

The Trailing Edge

March 2024

The Origins of Evil Editor Zurg

So how exactly does one go from reigning terror and destruction across the galaxy and being the singular nemesis of Buzz Lightyear, Space Ranger, to being the editor of an EAA Chapter newsletter? The story told here has been passed around (it hasn't been around long enough to be passed down) as an oral tradition. It is a wonderful example of what happens when a silly, throwaway idea resonates with the members of a group, and thus becomes a part of the culture of that group.

Organizational Inside Jokes

All families and many organizations have inside jokes. You can't create these, you have to wait for them to happen. Somebody does something odd or stupid, and it is remembered for years. My grandmother introduced herself to anyone of my generation as "Nana", a name she got because my brother, the first grandchild, couldn't say "Nanny" and it came out as "Nana". That's the story in my family. I have no idea how the dog in *Peter Pan* picked up the same name.

Organizations can pick up inside jokes, sometimes from a throwaway joke that was intended for one time use. In EAA Chapter 1000, original President Jim Piavis came up with the *Project Police* in his [newsletter column in April 1992](#) (6 months after the chapter was founded) as a throwaway joke, twisting the Air Force custom of "Hospitality Checks" into something more relatable to EAA and building experimental aircraft. This throwaway joke resonated so well with the chapter members that this persona was [adopted as the identity of the chapter](#), and chapter members almost [immediately started acting out this idea](#). This continued for the life of the chapter and beyond, with EAA Chapter 1000 always being known as the *Project Police*.

Evil Editor Zurg would be another one of these inside jokes that would start out as an innocent throwaway joke, but would grow to become a major part of the culture of EAA Chapter 1000.

EAA Chapter 1000 Newsletter Publication Process

EAA Chapter 1000 held its regular meetings on the third Tuesday of the month. In preparation, the EAA Chapter 1000 Board of Directors would hold its meeting on the second Tuesday of the month, and one of the recurring action items for that meeting was to fold and stamp the newsletters so that they could be immediately mailed out. The intent was for the newsletter to get to the members a few days before the meeting to remind them of the meeting.

To make this schedule, the newsletter would be e-mailed to Gary Aldrich (originally Vice President, then later President) by Sunday night before the board meeting. He would drop off the master for copying at Staples on Monday morning on his way to work, and would pick up the finished copies on his way home Monday night.

Therefore, inputs for the newsletter were due by 1700 on the Friday before the second Tuesday of the month, so that I had the weekend to put the newsletter together. In December 1999, the newsletter inputs were due on 10 December 1999. Presumably, on Friday, 3 December 1999 (one week prior), I sent an email, as I was wont to do, to the President (column), Vice President (program), Secretary (last meeting summary), and Young Eagles Coordinator (Young Eagles report) to remind them of their upcoming deadline.

However, this time was different. On Thanksgiving, 25 November 1999, *Toy Story 2* was released in theaters. The next day, I saw the movie with my family on the way to buy a Christmas tree. While the nemesis of Buzz Lightyear, Evil Emperor Zurg, had been mentioned in the first movie, in the second movie Evil Emperor Zurg made an actual appearance, and of course was defeated and deposed by Buzz Lightyear.

I never liked coming across as the demanding type, yet it was my job as newsletter editor to "demand" that the chapter officers get their expected inputs sent in. As I was about to sign the e-mail as I had done many times before, the inspiration came to me for no reason in particular to sign the e-mail as "Evil Editor Zurg" since the recent viewing



of *Toy Story 2* was still on my mind. After all, I could pretend that it wasn't me making the demands, but some evil overseer. It was a throwaway joke, and I figured that would be the end of it. It also worked because there were three syllables in both "Emperor" and "Editor" so it flowed off the tongue almost identically.

Except the next month, when it was time to send out the same e-mail, I remembered that and signed it as "Evil Editor Zurg" again. And the next month, and all the months after that. At this point, in my mind it was just to be a joke between me and the recipients of the e-mail.

Evil Editor Zurg is released into the wild

And thus it was for three months, December 1999 through February 2000. In February 2000, Vice President George Gennuso got the joke and decided to run with it. In his announcement for the month's meeting program, he wrote

You know, you guys don't know it, but every month I have to put up with that Evil Newsletter Editor Zurg.... Yuck, he's always pushing and prodding, get your article in, the deadline is yesterday, hurry up, you're already late, you and the others (Gary, Miles and Opie) are good for nothing, and on and on...And while he's ranting and raving he's pointing that silly dime store Ray Gun at me, waving it all over the place. I wish I could short circuit that thing and see what he does then. And what about that stupid skull cap he wears for a hat, looks more like a woman's black swim cap with those silly little designs he's painted on it with nail polish, oh boy, that really scares me..... And who does he think he's fooling with that big silver belt? Everyone can see that the jewels in it are really jellybeans that he's glued on it. I'm not even going to get into the cape, the long johns and the rain boots....

