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Denver firm's mine poisons river

Golden Star operation spills 325 million gallons of cyanide waste in South America. **Page 3A**

Vietnam Babylift marks 20th anniversary



Dean Kraker/Rocky Mountain News

Young people evacuated from Vietnam in 1975 as orphaned infants in Operation Babylift say goodbye at the close of Reunion '95 at the YMCA Snow Mountain Ranch near Tabernash. "We came as individuals, we leave together," said one of the 50 participants Tuesday. "We'll always be together now." **Page 10A**

War orphans give thanks

Last to flee Saigon meet at Colorado reunion

By Maureen Harrington
Denver Post Staff Writer

FRASER — They're closer to teenagers than to adults. Their hair is moussed. They're tattooed, pierced, hip.

On Saturday they were strangers. By yesterday they were hanging out, smoking, eyeing each other in the hot grip of youthful hormones.

The young — what do they know of horror?

They are young, but they know.

Vietnam War babies. Conceived in a nightmare, born into hell — their baby pictures are part of the war records. Their childhood snapshots are filled with ghosts.

This morning, they will memorialize their dead. They pray for those not so lucky — for children not chosen for adoption. They will remember those too weak to make it through the first months of

■ **INSIDE:** Fateful flight to U.S. killed children, volunteers. 9A

dysentery and pneumonia. They wonder if anyone else in their birth family survives — brother, sister, mother, father.

They will mourn those they left behind and celebrate their own sweet fate.

One hundred and ten twentysomethings from across the U.S. have gathered at a YMCA camp near Winter Park. They are some of the 2,003 children flown out of Saigon by the U.S. military in April 1975 and adopted by American families.

These are the children of Operation Baby Lift, the last to escape before their country closed for two decades.



The Denver Post / Kent Meirels

SAVED: Allen Watkins was one of 2,000 babies from Vietnam who were airlifted to the United States as part of Operation Baby Lift.

Please see **BABIES** on 9A

Monday, August 21, 1995

THE DENVER POST

Rescued Saigon orphans give thanks at reunion

BABIES from Page 1A

All of them lived as infants in one of five Saigon orphanages started by Rosemary Taylor, an Australian ex-nupt. The reunion was hosted by the Colorado organizations Friends of Children of Vietnam and Friends of All Children, founded to help Taylor's work 20 years ago. They continue to support her work in the Cambodian refugee camp at Khao I Dang in Thailand and to act as a resource for the adoptees in America.

As children, the Vietnamese orphans left behind the killing fields. As adults, they have come together to learn about themselves at the four-day reunion.

Still, 20 years after Operation Baby Lift, they feel like exiles in the land of plenty. They have been given names that come from places with fjords and moors, though their heritage is heat and jungle: Katy, Matthew, Sven.

Only two raise their hands when asked who speaks Vietnamese, the language of their homeland.

But for a few days they are not strangers.

"We are small and dark skinned and dark eyed," said Ethan Brady, who works in the Excelsior Youth Center in Aurora. "We have spent a lifetime being different — looking different, feeling different. This is our time. We are not alone here."

Gathered in front of a collection of black and white photos taken 20 years ago in Saigon, five young women whisper and giggle, taking pictures of themselves and talking about boys.

"I'm from New Haven (orphanage)," says the first in vampy lipstick and blue contacts.

"What's your orphanage?"

Alissa Caves finds her picture in the Hy Vong nursery collection. She was bald and scrawny 20 years ago.

The 21-year-old Amerasian is beautiful now.

"Hey, dude, you had a pot belly," says Tim Holton to Allen Watkins.

The two young men, strangers 20 minutes before, look at Watkins' baby pictures taken at the New Haven orphanage.

The baby's belly was distended from malnutrition. Now, Watkins is a body builder. In 1992, while a junior at Arvada West High School, he was state wrestling champion.

He drives a red sports car, never takes off his cap and has every girl's name down pat.

Only Sister Mary Nelle Gage calls Watkins by his Vietnamese name, Binh.

Twenty years ago, the Sister of Lotto bathed him and held him in the Saigon orphanage, then sent him to his adoptive parents, Betty and Melvin Watkins of Arvada.

Fateful flight to U.S. killed children, volunteers

By Maureen Harrington
Denver Post Staff Writer

Twelve minutes into its flight, a plane carrying 228 Vietnamese orphans and hundreds of adult volunteers to America was in trouble.

A little after noon, April 4, 1975, the huge U.S. Air Force C-5A transport plane was 40 miles out of Saigon, at 23,000 feet, when two big "clamshell" doors blew open at the back of the cargo hatch.

What happened exactly has never been explained. Though sabotage was suspected, the tragedy of C-5A eventually was ruled accidental.

Surviving crew members guess that the orphans sitting on the floor of the plane's cargo area and the adults taking care of them were literally sucked out.

With the doors hanging open, Air Force Capt. Dennis Traynor turned the plane back toward Tan Son Nhut Air Base. He didn't quite make it.

"We fell into one bank of the Saigon River and then bounced to the other side of the river," says passenger Meritt Stark, a retired Denver pediatrician who was working for the U.S. State Department in Vietnam.

The enormous plane, capable of carrying three helicopters, eventually came to a stop in a rice paddy. One hundred and seventy-six survived. Forty-nine adults and 78 Vietnamese children were found dead.

Laurie Stark, 26, was one of the Americans who died that day. Her father says she hated all things about war.

"She was a protester of the war. I asked her to come to Vietnam to see for herself what was going on," said Dr. Stark from his retirement home in North Carolina. "She wasn't so political there. She became concerned for the children and started a little school, the Peter Pan. She helped the street boys — the beggars, the homeless, the prostitutes."

"We wanted him so much," says Betty.

"He is our life. We were 31 when we got him, and we were so grateful."

She looks at her husband, who smiles shyly and lets her do the talking.

"Don't you think?" she asks him rhetorically, not waiting for the answer.

No need. This is family myth.

On she goes with the story:

"It was just meant to be. He was so sick and then he was supposed to come out on a plane that crashed and we thought for a week he was in that crash and then we discovered him in a hospital in San Francisco. And they kept him there because he was so sick."

Betty Watkins takes a breath. Her son smiles at her.

"I looked pretty bad. I was all covered with bites and scabbies," Allen adds to the story.

"I was a pretty chubby kid, and people were always telling my mom to put me on a diet, and she never would. She said, 'Let him eat. He was so hungry when he came here.'"

Though much of the weekend is

Stark has no regrets about the six years he spent in Vietnam. "I thought I could do more there practicing medicine than I could in the U.S."

"I can't answer for Laurie. But, I think that she lived her life as she wanted to."

There is a picture of Laurie posted at the reunion of Vietnamese orphans. They don't remember her. They look at the young woman with long hair — slim and smiling — sitting on a rock, and they are silent.

They pass by and look at the other pictures of those who died in the crash:

C.S. Lewis was about 3. In his picture, he is naked and grinning. Dark eyed. He died with Laurie.

David Brackney looks at the pictures of the living and the dead. His American mother's picture is under Laurie's. He didn't know Laurie, but his mom did.

"I can hardly talk about that day," says Lidia Brackney, who is widowed and living in Oregon. "My husband and I were working in Vietnam and had adopted our two boys in Saigon. We had been advised to get out. I was due to take David and Tim out on that flight, but I had a terrible fight with my husband."

"He didn't want me to go alone to the States. He wanted us to fly to Bangkok and wait for him there. I was very very angry but I decided to give into him."

She pauses, near tears. "We are so lucky. We would have been on that plane. I think that crew was so heroic. I have no idea what would have happened to us."

Her son David graduated from the Air Force Academy in May and is on his way to flight school.

"I want to give something back to the country that saved me. I know how lucky I am. I've heard all the stories of my beginnings."

"I'm just one decision away from not being here. What if they'd chosen someone else? What if my mom and brother and I got on that plane?"

given over to private sessions talking about the problems of adoption, alienation, race and identity, Allen Watkins is not looking for his birth parents.

"I'm not bothered by this stuff too much. I'm a U.S. citizen," says the 20-year old sophomore at the University of Wyoming.

"I feel really lucky for my parents. We really click. We're like one person. I don't want to go to Vietnam or learn the language or look for anyone."

Though he's tolerant of the other adoptees' angst, Watkins calls himself, "completely whitewashed."

"I don't even date Asian girls. I guess I'm really American. I'm loud and outgoing. I'm not really like most Asians, I don't think."

Though Watkins wants to "leave the past in the past" he says, "I'd like to talk to Sister Mary Nelle. I would like to hear her talk about that time."

"You know, I look at these pictures of Ethiopian kids and think how sad that is, and then I remember that I was that baby. I was the kid in the commercial."

"If there was another decision made, I wouldn't be here."

His mom starts to tear up.

Colorado & The West



Dean Krakel/Rocky Mountain News

Participants in the reunion of young people airlifted as infants from Vietnam 20 years ago pluck ribbons of remembrance from a memorial wreath at YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch.

Vietnamese airlifted to U.S. 20 years ago connect at reunion

Cribmates become soulmates

By James B. Meadow

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

TABERNASH — With lips that trembled, voices that broke and eyes that glistened, they bore witness to a curious-yet-comforting truth: 8,500 miles from their birthplace, they had finally come home.

Tuesday was the farewell segment of Reunion '95, the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the last infants airlifted from Vietnam in Operation Babylift, the innocent refugees from a war that few would ever understand. For four days, these 50 young men and women coalesced at the YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch.

They had been among those helpless orphans — some sickly, some half-doomed by their mixed Amerasian blood, all imperiled by the war. They arrived to find adoptive parents

who loved them and cared for them and raised them.

Yet there had been something missing.

"There were things, we didn't know we felt; a lot of us didn't really know who we were," said Ethan Brady, 22, one of the reunion organizers.

"In the United States, Vietnam is a war, not a country," said Brady, one of those Vietnamese babies who arrived 20 years ago. "At this reunion, there was finally a place to be among those who have similar backgrounds."

Not surprisingly, the paths to enlightenment took diverse routes. One level was social — hiking, horseback riding and 3 a.m. star-gazing. But on another, more searingly personal level, the four days represented an epiphany.

"For me, this reunion has been very cathartic," said Kate Pickup, a 21-year-old senior at

Princeton University. "I grew up in South Florida, and there's not much of a Vietnamese community there. It wasn't until college that I thought of myself as Asian."

Helping Pickup were the many seminars and discussion groups the attendees held, discussing a litany of issues.

"Everything from what's it like to be part of a trans-racial adoption, to who *am* I, to did my birth mother abandon me, and if so, why?" said Brady, who became so emotional at the closing ceremonies, he had to stop his impromptu talk on several occasions to compose himself.

But it wasn't just the final event that inspired roiling emotions.

One of the most intense gatherings occurred Monday night, when some of the men and women who had been back

See **BABIES** on 14A

Features of Vietnam tap wellspring of emotion at reunion

from 10A

Medinger showed slides and talked about what it was like to grow up in their homeland. Perhaps she received more rapt attention than any other speaker. Jessica Medinger, 21, said that during the reunion, Medinger was

researching Catholic schools and orphanages in her homeland. Medinger ran into a nun who "knew my mother and recognized me because I looked just my mother did when she was my age."

Soon, Medinger met her birth mother. And a younger brother. And a grandmother.

"That whole experience brought a sense of peace and completeness to me that I can't really describe," said Medinger. Then she added, "But this reunion has been like that also. It's like being with my family."

"Everyone came here from all over — separate, bewildered, with

a lot of questions," said 20-year-old Tim Hoye. "But we leave with answers. We leave as true friends. We leave as brothers and sisters."

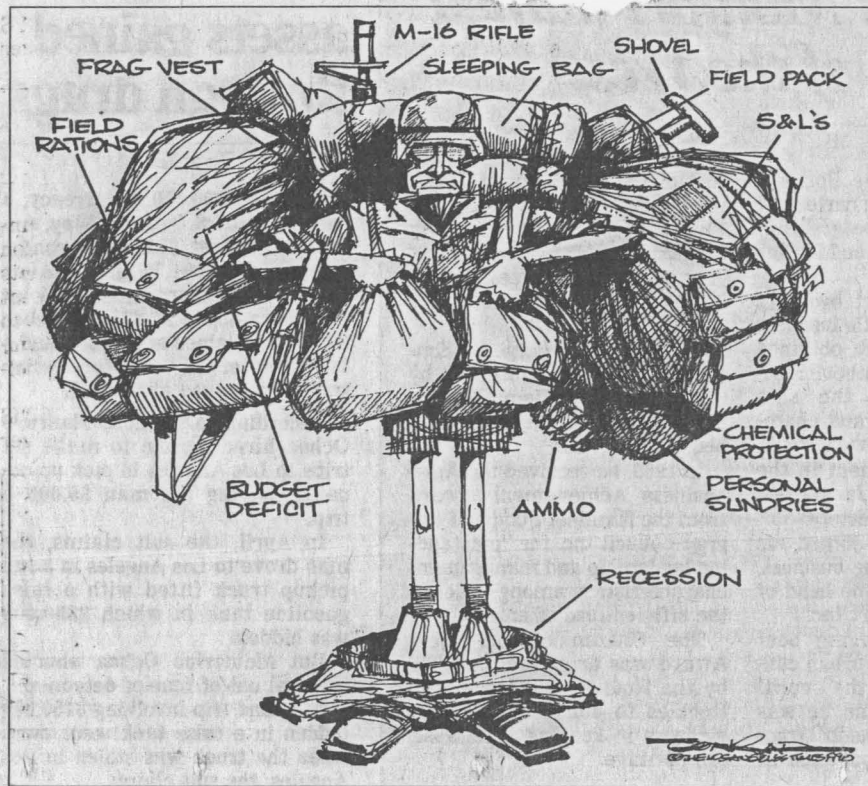
Or something even deeper. As video cameras recorded the spirited singing, and tissues were passed around, and long embraces were exchanged, it became clear

why many of the participants weren't willing to wait 10 more years before the next reunion.

