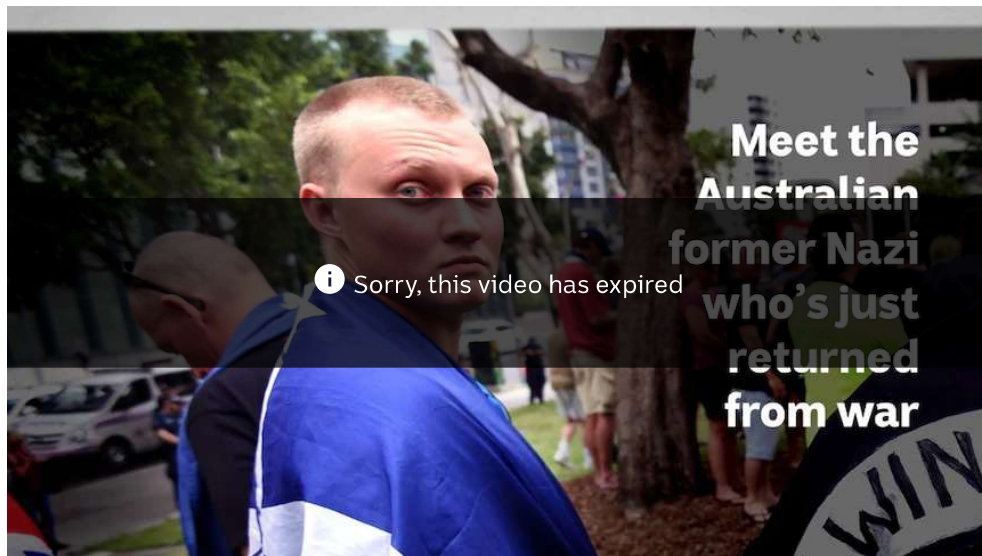


From Neo-Nazi to militant: The foreign fighters in Ukraine who Australia's laws won't stop

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The Australian former soldier turned Neo-Nazi who fought in Ukraine

When Australian former Neo-Nazi and registered gun owner Ethan Tilling flew into Brisbane this year, he was returning under the radar of Australian authorities with newfound combat experience from a brutal and forgotten war.

Mr Tilling, who was until recently a member of the Nazi group Right Wing Resistance, had spent the Australian spring in the bitter cold of Eastern Ukraine firing Kalashnikovs, rocket launchers and grenades at Russian-backed separatists.

The 23-year-old former soldier from Brisbane is one of two Australian ex-Defence Force personnel identified by the ABC who have joined thousands of ultranationalists flocking from across the world [to take up arms in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbass](#).

Mr Tilling and former Royal Australian Air Force airman Jared Bennet joined a patchwork of [pro-Ukrainian militia groups taking on the Russian-backed separatists in a chaotic and stuttering conflict](#), which has become to right-wing extremists what the war in Syria is to jihadists.

Key points:

- Two Australians have been identified as joining militant groups to fight in the war in Ukraine
- One of the men, Ethan Tilling, is a former Neo-Nazi and soldier in the Australian Army and the other was an airman with the Royal Australian Air Force
- There are no rules prohibiting Australians fighting for Ukraine

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Unlike Australians who break strict foreign fighter laws by joining Islamic State or the Kurds who oppose them, neither Mr Tilling nor Mr Bennet, from Melbourne, have broken any Australian law by taking up arms in Ukraine.

The ABC does not suggest Mr Tilling or Mr Bennet pose any threat, but Australian and international security experts say the cases highlight an inconsistency in the law which leaves Australia vulnerable to the brand of violent right-wing extremism that is spreading across the US and Europe.

From the Australian Army to Nazism

Like many young men attracted to the global ultranationalist movement, Mr Tilling reveres the Norse gods of war and grew up desperate to become a warrior himself.