Initial conception of Zurg

George's characterization of Evil Editor Zurg was spot on for what I had been thinking, even if it sounded more like a little kid doing cosplay. Still, it fit in well with the movie storyline of these toys not thinking they are toys, but thinking that they really are these supervillains that kids pretend they are.

Now that George had taken what I expected to just be an inside joke with the newsletter contributors and thrown it out into the whole chapter, I figured that I needed to define in my mind what this character was going to be. After all, if we already had the *Project Police*, why couldn't our newsletter have an evil editor that was on a work release program after being deposed as the emperor of the galaxy?

From the start, I knew that I did not want to be Evil Editor Zurg myself, but I wanted him to be an imaginary taskmaster over me. I would merely be his "whipping boy", the lowly clerk that was forced to do his bidding. Alternatively, I was like Bob Cratchit and Zurg was Ebenezer Scrooge, except the story never progressed beyond the first scene. I wanted to avoid a duality like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, preferring to remain a minion.

By telling the story that Zurg was someone over me, I could blame all of the demands on "someone else". Zurg would become the Chapter Heavy, the enforcer of what needed to be done. As a special bonus, that relieved the chapter President, later to be renamed "Kommandant", off the hook for having to be the heavy. (Given the strong military background of many members of EAA Chapter 1000 and the fact that meetings were held on an Air Force base, in June 2000 Gary Aldrich declared that his position would no longer be referred to as "President" and would henceforth be referred to as "Commandant". As I am a big fan of the show "Hogan's Heroes" and all things German, I decided that we would use the German spelling of "Kommandant". Gary's column changed from "The Prez Sez..." to "Kommandant's Korner". Since "truth" is whatever is printed in the newsletter, the name change stuck.)

Evil Editor Zurg, as part of his work release agreement, was no longer evil in the sense of doing illegal and immoral acts. However, he did retain that evil side of not caring about your weak, pissant excuses of why something couldn't be done. He did not suffer pusillanimous twits. He expects his demands to be carried out without whining.

It took a while to set the narrative that I was not Evil Editor Zurg myself, though he did seem to operate through me. Early on in 2002, in January and October other writers used the name Zurg to refer to me, but I continued the narrative that I was not Zurg, but merely his minion. This storyline led to the humorous statement by Doug Dodson of "Have you ever noticed that you never see Zurg and Russ together?" This would eventually lead me to purchase an "Action Figure" of Evil Emperor Zurg so that we could be seen together.

Many years later, Mike Machat, himself a magazine editor, would lean into the characterization of Evil Editor Zurg, claiming that he himself had worked for many an editor, and many of them fit the description of "evil".

Zurg Doing Editorial Stuff

The concept of Evil Editor Zurg was slow to catch on in the chapter, possibly because most chapter members don't think too much about how a newsletter is created. To them it just appears in their mailbox (snail- or e-). The idea of a chapter heavy did start to catch on, as other people added to the story.

After first being mentioned in February 2000, the next mention would be in October 2001 as simply the editor reminding the Kommandant that it was time for elections. Zurg would only be mentioned twice in 2002, both times being the Kommandant saying that he needed to close his column and get it in before Evil Editor Zurg got mad.

Mentions of Zurg picked up in 2003 as he took over the *Project Police* Aircraft Spotters Quiz. This quiz had begun in November 1998 as the "Obscure Airplane Identification Contest" but had changed to its final name by the third installment. Since many members of EAA Chapter 1000 were very smart airplane geeks, there was no challenge in getting them to identify a P-51, a Boeing 737, or an RV-6. Too easy. To challenge these folks, the subject aircraft needed to be really obscure. Creating a quiz that people are expected to fail seemed totally on-brand for an Evil Editor, so Evil Editor Zurg became the creator of the quizzes in February 2003. Evil Editor Zurg would be mentioned in 62 newsletters in conjunction with the Aircraft Spotters Quiz.