"Our looks, our backgrounds, the prejudices we've faced — they won't go away," said Pickup. "Now, we have people to turn to as a support group. We don't want to give them up now. Or ever."

Tom Gavin's column
and Fridays

July 18, 1990



Denver Post
1990

Inquiry launched anew into reports of live Boulder woman, others seek Pentagon action

By Kit Miniclier
Denver Post Staff Writer

A new congressional inquiry is under way into persistent reports that American POWs are still being held in Southeast Asia 17 years after the last GIs were pulled out.

"This is a very unpredictable thing. We could be chasing fairy tales, or we could be onto an interesting story," said Dan Perrin of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff.

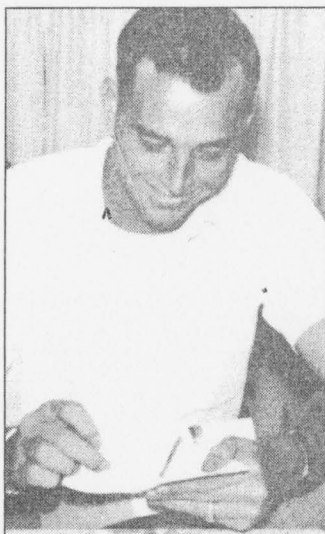
Although Perrin declined to comment on the scope or possible outcome of the inquiry, he said two investigators have been gathering information for "several months."

The investigation was started after North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, the ranking Republican member on the committee, concluded "it is time to take a closer look and make some sort of final decision" about the POW situation, Perrin said.

The congressional inquiry and a soon-to-be-published private-sector exposé come at a time when increasingly strident Vietnam veterans are joining exasperated relatives of missing soldiers in calling for Pentagon answers, rather than red tape.

Among those seeking action is Lillian Bickel of Boulder, whose first husband vanished after being shot down over Laos on June 14, 1969.

Bickel has spent years trying to



IN '69: James Grace before he was shot down over Laos.

find out what happened to Capt. James Grace after he was shot down, enlisting the aid of other pilots, Sen. Bill Armstrong, R-Colo., and a well-known forensic anthropologist.

She claims photographs prove Grace was taken prisoner. The Pentagon denies her claim, and at least three other families believe the photographs may be of their missing relatives.

But last week, nationally known

forensic anthropologist Michael Charney of Fort Collins compared photographs of a captured airman taken by a Soviet film crew in Vietnam with other photographs of Grace and concluded the Soviet pictures show Grace.

Charney said the prisoner's receding hairline compares favorably with Grace's hairline.

There is "little doubt that the man in the photo is Grace," Charney wrote Bickel.

Asked later about his finding, Charney sounded even more certain: "To my mind, that is Grace."

But the Pentagon believes that is impossible.

"Again, we would answer by saying he was shot down six weeks after that film was obtained by the CIA on May 1, 1969," said Lt. Commander Ned Lundquist, a Pentagon spokesman.

Lundquist denied allegations that the Pentagon changed the film's acquisition date after several relatives and colleagues submitted sworn affidavits saying the film showed Grace.

But 13 months ago, the chief of the Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action — Col. Joseph Schlatter — said the film wasn't acquired until June 16, 1969, which was two days after Grace was shot down, according to a Department of Defense correspondence obtained by The Denver Post.

Asked whether the Pentagon believes there still are POWs being held against their will in Vietnam, Lundquist said: "We are unable to prove any Americans are being held against their will in Indochina today," and "we are unable to prove that there aren't any."

"As long as we continue to receive reports, we will continue to investigate these with highest priority," He said four U.S. military teams are now in Southeast Asia looking for remains or tracking old reports of airmen seen alive near crash sites.

There are 78,750 American GIs missing from World War II, 8,200 from the Korean War and 2,304 from Vietnam.

As the 17th anniversary of the final withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam (March 29) approaches, two nationally known investigative authors/reporters are in Thailand putting the finishing touches on a highly critical five-year study of Washington's handling of the POW issue.

Titled "Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam," the book contends the federal government knows prisoners were left behind and has "regularly obstructed the efforts of private citizens to discover the truth."

The authors are Monika Jensen, a former producer for CBS-TV's "60 Minutes," and her husband,



POW PHOTO: A 1969 Soviet photo families believe the pictured capti

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Their Canadian editors say the book, to be published later this year, not only "reveals the heart-breaking evidence of men abandoned and families torn apart" but also asks: "When a government uses the cry of 'national security' to conceal facts from the public, how can the actions of that government be assessed and to whom is it answerable?"

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Coalition, says he is certain there still are American POWs being held against their will in Southeast Asia.

His coalition strongly supports legislation permitting taxpayers to reward those who find live POWs.

Helms has sponsored a bill authorizing a "POW/MIA Rescue Fund." It would be financed by \$1, non-deductible taxpayer contributions and would offer unspecified cash rewards to anyone in Burma, Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam who rescues an American POW being held against his will.

Colorado Campus

BECAUSE EXPERIENCE IS THE BEST TEACHER.

March 4, 1990

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War orphans give thanks

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The Denver Post / Kent Meireis

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"He is our life. We were 31 when we got him, and we were so grateful."

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"Don't you think?" she asks him rhetorically, not waiting for the answer.

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C.S. Lewis was about 3. In his picture, he is naked and grinning. Dark eyed. He died with Laurie.

David Brackney looks at the pictures of the living and the dead. His American mother's picture is under Laurie's. He didn't know Laurie, but his mom did.

"I can hardly talk about that day," says Lidia Brackney, who is widowed and living in Oregon. "My husband and I were working in Vietnam and had adopted our two boys in Saigon. We had been advised to get out. I was due to take David and Tim out on that flight, but I had a terrible fight with my husband."

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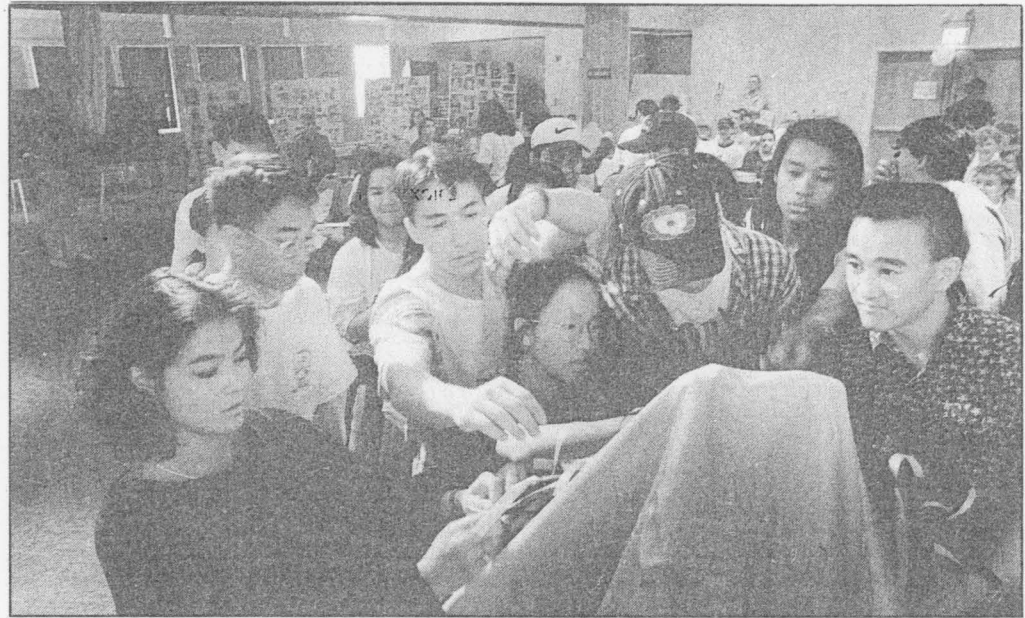


Dean Krakel/Rocky Mountain News

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Rocky Mountain News 8/23/95

Colorado & The West



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Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

TABERNASH — With lips that trembled, voices that broke and eyes that glistened, they bore witness to a curious-yet-comforting truth: 8,500 miles from their birthplace, they had finally come home.

Tuesday was the farewell segment of Reunion '95, the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the last infants airlifted from Vietnam in Operation Babylift, the innocent refugees from a war that few would ever understand. For four days, these 50 young men and women coalesced at the YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch.

They had been among those helpless orphans — some sickly, some half-doomed by their mixed Amerasian blood, all imperiled by the war. They arrived to find adoptive parents

who loved them and cared for them and raised them.

Yet there had been something missing.

"There were things, we didn't know we felt; a lot of us didn't really know who we were," said Ethan Brady, 22, one of the reunion organizers.

"In the United States, Vietnam is a war, not a country," said Brady, one of those Vietnamese babies who arrived 20 years ago. "At this reunion, there was finally a place to be among those who have similar backgrounds."

Not surprisingly, the paths to enlightenment took diverse routes. One level was social — hiking, horseback riding and 3 a.m. star-gazing. But on another, more searingly personal level, the four days represented an epiphany.

"For me, this reunion has been very cathartic," said Kate Pickup, a 21-year-old senior at

Princeton University. "I grew up in South Florida, and there's not much of a Vietnamese community there. It wasn't until college that I thought of myself as Asian."

Helping Pickup were the many seminars and discussion groups the attendees held, discussing a litany of issues.

"Everything from what's it like to be part of a trans-racial adoption, to who *am* I, to did my birth mother abandon me, and if so, why?" said Brady, who became so emotional at the closing ceremonies, he had to stop his impromptu talk on several occasions to compose himself.

But it wasn't just the final event that inspired roiling emotions.

One of the most intense gatherings occurred Monday night, when some of the men and women who had been back

See **BABIES** on 14A

Pictures of Vietnam tap wellspring of emotion at reunion

BABIES from 10A

to Vietnam showed slides and spoke about what it was like to return to their homeland. Perhaps no one received more rapt attention than Jessica Medinger.

Last spring, Medinger was

researching Catholic schools and orphanages in her homeland. Medinger ran into a nun who "knew my mother and recognized me because I looked just my mother did when she was my age."

Soon, Medinger met her birth mother. And a younger brother. And a grandmother.

"That whole experience brought a sense of peace and completeness to me that I can't really describe," said Medinger. Then she added, "But this reunion has been like that also. It's like being with my family."

"Everyone came here from all over — separate, bewildered, with

a lot of questions," said 20-year-old Tim Hoye. "But we leave with answers. We leave as true friends. We leave as brothers and sisters."

Or something even deeper.

As video cameras recorded the spirited singing, and tissues were passed around, and long embraces were exchanged, it became clear

why many of the participants weren't willing to wait 10 more years before the next reunion.

"Our looks, our backgrounds, the prejudices we've faced — they won't go away," said Pickup. "Now, we have people to turn to as a support group. We don't want to give them up now. Or ever."

**Fort Collins women
rescued 300 infants
as Saigon fell**

**Viet babylift
saved 'child
of destiny'**

By Karen Abbott

Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

Twenty years ago, Jennifer Lin Bergner was one of the thousands of babies packed three to a cardboard box and airlifted out of Saigon as Vietnam fell to the Communists.

Soon, the 20-year-old Denver woman with a past lost in Vietnam will be teaching classrooms of American children. Bergner, a star athlete when she attended Thomas Jefferson High School, is studying psychology and education at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

INSIDE

■ Excerpts from the book *This Must Be My Brother*/17A
■ Vietnamese celebrate victory/29A

In early April 1975, just three weeks before the last U.S. helicopters left the rooftop of the Saigon embassy, the baby now known as Jennifer Bergner and 299 other infants were rescued by two women who now live in Colorado.

The Viet Cong had reached the suburbs of Saigon and bombs were falling when Bergner was flown to the United States in a frantically assembled planeload of 300 babies.

"Oh, plenty of time," LeAnn Thieman said recently, recalling the exhausting, terrifying journey she spent feeding, diapering, burping and rocking the babies.

Thieman and her friend, Carol Dey, then young mothers from the Midwest, had never dreamed they would walk into a wartorn nation halfway around the world when they volunteered to work for Friends of the Children of Vietnam.

The Denver-based agency flew them to Saigon — with assurances from the State Department that they would be safe — to escort a half-dozen babies back to the U.S., where families waited to adopt them.

But war conditions abruptly worsened, and Iowa mothers suddenly found themselves swept up in world history. This year, they published a book on their unexpected adventure, *This Must Be My Brother* (Victor Books) that includes a photograph of Jennifer as a fragile, 7-month-old with her head shaved because of grave illness.



Ken Papaleo/Rocky Mountain News



JENNIFER LIN BERGNER was airlifted as an infant from Saigon during the city's death throes in 1975. Now, she is a student at the University of Colorado. Photo at left, showing Bergner as a baby, appears in *This Must Be My Brother*, a book by LeAnn Thieman and Carol Dey. They're the Colorado women who helped rescue her.

Thieman and Dey now live in Fort Collins, less than a two-hour drive from the university where Bergner is preparing for her teaching career. She hasn't seen them since the airlift, which she doesn't remember. But she read their book in one night. "It was my past," she said.

