

How this 18-year-old gamer went from neo-Nazi to Muslim to alleged killer

By Elspeth Reeve on May 25, 2017

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On Friday night, Devon Arthurs, an 18-year-old with no criminal record, ran into a smoke shop in Tampa, Florida, took people there hostage, and said he was angry about America bombing Muslim countries. According to a police report, Arthurs waved a semiautomatic pistol and yelled “Do me a favor and get the fuck on the ground!” He asked a customer, “Why shouldn’t I kill you?”

Police arrived and soon convinced Arthurs to let the hostages go. But when an officer asked if anyone else was hurt, Arthurs said his roommates weren’t hurt — they were dead.

When police took Arthurs to his nearby apartment, they found Jeremy Himmelman, 22, and Andrew Oneschuk, 18, dead from gunshot wounds to the head and chest. They also found Brandon Russell, dressed in his Florida National Guard uniform, crying.

“That’s my roommate,” Arthurs told police when they came upon Russell. “He doesn’t know what’s going on and just found [our other roommates] like you guys did.”

The killings, which slowly made their way into the national news this week, look like a case study in the online radicalization of young men. All four of the roommates were brought together by a neo-Nazi ideology developed in online chatrooms. Police discovered explosives and a device that could be used as a detonator in the apartment’s garage, which Russell said belonged to him; he was arrested Sunday on federal charges. The explosive materials were found only because Arthurs went from a neo-Nazi to a radical Islamist to an alleged killer in just over a year.

Two weeks earlier, Himmelman and Oneschuk had moved from Massachusetts into the apartment with Arthurs and Russell. They’d previously all become friends while playing video games and hanging out in chatrooms on platforms like Tinchat, Discord, and Skype, according to members of those chatrooms. The four were members of a white nationalist online group called Atomwaffen — German for “atomic weapon.” (Himmelman’s sister, Lyssa Himmelman, told the Tampa Bay Times that claims her brother was a neo-Nazi were “lies.”)

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The roommates had, in the parlance of that part of the internet, “edgy” politics. But over the last year, Arthurs had begun to make his online friends uncomfortable. Though he still hung out in the same rooms, his interests had shifted from national socialism to Salafism, an ultraconservative form of Sunni Islam. He’d converted, changing his screen name from Weissewolfe to Kekman Al-Amriki. The first name, Kekman, is a reference to 4chan slang; the second echoes the name of an American member of the Islamist militant group al-Shabaab.

Arthurs had no mortgage, no Facebook profile, and virtually no presence on the internet — at least, not under his given name. But he left a 4-year-long trail showing his shift from teen gamer to neo-Nazi to radical Islamist. VICE News communicated with nine members of chatrooms he frequented in addition to alt-right activists who were aware of Atomwaffen, and read sections of old online chat transcripts with Arthurs and Russell, along with screenshots of private chats among their friends after the crime. Together, they all served to piece together Arthurs' online extremist evolution.

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Russell and Arthurs were the leaders of Atomwaffen and best friends, according to those who knew them. But about a year ago, Arthurs converted to Salafism, an ultraconservative version of Sunni Islam, and had begun to defend ISIS online. Members of Atomwaffen were wary of having a Muslim in their midst, but Russell defended Arthurs.

“When you hear the word radicalization, what usually comes to mind is young people turning to Islamic fundamentalism,” academic researchers Alice Marwick and Becca Lewis wrote on the site Select/All days before the killing. “ISIS has a host of YouTube channels, chat rooms, and Twitter accounts that are extremely effective at channeling the energy of disaffected and disenfranchised young people. But the far right is doing virtually the same thing — and possibly even more effectively.”

Marwick and Lewis argue that once a community becomes open to one form of extremism, it's easier for other forms to be introduced. “Some sci-fi, fandom, and gaming communities — having accepted run-of-the-mill anti-feminism — are beginning to espouse white-nationalist ideas.”

According to his friends, Arthurs moved along that same path.

“He went from communist to national socialism to hyper-pragmatic capitalism to full ISIS,” said James, a 20-year-old “American nationalist” who met Arthurs on Tinchat several years ago. James said Arthurs found the American far right to be “soft... because groups like ISIS actually do murder homosexuals etc. and take action, while our group had multiple LGBT individuals.”

“Life isn't politics 24/7. He and his friends enjoyed playing the same video games. It was fun to have him around.”

