

# Winging it



Eric Weintz, center, projects director for AmeriCares, discusses an airlift project to Panama with Ed Williamson, left, a pilot, and Army Sgt. Spencer Carter.

STAFF FILE PHOTO BY MARY COOLEEN

## AmeriCares' projects director rises to job's challenges

By Christine Lyall  
Special Correspondent

**I**t was almost 8 a.m. on a hot March day in Massawa, a war zone in northern Ethiopia. The Eritrean army had recently taken over the region, and MiG fighter jets often flew through unannounced, bombing the villages and the hospital. That morning wasn't any different.

Just as the sun reached the horizon, the "swoosh" of a fighter plane cut through the heavy air. Seconds later, the explosion of three bombs released less than a mile away could be heard.

"It was an eerie feeling because people were leaving as we were arriving," recalled Eric Weintz, projects director for AmeriCares, a New Canaan-based relief agency that flies in emergency medical and health supplies to distressed regions around the world.

Weintz, 27, a native of Riverside, was in Massawa earlier this year delivering relief supplies to drought and famine victims when the jet attack occurred. In September, he was in Jordan, aiding refugees along the border with Iraq.

On July 8, 1988, Weintz took on a job with AmeriCares — a job that would put his instincts and intelligence to the ultimate test while he traveled around the world to help victims of natural and political disasters.

So far he has never been happier — or busier. Clad in running shoes, jeans and a thick cotton shirt, Weintz fits the image of a young man on the move. Even his rarely used office at AmeriCares is only temporary while he waits to be transported to another room.

The minor inconvenience doesn't seem to faze a man who found himself bound for Ecuador only three days after he was hired.

"The nature of the job is not regimented," Weintz said. "Life at AmeriCares is largely winging it."

When disaster strikes, Bob Macauley, AmeriCares' founder, puts Weintz on a plane with a few sketchy instructions and a handshake. From there, Weintz' success



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Medical supplies shipped by AmeriCares for Romania are off-loaded from a cargo plane at the airport in Budapest.

depends on his wit and resourcefulness.

"I never have much notice," Weintz said with a chuckle. "Sometimes I'll get on a plane with just the shirt on my back."

Weintz once had an hour to catch a plane for Jamaica, so he grabbed his briefcase and headed out to the airport. Luckily he had enough time in Miami to buy a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste.

Upon his arrival at the site of a disaster, Weintz gathers information on health care, transportation and security so he can organize the area for the arrival of AmeriCares' airlifts.

Meanwhile, he tries to assess the people he meets to determine who will distribute and administer the supplies efficiently and without political or religious bias.

"I rely a lot upon intuition," said the enthusiastic Weintz, who has never seen any of his projects fail.

"If the products get handed to the wrong people, they could end up sold on the black market or left to rot on the docks," he said.

## Former resident took an alternate route to career

When he graduated from Stanford University in June 1985 with a degree in economics, Eric Weintz got a case of the jitters over joining the labor force.

While still interviewing with executives from midtown Manhattan banks, "I realized that once I landed a job, I would never get back out," he said.

So Weintz went home, packed a bag, bought a ticket and flew to Japan. He embarked on an adventure that he had wanted to take ever since he was a freshman in college and saw the movie "An American Werewolf in London."

"It was the first two minutes of that movie, where the guys are hitching a ride on the back of a truck crammed with sheep," Weintz said, laughing. "They're out there in the middle of nowhere. What are they going to do?"

That's when it occurred to Weintz that he, too, wanted to travel. He wanted to live by the seat of his pants in a foreign land. For the next 2½ years, Weintz, a former Riverside resident, got a taste of life in the Far East and Asia.

He recalled that the Chinese trains were particularly tough — especially for someone who stands more than 6 feet tall.

"They have these hard wood seats . . .," he explained. "There were chickens flying around, people spitting . . . it was a lot different."

In India, there was plenty of crime and squalor to keep Weintz on his toes, but many people spoke English, he said. It was a much different story in China, where he faced an almost crippling language barrier.