The airlift not only changed Jennifer's destiny, it changed the lives of Dey and Thieman, who struggled to fight their own fears that they would be killed and never return to their children in Iowa.

"The book for me is symbolic of growth within myself and how my life has been," said Dey, "That is, to be sometimes fearful about stepping forward, and then being able to muster the courage to do what I think is right

— and the strength that comes from that." The two women had to be very strong. They had to watch mothers who had loved and cared for their tiny babies give them up so they could have better lives. They had to watch as other infants were left behind because they were too ill to make the trip. They had to listen to frightening gunfire as they cared for hundreds of crying babies in the stifling tropical heat. Thieman became ill in Saigon.

They were terrified when an airplane carrying babies exploded on takeoff, killing many of the infants and the escorting adults on board. No one knew what had caused the explosion.

See **RESCUED** on

Women saved a child of destiny

RESCUED from 5A

In addition to discovering the strength of her courage during the journey, Thieman also found the baby boy who became her adopted son, Mitchell, now a student at Colorado State University. Like Jennifer, Mitchell had been given to an orphanage by his biological mother.

Thieman said there were an estimated 20,000 orphans in Vietnam at the time, many of them facing grim futures because they were the children of U.S. servicemen. Mixed-race children were not accepted.

Bergner believes her own biological father also was a U.S. serviceman. She was adopted by Sally and Paul Bergner of Denver, and she and her family know only that her biological mother was a 15-year-old who handed her daughter to a nun at an orphanage. "She must have loved me a lot in order to give me up, knowing she couldn't take care of me," Jennifer said. "I thank her for what she did for

me."

Jennifer and Mitchell were among some 2,700 orphans brought to the United States during "Operation Babylift." Thousands more went to other nations.

Thieman and Dey said they still wonder about the children who were left behind.

"I wanted to get huge jetliners and bring them all out," Thieman said. "It was hard to bring out only a few. I hope their lives have been healthy and good, but I do worry about them."

Dey also worries. "I wonder about it, but I don't know what else to say. We don't know what really happened to the babies who didn't come. But I'm thankful for the babies that did come."

Bergner, too, is thankful. "I consider myself very lucky to have the family that I have," she said last week. "Because of the huge number of orphaned children in Vietnam, the fact that I was chosen — the odds were incredible — I think it was kind of my destination to be here."

BABIES LOADED ON PLANE IN BOXES



Thieman



Dey

The following is an excerpt from the book, *This Must Be My Brother*, by Coloradans LeAnn Thieman and Carol Dey. It tells of the airlifting of 300 babies during the fall of Saigon.

♦ ♦ ♦

As Carol (Dey) carried a baby from the center to the van, a Vietnamese woman in a head scarf touched her arm to get

her attention. She pointed to a boy, probably about 8 years old, sitting next to the window in the van.

His frightened eyes were moist as he stared out the window at her. She tapped the left side of her chest and said, "Not forget me."

He had a picture of her in his pocket. Her eyes, sad and dark, carried a burden of a mother giving up her child.

As Carol handed me (Thieman) the baby in her arms, she described the encounter and the anguished look on the woman's face.

"Do you think she actually gave up her son?" she choked. "I can't imagine what she's going through. I don't want to believe it." If it were true it would be the greatest maternal sacrifice.

When asked, these women denied that the children were theirs . . . Each had to sign a release swearing the child was an orphan.

Carol and I entered the mammoth cargo jet . . . all but a few seats had been removed and had been replaced by long benches along the sides. Down the center was a row of about 20 cardboard boxes, each approximately two feet square. Two to three babies were lying in each box.

A long strap was secured at one end of the plane. From there it was stretched over the boxes, then attached to the other end of the plane to hold the boxes securely in place . . . Toddlers and the older children sat with seat belts on the long benches . . . bewildered orphans strapped inside a flying boxcar.

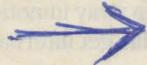


ROGER DONG

▶ SPIRITED TO SAFETY

Vietnamese orphans rescued in 1975 by Operation Babylift recall the past—and dream of the future.

40



EVERETT COLLECTION



TONY KORODU/SYGMA

STARS AND STRIPES

▼ Actress Paula Korologos's enthusiasm never flags for her role as a right-winger on *Murphy Brown*. **106**



SAM JONES

singer **Victoria Williams** is busy playing to a whole new world of fans

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Tree artists **Skip** and **Chris Roth** arbor a passion for their unusual wood sculptures

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Regulatory gadfly **Philip Howard** pleads for relief from burdensome rules in a surprise best-seller, *The Death of Common Sense*

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Got a sophisticated new computer program? It may have been tested by 9-year-old wunderkind **Adam Baratz**

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Beloved balladeer-actor **Burl Ives**, who died on

Good Friday at 85, beguiled children with "The Blue Tail Fly" and riveted adults with his rendition of Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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Their careers cover both ends of the clock, and *The Tonight Show*'s new bandleader **Kevin Eubanks** and *Days of Our Lives* star **Tammy Townsend** are cuddling most hours in between

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In Friendsville, Md., **Spencer R. Schlosnagle** is happily serving his fifth term as mayor—despite numerous arrests for indecent exposure

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She grew up romping in the halls of the Nixon White House; now **Paula Korologos** is making waves as *Murphy Brown*'s resident Republican

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Correspondents were neither surprised by the breakup of the Julia Roberts-Lyle Lovett marriage (PEOPLE, April 10) nor particularly sympathetic to the erstwhile bride and groom. Most felt they had married in haste, with little regard for the commitment required to make marriage work.

■ JULIA & LYLE

Spare me another story about celebrities who think a lifelong commitment like marriage can be entered into after knowing each other for only a few months. Did these couples ever hear of dating? Here's a news flash, Lyle and Julia: Marriage is wonderful, but it's also a lot of work. And it's an affront to all of us out here who are trying to make it work when celebrity couples hop into marriage with the same apparent degree of understanding and commitment that teenagers display when they decide to go steady.

BARBARA MEYER, *St. Louis*

Julia and Lyle announcing that they are separating? Since when is this news—they have been separated for the entire 21 months they have been married.

BEVERLY KAUFMAN, *Redding, Calif.*

I'm sick of hearing about Hollywood couples being "in love" or "perfect for each other." The great majority don't know what love and marriage mean. Love is forgiving, compromising, giving unselfishly, remaining faithful. It means sticking around when life gets rough. I know. I got married at 18 and have been married for 14 years. The next time you write about a Hollywood romance or wedding, please title it "Two People in Lust"!

MARY HAGER, *Rockville, Md.*

■ THE OSCARS

The Oscar landslide for the heartfelt *Forrest Gump* and the virtual shutout of the viciously violent *Pulp Fiction* restores one's faith. Maybe the film industry's terminally hip will begin to

accept that life-affirming films are ultimately superior to those that denigrate the quality and value of life.

ROBERT GORDON JR., *Nashville*

Why is it that the only celebrity you criticized in your Oscar article was Oprah Winfrey? I fail to believe that no one thought Sigourney Weaver's outfit was a bit much—or that the outfit worn by Jacqueline Bisset wasn't ridiculous. Come on, PEOPLE, be fair!

HOPE HICKS, *Albuquerque*

■ ALFONSE D'AMATO

With all due respect to Penny D'Amato, the estranged wife of Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, children are not made illegitimate if their parents' marriage is annulled under church or civil law. Just ask a priest.

J'NEANE WEYDERT, *Dubuque, Iowa*

■ ROSEMARY GREEN

I want to congratulate Rosemary Green on her weight loss and the success of her book, *Diary of a Fat Housewife*. But I don't think her success gives her the right to pretend to speak for all overweight people when she states, "When you're fat, you can't go through a day without hating yourself." I have been overweight for most of my 34 years, and I have never hated myself.

ANDREA CARRINGTON, *Alameda, Calif.*

■ TIFFANY COCHRAN

I enjoyed Tiffany Cochran's tale about when she and her father, Johnnie, were driving down Sunset Boulevard in a Rolls-Royce. At gunpoint, Johnnie was supposedly ordered out of the car by police who backed off once they learned Johnnie was a deputy district attorney.

Well, Johnnie must have been a former deputy DA by the time the incident occurred. I don't know any prosecutors who drive around in Rolls-Royces. Tiffany's story deserves some cross-examination by the Dream Team.

LYNN R. SHOEN, *Las Vegas*

Fifteen years ago a deputy DA in Los Angeles could afford a Rolls-Royce? Where do I apply for the job?
BILL HOPKINS, *Marble Hill, Mo.*
Prosecuting Attorney of Bollinger County
Mr. Cochran had been in a very lucrative private practice before joining the District Attorney's office in 1978.—ED.

■ EAZY-E

Your tribute to Eazy-E was a shining example of what's wrong with society today. Glorifying a street thug who started a record company using drug money, who fathered eight children by seven different women and whose biggest contribution to the world was music that no one will remember in three years sends out a dangerous message. Gee, what a guy! Just the kind of person I want my kids looking up to. It saddens the heart to think of all the decent people who slip away unnoticed while vermin like this get international coverage.

JOEL HUESTON, *Delta, B.C.*

■ INSIDER

Please spare us! Isn't Joey Buttafuoco's 15 minutes of fame over yet?

SALLY HENDERSON, *Houston*

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THE INSIDER

by Mitchell Fink

THE TRIPPLEHORN-STILLER SAGA CONTINUES



▲ Gloria Steinem: Proud to be dissed by Arianna Huffington

I reported last week that the nearly two-year engagement of actress **Jeanne Tripplehorn** and actor-director **Ben Stiller** had come undone. Now I know why. Tripplehorn was seeing a new boyfriend, **David Barrett**, whom she met while working this past year with **Kevin Costner** in *Waterworld*. Barrett, a stunt man on the big action movie, comes from wealth. His family owns the popular Mammoth Mountain ski resort near Mammoth Lakes, Calif. I'm told that Tripplehorn suddenly called it off with Barrett a couple weeks ago and is now trying to reconcile with Stiller. Good luck. . . . Author **Arianna Huffington**, whose husband, **Michael**, narrowly lost the California senatorial election in November to incumbent **Dianne Feinstein** and now has his eye on the governor's seat, is no fan of *Ms.* magazine cofounder **Gloria Steinem**. During

a Q&A session following her recent speech at the American Society of Magazine Editors in Manhattan, Huffington called Steinem a "bitter woman whose life is in shambles" and added: "Most women have no connection with her beliefs, her values." Steinem, who missed this diatribe, expressed no surprise when told of Huffington's comments. "If she said something good about me," said Steinem, "I would think I was doing something wrong." . . . Call it the trickle-down effect of **Marcia Clark**'s new hairstyle. The five Clark lookalikes at Ron Smith's *Celebrity Look-Alikes* in Los Angeles, who have been sent out to conventions and TV shows such as *Leeza* and *American Journal*, have been forced to get new haircuts too. . . . And speaking of the real Marcia Clark, venerable Hollywood producer **Ray Stark** hosted a dinner in her honor recently at his Beverly Hills home. Stark sat Clark next to **Sally Field**'s ex-husband, produc-

▼ Arlene Parness: A Marcia Clark lookalike



er **Alan Greisman**. Make of that what you will. . . . And for those who still think magician **David Copperfield**'s yearlong engagement to supermodel **Claudia Schiffer** is just a publicity stunt for both, check this out: The two were

sighted recently at Trattoria Dell'Arte, a Manhattan restaurant, where Schiffer could barely stop nuzzling Copperfield's neck. . . . **Carly Simon** is the godmother of **Mia Farrow**'s 17-year-old son **Moses**. On the Lifetime cable special, *Intimate Portrait: Carly Simon*, airing May 21, Farrow says she may also ask Simon to be



▲ Claudia Schiffer and David Copperfield



▲ A scene from *Jurassic Park*. Rick Dees, for one, wants to keep dinos onscreen, not outside his window.

