

## Thirty Years Later – Looking Back at Operation Babylift

Sarah Gray

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The first U.S. military cargo plane evacuating Vietnamese war orphans flew out of Saigon on April 4, 1975. Inside the C-5A Galaxy were close to 250 Vietnamese babies and toddlers and 50 American nurses, adoption workers and U.S. military personnel headed for the U.S. Aluminum benches lined the sides of the plane, and rows of 2 foot square cardboard boxes—each carrying two or three children—ran down the center, held in place by a long strap.

The flight began “Operation Babylift,” President Ford’s controversial directive to airlift several thousand of the estimated 70,000 Vietnamese war orphans at the end of the Vietnam War. Thirty U.S. military and commercial flights brought an estimated 2,500 orphans to the U.S. and 1,300 to Canada, Europe and Australia.

Forty miles out of Saigon and 23,000 feet up, the rear doors blew off of the C5. Although the Air Force pilots managed to turn the plane back toward Saigon, it crashed 2 miles from the city, killing 154 people, at least 100 of them children. To some, the crash epitomized the tragedy and chaos of the war. To others, it was an unfortunate incident in a mission that, according to Sally Vinyard, a member of the evacuation team at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon at the time, “may be the only good thing that came out of the war.”

Not surprisingly, “Operation Babylift” was mired in the heated emotions and divided opinions that surrounded the war. Was the mission truly an effort to save children whose futures were doomed or did it exploit these children in a last ditch effort to save face as Saigon fell to a North Vietnamese army the U.S. military had failed to defeat at the cost of 58,000 American and almost 4 million Vietnamese lives? How does the criticism of thirty years ago stand today in the eyes of those involved in the Operation?

Harsh criticism came from many directions. In response to the C5 crash, one South Vietnamese army lieutenant said, “It’s nice to see you Americans taking home souvenirs of our country as you leave—china elephants and orphans. Too bad some of them broke today, but we have plenty more.”

A petition signed by professors of ethics and religion at Stanford and the University of California—Berkeley on April 4, 1975 stated that “the only reason for bringing the children here is to salve our conscience, and children should not be used in that way.”

And Gloria Emerson, who won the National Book Award in 1978 for her book on Vietnam, *Winners and Losers*, criticized Operation Babylift as “a most successful propaganda effort.”

“Babies are a much nicer story than the 26 million craters we gave South Vietnam, nicer than the 100,000 amputees in that wretched country, more fun to read about than the 14 million acres of defoliated forest and the 800,000 acres that we bulldozed,” Emerson wrote. Still others asserted that the children’s relatives may have been displaced by war, and thus the children were not truly orphans.

Vinyard helped care for many of the children who would fly out. She recalled one busload of orphans that arrived to be processed for evacuation.

“They looked so pitiful,” she said. “There were about 20 of infant size—but I knew they were older—and then the little toddlers. I don’t know how many there were, dozens of them...they had been dressed up in

brand new little white dresses that morning, but by now they had thrown up...they had diarrhea, they were pitiful, and I doubted that many of them would make it.”

Conditions in Vietnamese orphanages were harsh; illness, malnutrition and lack of food and basic medical supplies were the norm. By April 1975 when the war ended, orphanages were overflowing with children who had lost their parents, children of American GIs whose Vietnamese mothers gave them up, and even more who were malnourished, sick or disabled.

Stephanie Johnson\*, a 31 year-old from Marietta, Georgia, was one adoptee who did make it. Johnson, now a homemaker and mother of three, was adopted by a flight engineer and a homemaker in Georgia who had also adopted a Caucasian boy from California. For her, what matters is not the politics of Operation Babylift but that children were given an opportunity for a better life.

“Babies born into this world do not have a choice of where they will grow up and who their parents will be” she said. “Operation Babylift gave these children who would be possibly left to die a chance for a different life.”

In fact, nine of the 2,500 babies that came to the U.S. died after arriving. One of them was Lana Noone’s first child, Mai Ngoc Tranh, renamed Heather Constance Noone. In honor of Heather’s death, Noone has spoken widely on the event and written a book on international adoption “so that people would remember Babylift, and remember that children did not die in vain.”

Noone, however, refuses to politicize the event.

“No matter what your politics were about the Vietnam War, you knew that tragedy was unfolding,” she said. “No matter who was in charge in Vietnam, who you think is right or wrong, whatever government should be there or wasn’t there, those children were in harm’s way.”

“They were not at the top of anyone’s list, “ she said. “They had no future in Vietnam and here they were with families from across the United States waiting with open arms.”

That life was not necessarily easy. Like many adoptees, Johnson faced racism more than prejudice for being adopted. She described an incident that took place when she was 16 and working as a cashier at a grocery store. A customer called her a “gook” and told her that she was the reason so many Americans soldiers had died, shocking to her because she had never heard the word and considered herself American.

“I know this sounds strange, but when I was growing up, I never saw myself as Vietnamese,” said Johnson. “I wanted to be as far away from [Vietnamese culture] as possible.”

In 2003, however, Johnson changed her mind. She began looking for her birth parents online, hoping that “it would lead me to many unanswered questions about [her] past”. She knows that she was put on the steps of a convent with a note in Chinese pinned to her dress. She believes her father is American and her mother is from a Chinese-speaking province in Vietnam. Other than locating a nun who knew the Sister who had cared for her, she found nothing.

In June 2005, Johnson joined 20 other adoptees for “Operation Babylift: Homeward Bound,” a flight to Ho Chi Minh City sponsored by World Airways, one of the commercial airlines that helped evacuate orphans in 1975, including Johnson, then a sick toddler.

Since the trip, Johnson no longer feels the need to look for her birth parents. For her, “the trip was not just to go to Vietnam” she said. “It was a mixture of meeting adoptees who went through this experience and realizing I was not the only one who went through this.

“Meeting the flight attendants, the two pilots that flew the plane...the volunteers who risked their lives to get us here was the most incredible experience of this trip” Johnson said. “I was able to meet my heroes and thank them.”

*\*The interviewee’s real name has not been used at her request.*