“We all connected in the sense that we were introverts that didn't really connect with the ‘outside’ world,” explained Catherine, a member of a group of friends who came together in a Tinchat room beginning in 2013. Many came to the chat rooms from 4chan and 8chan, message boards that are totally anonymous. In Tinchat, users show their faces, or at least use screen names, so it's easier to make friends and follow who is saying what over time.

The group of about a dozen mostly young people became close; when one of them committed suicide about a year ago, Arthurs and Russell were both inconsolable. Arthurs helped organize the group to contact the friend's parents and tell them how much he was missed.

Eventually, the friends got the urge to move into the real world. “Tinchat was just for chatting online,” said a friend who goes by Nero. “[Arthurs and Russell] met there and became friends and they wished to

build some sort of real-life community, real-life activism so all their time didn't go to waste doing nothing and chatting online."

That's how the Florida chapter of Atomwaffen came to be. The group formed on Ironmarch, a fascist forum that's part of the tapestry of far-right sites that expressed rabid support of Donald Trump. Atomwaffen has 50 members at most, and several people in the Tinchat group said they didn't take Atomwaffen too seriously.

"Most of our [Tinchat] group saw them as a bunch of goofy kids," according to James. Atomwaffen put up neo-Nazi fliers and stickers and had a YouTube channel. They made flags and posed with guns.

In April, Russell posted photos of their urban exploration trip, writing, "A few of us in Florida explored this abandoned Juvenile Detention Centre on Hitler's birthday this year." The captions have the discordant tone of white supremacist Boy Scouts.

"[Russell] once told me it was one of his favorite hobbies aside from national socialism," Selina Ortiz, who frequently chatted with the pair, said of the urban exploration.

When they heard I'd been asking around about Russell, several of his friends messaged me to praise his character. Friends described Russell's childlike love of scientific experimentation. Russell can be seen in a "backyard scientist" YouTube video making a watermelon explode, and in a Skype chat from 2014, he talked about building a rocket. Friends insist that the explosive material found by the FBI was pure scientific inquiry.

According to police, however, Arthurs said Russell had participated "in online neo-Nazi internet chat rooms where he threatened to kill people and bomb infrastructure."

Russell "was tied to some very hardcore beliefs but had a heart of gold," James said. "He said a bunch of shit but wouldn't hurt a fly. He just got sucked in."

In a world defined in part by merciless trolling, Russell appeared to be extremely sensitive. "People would go in and make fun of him and he would cry and become visibly upset," Catherine, a Tinchat user, said. "There were memes with screencaps of him looking sad in the camera like 'I'M MASTERRACE—PLEASE BE MY FWEND.' Was pretty funny tbh. But it got to him."

She continued: "He's a tender emotional kid, just not too mentally stable and got messed up with the wrong people and didn't have a good father figure. I don't condone his opinions or beliefs or justify them whatsoever, he just wasn't all hatred and scorn."

"He always hopped around ideologies. National socialism and Islam both offer a strong worldview — very masculine, very optimistic."

After the shootings, according to screenshots sent to me, friends talking among themselves expressed frustration, particularly regarding the explosives. In one Discord chat, a friend complained, "He fucked up keeping that material around."

Most of the friends from Tinchat were less complimentary of Arthurs — something was “not quite right.” Screenshots show Arthurs “awkwardly,” in his own words, thanking friends for helping him through depression. Friends say they encouraged him to focus on family and getting a job, and to cool off on the radical politics for a bit. They told him Atomwaffen was bad news.

According to friends, Arthurs converted to Islam a little more than a year ago. “It’s hard for me to say it straight up like this, since I considered him to be one of my closest friends at some point,” said a member of Atomwaffen. “I even was shitposting with him as recently as 12 hours before this all went down. But I think he was always unstable, and this Salafism shit got to his head more than anything.”

Another 18-year-old alt-right activist told me, “He’s always been hopping around ideologies.... He wanted to feel like he belonged to something strong.... National socialism and Islam both offer a strong worldview — something very masculine, something very optimistic. Conquest and all that.”

While Arthurs did lose some friends after his conversion, others remained close to him. “Life isn’t politics 24/7,” Nero explained. “They enjoyed playing the same video games, and although I really dislike Devon for what he did, he was a very charismatic and funny guy at times. It was fun to have him around.”