Jurassic Park attraction that Universal Studios Hollywood plans to open next summer. Why the code name? Because, in the words

of a source, it's "Universal's way of protecting itself" from the expected negative reaction from local residents in Universal City. Like **Rick Dees**, the L.A. disc jockey, who lives close to the prospective Jurassic site. "What I'm hearing is, 'Quick, Rick, sell your house,'" says Dees, adding plaintively, "I would rather not have to look out my window at a big green dinosaur." Sorry, Rick, it's a done deal.

godmother to newest child, daughter **Keili-Shea**, 1. Farrow says, "I can't think of anyone better than Carly." Of course, after a dozen kids a case can be made that Farrow may be running out of potential candidates. . . . I hear **Ralph Reed**, executive director of **Pat Robertson**'s Christian Coalition, will get \$350,000 to write a book for the Free Press, a division of **Simon & Schuster**, explaining the coalition's conservative agenda. . . . And, finally, **Project 777** is the code name for an \$80 million

► **Carly Simon's anticipation:** Being a godmother, again



ANDREA RENAULT/GLOBE PHOTOS

HUTCHINS/MICHELSOHN

KEVIN MAZUR

SYGMA

A. BERLINER/GAMMA LIAISON

TO A NEW HOME

Twenty years later, Vietnam's Babylift orphans come of age

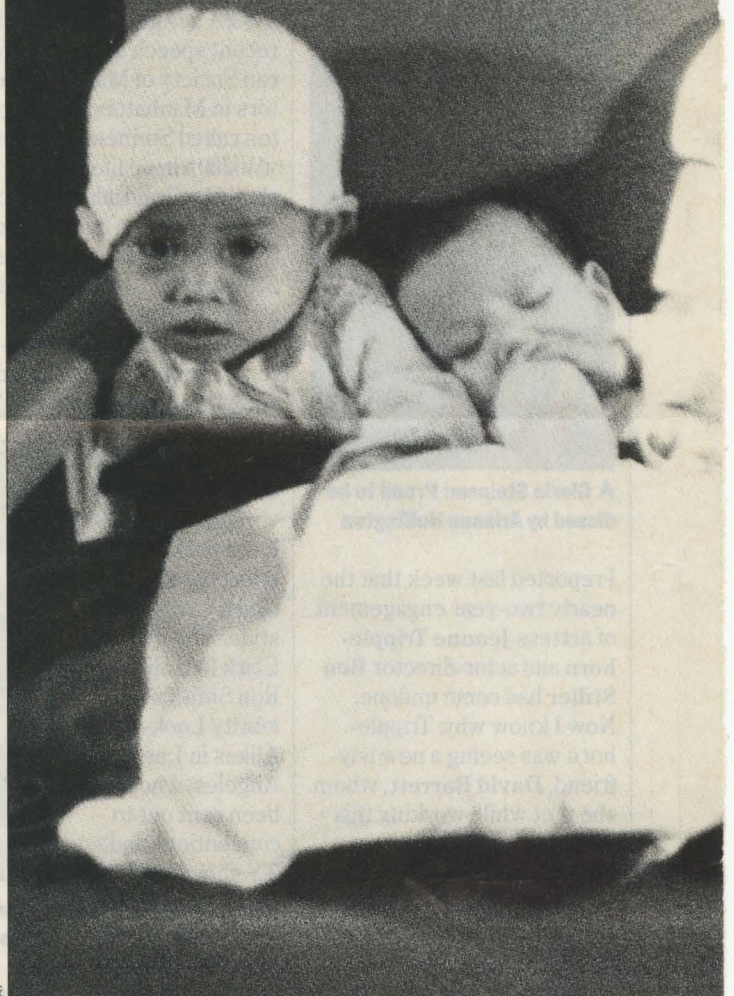
The C5-A transport carrying 228 Vietnamese orphans was just 12 minutes into its flight from Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon to Travis Air Force Base in California when something went terribly wrong. "There was this loud explosion," recalls Dr. Meritt Stark, a retired pediatrician living in Asheville, N.C., of the April 4, 1975, flight. "I thought we had been hit by a surface-to-air missile." What he could not see from his position on the upper deck was that the rear cargo door had burst open, damaging the plane's rudder and stabilizer and causing a sudden decompression in the plane's interior. Air Force Capt. Dennis Traynor turned the crippled plane back toward Saigon and managed a crash landing in a rice paddy. The plane broke apart on impact; although 176 survived, the bodies of 49 adults and 78 Vietnamese orphans lay strewn about the site.

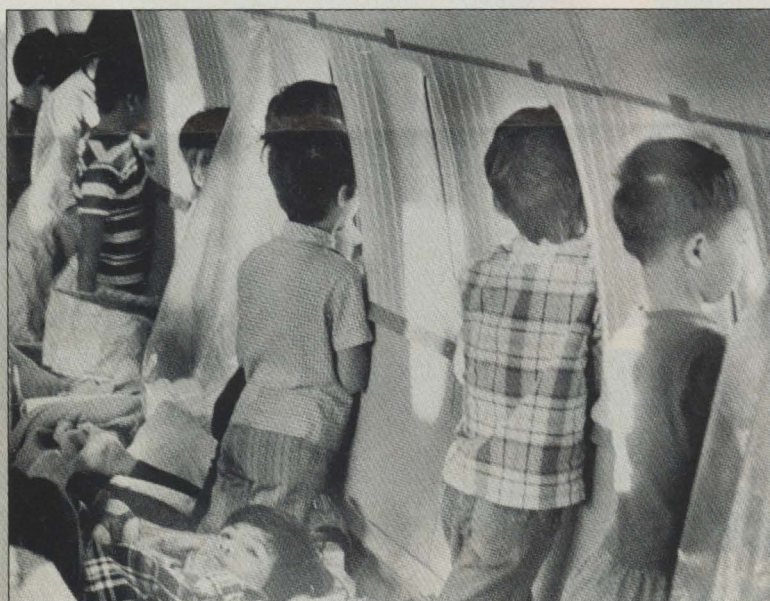
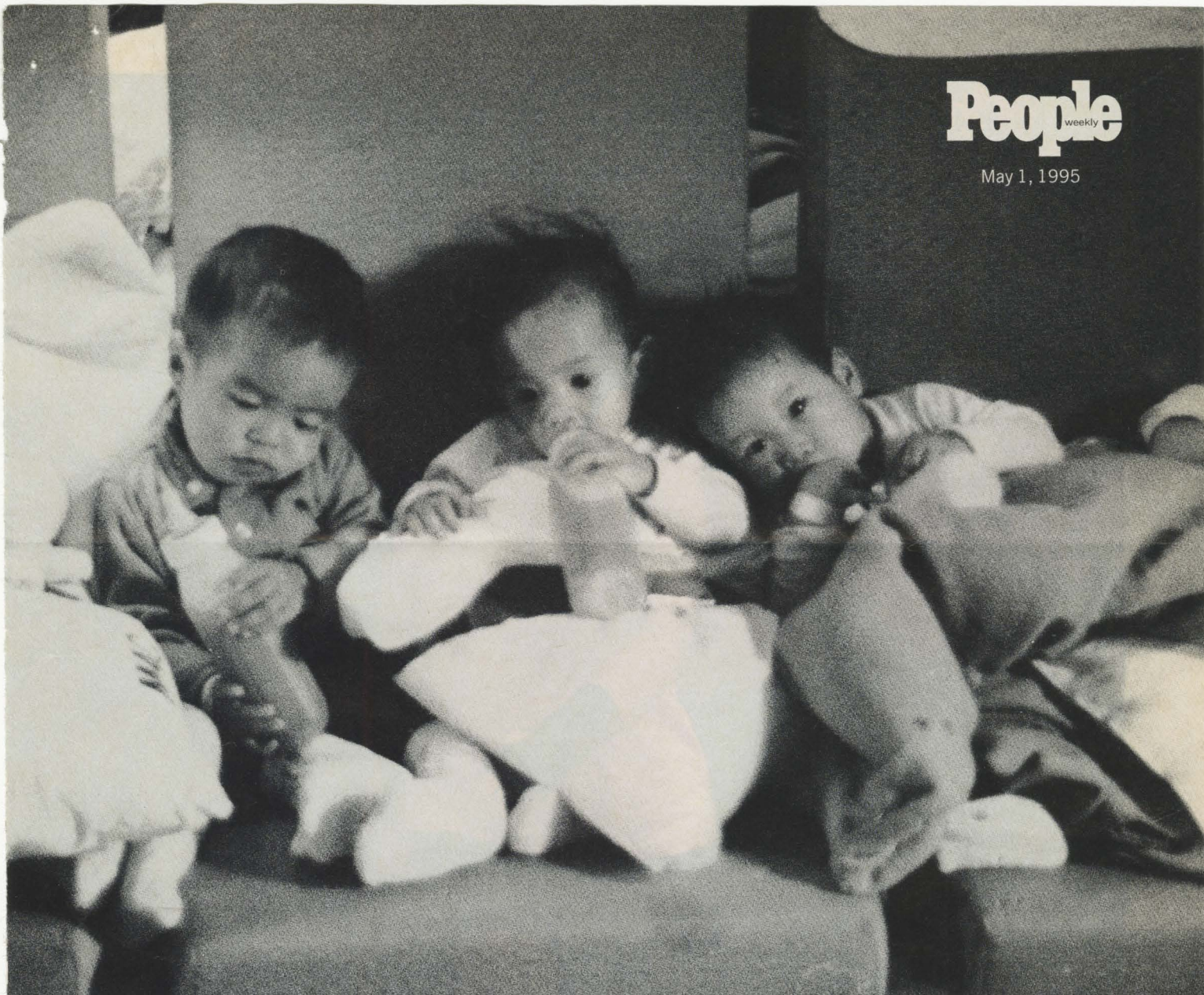
The crash was yet another calamity for children—many of them offspring of U.S. servicemen—whose lives were already freighted with tragedy. But it was also the beginning of an extraordinary moment of hope. As North Vietnamese forces closed in on Saigon—soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City—the U.S. scrambled to evacuate its remaining 7,000 soldiers, diplomats and civilians, and President Gerald Ford sponsored one last effort on behalf of Vietnam War orphans under the care of relief agencies. From April 3 to April 19, Operation Babylift, the largest such rescue effort in history, flew 2,003 children, including the survivors of the April 4 crash, to new homes in the U.S.; another 1,300 went to Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and Scandinavia. Recalls lawyer Ross Meador, 40, who helped run an orphanage near Saigon for the Denver-based Friends of Children of Vietnam (FCVN): "People were desperate to get children out."

For the children of Operation Babylift, being given over to adoptive families in the West represented an unimaginable change of fortune. The transition has not always gone smoothly. According to FCVN executive director Cheryl Markson, about a quarter of the children airlifted to the U.S. have had adjustment problems. Yet most of them are now productive young adults, attending college, pursuing careers, starting families of their own. With the Vietnam War under renewed scrutiny 20 years after the fall of Saigon, Operation Babylift stands out as a victory. As the stories on the following pages attest, it provided a future for children for whom hope appeared lost. ➤

➤ In April 1975, as the North Vietnamese closed in on Saigon, relief workers hurried children aboard an American plane.

These infants in the C5-A flight deck were among the 150 orphans who survived the April 1975 crash.





PETER ARNETT/AP

◀ Near the end of their long trip, young passengers on the first Babylift flight to reach the U.S. got a glimpse of California.

▶ On April 5, 1975, at San Francisco International Airport, the first Babylift arrivals received a presidential welcome from Gerald Ford.

WALLY MCNAMEE/WOODFIN CAMP



UP FRONT

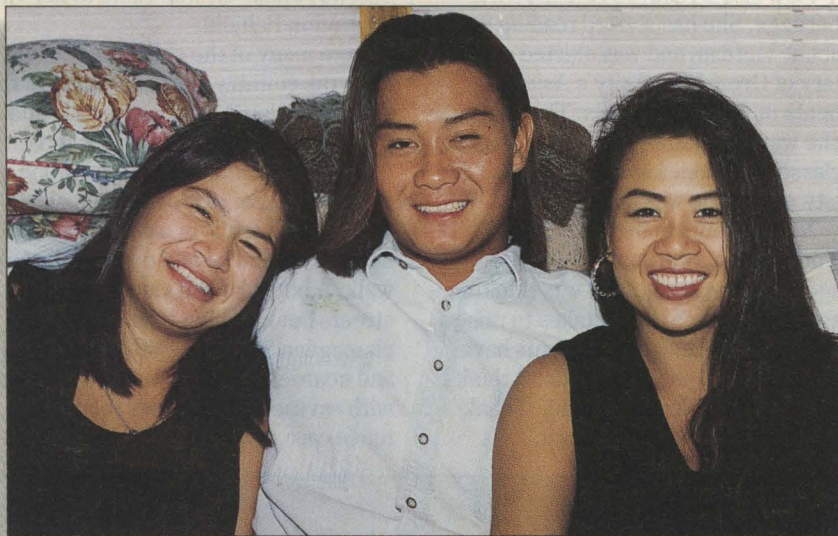


"I have a feeling of completeness now," says Ginger (near home in Lenexa, Kans.).

► **Ginny and John Seevers met Ginger, 4, on April 11, 1975, at the Kansas City airport.**



▼ **Ginger was reunited with long-lost siblings Mailin Felgitsch (left) and Jeff Teglas last fall.**



COURTESY GINGER SEEVERS (2)

Together again after a lifetime separation

Ginger Seevers was 4 when she climbed aboard the huge cargo plane in April of 1975, old enough to be anxious about being torn away from what was familiar to her. Her mother had left the family for unknown reasons, and her great aunt, who was caring for her, persuaded her father, a South Vietnamese soldier, to put her up for adoption. "I remember being on the plane and drinking milk," says Ginger. "I spilled it on a blanket and started crying and crying."

John and Ginny Seevers, of Kansas City, Mo., were also anxious. Although they had a biological daughter, Heather, 5, they had been trying for three years to adopt a Vietnamese child. "I had gotten to the point that I wouldn't leave home without having someone

come over and babysit the phone," says Ginny, 53, a desktop publisher. "We were really frantic," adds John, 53, a high school social studies teacher in Overland Park, Kans. They had been told to expect a 3-year-old girl; then at the last moment they were informed that the child had been left behind in Vietnam but that another child needed a home. When they met their new daughter at the Kansas City airport, they realized they didn't even share enough language to ask her if she wanted to use the bathroom.

It was Heather who closed the language gap by naming things as she led Ginger—the name the Seevers gave her—around the house. A happy, sociable child, Ginger poured her energy into becoming an American—she acted in family theatricals, read fashion magazines, excelled in school—and ex-

pressed little interest in her past. Then, in 1990, she asked the Seevers to see her adoption file. "When I turned 20, I suddenly wanted to know everything," she says. "It's like a missing part of you out there. I was so curious."

Ginger was shocked to read that she had a brother from whom she had been separated in the confusion of the airlift. The file also listed the name of the FCVN's Cheryl Markson. When Ginger telephoned, Markson told her that the great aunt who had cared for her was now living in Florida. A second shock came when the aunt asked Ginger: Where were her brother and sister?

