

September 9, 2020

The Canadian Rangers, “Watching for Illegal Immigrants,” and Far-Right Extremism

P. Whitney Lackenbauer, Ph.D.

NAADSN Network Lead

Today, [CBC News reports](#) that “a Canadian Ranger group under investigation over ties between one of its members and two far-right militia groups has advertised on its website for years that part of its mission is to guard Canada against illegal immigration.” When informed that the reference to “watching for illegal immigrants” could attract extreme right-wingers to the Reserve organization, the Army promptly removed it.

I must start with various caveats. I am devotedly anti-extremism. I am highly supportive of immigration to Canada. I also worry about far-right extremism and ideological polarization as threats to national security. I am also concerned about over-generalizing about organizations like the Canadian Armed Forces on the basis of a couple of individuals who espouse ideologies or undertake illegal actions that I find offensive.

The Canadian Rangers, as a subcomponent of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves intended to “[provide a CAF presence in those sparsely settled northern, coastal and isolated areas of Canada which cannot conveniently or economically be covered by other elements of the CAF](#),” are typically described as the military’s “eyes, ears, and voice” in remote communities. Their mission to provide “lightly-equipped and self-sufficient mobile forces in support of CAF sovereignty and other domestic operations” does not include tactical military training or “assisting federal, provincial, territorial or local police in the discovery, reporting and apprehension of enemy agents, saboteurs, criminals or terrorists.” As such, the Rangers’ job is not to apprehend “illegal immigrants” or anyone else entering Canada unlawfully – but their task list does include “report[ing] suspicious and unusual activities” that they are well suited to observe in local areas that they know intimately as full-time residents.

Army Commander LGen Wayne Eyre told CBC that “the 4th CRPG works at times with the RCMP on search and rescue operations but, to his knowledge, has not worked on cases involving migrants.” He also suggested the reference could have been rooted in the Rangers’ “origins” as coast watchers during the Second World War.”

While the Rangers’ “eyes and ears” mission extends back to the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers (PCMR) during the Second World War, the concern at that time was not illegal migration but hit-and-run raids against the Pacific coast. I have studied the Canadian Rangers’ history in depth for twenty years, and I can recall no reference whatsoever to illegal immigration from the 1940s to the 1970s when the military decided to suspend Ranger activities in British Columbia before reinvigorating them in the early 1990s.

Instead, the reference to “watching for illegal immigration in Canada’s waters” on the 4 CRPG website likely emanates from the so-called “ghost ships” carrying illegal Chinese migrants that arrived off the B.C. coast in the summer of 1999. I remember visiting Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt as a student that September and seeing the tents set up on the base to accommodate some of the migrants who had endured the horrific conditions on the vessels and were picked up offshore. It is difficult to contend that these people were not “illegal immigrants” or “illegal migrants” – during the ensuing public debate, even those who argued that Canada should accept them as refugees did not dispute this status.

The military’s role in responding to the situation at that time (which saw charges brought against dozens of people for human trafficking) had nothing to do with “three percenters” or “extreme right-wing” viewpoints. As I understood it at the time, the task of “watching for illegal immigration in Canada’s waters” was a humanitarian and anti-human trafficking mission – and one in which the Rangers could be logically and appropriately involved.

In the early 2000s, it is unsurprising to me that Rangers living and serving as the military’s “eyes and ears” along isolated stretches of the Pacific and Atlantic coasts would watch for unauthorized vessels along these lines. Knowing where these vessels were could mean life or death for the people onboard. For example, the report of a Vice Chief of the Defence Staff Area Commanders Conference in October 2003 noted that Rangers reported sightings of Chinese migrants off the coast of B.C. and suspicious activities in areas frequented by smugglers off the East Coast.

Professor Elizabeth Perry, the main source for Thompson and Brewster’s CBC story, intimates that invoking the phrase “illegal immigrants” could make the Rangers attractive to [people who support far-right militia groups](#) or might itself be an indicator of right-wing extremism. If this is no longer preferred language to refer to migrants who arrive in Canada with proper authorization or permission, it should be avoided. Given my support for efforts to root out racism, and the desire to prevent extremists adhering to any far-right or far-left ideology from serving in the Canadian Armed Forces, I promote efforts to avoid language that, while used appropriately and with the best of intentions in the past, might be associated with more unsavory currents of opinion today.

Accordingly, removing the phrase “watching for illegal immigrants in Canada’s waters” from the 4 CRPG website is a wise move if experts such as Professor Perry are correct in pointing out that it is no longer politically correct and/or may attract supporters of the far right. In our current, highly-charged political environment, this language may create unnecessary exposure for organizations like the Canadian Rangers if it leads them to be misrepresented as bastions for far-right extremism.

In practical terms, however, I see no problem with Rangers with continuing to watch for and report any anomalies, including the suspicious presence or arrival of unexpected persons, in and around their home communities. This is consistent with their longstanding service as eyes, ears, and voices of their communities.

Perry warns that the reference to “watching for illegal immigrants in Canada’s waters” as a Ranger mission “could attract far-right supporters to the Rangers.” The speculative language is key. The story cites two Rangers, neither of whom are likely to have been enticed by an anti-immigration coast watching role. Erik Myggland (a member of two far-right militia-style groups) lives in Valemont, B.C., which is located in the mountainous east central British Columbia interior along the Alberta border. As unnerving as I find his online support for the far-right Three Percenter movement and the Soldiers of Odin, as well as his violent anti-government rhetoric, I doubt that countering “illegal immigrants in Canada’ waters” was his primary motive for joining the Rangers.

Corey Hurren, who crashed the gate at Rideau Hall with a loaded firearm on 2 July, is from Bowsman in southwest-central Manitoba near the Saskatchewan border, far from Hudson Bay.

More research is required to determine if these two unsettling cases are reflective of a more widespread problem in 4 CRPG or of the Canadian Rangers organization - which boasts about 5000 members from coast to coast to coast - or if they are outliers. These two cases represent 0.0004% of the Ranger membership. As an academic, I would argue that this number is statistically insignificant to draw any sweeping conclusions (as the CBC News story might lead readers to do). This does not mean that these cases are inconsequential. I do not see a place in the Rangers for Myggland or Hurren, given what they have done in words and in deeds. But I will need to see more data to convince me that the Ranger organization is particularly susceptible or vulnerable to infiltration by extreme far-right elements.

When I heard the story of Hurren crashing the gates at Rideau Hall, I was mortified. I also immediately thought of the many Canadian Rangers who had been called to that location to receive decorations from governors general for meritorious service, saving lives, and voluntarism. The many Rangers whom I know are loyal, patriotic Canadians. They hold many different viewpoints, reflecting of the diversity of our country, but I have seen no evidence that the organization promotes or accepts far-right extremists – or ideological extremists of any other stripe.

At a time when many counter-terrorism professionals are ringing alarm bells about the threat of the extreme right and associated militia activities, stories like the CBC News one are important to draw attention to *potential* problems in an organization and to encourage further investigation. It is also essential that readers do not draw sweeping, firm *conclusions* about an entire organization based upon a couple of cases and on academic speculation.