

Real-life superhero Captain Australia, whose aims are to prevent crime and inspire civilians to be better people.



THE SUPER HUMAN LEAGUE

Office workers by day, real-life superheroes are ridding the world of evil, one spandex suit at a time. Fighting crime, corruption and environmental destruction, these costumed crusaders are growing in numbers – faster than a speeding bullet

STORY BARBARA MESSER PHOTOGRAPHY TOM HOLLAND

Captain Australia is a regular dad with a sensible job, a steady income, a loving family – and a secret identity as a crime-fighting masked avenger.

"All the evidence defies that I'm a sane man," says Captain Australia, who shares his Brisbane hide-out with his alter ego, wife and one-year-old son. "I'm not insane, but the more I deny it, the more convincing an argument I make that I'm quite mad."

Wearing yellow boots and a green shield emblazoned with an '@' symbol, Captain Australia looks more like a bumblebee than a fearsome hulk when he arrives for our interview at an inner-city pub. He agrees to meet on two conditions: he will not disclose his real name, and the mask must always stay on.

Despite the silliness of his outfit and the bemused smirks from onlookers, Captain Australia is serious about his mission to fight apathy, decadence, evil and immorality. "By putting on a mask and a costume, and saying, 'I am a hero,' and declaring you're going to save the world – if nothing else, people will notice."

His calling to the vocation of part-time super-heroism came shortly after the birth of his son. "The idea just sprang into my mind. I suddenly realised the world matters, that people are beautiful and life is sacred. Society is becoming darker and emptier, less community-oriented. We don't pursue our personal betterment with any vigour. I don't want that for my son."

A more conventional person might donate to charity, volunteer for a good cause or join the fire brigade or police force. But, to Captain Australia, these options were too obvious. The only way to shake people out of their apathetic haze, he decided, was to put his safety on the line and become a 'Hero' with a capital 'H'.

Since then, he's led a double life as a suburban professional aged "somewhere between 37 and 40" and a masked crusader. His escapades are detailed in his online journal (www.captainaustralia.net), which shows footage of him chatting to the homeless, drunks and prostitutes (to cheer them up and offer assistance); at Schoolies Week (sharing career advice with inebriated teenagers); and searching for people to help (only to discover that most people are not generally in great peril). Especially bizarre are Captain Australia's aerobics workout videos, which are part of his daily weight-loss regimen.

In person, Captain Australia is far less crazy than you might expect, although clearly eccentric. The ingenuity of his outfit is also apparent up close. His mask is a reconfigured

hooded jumper hand-sewn by his wife (Mrs Australia?). His original boots were gold spray-painted gumboots, but they proved inadequate for the rigours of policing crime when one of his toenails fell off. They were replaced by yellow patent-leather shoes purchased from an online kinky apparel vendor, while his green-and-gold gloves look as though they'd be perfect for pruning roses.

"Yes, they're gardening gloves," he admits sheepishly. "I know the costume is not all it could be. If you want to be a superhero, the logistics are nightmarish. It's like inventing a religion. You've got all these trappings, rituals and necessary things you need to create first."

Captain Australia is not alone in his quest to create the ultimate crime-fighting persona. According to the World Superhero Registry – an online database of real-life superheroes – there are hundreds of masked avengers patrolling the globe, including more than 200 in the US.

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They first began to emerge in the late '80s, but it wasn't until the September 11 attacks in 2001 that they multiplied exponentially. This motley crew of caped crusaders figured that if individual tyrants such as Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein could threaten the world, why shouldn't individual real-life superheroes attempt to save it?

To find out more about the movement's origins, I ask one of its pioneers, Captain Ozone, to explain his conversion.

"It wasn't my idea to become a costumed superhero. General Andrew Carter and his clandestine organisation assigned me on this mission 21 years ago," Captain Ozone says cryptically (from his headquarters in Belfast, Ireland). "I arrived via time latrine as William James Ozone on March 13, 1989, in Washington, USA, which makes me one of the earliest real-life superheroes."

Thanks to an eye-catching ensemble of white spandex, blue cape and matching

blue G-string, Captain Ozone has achieved moderate fame as an environmental crusader on a mission to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by promoting renewable energy. He admits his disguise is a gimmick to attract media attention, but it also works covertly to avoid the ire of "several oil moguls who would like to have me silenced".

In Naples, Italy, 'Entomo the Insect-Man' has also concocted a fantastical tale explaining the beginnings of his heroism.

"When I was five or six, I had a near-death experience that almost blew up my mind forever. It awoke a hidden part of my nature and made me 'connected' to a parallel plane of consciousness related to insects and arthropods. This was the day I became the Insect-Man," says Entomo.

Since 2007, Entomo has patrolled the "crazy, wild and dangerous" streets of Naples to restore equilibrium in a world that's tipped off kilter, describing himself as a detective, crime fighter, activist and environmentalist. "I'm very famous in Italy, even if I don't care about popularity. I'm not a vigilante, but a guardian – an 'Agent of Balance'," he says.

Many real-life superheroes perform good deeds such as visiting hospitals, attending environmental rallies, helping the elderly cross streets and giving sandwiches to the homeless. Others, judging from their MySpace profiles, are in it purely for the glory. They wear fancy costumes and talk the talk, but there's scant evidence they ever leave their garages.