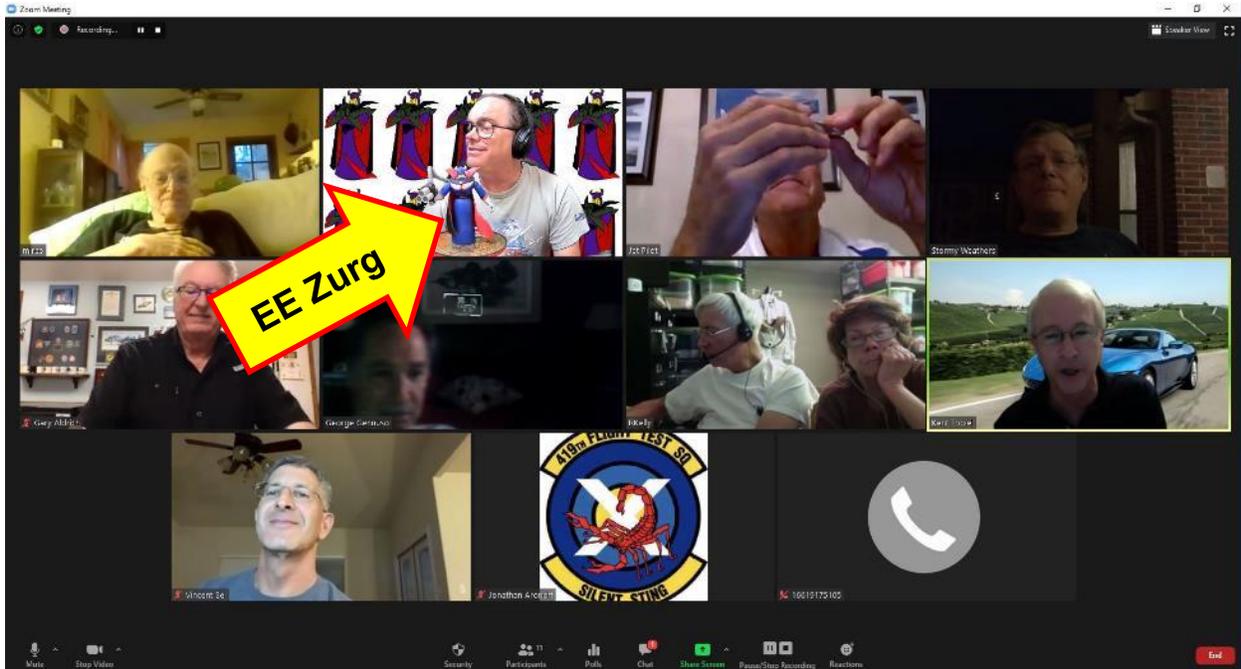
Kommandant Gary Aldrich would really lean into the Evil Editor Zurg idea, which may have been because his work cube was in the same room as mine for about 14 years, not to mention we frequently flew together. The Kommandant's Korner would mention Evil Editor Zurg in 46 newsletters. This was usually in the form of "Everything was going just fine until I got a message from Evil Editor Zurg reminding me that this column was overdue" or "I need to get this on the wire before Evil Editor Zurg comes after me". Sometimes Zurg would be slightly compassionate (as in less evil) and let the Kommandant slide from his duties, such as when the Kommandant and Mrs. Kommandant were out of town celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary. However, this didn't stop Zurg from making snide comments about the Kommandant's clear inability to plan ahead and fulfill his known duties before his departure.

The Secretary would also mention Evil Editor Zurg and his demands when submitting his meeting summaries (what some organizations would call "meeting minutes"). Zurg would likewise make snide comments about the Secretary when he failed to supply said summaries on time. One Secretary thought that if he failed enough times that he would be ejected from his position and thus not have to worry about it anymore. Evil Editor Zurg, knowing that this was exactly what the Secretary wanted, responded with Public Humiliation of the Secretary and retention in the job until he could get it right. Once he got it right, he would be retained in the job, because Evil Editor Zurg couldn't be bothered to train another Secretary. Sort of our own version of Hotel California. Complaints about chapter officers were kept to a minimum by Evil Editor Zurg's rule that anybody complaining about the performance of a chapter officer would summarily replace that chapter officer to prove that they could do better. Amazingly, there was very low turnover of chapter officers.

Evil Editor Zurg would be mentioned for doing editorial type stuff in 93 newsletters, including things like reminding you to pay your dues, glorifying those who did pay dues, and publicly humiliating (or at least threatening to) those who failed to pay their dues. Evil Editor Zurg would demand content and be the recipient of any responses sent to the newsletter. He even had his own e-mail address eez@pobox.com (which still works).