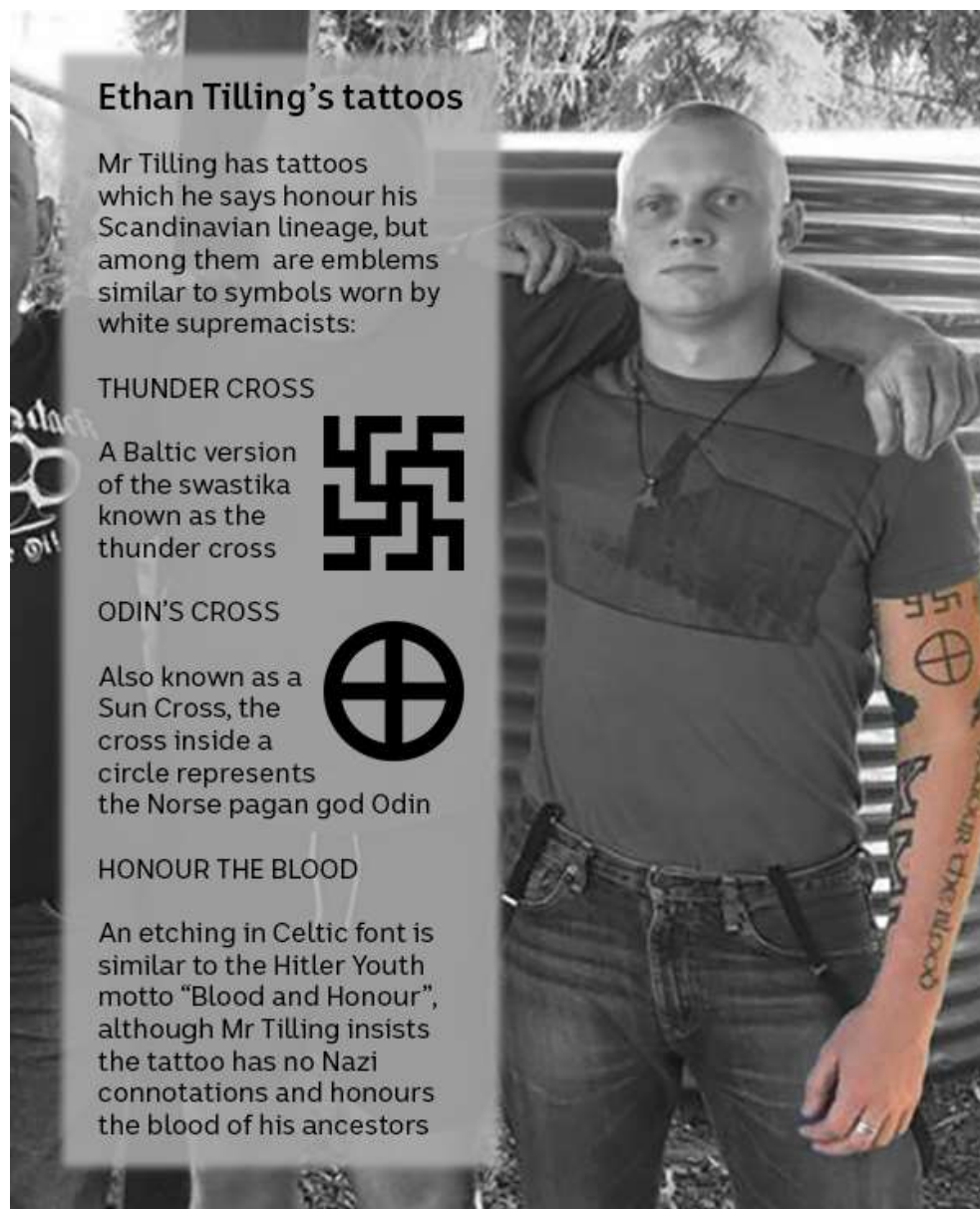


Ethan Tilling behind the Right Wing Resistance flag at a Reclaim Australia rally in November 2015. (AAP: Dan Peled)

"I think it's a rite of passage for every man," he said.

"Some men feel they should defend something or go to war. It's part of the things they have to do in their life."

Mr Tilling's body is plastered in tattoos which he says merely honour his Scandinavian ancestors, but among them are emblems worn by white supremacists.



Ethan Tilling has tattoos with right-wing associations.

By Mr Tilling's account, he was a violent teenager.

At the age of 18, he joined the Australian Army but he did not serve out his contract and was discharged after serving 18 months with the 8th/12th artillery regiment in Darwin.

Two months after his discharge in late 2015, when anti-Islamic sentiment was boiling over in Australia, Mr Tilling wore a Southern Cross flag to a Reclaim Australia anti-Islam protest in Brisbane.

He said it was there that he met a New Zealand-based Neo-Nazi group called Right Wing Resistance, which describes itself on its website as "an active army of white nationalists" committed to white supremacy.

"I got involved [in Nazism] firstly following Islamic terror in Australia and with the terror attacks overseas," he said.

"I just became increasingly worried about the immigration into Australia and who was coming in, and whether or not we could guarantee those people wouldn't harm us."

Mr Tilling joined Right Wing Resistance's tiny Brisbane chapter but said he quickly became frustrated with the commitment shown by its three other local members.

"They had no agenda for political and economic reform," he said.

"They were there because they had no-one else.

"I realised they were absolutely useless human beings ... I decided I wanted nothing to do with those people.

"It wasn't even any part of why I went to the Ukraine."

'It's hard to join a foreign army'

Mr Tilling abandoned the group after just six months and three meetings, but said he remained a Nazi skinhead for about another half a year.



Ethan Tilling's Facebook profile picture in 2016. (Facebook)

Still "an Australian nationalist, a patriot ... very much anti-immigration" and "definitely anti-Muslim", Mr Tilling turned his mind to fighting a war.

