interviews, by including contextualising quotes from participants which indicate when they were trying to recruit or attract others, we can say their actions resemble the framework of signalling, even if the participants did not use these exact words. If this trend is validated in larger samples, this also has important implications for military institutions. The fact that all our interview participants had encountered law enforcement or military investigations at one point indicates these institutions are, in fact, adept at detecting these individuals. However, what appears to be lacking are responses, which were non-existent, inconsistent, or ineffective in many cases.

The link between right-wing extremism and the military is not a new phenomenon but has so far been relatively underexplored in academic research. This study sought to produce a framework for better understanding how RWEs navigate military institutions before, during, and after service. As such, we hope these findings will help fuel further investigations into the topic, which, since 2021, has received renewed attention around the world.

Amarnath Amarasingam is an Associate Professor in the School of Religion, and is cross-appointed to the Department of Political Studies, at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. He works in the areas of social/extremist movements, radicalisation and terrorism, conspiracy theories, online communities, diaspora politics, post-war reconstruction, and the sociology of religion.

Michèle St-Amant is a Senior Researcher at the Organization for the Prevention of Violence. Her research interests include far-right extremism, anti-government extremism, and violent conspiracy theories. Her work has appeared in the Journal for Deradicalization, the Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, and Lawfare.

David Jones is a Research Advisor at the Organization for the Prevention of Violence. He holds an undergraduate and graduate degree from the University of Alberta and is completing a J.D. at Osgoode Hall Law School.

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- 65 Authors' interview with participant 6.
- 66 Author's interview with participant 1.
- 67 Author's interview with participant 4.
- 68 Author's interview with participant 7.
- 69 Author's interview with participant 1.
- 70 Author's interview with participant 3.
- 71 Author's interview with participant 3.
- 72 Authors' interview with participant 4.
- 73 Author's interview with participant 6.
- 74 Author's interview with participant 6.
- 75 Author's interview with participant 7.
- 76 Authors' interview with participant 2.
- 77 Authors' interview with participant 2.
- 78 Authors' interview with participant 5.

- 79 Author's interview with participant 2.
- 80 Author's interview with participant 2.
- 81 Authors' interview with participant 5.
- 82 Authors' Interview with participant 6.
- 83 A reference to Robert Mathews, the leader of The Order, a white supremacist terror cell active in the United States in the 1980s.
- 84 Authors' interview with participant 6.
- 85 Author's interview with participant 2.
- 86 Authors' interview with participant 5.
- 87 Authors' interview with participant 3.
- 88 Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–83. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.
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