"There's a guy making YouTube videos where he fakes fighting with gangs. That's painful and sad. A real hero doesn't necessarily need to blog everything he does," says Entomo. "It's about deeds, not words. We must inspire, we're living symbols."

The most committed superheroes share a few traits in common. They devote many hours to designing, tweaking and perfecting the quality and fit of their costumes. Spandex and masks are popular, but not obligatory. They carry a utility belt for torches, first-aid kit, plastic handcuffs and a walkie-talkie. They use the internet to promote themselves, possess basic martial arts skills and speak using dramatic catchphrases such as "Hear my buzz fear my bite" – one of Entomo's favourites.

Back in Australia, I track down another real life superhero: a 20-year-old Melburnian calling himself Shadow Wolf, who wears an iron mask and a wetsuit decorated with a silver shield.

I contact him via his MySpace profile to find out about his goals. "I'd be more than happy to answer any questions you have, but this week is not the best time for me," he replies. "If you like, we can sort something out next week."

CAGE
IDES



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A week later, Shadow Wolf deactivates his MySpace profile and is nowhere to be found on the superhero forums, where he previously shared information to help 'Aussie heroes starting out'. His disappearance is disappointing, but not surprising; superheroes can be notoriously shy, often working alone and terrified of unmasking their 'real' identities. (Three months later, Shadow Wolf reactivates his profile, but unfortunately declines to be interviewed.)

Still, not everyone finds the solitude a burden. Captain Australia isn't bothered by the loneliness of his quest. In fact, he was disheartened when he realised there were other superheroes on the planet. To be clumped together as a 'community' simply highlights the oddity of his vocation, and Captain Australia wants to be taken seriously.

"I do see the ridiculousness of what I'm doing," he admits. "For instance, I honestly didn't realise I had a gut until I saw one of my videos. I had this revelation towards the end of last year: one, I've got a gut; and two, the humour undermines what I'm doing."

(Captain Australia immediately embarked on a weight-loss program and is now 10kg lighter.)

"I absolutely have to become better at what I'm doing. If I'm to deserve the 'hero' label, I have to aspire to it. I lack tactical structure in what I'm doing, and I'd like to be more targeted in my missions. But I think it's noble to aspire to be something you can't be. It keeps you doing the best you can," he says.

It's easy to laugh, but perhaps real-life superheroes aren't as wacky as they seem. A quick glance at history's highest grossing films proves we've long been obsessed with the notion of someone whose purpose in life is to save the day. We admire their unwavering righteousness and the purity of their cause, even though fictional superheroes can't help us in the real world. At the end of the day, we can only help ourselves.

After our interview, Captain Australia heads off in search of crimes to fight, and I join him

in the hope of seeing him in action. People beep their horns and shout from their cars, laughing and waving. When a woman holidaying from Europe asks for his email address, Captain Australia whisks out a photocopied business card and gives a practised salute. At an intersection, arms akimbo, he calls out, "Hello citizens," to curious passers-by.

Later, Captain Australia reports that the day's patrol was uneventful, despite a small altercation with a nasty nightclub bouncer. Since then, however, he's crossed paths with his first real-life villain. Named Grodd, his purpose in life is to ridicule Captain Australia's combat skills on his own anti-hero blog.

But when I investigate, it seems even Grodd is won over by Captain Australia's irrepressible

optimism. "I have nothing personal against you, Captain Australia. I think you're a great guy, even if you are a dilusional [sic] weirdo. But how can you be a hero with no one to oppose [sic]? There can't be a hero without a villain. Consider me a 'necessary [sic] evil', if you will," writes Grodd, a super-villain and a terrible speller.

Not only have real-life superheroes spawned their own countermovement, they've inspired the best-selling teen superhero comic *Kick-Ass*, which has now been made into a film.

But away from the spotlight, their valour lies in attempting to save the planet, no matter how grim their chances. Real-life superheroes might be deluded, but at least they're giving it a go.

"By standing up and saying, 'I will do my best

to help you if you have a problem,' it's seeding goodness," explains Captain Australia, "and goodness can spread."

Captain Ozone agrees it's the sentiment that counts: "If crimes against humanity and Mother Nature persist, there will always be a need for more heroes."

As for Entomo the Insect-Man, heroism is simple. "I aim to live life in the best way possible which means inspiring others to live in the best way possible. I want to save the world, one person at a time. This is just the beginning." SM

AND THEN A HERO COMES ALONG...

Mere mortals have been captivated by superheroes ever since Action Comics introduced Superman in 1938, followed by the advent of Batman in 1939 and Wonder Woman in 1941.

In the '60s and '70s, Iron Man, Spider-Man, Wolverine, The Fantastic Four and The Incredible Hulk arrived to save the world from evil, wowing us with their spider-like agility, impenetrable armour, mutant genealogy and superhuman strength.

For 70 years, these superheroes have raked in billions of dollars for their creators, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, which - in addition to owning the rights to all their comic books and films - co-own the trademark to the term 'super hero'.

Marvel Comic's next film instalment, *Iron Man 2*, starring Robert Downey Jr and Gwyneth Paltrow, is in cinemas April 29.