With Markson's help, Ginger discovered that her younger sister, Mailin, had been airlifted to Germany and adopted by Werner Felgitsch, an architect, and his wife, Brigitte. After an exchange of letters, the two met in Bristol, England, in 1993. "I'll never forget it," says Mailin, 23, who now works in Munich for a computer-parts company. "We talked and talked. After two days it finally hit me I had a sister."

Next Ginger tracked down their brother Jeff, who was living in San Diego. Jeff, a senior at the University of California at San Diego, had been brought up by Julius and Barbara Teglas, schoolteachers in Upland, Calif. "I called, and we talked for 3 or 4 hours," says Ginger, a slight 5'1". "I asked him what he looked like—if he were as short as me."

The siblings began to plan a reunion. Last September the three met for the first time in two decades at Ginger's apartment in Overland Park, where she works as a hairstylist. "I was really, really nervous," says Jeff. "I needed a couple of beers on the plane to relax."

For two weeks the three were inseparable. They went dancing and took turns cooking for each other—from burritos to spaghetti. "We did a lot of looking in the mirror," says Ginger. "We'd stand there and say, 'Look at your nose. We have the same noses.'"

"There was a bond there that none of us could really explain," says Jeff. "Maybe deep, deep down we could remember each other."

The three are planning a second reunion in California this year and, at some point, a return trip to Vietnam. "All I know is that we're not going to lose each other again," says Jeff. Adds Ginger: "It's like finding the pieces of a missing puzzle. Now we're all one again."

A fulfilling life, joyously lived

She races from classes to rugby practice to intramural softball, then to her two part-time jobs in a deli and coffee-house. In between, Jennifer Noone, 20, a sophomore at Drew University in Madison, N.J., loves to laugh and play practical jokes with her friends. "I'm so happy with my life that I can't imagine it being any different," she says.



COURTESY NOONE FAMILY

But for Operation Babylift, it would have been. Born in Saigon in January 1975, Jennifer—then an orphan named Nguyen Thi Dai Trang—was evacuated when she was just 3 months old and adopted by Byron Noone, an English professor at Queensborough Community College, and his wife, Lana, an elementary-school music teacher in Long Island, N.Y. Despite a happy childhood filled with piano, gymnastics and dance lessons, Jennifer felt the occasional sting of racial taunts at her mostly white elementary school. For a while she hid the fact that her middle name was Nguyen, the name her parents had retained for her as a vestige of her Vietnamese heritage. "When I was young, being different was kind of hard," she says.

Now she is ready to celebrate her heritage. She has started reading books about Vietnam and was elected secretary of Drew University's Asian Students in America chapter. This summer she wants to start Vietnamese language classes and hopes some day to visit the city where she was born.

Noone wants to become a social worker in an international adoption agency. "The other day I was thinking about how much time it takes to raise a child and how much my parents have done for me," she says. "I don't think I ever sat them down and said, 'Thank you.' But I think they know it."

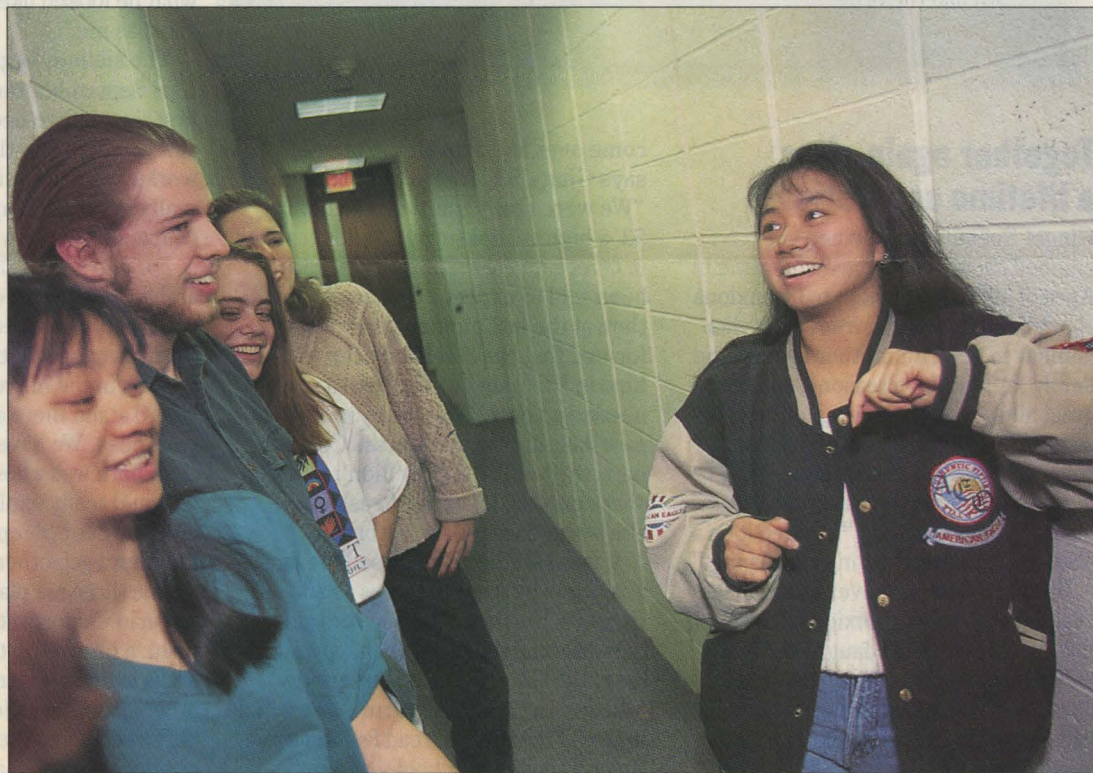
An emotional return to a Vietnamese orphanage

In 1968, 22-year-old college student Gratia Meyer lay in a Denver hospital bed recovering from a near-fatal intestinal inflammation. Too feverish to read, she spent hours watching news coverage of the Vietnam War. "I bargained with God," she says. "I told him if I survived, I would take care of orphans."

Meyer's convalescence lasted seven months, but she eventually regained her strength and made good on her promise. In July 1974, Meyer and her husband, an Air Force captain, gained custody of Nhat, a 1-year-old boy who came from an orphanage near Saigon. Five months later she applied for a second child, Nol, who came to her via Operation Babylift.

Like many of the children evacuated from the country in the late days of the War, Nol, then 2, was both sickly and crippled. His body stiffened when touched, a common reaction among infants who receive too little physical contact. His left arm was paralyzed from birth, and he had never learned to walk. A boy who had survived on the streets before being taken to an orphanage in Saigon, he still ate insects and hoarded food. His teeth were filled with cavities. "Both boys required intense care, psychologically, emotional-

Byron and Lana Noone picked up 5-month-old Jennifer at JFK airport in New York City in May 1975. Now 20, Jennifer (right, in jacket, with dorm pals at Drew University in New Jersey) says, "I'm the one my friends usually pull pranks on. But they do it because I can take it. I just give it right back."



HARRY BENSON



MIGUEL LUIS FAIRBANKS

ly and financially,” says Meyer, 49. “They both had the orphanage survival approach, which is ‘I can do it on my own.’ But of course no one can make it in isolation. I was consistent and tenacious. They began to trust me.”

Meyer taught herself how to get up from the floor using just one arm and then demonstrated the technique to Nol. She spent long hours exercising his paralyzed left arm so that the muscles in his back wouldn’t atrophy.

Working by day as a school psychologist in Denver, she completed her Ph.D. in psychology through the University of Pittsburgh. When Meyer and her husband split in 1981, she kept the boys. She tried to make her sons proud of their Vietnamese heritage while remaining true to her own. “I raised them as Jewish Buddhists,” she says.

She could not, however, ward off the cruelty of schoolmates who would taunt Nol about his limp arm. “In elementary school I used to slam my arm against brick walls,” says Nol, 21, recalling his frustration. “I would rip off a fingernail with my teeth. When I got to be a teen-



NHAT MEYER

Nol Meyer makes his home in San Francisco (above). In 1993, he returned to Vietnam and visited Nguyen Van Vung (left), the director of the orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) where Nol spent his toddler years. “I hope that he sees what he had done is not wasted,” says Meyer.

ager, I spent a lot of time trying to hide my paralysis, sticking my hand behind my back, denying its existence.” Eventually, Nol had reconstructive surgery, which increased the arm’s mobility. “Now that I’m not hiding it, people notice it less!” he says.

Nol flourished in high school, scoring

straight A’s and winning a leadership award. A talented artist, he enrolled at the University of San Francisco and the Academy of Art College. It was there he came across a brochure advertising a study program in Vietnam. “I decided I wanted to know about the Vietnamese side of me,” he says.”



Nol spent part of 1993 in Vietnam. During that time, his brother and mother and her new husband came to visit, and Meyer brought along a surprise: the paperwork from the Santa Maria Orphanage in Saigon, where Nol had once lived. When they paid a call, they found that the director of the orphanage, Nguyen Van Vung, was still there. At first Nguyen didn't understand who his foreign visitors were. But when he saw the papers with the Vietnamese name he had given Nol—Nguyen Van Cuong—he burst into tears. "I remember him when he was only this big!" he said, holding his hands apart. "I can't believe he has done so well."

Nol, who will graduate from both the academy and the college this May—and who is already writing and illustrating a children's book about adoption—was profoundly moved by the visit with the orphanage director. "He was so happy to see me," says Nol. "It was a moment I will remember forever. It was one of those events that helps put your life in perspective."

Despite the entreaties of a friend, MaiLy Wong, 10 (near right), was sullen and angry when she arrived in Denver in 1975. Says Maily (above, at a San Francisco school with her son Rudy): "Growing up as an adopted child was hard."



COURTESY MAI LY WONG

Coming to terms with the pain of abandonment

MaiLy Wong is one of the few Babylift children who remember life in Vietnam. Now a 29-year-old secretary working near San Francisco and the mother of an 8-year-old son, MaiLy recalls her 10 years in a Catholic orphanage in Da Lat, northeast of Saigon, as terribly lonely. "All you could do most of the time was sit and daydream," she

says. "We didn't have toys. We would dig for whatever creatures we could find in the ground. You could hear the whines of babies."

The one joy in her life was Paul Markson, a U.S. Army Intelligence officer, who began making regular visits to the orphanage in 1969. "I would cling on him," she recalls. "He used to take my picture, and I would feel like a superstar. At night I would dream about what it would be like

if a guy like that took me away.”

Markson was taken with MaiLy too. In January 1975, he persuaded his wife, Cheryl, who had just begun to work for FCVN, to visit the orphanage with him. “They asked me if I wanted them to be my parents,” says MaiLy. “I didn’t know what a parent was. I thought it meant for them to keep visiting me. I said, ‘Sure. As long as you keep bringing me cookies.’”

But the nuns who ran the orphanage held the Marksons off, saying they wanted to send MaiLy to a convent school in France. Then, in March 1975, Da Lat was overrun by Communist troops. The 60-odd children and 15

apart. “Everything just hit me,” she says. “Something told me I’d never see my country again. I burst into tears. I was scared and full of hostility. I refused to sit next to Cheryl. I hated her. I hit her and kicked her. Believe me, that woman regretted the idea of adopting me. It was a long ride.”

MaiLy seemed to adjust quickly to life with her new parents and their five other children. But as the Marksons continued to adopt—they would eventually take in seven more children—MaiLy felt a little lost. “You’re the president of an adoption agency,” MaiLy says she used to kid Cheryl. “You can’t keep them all for yourself.”

numb for a day,” says MaiLy. “Always in my heart I knew she was alive.”

Cheryl Markson says she understands her daughter’s lingering anger. “The most central question for these kids is dealing with their abandonment, their loss,” she says. “Even if they were babies at the time, they still wonder why. Sometimes having parents that love them just isn’t enough.”

MaiLy rebelled. Although she excelled at Denver’s East High School, getting straight A’s, she decided not to go to college. Working first for her mother’s adoption agency, then as a grocery store clerk, she became pregnant at 21 with her son Rudy and moved to Las Vegas with the boy’s father. The two soon separated, and in 1988 MaiLy met Ronald Wong, 41, an ex-Marine who works for a computer equipment company near San Francisco.

The two married in 1991 and are expecting a child in October. At last her long search seems ended. “I pray every night to God not to send me anything more,” says MaiLy. Now she wants to give back something of what she has received. “I want to reach out to troubled kids,” she says. “I want to help children who are neglected by their parents.”

When anxious hope gave way to agonizing fear

Shane Dewey lived through one of the bleakest moments of the national disaster that was our time in Vietnam: He was aboard the C5-A packed with orphans that crashed shortly after takeoff on April 4, 1975. Strapped to a seat on an upper deck, the infant was one of 167 children pulled from the wreckage. Shane experienced oxygen deprivation when the cabin decompressed prior to the crash, but otherwise survived the experience unscathed. For nearly two weeks afterward, half a world away, it was his would-be adoptive parents who suffered.

Fred Dewey, now a chemistry professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver, and his wife, Karleen, studying for a master’s degree in counseling, had waited a year to adopt a Vietnamese baby. On April 2, they were told that they had finally succeeded and that their son would be flying out in two days. Fred was driving to work on April 4 when he heard news of the crash on



▲ MaiLy’s mom, Cheryl Markson, with daughter Dahra (right) and grandchild MacKenzie.

nuns of the orphanage were taken to the coast by truck, then loaded onto a makeshift raft. After three days on the South China Sea, the raft put in near Saigon. “I remember sitting for a long time,” MaiLy says of the voyage. “I don’t recall eating anything.” On April 9, MaiLy and others joined the Babylift and were flown to Travis Air Force Base in California.

