

How two Australian soldiers became unwitting poster boys for Russian mercenary Wagner Group's Ukraine recruitment drive

By Zac Crellin

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A photograph of Australian soldiers has been used in recruitment posters for Russian mercenary force the Wagner Group. *(Supplied, Gagan Dhiman)*

On a spring day in 2013, two soldiers from Australia's elite Special Air Service Regiment had their photograph taken in Uruzgan Province, central Afghanistan.

Nine years later, this photo has resurfaced in a scheme to recruit mercenaries for Russia's invasion of Ukraine — all without the soldiers' knowledge.

The photo has been used on billboards that belong to the mysterious Wagner Group, an organisation known in the West as "Putin's private army" and which did not officially exist until this year.

Former US military photographer Gagan Dhiman was embedded with the Australian soldiers at the Tarin Kowt military base when he took the original photo.

He said he was devastated to see his work turn up in a mercenary recruitment ad.

"It really took me by surprise," the photographer said. "Just the thought of how these images are being used is really frustrating."



The photo of two Australian soldiers has appeared on flyers and billboards for the Russian Wagner Group. (Supplied: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

Wagner Group emerges from the shadows

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, numerous billboards featuring Mr Dhiman's photo began to appear around the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, some 100 kilometres from the border.

This was part of a recruitment drive by the Wagner Group to boost Russian troop numbers on the battlefield with mercenaries.

The advertisements were emblazoned with the words: "Homeland — Honour — Courage."

Independent Russian news website The Information rang the numbers on the billboards to confirm that it was a real mercenary recruitment operation.

US-funded Radio Free Europe also reported that posters with the same design were plastered around university campuses in Rostov-on-Don in order to attract young students.

The Wagner Group was founded in 2014 by hospitality tycoon and Putin confidant Yevgeny Prigozhin.



Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2016. (AP: Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Observers say the paramilitary group provides the Russian leader with plausible deniability in conflicts where official involvement would attract too much attention.

Wagner Group mercenaries have been accused of war crimes in Syria, Mali, the Central African Republic and, more recently, in Ukraine.

These billboards and others were a rare public appearance for a group that operated in secret for almost a decade. Mr Prigozhin finally admitted to founding the group in a statement made in September this year.

Mr Prigozhin has also been implicated in election interference, [admitting earlier this month on social media that he had interfered in US elections](#) and would continue to do so.

In July, the US State Department offered a reward of up to \$US10 million (\$15 million) for information on Russian interference in US elections, including about Mr Prigozhin and the Internet Research Agency, the troll farm his companies were accused of funding.

He has also been sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for election interference.

Yevgeny Prigozhin is wanted by the FBI for conspiracy to defraud the United States. (*FBI via Reuters*)

How a memento was misused

Mr Dhiman, the former US military photographer, said he took the photo as a keepsake for the soldiers themselves.

"They were posing because when you get deployed, you want to have some sort of memory," he said.

"It was just one of those things. I was taking pictures of all the soldiers, even the US Army, and when the Australians saw that I was taking photographs, they asked if I could take their picture."

Mr Dhiman uploaded the photo to his online portfolio in 2014. He now works across the United States as a wedding photographer based out of California's Sacramento Valley.

The original photo was taken in Uruzghan province in 2013. *(Supplied: Gagan Dhiman)*

But as early as 2017, users on Russian military forums, blogs and Telegram channels began sharing Mr Dhiman's photo in threads about the Wagner Group, which was still a covert operation at the time.

The picture became so widely shared that it is now one of the top results for "Wagner Group" on Yandex, a Russian search engine that is more popular than Google in its home country.

A screen shot of the Russian search engine Yandex, which shows the photo as one of the top results for Wagner Group. *(Supplied: Yandex screenshot)*

"When I was posting these pictures I was very intentional about not showing any faces," Mr Dhiman said.

"So I'm really glad I stuck with my gut to not post anything where it was showing or revealing their identity at all.

"I would never in 100 years just hand over an image this iconic to a group like that."

Billboards highlight Russia's 'desperation'

Neil James, executive director of independent military watchdog the Australian Defence Association, said the Wagner Group likely used the photo without realising the soldiers were from a Western nation.

He pointed to the fact that Australia has provided more than \$475 million in military aid to Kyiv since Russia invaded.

"The idiots at Wagner probably don't know that because of the external censorship in Russia," Mr James said.

Having served for 46 years himself, Mr James said it was disappointing to see the likenesses of Australia's elite soldiers being used to recruit mercenaries for an invasion that Australia has repeatedly condemned.

"To some extent, it just shows the desperation of the Russian government and its puppets," he added.

One indication of how the Wagner Group was faring came when it began recruiting prisoners as early as July this year.

Despite having no official role in the Russian government or civil service, footage has even emerged of Wagner founder Mr Prigozhin himself offering clemency to inmates who choose to fight.

A spokesperson for the Department of Defence confirmed to the ABC that the use of Australian soldiers' likenesses by the Wagner Group was unauthorised.

Photographs taken by employees of the US Department of Defense as part of their official duties are automatically released into the public domain.

Mr James said the ads were unlikely to bring the Australian Defence Force into disrepute.

He was more concerned with Australian political candidates attempting to campaign using military uniforms and symbols, as well as targeted incidents such as when a Chinese official posted a doctored photo of an Australian soldier holding an Afghan child at knifepoint.

"This [incident] is more an embarrassment than anything else," he said.

Photographer laments 'irony'

The use of the photo in Russia is nevertheless upsetting for those personally involved.

Mr Dhiman said he took these kinds of photos as a way to keep morale up on base.

For him, the misuse of his work says more about Wagner than it does about the soldiers in the photo.

"I just find it ironic they're using the Australian SAS and a US Army Black Hawk [helicopter] in a photograph taken by a US Army soldier," Mr Dhiman said.

"To recruit to fight opposed to these guys — it just makes no sense, that's the irony."