

MILITARY

In secret Facebook groups, America's best warriors share racist jabs, lies about 2020, even QAnon theories

NBC News reviewed posts from four private, secret Facebook groups that describe themselves as solely for current and former special operations forces.

Elite members of U.S. military community share misinformation in secret Facebook groups

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By **Carol E. Lee**

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operations forces that were accessed by NBC News, they share misinformation about a stolen 2020 election, disparaging and racist comments about America's political leadership and even QAnon conspiracy theories.

Among the hundreds of Facebook posts NBC News reviewed from forums for former Rangers, Green Berets and other elite warriors: a member of a special operations unit lamenting that several aides to former Vice President Mike Pence were part



by the thieves and pedophiles walking the hallowed halls of the peoples government" to undermine former President Donald Trump.

"In a just world, they would have already been taken out behind the court house and shot," another member commented.



In yet another post, a member of one of the groups responded to criticism of the Black Lives Matter movement with an image of a noose and the message "IF WE WANT TO MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN WE WILL HAVE TO MAKE EVIL PEOPLE FEAR PUNISHMENT AGAIN."

"The story of radicalization in special operations is a story that needs to be told," said Jack Murphy, a former Army Ranger and Green Beret who has written extensively about the special operations forces community. "It has shocked and horrified me to see what's happened to these guys in the last five or six years."

Extremism in the military has been in the spotlight since more than two dozen current and former service members were linked to the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. But the private Facebook groups reveal an underbelly of a segment of the military that has long been revered as America's front line of defense.

NBC News reviewed posts from four private groups that describe themselves as special operations forces. While the majority of the content in two of the groups, Special Operations Forces Team Room and US Special Forces Team Room, is political in nature, the forums shouldn't be reflective of the overall views of the whole special operations forces community.

Collectively, the two groups have more than 5,000 members, with some belonging to both. U.S. Special Operations Command has about 70,000 personnel, and there are tens of thousands more retired members of special operations forces.

Facebook has flagged a few of the posts in the groups as including false information, or they have received pushback from fellow members.

The screenshot shows a Facebook group interface for "US Special Forces Team Room". The group is private and has 4.7K members. Below the group name are navigation tabs for "Announcements", "Watch Party", "Photos", "Events", "Files", "Albums", and "Recent". A post is visible under the "Announcements" tab, written by a user whose name is redacted. The post contains a list of instructions for group members and moderators, including a warning about political posts and a reference to "sick burns". The post has 23 comments and was liked by the author and 98 others.

US Special Forces Team Room >
Private group · 4.7K members

+ Invite

Announcements Watch Party Photos Events Files Albums Recent

Write something...

Live Photo Poll

Announcements See All (7)

Another great day in the Team Room apparently. Just a few words.

1. Moderators- please leave a note on the actions taken page so we are all get a read on.
2. Members/Brothers- dont waste your time reporting a post regardless of how f[redacted]d up it may be, ignore it or talk s[redacted]t (preferred method), or you can leave. We are in some trying times in our greats nation, let's not turn in each other. Keep it all in good fun.
3. Hardcore political folks- remember many of us are still active duty and must attempt to be apolitical. Be careful what you post, someone is always watching and collecting. We know FB fact checkers f[redacted]s are all over it, it could be big brother, or even some domestic terrorist data mining.

Point is stay safe and take an extra second before you hit post, Love you all.

And remember, I love the smell of sick burns in the morning, followed by good conversation, bikes, and sexy ladies.

and 98 others 23 Comments

— An announcement in the Facebook group US Special Forces Team Room last year [redacted] careful of what they post because "someone is always watching and collecting." obtai [redacted]

The politically charged ones often ridicule President Joe Biden – describing him as "senile" and weak compared to leaders like Russian President Vladimir Putin – and refer to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin with derogatory terms like "bubba."

Many of the posts express support for Trump, including his false claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 election. One member of a group, for instance, commented on an image of law enforcement officers with their guns drawn while barricaded inside the House chamber during the Jan. 6 riot, writing, "too bad they didn't bother to defend the Constitution."

Other posts promote conspiracy theories that those involved in the Jan. 6 riot were members of antifa and Black Lives Matter, not Trump supporters.