The Marksons, back in Denver, received welcome news from FCVN that MaiLy would be aboard an Operation Babylift flight. Cheryl Markson met her at Travis AFB, and the two boarded a bus for San Francisco, where the children were processed. Watching the strange countryside roll by, MaiLy fell

The Marksons say MaiLy spoke little of her past. “It was so difficult to get her to talk about Vietnam, to do any grieving,” says Cheryl. “I think it was just too scary to remember.”

One issue that came between adoptive mother and daughter was MaiLy’s birth mother. Cheryl says she and Paul were told only that MaiLy was abandoned on the steps of the orphanage. But MaiLy insists she remembers visiting her mother, who lived nearby. The matter was finally resolved in 1994, when Paul and Cheryl returned to Vietnam and were told by the nuns that MaiLy was correct, and that her mother was alive and selling vegetables in the local market. “I was shocked. I went



his car radio. "I was just crushed," says Fred, 55, tears welling in his eyes at the memory. "I had to pull off to the side of the highway. I sat there and wept and prayed for 5 minutes."

Says Karleen, 55: "We mourned the loss of all the children, not knowing if Shane was one of them. I was not able to eat or sleep. It would have been easier to have known."

The Deweys received no news for 13 days. Then, just after Karleen remembers saying a prayer, the phone rang. It was the adoption agency announcing that their son was alive and had arrived in Denver. When Karleen first saw Shane at the reception center, he was lying on his stomach. "He lifted his head up kind of like, 'Hi, Mom! Where have you been?'" and gave me this big smile," she says. "I totally lost it and began sobbing."

Though Shane was healthy, he was later diagnosed with learning disabilities believed to have been caused by the minutes he had spent starved of oxygen. He spent kindergarten and



Shane Dewey, 20 (with parents Fred and Karleen at their home in Denver), was less than a year old when he survived the April 4, 1975, crash of a Babylift plane. "For years afterwards, whenever a fire siren went off, Shane would shriek and run to me," says Karleen.

first grade in a special school for children with learning problems—"Memory type of things are still hard for me," he says—but was successfully mainstreamed through the rest of his school years.

Shane fit in easily with the Deweys' nine other children, now 13 to 35—three of whom, like Shane, were adopted—and he attended Silver State Bap-

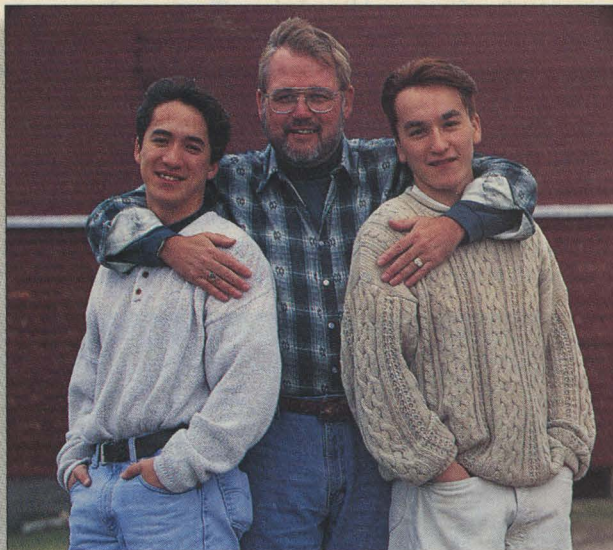
tist High School in Denver, where he played on both the football and basketball teams. In the year since he graduated, he has enrolled in chef school and is working with his brother-in-law building redwood decks. He wants to save enough money to go to business school, but now he has a new responsibility. Shane, 20, and his girlfriend Angela Delagarza, 17, are expecting a

baby daughter, due early in May.

The Deweys, meanwhile, keep finding new ways to be useful. An organization they started eight years ago teaches parenting skills to Denver teens—while encouraging sexual abstinence. Another of their projects has been sending teams of nurses and counselors to Romania since 1991. “It’s all about helping children,” says Karleen Dewey. “That’s what counts.”

A dedicated single dad takes on twin sons

Steve Johnson remembers the precise moment in 1974 when he first laid eyes on the two scrawny Amerasian boys in the orphanage in Da Nang. “They were two pathetic babies, twins,” says Johnson, then a 25-year-old production controller for ITT who had become acquainted with the orphanages during an earlier tour in Vietnam as a GI. On his days off, Johnson would help shuttle supplies, clothing and children between FCVN facilities in Saigon and Qui



LORI GRINKER/CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

At the Da Nang orphanage in 1974 (below), 25-year-old Steve Johnson (with a friend) held Christopher, one of the twins he would soon adopt. (The other, Anthony, lies near his feet.)

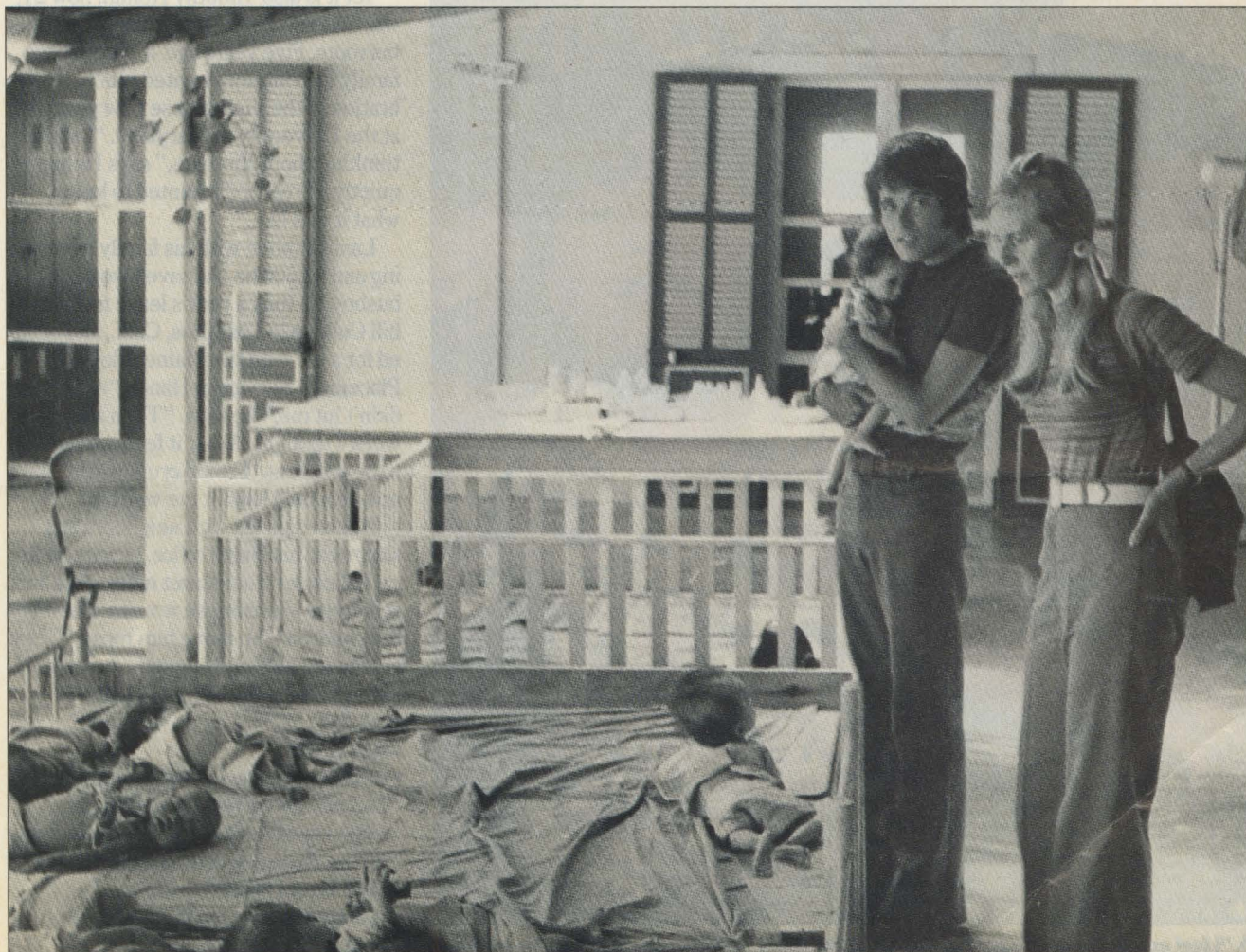
“Growing up with a single parent, they had to be more independent,” says Johnson (with Chris, left, and Anthony near their DeKalb, Ill., home).

Nhon, a city on the coast. Johnson was single at the time, but he just couldn’t help himself. “I told FCVN that I wanted to adopt them,” he recalls. “Everyone was doing so much for these children. I wanted to do my part.”

Johnson had the twins transferred to

Saigon. Then, in January 1975, he married Carol Kim, a Vietnamese singer he had been dating. In April, the boys were assigned spaces on a Babylift transport. (They were scheduled to leave on the ill-fated April 4 flight, but were bumped.)

The arrival of the babies, by then almost



COURTESY STEVE JOHNSON

2, in the little, all-white community of Geneseo, Ill., where Johnson's parents lived, made local headlines.

In 1980, Johnson and Kim were divorced. The boys, Chris and Tony, stayed with their father. Both are now students at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, where Johnson is a public programming director. Chris, a junior, is a psychology major who wants to work in

public relations. Tony, a sophomore, is majoring in electrical engineering.

Both boys are musical—Chris has had some singing roles in community theater productions—and they wonder if their talent is inherited. But like many of the Babylift immigrants, they don't know their biological parentage. Even their true age is somewhat in doubt. In the early days of 1975, the Saigon courts

invented birth records for children needing documents to leave the country. The boys' official birthday, Sept. 8, was arbitrarily selected by a local official.

The lack of documentation gnaws at Tony. "I'd like to find out who my parents are," he says. "I want to know who I am."

A U.S. adoptee turns toward home to help

Timothy Holtan was, in many respects, the all-American boy. He played Little League baseball for five years. His bedroom in the Whiteford, Md., home he shared with his adoptive parents, Andrew and Barbara Holtan, and their four other children was festooned with pictures of rock stars. He played percussion in his grade school band and joined the chorus. At the John Carroll School in Bel Air, he was elected president of his freshman class and lettered in track and football. (He established the school's record for the 100-meter dash—11.3 seconds.)

Yet it is also Timothy Holtan, now 21, who has returned to Vietnam to discover his roots. Five years ago, a Vietnamese family in Whiteford invited him to a celebration of the Vietnamese new year, Tet, at the University of Maryland. "I started thinking about Vietnam," says Holtan quietly. "I realized I wanted to know what it was like."

Last October, with his family's blessing and \$1,500 he had saved working as a busboy, he took a year's leave from Foot-hill College in Los Altos, Calif., and headed for a job with the Maine Adoption Placement Service in Hanoi. "At first it didn't hit me," he says. "Then after a week I thought, 'Wow, it feels great not to be different.' I could cruise on by and no one would look at me weirdly."

Holtan sips tea with neighbors at a shop near his Hanoi office, snacks on local delicacies from street merchants and is dating a Vietnamese woman. But it is the children who move him most. "They love being held and hugged," he says. "I know. I was in the same place at one time."

■ SUSAN REED

■ VICKIE BANE in Denver, JONI H. BLACKMAN in DeKalb, JOANNE FOWLER in Munich, LORNA CRISBY in Madison, LAIRD HARRISON in San Francisco, KATE KLISE in Kansas City, ANDREA PAWLINA in Hanoi, JANE SIMS PODESTA in Washington and JAMIE RENO in San Diego



PETER CHARLES WORTHISABA

▲ "I feel accepted here," says Tim Holtan, at the Hanoi adoption agency where he works.

THE FALL OF SAIGON

UTTER CHAOS

Panic reigned in final hours

By George Esper
The Associated Press

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam — "Finis! Finis!" the South Vietnamese police officer yelled, his arms flailing wildly, his eyes crazed with fear. He raised his pistol to his head and pulled the trigger.

As he lay mortally wounded in the downtown Saigon square, hundreds of his comrades stripped off their uniforms in a desperate attempt to blend in with their victorious northern Communist foes.

By then, the sole remaining American allies — 11 Marines — already had scrambled aboard the final helicopter leaving the besieged U.S. Embassy.

Twenty years ago, on April 30, 1975, a dispirited South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam, its lifeline of American blood dried up, its supporting U.S. war machine turned off.

The U.S. toll: 58,153 dead. The Vietnamese toll: 1.1 million Communist fighters, 223,748 South Vietnamese soldiers and nearly 2 million civilians, according to Vietnam's official casualty report, which was released

April 3.

The end came in chaos — with South Vietnamese clawing frantically at the U.S. Embassy's chain-link gate, thrusting their babies at American strangers with bags of gems and gold, desperately trying to bully or bribe their way onto the departing helicopters.

Any plans for an orderly evacuation collapsed in panic and bedlam, and hundreds of Vietnamese allies promised safe passage were left behind.

"It still leaves a bad taste in my mouth 20 years later," says Col. Harry G. Summers Jr., then an American negotiator in Saigon. "It was just disgraceful. It was the Vietnam War in microcosm. Good intentions but fatally flawed execution. The whole thing was just tragedy working itself out."

Rockets rained down

The beginning of the end came with the dawn of April 29.