"That's where I started to communicate on an interpersonal level," he said. It was his interpersonal skills that helped Weintz find odd jobs to make enough money to survive.

Weintz bartended, taught English and even ran a booze cruise in Hong Kong on a "junk" boat before he took the Trans-Siberian railroad to Leningrad. From there, he traveled to Finland, then on to Germany, where he got a cheap rate on a cargo plane headed for the United States.

# AmeriCares' project director

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Although Weintz must improvise while on the job, there is one formula that he consistently follows: he always approaches situations with patience and flexibility.

"You can't go in and demand results and be forthright in what you're looking for," he said. "You must be sympathetic to the country's conditions and politics."

Weintz honed his interpersonal skills while he was traveling in the Far East after he graduated from college in 1985. He traveled on a shoestring budget, living with poor families, doing odd jobs and learning how to cut red tape so he could travel without bureaucratic hassles.

"I have to work with bureaucracies and

## Career

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"He basically lived like a third-world person," said Weintz' father, Fred, a retired investment banker from Riverside.

Fred Weintz and his wife, Betsy, raised their four children to be independent and responsible, he said, but not without some trepidation.

"When Eric and his brother were in college," Fred Weintz said, "they wanted to learn mountain climbing."

The boys attended a school in Colorado and ended up climbing a mountain that had never been climbed before.

"It was practically vertical!" he said. "It was very dangerous, but they learned the buddy system and looked out for each other."

Weintz' survival skills and communication won him his current job at AmeriCares as the agency's projects director.

"When I came back to the states, all I

government officials," he said of his work with AmeriCares. "You have to know how to make them your friend; then they're a lot more likely to allow you to do what you're hoping to do."

Speaking no foreign language fluently, Weintz often relies on gestures and tonal communication. By simply being nice, getting to know families or just raising his glass in thanks to their hospitality, Weintz is often able to make important friends and contacts.

Soviet Armenia proved to be his biggest challenge, he said. Weintz stayed there for several months, helping victims of the December 1988 earthquake.

During the fifth of his eight trips to the region, Weintz and his staff decided to take

knew was that I wanted to help people," he said.

Weintz came across AmeriCares when he met its president, Stephen Johnson, who originally called Weintz because his son was seeking tips on traveling in China.

"I see three or four resumes a day, most of which are from people with degrees in international development or international communications," Johnson said. "But what impressed me most about Eric was his keen initiative and ability to be faced with a totally unknown situation and in a short period of time make some sense out of it."

Having traveled around the world, living by his wits, Weintz stood out among the other applicants, Johnson said.

"I'm not doing what I'm doing because I set out to do it," Weintz said in retrospect. "I had no idea what I wanted to do. It goes back to trusting my intuition . . . something told me I shouldn't go 'Midtown.'"

—Christine Lyall

some severely injured victims back to the United States for corrective surgery.

"In two days, burning the midnight oil, we were able to get issued passports for 15 people," he said. "Clearly, people went way out on a limb for me and AmeriCares."

Weintz also helped to ease the pain and grief of the earthquake victims by developing closer and more personal friendships.

"I felt like I really made a difference in several people's lives," Weintz said with a note of satisfaction. "I stayed with families and played with their children by making faces, miming, tickling — trading happier things than just the disaster."

"Armenia just showed me the value of relationships and just treating people the way you'd want to be treated."

In the past, AmeriCares has been criticized for airlifting emergency aid to U.S. enemies, such as Iranian victims of the devastating earthquake last June.

"We're not here to pass judgment on people's politics," Weintz said, adding that he always tries to approach sticky situations with concern and neutrality. "I'm human and I care for these people."

Bob Macauley, who started AmeriCares in 1982, admires Weintz' drive to help people and his ability to work with foreign governments and armies.

"Eric is highly intelligent, venturesome, and he has guts," said Macauley.

There are times, however, when Weintz' job overwhelms him.

"There are a lot of faces that will always be in my memory . . . those that got away," he said. "But do you treat eight people or one person? It's a very moral decision. It's like playing God."

By the end of the cab rides home from the airport, Weintz' energy is recharged.