He was initially drawn to fighting against Islamic State in Syria, but Australians who joined the Kurdish forces were being threatened with charges under foreign fighter laws.

Under Australian law, anyone who participates in acts merely with the intention of engaging in hostile activities faces life in jail, but taking up arms alongside an army on their soil is perfectly legal.

Mr Tilling set about trying to find a foreign army that would take him.

"It was actually a lot harder to join a foreign army than people might think," he said.

"I jumped on the internet and for weeks and weeks, I tried to find articles and reviews about foreign legions taking foreign nationals voluntarily into their forces and then fighting from there."

It was a YouTube video that drove him to sign up with the Georgian National Legion, an international unit of foreign fighters in Ukraine including Americans, Brits and Europeans.

The video featured Craig Lang, a former US soldier who had fled America after allegedly stealing military equipment and threatening to kill his ex-wife.

YOUTUBE: The video of Ukraine's Foreign Legion which inspired Ethan Tilling to join the war

Tilling arrives on the frontline

After contacting the Georgian National Legion and assuring the unit he was not breaking any laws, Ethan Tilling landed on the frontline of Lugansk, the site of the most intense battles of the war in eastern Ukraine.

The Georgian National Legion was among a mishmash of militant groups which had gained strength and popularity in Ukraine when the ill-prepared and under-resourced Ukrainian army struggled to beat back Russian-backed separatists after war broke out in 2014.

Groups on both sides of the conflict were a magnet for thousands of ultranationalist amateur militants who were on an ideological "pilgrimage", according to Dr Kacper Rekawek, from the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Slovakia.

"There's been a dream of these guys of having a war right next door to Europe ... to prepare themselves for a war back at home," he said.

"For them, this is a perfect occasion to train, prepare, organise and in the future, maybe launch something bigger somewhere else."

Dr Rekawek estimated at least 17,000 people had travelled to fight in Ukraine from more than 50 countries, with most of them coming from Russia to join the separatists.

Mr Tilling said his ideology had nothing to do with his decision to fight in Ukraine.

He said the war was not what he expected.

"Everything smells rotten. The ground smells like a combination of piss, shit and blood," he said.

"When you're in combat, it smells like smoke, it smells like gunpowder. Everyone's letting off about 50,000 rounds in 60 seconds. It's almost like out of a film."

The legion fought alongside the Ukrainian army, under constant artillery fire from Russian-backed separatists, who seized a large swathe of eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Fighters were equipped with Soviet-era machine guns, small rocket launchers, semi-automatic grenade launchers and sniper rifles, Mr Tilling said.

"I personally had an AK assault rifle and a grenade launcher — and we had everything on the line," he said.

"It's more or less World War I-style trench warfare and I certainly didn't expect that when I got into occupied Donetsk.

"We were getting shelled by a combination of mortar and artillery for almost 24 hours a day."

The fighting was very close, Mr Tilling said, with soldiers having to do six-hour night watches to stop the enemy "running across the trenches at you".

"We were up to our guts in mud and the difference between the lines was about 120 metres," he said.

"We could hear them speaking Russian from our trench, we could see their bunkers, we could see their trenches clear as day."

Their uniforms were not made for the icy temperatures and the snow, and food and water were scarce.

The legion was living off stale bread and biscuits.

"I lost about 10 kilograms while I was in the trenches there. The mental state, it's rough," Mr Tilling said.



Ethan Tiller joined the Georgia National Legion and fought with Ukrainian nationalists against pro-Russian separatists. (Snapchat)



Cramped bunks for the soldiers fighting in Ukraine, 2017. (Supplied: Ethan Tilling)

"It certainly wasn't what I expected, and I would tell any Australian thinking about going there to fight in the war to think very carefully about what they want to do, whether it's something they want to endure."



Ethan Tilling took part in trench warfare, contending with snowfall and mud. (Supplied: Ethan Tilling)

Mr Tilling told the ABC he witnessed atrocities but never engaged in any war crimes.

"There were certainly things going on there that would be considered war crimes," he said.

"We found one of our guys with his fingers, toes, his testicles and his penis cut off in a field with his throat slashed."

The ABC was unable to independently verify Mr Tilling's account, but the commander of the Georgian National Legion, Mamuka Mamulashvili, and an independent observer confirmed there had been instances of bodies of fighters being mutilated.

'We do not tolerate nationalism'

Within days Mr Tilling found himself dismayed by the chaos surrounding him and again disillusioned by the incompetence of his peers.

Fighters were often drunk and sometimes high.

"That was combined with things like walking around at night-time with lights on, singing at night, pointing loaded guns at your own team," he said.

Mr Tilling walked off the battlefield in anger after less than two months in Ukraine.