For more than three hours, from 4:10 a.m. to 7:15 a.m., North Vietnamese gunners rained rockets and

Please see SAIGON on 27A



Associated Press / Neil Ulevich

DESPERATE: Mobs of South Vietnamese try to scale the 14-foot wall of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, trying to reach the evacuation helicopters as the last Americans leave Vietnam on April 29, 1975.

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LOOK FOR YOU

FREDSCH

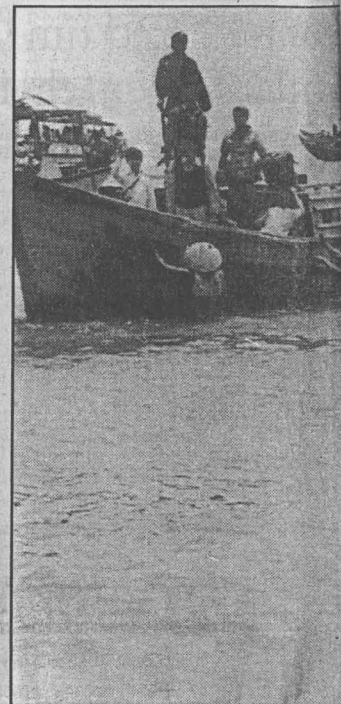
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IN TODAY'S
PAGES 23

WAR VICTIMS

A Vietnamese woman, right, carries her wounded daughter as they flee heavy fighting near Huan Loc, about 35 miles north of Saigon, on March 13, 1975.



Associated Press / Russell Thurman



LAST OUT

Above, Sgt. Terry Bennington, left, exits the helicopter that evacuated him and the other 10 remaining Marines during the fall of Saigon. At right, Bennington pauses in March at Virginia's Quantico Marine Base.



Associated Press / Dennis Cook

'Frequent Wind' ferried evacuees from embassy

SAIGON from Page 21A

artillery shells onto Tan Son Nhat Air Base, home to the U.S. defense attache's office, the so-called Pentagon East.

The last two Americans killed on Vietnamese territory, Marine Cpls. Charles McMahon Jr., 21, of Woburn, Mass., and Dennis J. ...

to scale the surrounding 14-foot wall to reach the helicopters, Marines and civilians beat them back with anything they could find.

"I will die if I stay," screamed a teenage girl.

Col. John Madison Jr., a U.S. negotiator who attempted to calm the mob, reported to Washington that ...

THROW IT DOWN AND SURRENDER

shalltown, Iowa, died in the assault.

The relentless barrage hastened orders from Washington to pull out all Americans and as many as possible of the Vietnamese thought to be marked for death or prison.

Operation Frequent Wind was the biggest helicopter evacuation in history. The Marines carried 1,373 Americans and 5,595 Vietnamese and other foreigners to safety aboard U.S. carriers in the South China Sea, logging 1,054 flight hours and 682 sorties.

But back in Saigon — immediately renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the legendary Communist leader — all was disintegrating.

The vastly outnumbered South Vietnamese soldiers deserted by the thousands, fleeing with their families. Some were firing their rifles in the air, yelling at the Americans, "We want to go, too!"

"They were nothing more than hoods, . . . running around with weapons, not even defending their own country," said one of the 11 final Marines, Sgt. Maj. Terry Bennington, now 42.

Across from the U.S. Embassy, the crowd stripped and stole dozens of abandoned embassy cars. They looted the apartments of departing Americans of furniture, bathroom fixtures, air conditioners, typewriters, books, radios, stereo equipment and food.

As hundreds of South Vietnamese stampeded the embassy gate or tried

control of the Marine guards, who began to resort to force. This, in turn, tended to intensify the panic."

Summers, a noted military strategist and author, said in a recent interview that he was furious some Vietnamese were left behind because of the lack of direction.

"I went to Hanoi a week before the fall of Saigon, knowing we were going to get the terms of the U.S. withdrawal. And I asked the embassy what my instructions were, since I had diplomatic status. And the answer was 'Damned if I know.' And I said, 'What am I supposed to do?' And he said, 'Well, do the best you can.'"

So 'happy, tears of joy

As the end of the war neared, North Vietnamese leaders rejoiced at their command headquarters.

"There are few moments in life when one is so happy that they want to cry," Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, the commander of the Communist forces, recalled in a 1983 account of the Ho Chi Minh Campaign.

"I suddenly felt as if my soul was translucent and light, as if everything had sunk to the bottom," Tra wrote. "The war was nearly over. It had been a long, fierce war and many of our comrades and compatriots were not around to share that happy moment. They had fallen so that we could enjoy that moment."

The collapse of South Vietnam actually began nearly two months be-

FLEEING THE MAYHEM: Vie gees escape from Vung Tau by boat

fore its surrender with a Communist strategy that forced South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu into a fatal decision.

In a surprise attack March 10, North Vietnamese forces captured the provincial capital of Buon Ma Thuot, the southern anchor of South Vietnam's defenses.

Thieu, up against a larger, better-equipped foe and facing the imminent end of U.S. military aid, ordered his forces to abandon the sparsely populated highlands and withdraw to the more easily defended coastal cities.

Thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians fled by car, truck and foot, clogging major highways and putting themselves in harm's way from North Vietnamese guns and lack of food and water. Hundreds died, their bodies along the roadsides attesting to the cruelty of those final days.

The northern cities fell next, including the old imperial capital of Hue and the country's second largest city, Da Nang. Central coastal cities then were abandoned without a fight.

President Nixon had begun a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1969, culminating four years later with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement. Under

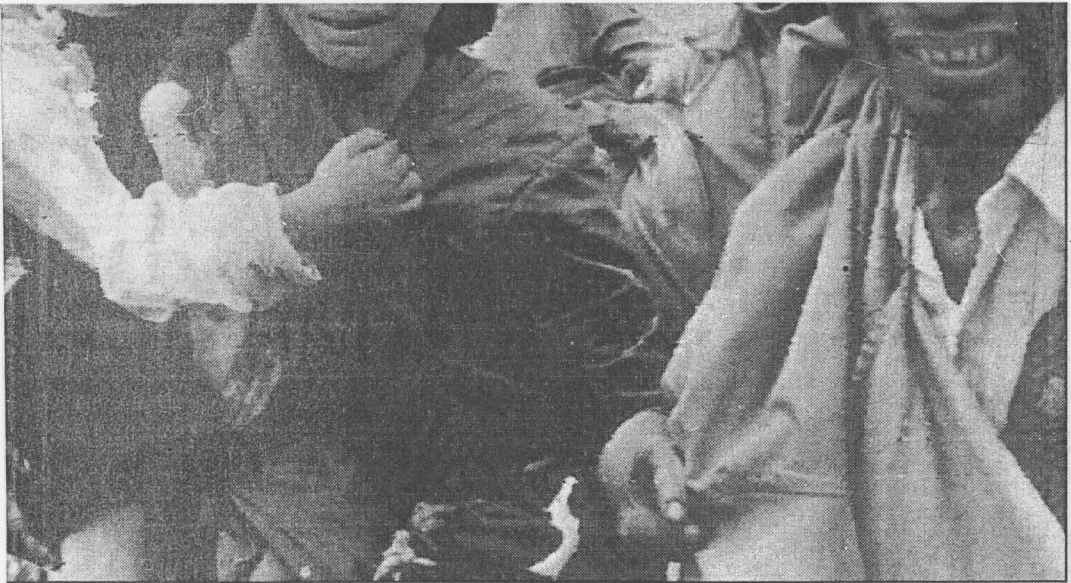
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Associated Press / Nick Ut



Associated Press / Nick Ut

Vietnamese refugee boat and a makeshift craft to wait for U.S. ships to pick them up on March 7, 1975.

terms of that accord, which ended direct U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, North Vietnam released 591 American prisoners of war over the next three months and the United States withdrew its last 23,000 combat troops.

The agreement allowed the United States to maintain 50 military attaches and 1,200 civilians at Pentagon East and 150 Marines at the U.S. Embassy.

As conditions worsened, the United States hurried to evacuate 226 Vietnamese orphans, but Operation Baby-lift ended in tragedy. The Air Force C-5 carrying the children made a crash landing April 4 after a lock system failed and the doors flew off the plane; 135 people died, including 76 orphans, and more than 100 children were injured, many suffering brain damage from the lack of oxygen.

Thieu fled the country April 21. In

a tearful and bitter farewell address, he said the United States had broken a pledge to intervene if North Vietnam violated the 1973 agreement and had "led the South Vietnamese people to death."

Once the evacuation finally was completed, the 11 remaining Marines locked the embassy's oversized oak doors and took refuge on the roof. It was seemingly endless hours before the final CH-46 helicopter headed their way.

"As we were taking off, the South Vietnamese had made it to the roof," Bennington said. "So it was pretty hairy there at the last moments."

As the Marines soared over Saigon, they watched the North Vietnamese begin their final attack. The Communists rolled into Saigon in tanks and armored vehicles and raised their flag over the Presidential Palace.

On the first floor of the palace, a Communist search team pulled back a curtain shielding a government conference room. Inside, the South Vietnamese cabinet sat around an oval-shaped table.

"You've been surrounded!" team member Pham Duy Do yelled, pointing his rifle. "If anyone has a weapon, throw it down and surrender!"

"We have been waiting for you so that we could turn over the government," responded Duong Van Minh, who had taken over as South Vietnam's president in his country's final days.

"You have nothing left to turn over," a Communist political officer told him.

The war had ended.

The writer covered the Vietnam War for The Associated Press and was in Saigon when it fell to the Communists. He was expelled from the country, but returned in October 1993 to reopen the AP's bureau in Hanoi.

IT'S BUILT
AROUND
ONE UNIQUE



THE 1995
INFINITI G20



Associated Press / Nick Ut



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TO A NEW HOME

Twenty years later, Vietnam's Babylift orphans come of age

The C5-A transport carrying 228 Vietnamese orphans was just 12 minutes into its flight from Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon to Travis Air Force Base in California when something went terribly wrong. "There was this loud explosion," recalls Dr. Meritt Stark, a retired pediatrician living in Asheville, N.C., of the April 4, 1975, flight. "I thought we had been hit by a surface-to-air missile." What he could not see from his position on the upper deck was that the rear cargo door had burst open, damaging the plane's rudder and stabilizer and causing a sudden decompression in the plane's interior. Air Force Capt. Dennis Traynor turned the crippled plane back toward Saigon and managed a crash landing in a rice paddy. The plane broke apart on impact; although 176 survived, the bodies of 49 adults and 78 Vietnamese orphans lay strewn about the site.

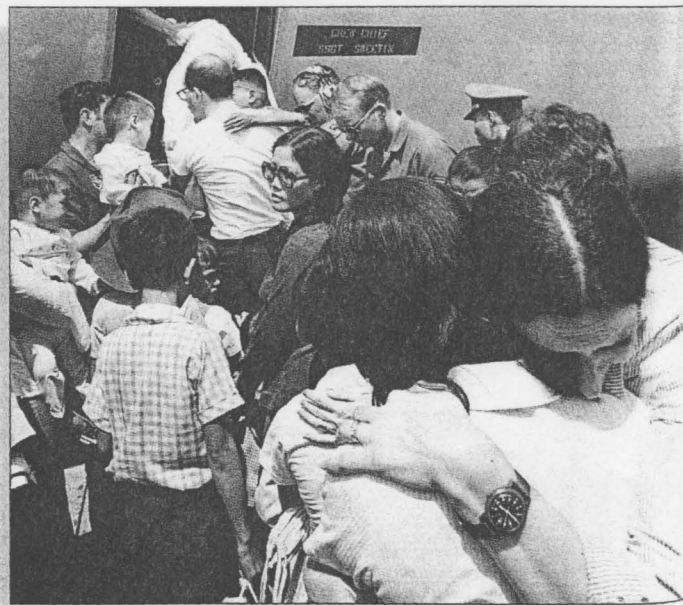
The crash was yet another calamity for children—many of them offspring of U.S. servicemen—whose lives were already freighted with tragedy. But it was also the beginning of an extraordinary moment of hope. As North Vietnamese forces closed in on Saigon—soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City—the U.S. scrambled to evacuate its remaining 7,000 soldiers, diplomats and civilians, and President Gerald Ford sponsored one last effort on behalf of Vietnam War orphans under the care of relief agencies. From April 3 to April 19, Operation Babylift, the largest such rescue effort in history, flew 2,003 children, including the survivors of the April 4 crash, to new homes in the U.S.; another 1,300 went to Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia and Scandinavia. Recalls lawyer Ross Meador, 40, who helped run an orphanage near Saigon for the Denver-based Friends of Children of Vietnam (FCVN): "People were desperate to get children out."