"Trump was sabotaged once again!" a member of US Special Forces Team Room wrote Jan. 7 about the Capitol riot. And because of those posing as Trump supporters at the Capitol, he added, "trying to get to the bottom of the obvious election fraud now looks like it doesn't have a chance."

"Well said!" a member responded. But another disagreed. "Nope, they were definitely real trump supporters," he wrote.

Robert Wilson, a former Green Beret who was commander of the 3rd Special Forces Group, said members of the community "are radicalizing themselves online, just like many of these lone-wolf ISIS terrorists did."

"It's a problem, and it's an internal threat to the United States," said Wilson, who was counterterrorism director on the National Security Council during the Obama and Trump administrations.

The secret Facebook groups for special operations forces can be found only by members. All of the groups reviewed by NBC News say they rigorously vet their members to ensure that their special operations forces backgrounds are authentic.

SF Brotherhood - PAC, for instance, tells its 719 members that "only SF vetted are allowed here" and urges them to "Remain Quiet Professionals." US Special Forces Team Room, which has 4,700 members, is described as "for US Special Forces qualified individuals only."

"You can say what you want, post what you want, but most importantly you can dislike what you want and get over it. Same rules as a team room," the group's description says. (A "team room" is what a special operations unit calls the room where members congregate while deployed, and one rule is that what happens there, stays there.)

The two other groups reviewed by NBC News focused largely on military news. There were some discussions about political issues, such as discussions about members who participated in the Jan. 6 riot.

While the groups include current special operations forces, more members are retired than active-duty, a member said. NBC News reached out to members of the groups behind the posts described in this article – all of whom are men – but none of them responded on the record.

Garry Reid, director for defense intelligence at the Defense Department, said the Pentagon is trying to better "identify, detect, categorize and take action against any such behaviors in this department."

"This is very disturbing material for me and very disturbing content that in no way would mirror the behavior expected of persons employed by the Department of Defense, and certainly not serving in the U.S. military," Reid said.

When it comes to special operations forces, he said, "because of the sensitivity of the missions and the criticality to security that some of these operations have, people would be even more concerned and upset to know that that exists in that community."

Such behavior isn't acceptable in the military, but it can be difficult to detect and root out, he said.

"Humans have thoughts, and we don't like all the thoughts that people have. But what's not tolerated is putting thoughts into action," Reid said. "And taking action in this case, [meaning] posting something to a site on the internet, is contrary to policy, because it is espousing the views that bring forward aspects of hate and violence and unlawful discrimination. That is just flatly unacceptable."

The posts viewed by NBC News "would be a reason for further investigation," he said.

A spokesperson for Facebook said that while its private groups have the option to be visible or hidden, the company's standards apply to both, and that they are enforced by a combination of technology and employees who review content.

'I am concerned about active duty'

The military's handling of extremism in its ranks has come under intense scrutiny in recent months, and internal data about the scope of the problem are scant. The Pentagon has acknowledged that it doesn't know how many current or former service members are affiliated with extremist groups.

Since the attack on the Capitol, the military has sought to get a better sense of the problem. Austin ordered a 60-day "stand-down" to address the issue, and last week he outlined new initiatives based on initial findings.

A Countering Extremism Working Group will oversee the implementation of the initiatives, according to the memo. They include screening military recruits for extremist behavior and training outgoing service members in ways extremist groups might target them.

U.S. Special Operations Command, or SOCOM, also published a plan last month to try to improve racial and ethnic diversity and remove bias within an arm of the military that is overwhelmingly white and male. "As national and global demographics shift and become more diverse, so must our enterprise," the Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan states.

A recent attempt by SOCOM's recent moves to address diversity created a hiccup. SOCOM reassigned the organization's new chief of diversity and inclusion because of his social media posts, including a derogatory one that essentially compared Trump to Adolf Hitler.

Some retired special operations forces have been among those facing charges in connection with the Jan. 6 riot, including a former Green Beret who is charged with assaulting a Capitol Police officer with a flagpole.

The FBI is investigating active-duty troops and reservists as part of its investigation into the riot. There is growing concern that the problem is more pervasive than it appears among those currently serving.

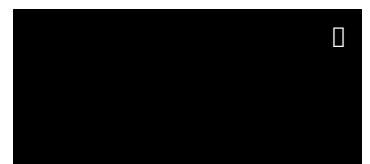
"I am concerned about active duty," Wilson said. "I don't think special operations forces just develop these ideas in their head when they get out and are in their late 40s. So I think it starts in the military and probably gets worse when they're out."