The trenches on the nationalist side of the Ukraine conflict are just over 100 metres from opposing forces. (Supplied: Ethan Tilling)

Commander Mamulashvili said Mr Tilling left after raising concerns about a severe lack of food and water.

He described Mr Tilling as a "motivated" and "good soldier", but expressed concern at learning he was a former Nazi.

"We have Muslims, we have Jewish guys, we have Americans, we have British guys, we are a big family," he said.

"We do not tolerate nationalism here."

A former RAAF airman joins the war

A year before Mr Tilling flew to Ukraine, another former Australian Defence Force serviceman traded his suburban life in Melbourne's north for the battlefields of Donetsk.

After ending a five-year stint with the Royal Australian Air Force, Jared Bennet, 30, had spent his days going to the gym and his nights driving trucks.

Like Mr Tilling, Mr Bennet was inspired by social media to take up arms in Ukraine.

Mr Bennet told the ABC the catalyst to join the war was the Facebook posts from the frontline of a former US military friend he had met on a training exercise in Australia while in the air force.

Mr Bennet said he travelled to Ukraine in 2016 to fight for the country's radical ultranationalist Right Sector.

A spokeswoman for the Right Sector-aligned Volvika Tactical Group told the ABC that Mr Bennet returned to Ukraine to fight with the unit again last year, but Mr Bennet refused to respond to the claim.

Mr Bennet served alongside Craig Lang, the same American ex-soldier who had fled the US for Ukraine after allegedly threatening to kill his ex-wife and who later joined Mr Tilling's unit.

The Right Sector Volvika Tactical Group was not the only ultranationalist cause Mr Bennet was drawn to on social media.

On Facebook, he likes the pages of the Australia First Party and self-styled ultranationalist leader Blair Cottrell, as well as right-wing army veterans groups and bikie clubs including the Rebels.

The ABC does not suggest Mr Bennet is an extremist.



Jared Bennet fought in the Ukraine with the Right Sector Volvika Tactical Group. (Facebook)



Then-airfield defence guard AC Jared Bennet demonstrates equipment at a school.

(Supplied: RAAF)

Uneven approach a 'danger' to Australia

Australia's former watchdog on national security laws, Bret Walker SC, called for changes to Australia's foreign fighter laws in response to the ABC's revelations that Australians had fought with militant groups in Ukraine.

Mr Walker said Australia was vulnerable to any returned ultranationalist fighters who go on to become violent.

"Those are people whose skills, experiences and lack of sensitivity are very likely to constitute dangers in this country," he said.

"There is a domestic concern, not just a concern about Australia's obligations in relation to prohibiting war, but also domestic concern in terms of terrorist dangers in Australia."

Mr Walker said the inconsistency in the current legislation was highlighted by the fact Australians could legally fight with the forces of foreign government dictators like Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

As the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor in 2014, Mr Walker SC made a recommendation to Federal Parliament for the law to be changed so that all foreign fighting would be illegal unless officially approved by the Australian Government.

His recommendations were ignored.

"There's very little sign that there was — let alone at parliamentary level — any consideration of them," Mr Walker said.

"They have been utterly silent in relation to the basic principle that Australians should not fight abroad except for Australia or with Australia's approval."

'I'm not a Neo-Nazi anymore'

In February this year, Mr Tilling was visited by two officers from the Queensland Police Counter-Terrorism Command who interviewed him about his time in Ukraine.

Police also contacted him after neighbours complained he was firing rifles and shotguns, which he is registered to own.



Australian man, Ethan Tilling, on the Donbass frontline in 2017. (Supplied: Andriy Tsaplienko)

Queensland Police refused to shed any light on the visits, saying it was unable to comment on specific individuals.

But the ABC understands counter-terrorism authorities had doubted whether Mr Tilling had even fought in Ukraine, despite being featured in a Ukrainian TV news story from the Donbass frontline, in Ukrainian army propaganda on YouTube and in pictures shared by some Australians on Facebook.

Mr Tilling said the visits from police were unnecessary because neither he nor any ultranationalists posed any threat to Australia.

"We've committed no crimes here, we've never committed a terrorist attack in this country," he said.

"I'm not a Neo-Nazi any more. I'm very much right wing, I'm a patriot, I'm an Australian nationalist, but I'm certainly not a Nazi anymore.

"I'm no longer associated with those groups and I certainly didn't go to the Ukraine with that as my motivation.

"I would have gone to Syria to help the Kurds and of course the Kurds are Arabs — or sorry they're Middle Eastern people — so you can see that I'm not that way inclined anymore."

Mr Tilling defended the right of Australians to fight in distant wars, saying it was a male rite of passage.

"I certainly meet a lot of men in my circles who feel a lot of discontent with the current system," he said.

"It's part of them just being a man in a modern world, that they want to go out and do something brave, or do something incredible. They just want to believe in something."