One of the reasons that Evil Editor Zurg worked was because the various chapter members bought into this silly gag. Several times I would refer to myself as Zurg's minion. Zurg was claimed to have bought a subscription to member Mike Machat's magazine. Once the Secretary demanded to see Zurg's EAA membership card, believing him to not be a dues-paying member of EAA National.

Starting in 2010, I hinted that Zurg would make an appearance at the chapter Festivus party. My plan was to take the Evil Emperor Zurg action figure with me to the party so that we could be seen together. On the day of the party, I totally forgot about this and didn't take it. This pattern would continue from 2010 to 2019, with me forgetting without fail every year. In November 2020 we were having a chapter meeting on Zoom thanks to some "pandemic" and I finally remembered to put the action figure in front of me so that we could both be seen together.



Evil Editor Zurg on EAA Chapter 1000 Zoom meeting, complete with his own special background

For two of the pandemic Zoom chapter meetings, Evil Editor Zurg sponsored quizzes for the participants.

In the end, Evil Editor Zurg was a successful part of EAA Chapter 1000 culture because it was a fun idea and resonated with the members of the chapter. Most of the chapter members were military, retired military, or at least military adjacent, such as government civilians or contractors. The idea of a superior who was harsh, demanding, and expected things done quickly and efficiently was a very military idea. Think about the Drill Instructor or Cadre you had in Basic Training. If you haven't been through Basic Training, think about the Drill Sergeants in just about any movie about military Basic Training. It was an idea we were very comfortable with. I don't know that this silliness would work with any other chapter, nor do I say it should. Of 258 newsletters that were published since Evil Editor Zurg was introduced, he would be mentioned in 161 of those newsletters. Before you reach for that calculator, I've got you covered—that's 62.4% of the newsletters.

The Non-End of Zurg

The last meeting of EAA Chapter 1000 was held in October 2021. With light attendance, the Kommandant moving out of state, and no one stepping up to take the Kommandant's position, EAA Chapter 1000 was shuttered after 30 years. I published one final newsletter in November 2021 both to gracefully close down the chapter and to use up the remaining material I had waiting to be published.

Meanwhile, two EAA Chapter 1000 members who had moved to Tennessee and Texas had both been roped into becoming the newsletter editor for their respective EAA Chapters. Now that I had been relieved of my Newsletter Editor post after 25 years, I thought I would relieve myself of Evil Editor Zurg by buying two Zurg action figures and mailing them to the two new newsletter editors. That would relieve me of Zurg by sending him to run herd over their newsletters.

One adopted and adapted Evil Editor Zurg to his Tennessee chapter, though I'm not sure how much his chapter members are into the idea. A previous President was seen to write in the newsletter that the Evil Editor had been on him to get his story in.

The Texas newsletter editor said he wasn't sure his new chapter would cotton to the caustic, demanding nature of Evil Editor Zurg, since there wasn't a large military presence in the chapter. Still, he loved the idea of an elusive chief editor running the show while he did the grunt work of assembling and distributing a newsletter, even if it was paperless. Thus, he adopted Zurg's more benevolent brother "Buck Rivetz". Buck sometimes makes veiled threats to dispatch his dog Cleco to chew on someone's sidewalls if they fail to submit requisite inputs. That doesn't carry the sting of the type of tongue lashing that Evil Editor Zurg is capable of, but it still has the benefit of assigning the demands to someone else.



Buck Rivetz

Even in this less caustic form, someone picked up on the joke and pressed the newsletter editor to produce a picture of Buck Rivetz. Sticking with the Toy Story theme, he devised such an image. Starting with a picture of Buzz Lightyear (ironically the sworn foe of Evil Emperor Zurg), he dressed him in cowboy garb reminiscent of Woody.

I thought I was done, but after a while found that I missed writing about things that interested me. Since I published a newsletter for 25 years called “The Leading Edge”, I decided to start a blog, which I cleverly named “The Trailing Edge” (<http://erbman.org/trailingedge/index.htm>). Also, being proud of the work we had done for 30 years in EAA Chapter 1000, I created a repository web site (<http://eaa1000.org>) to host most of the newsletters and crazy stuff we had published. Word got out, and I realized that Evil Editor Zurg had moved back in. The only things different was the administrative part of the job was gone, and the publishing schedule was gone. The fun parts, though, continue.

- Russ Erb

Evil Editor Zurg’s Whipping Boy

Minion of Evil Editor Zurg

EAA Chapter 1000 Newsletter Editor and Webmeister (Emeritus)



I’m Evil Editor Zurg, and I approve this message.