Part of what could make special operations susceptible to extremism is its insular culture, experts said, because it is composed of small, tight-knit units and lacks diversity.

Military officials have acknowledged that rooting out extremism in such a vast organization of current and retired personnel is difficult. The Pentagon, for instance, doesn't specifically ban membership in extremist groups. Among the new efforts outlined in Austin's memo is to update the Defense Department's definition of banned extremist activities.

"The vast majority of those who serve in uniform and their civilian colleagues do so with great honor and integrity, but any extremist behavior in the force can have an outsized impact," Austin wrote in his recent memo.

Austin's efforts to address extremism have made him the target of vitriolic commentary in the special operations forces Facebook groups.



AMERICAN MILITARY NEWS

VIDEO: SecDef Austin asks troops to report fellow troops' extremism and share any ideas they have to 'stamp it out' | American Military News

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This f██k.....this racist f██k! Tell me officers don't get social promotions! Pus-gut maggot! This f██k is an embarrassment to the military and everything it stands for! And how many senior officers are gathering around to kiss his ass to get another star???

6w Like Reply

2



I simply can't say enough about my distaste for this racist fraud! He has risen to the very peak of his profession, riding along on the color of his skin! And he's not



Write a comment...



— Members of the Facebook group SF Brotherhood - PAC react to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's asking troops to report extremism in the ranks to leadership in late February. obtained by NBC News

"Racist punk," "pus-gut maggot" and "bubba" are some of the attacks on Austin in response to his calls for troops to report extremism by fellow troops. Other posts question the merit of Austin's Silver Star or say he got to his current position only because he's Black.

"He has risen to the very peak of his profession, riding on the color of his skin," a member of SF Brotherhood - PAC wrote Feb. 26 about Austin's efforts to address extremism.

More broadly, in terms of race, there are expressions of frustration in multiple posts that white men are being targeted.

Austin has also come under criticism in the Facebook groups for changes to allow transgender people to serve in the military. "Well if this doesn't get the troops ready for combat, I am not sure what will!" a member wrote when posting a Newsmax story with the headline "US Eyes Free Transgender Surgery for Military."

Heidi Beirich, a co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, said the review of the secret Facebook groups was "an incredible find" given how difficult it is to get access to the forums.

"But also it's giving you on the ground real information about the most dangerous people in the military, right?" she said. "These are the exact troops who we do not want involved with things like QAnon."

Extremism among special operations forces is particularly dangerous given their specialized training, experts said, and that's even more the case when it comes to QAnon. The private special operations forces groups feature multiple references to QAnon.

"If you have been following Q for a while you know that Q taught many of us lurkers how he was going to communicate with us to by pass the mainstream media," a member wrote. "He's a mathematician by trade and had a brilliant aptitude to pick up Gematria code early in which the Cabal used to communicate with each other on SM," or social media.



— A member of SF Brotherhood - PAC refers to himself as a "lurker" and a Q follower in a 2019 post. obtained by NBC News

Another post elicits QAnon comments from other members after suggesting it's suspicious that an aide to Pence, Olivia Troye, publicly turned against Trump, that a separate former Pence aide testified in Trump's impeachment trial and that one of Pence's former chiefs of staff was married to an FBI agent.

"They will do anything to destroy Trump and Pence in order to prevent them from exposing their vile plans," a member responded.

QAnon followers aren't necessarily common among special operations forces. One member of the military believes in the conspiracy theory, that could create parallel, and separate chains of command for those forces, Murphy argued, given that QAnon followers swear an oath

to the movement that involves fighting the U.S. government. In the QAnon world, the military is responsible for cleansing corruption from the U.S. by rounding up politicians, pedophiles and human traffickers.

"If you really believe that sort of thing and you're a special forces guy, explain to me why you wouldn't pick up a gun and do something about it," he said, saying his former special forces team sergeant is now a QAnon believer who was present at the Capitol on Jan. 6.

"It's not just the occasional private in the 3rd Infantry," he said. "There are senior officers and noncommissioned officers in the military who believe this."

Carol E. Lee reported from Washington. Anna Schechter reported from New York. 



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