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In transcripts of chats, Arthurs blends alt-right ideas with Islam. “Any state that allows adultery or any other form of degeneration is not worth fighting or dying for.” “Degeneracy” is an alt-right fixation meaning nontraditional sexual mores.

According to screenshots of a Skype chat, Arthurs was disgusted by American culture. “See, I wouldn’t be so mad, if it wasn’t for the fact you literally have millions of western cuckolds ready to defend ‘freedom.’ The freedom for their daughters to be pimped out by pornographic distributors, freedom for their wives to be banged by countless guys while they are home, freedom to have their kids innocence be robbed.”

He also talked about about “white sharia,” which has become an alt-right meme — women are ruining society, the thinking goes, so the only way to fix it is to brutally oppress them. At times, friends say, Arthurs threatened violence.

“He was serious about this. People made fun of his religious beliefs a lot and I believe this was him finally pushing back,” Nero said.

How much of the alt-right’s racism is ironic — and whether that matters — has been much debated over the last year. In an infamous 2016 Breitbart article, Milo Yiannopoulos wrote, “Are they actually bigots? No more than death metal devotees in the ’80s were actually Satanists. For them, it’s simply a means to fluster their grandparents.... They have no real problem with race-mixing, homosexuality, or even diverse societies. It’s just fun to watch the mayhem and outrage that erupts when those secular shibboleths are openly mocked.”

Atomwaffen is far to the right of the alt-right. Many of Russell’s friends said he would never hurt someone, that he might condemn “sodomites” even while having gay friends. But it seems Arthurs took it seriously.

“Arthurs also stated that, before the murder, he had been privy to neo-Nazi Internet chat sites threatening to kill people,” according to a Tampa police statement, “and he had developed a thinking that he should take some of the neo-Nazis with him.”

Some alt-right types have suggested the killings show the danger of Islam. At the neo-Nazi site the Daily Stormer, Andrew Anglin wrote, “Talk about a narrative collapse. The Jews are trying to say we’re the same as Moslem terrorists. Meanwhile, Nazis are converting to Islam and then killing their old Nazi friends.”

An Atomwaffen member claimed to have worked on personal security for Richard Spencer, the man who coined the term “alt-right.” An alt-right military veteran who has organized security for Spencer told me he would not associate with Atomwaffen, but I asked Spencer if he knew anything about the group.

“Muslims are psychos,” he replied. “Even the White ones.”

Several people from the Tinychat group contacted me fearing a spin on the story. “There’s some sort of narrative being crafted that they were all virgin nerds and that is the cause of violent [sic] crime and national socialism,” one said. Yet he added that Arthurs and Russell “were drawn to that stupid shit because [sic] they never had proper father figures.”

I was sent screenshots of conversations between members, then screenshots of my conversations with members were sent to the private group chat, and in turn, screenshots of those screenshots were sent back to me. One guy said he wanted to make Arthurs “look gay.”

While they were attempting to control the narrative of this story, amongst themselves there were recriminations. “Somebody should have literally stepped up to the plate and been a father figure.” And: “We ignored the fact that cray [crazy] combined with crazy ideology doesn’t go well.” Someone claimed Arthurs had talked to ISIS members on Telegram, a chat app famously used by ISIS. Another responded: “Why the fuck didn’t you report him if you knew that?”

“Frustrated young men do crazy stuff. Why do you think ISIS is so popular?” Ortiz said. “I know testosterone is just a hell of a hormone.”

I asked, in several different ways, if the friends could have anticipated Atomwaffen would end in violence. They answered with a compassion that’s missing in their memeing.

“If you’re looking to make a hit piece on two people that were killed in cold blood then I think we’re done here,” Nero said. His friends had wanted to create a “proper community” that they had found absent elsewhere. “Many of these guys came from bad homes growing up and they wanted that belonging they didn’t have in childhood... Everyone else in the organization had issues with Devon’s religious beliefs, but they ignored it because they thought that Devon cared about them and that he wouldn’t ever do something like this to them.”

I also asked if it occurred to them that someone, perhaps a mentally ill person, might take everything seriously and actually do something about it.

“Oh of course,” James said. “I’m sure Brandon realized something wasn’t quite right with Devon. Never suspected he would do anything. But again, Devon was his best and closest friend, and many times people will overlook the bad qualities of loved ones.”