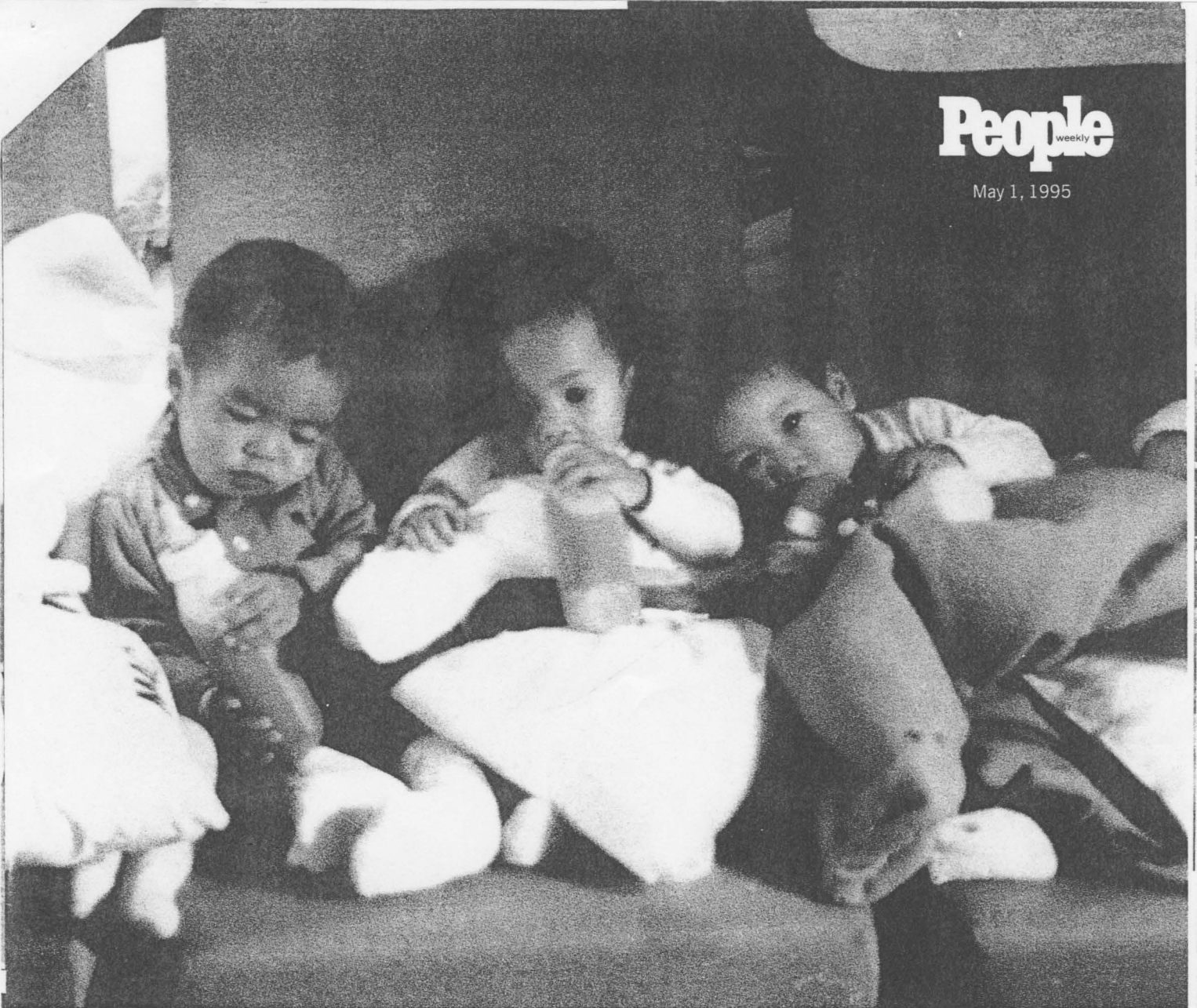
For the children of Operation Babylift, being given over to adoptive families in the West represented an unimaginable change of fortune. The transition has not always gone smoothly. According to FCVN executive director Cheryl Markson, about a quarter of the children airlifted to the U.S. have had adjustment problems. Yet most of them are now productive young adults, attending college, pursuing careers, starting families of their own. With the Vietnam War under renewed scrutiny 20 years after the fall of Saigon, Operation Babylift stands out as a victory. As the stories on the following pages attest, it provided a future for children for whom hope appeared lost.

*Surprised
if so few*

► In April 1975, as the North Vietnamese closed in on Saigon, relief workers hurried children aboard an American plane.

These infants in the C5-A flight deck were among the 150 orphans who survived the April 1975 crash.





PETER ARNETT/AP

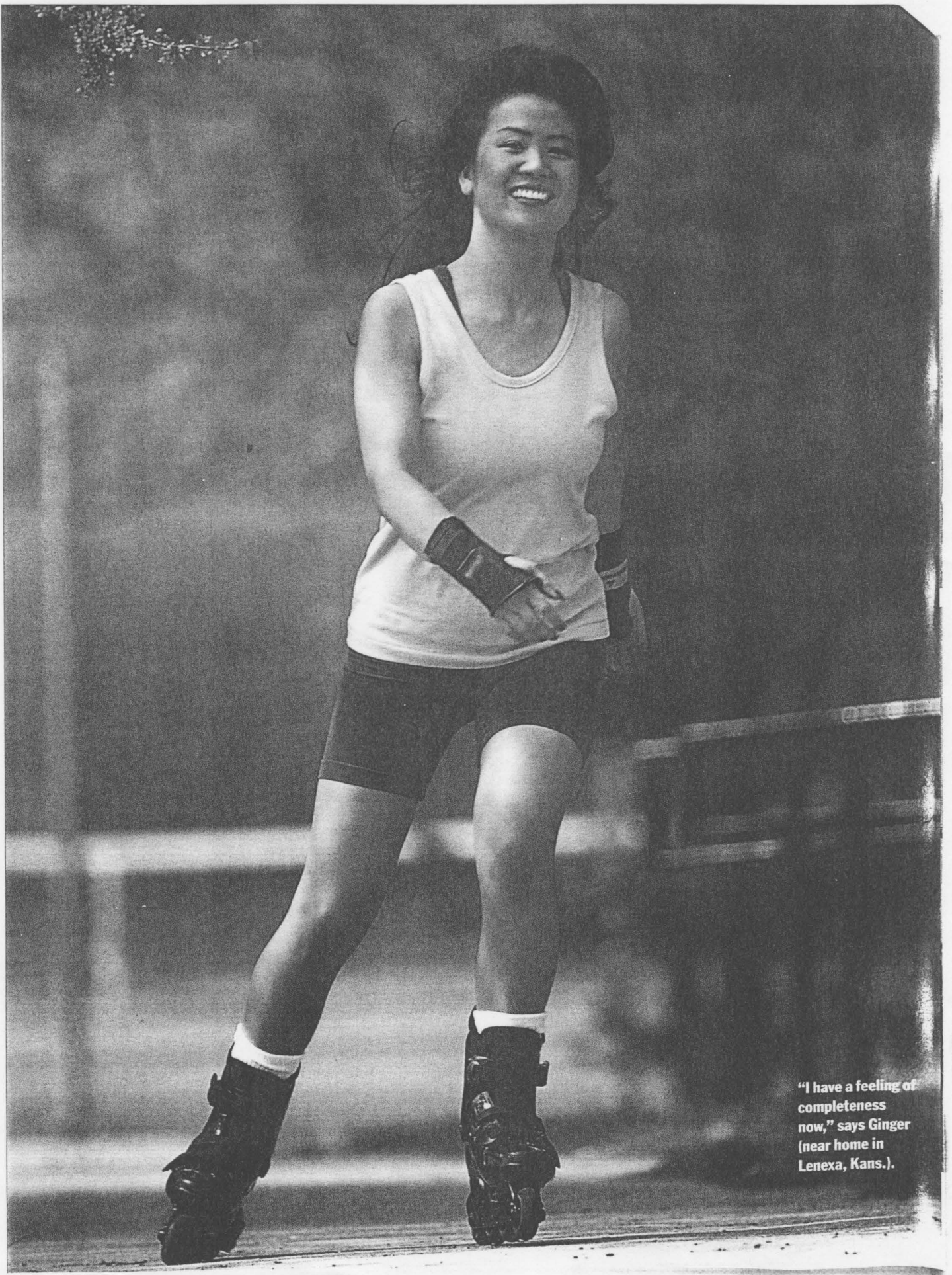
◀ Near the end of their long trip, young passengers on the first Babylift flight to reach the U.S. got a glimpse of California.

▶ On April 5, 1975, at San Francisco International Airport, the first Babylift arrivals received a presidential welcome from Gerald Ford.



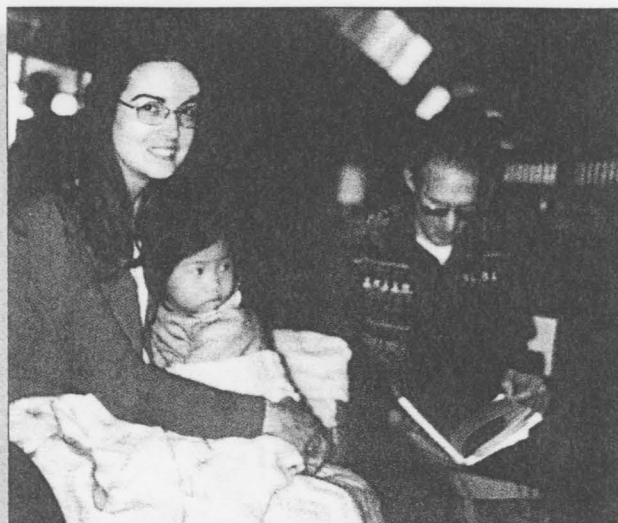
WALLY MCNAMEE/WOODFIN CAMP

UP FRONT

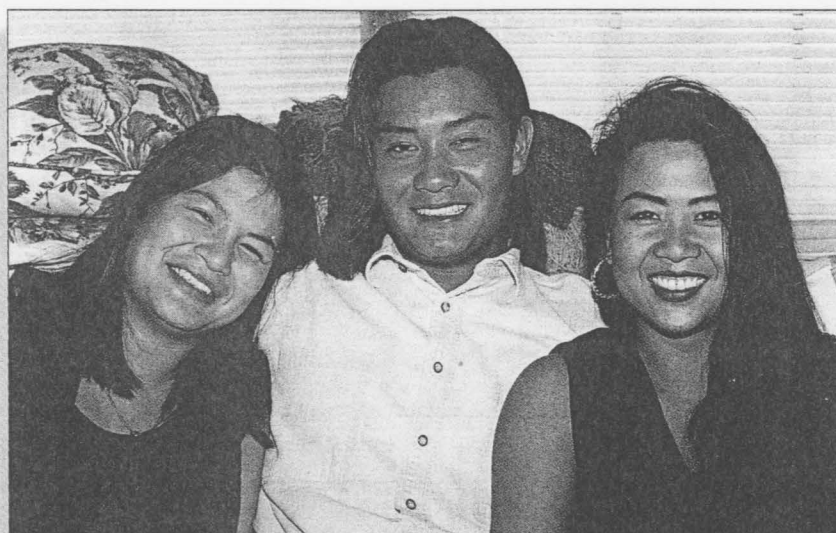


"I have a feeling of completeness now," says Ginger (near home in Lenexa, Kans.).

➤ Ginny and John Seevers met Ginger, 4, on April 11, 1975, at the Kansas City airport.



▼ Ginger was reunited with long-lost siblings Mailin Felgitsch (left) and Jeff Teglas last fall.



pressed little interest in her past. Then, in 1990, she asked the Seevers to see her adoption file. "When I turned 20, I suddenly wanted to know everything," she says. "It's like a missing part of you out there. I was so curious."

Ginger was shocked to read that she had a brother from whom she had been separated in the confusion of the airlift. The file also listed the name of the FCVN's Cheryl Markson. When Ginger telephoned, Markson told her that the great aunt who had cared for her was now living in Florida. A second shock came when the aunt asked Ginger: Where were her brother *and* sister?

With Markson's help, Ginger discovered that her younger sister, Mailin, had been airlifted to Germany and adopted by Werner Felgitsch, an architect, and his wife, Brigitte. After an exchange of letters, the two met in Bristol, England, in 1993. "I'll never forget it," says Mailin, 23, who now works in Munich for a computer-parts company. "We talked and talked. After two days it finally hit me I had a sister."

Next Ginger tracked down their brother Jeff, who was living in San Diego. Jeff, a senior at the University of California at San Diego, had been brought up by Julius and Barbara Teglas, schoolteachers in Upland, Calif. "I called, and we talked for 3 or 4 hours," says Ginger, a slight 5'1". "I asked him what he looked like—if he were as short as me."

The siblings began to plan a reunion. Last September the three met for the first time in two decades at Ginger's apartment in Overland Park, where she works as a hairstylist. "I was really, really nervous," says Jeff. "I needed a couple of beers on the plane to relax."

For two weeks the three were inseparable. They went dancing and took turns cooking for each other—from burritos to spaghetti. "We did a lot of looking in the mirror," says Ginger. "We'd stand there and say, 'Look at your nose. We have the same noses.'"

"There was a bond there that none of us could really explain," says Jeff. "Maybe deep, deep down we could remember each other."

The three are planning a second reunion in California this year and, at some point, a return trip to Vietnam. "All I know is that we're not going to lose each other again," says Jeff. Adds Ginger: "It's like finding the pieces of a missing puzzle. Now we're all one again."

Together again after a lifetime separation

Ginger Seevers was 4 when she climbed aboard the huge cargo plane in April of 1975, old enough to be anxious about being torn away from what was familiar to her. Her mother had left the family for unknown reasons, and her great aunt, who was caring for her, persuaded her father, a South Vietnamese soldier, to put her up for adoption. "I remember being on the plane and drinking milk," says Ginger. "I spilled it on a blanket and started crying and crying."

John and Ginny Seevers, of Kansas City, Mo., were also anxious. Although they had a biological daughter, Heather, 5, they had been trying for three years to adopt a Vietnamese child. "I had gotten to the point that I wouldn't leave home without having someone

come over and babysit the phone," says Ginny, 53, a desktop publisher. "We were really frantic," adds John, 53, a high school social studies teacher in Overland Park, Kans. They had been told to expect a 3-year-old girl; then at the last moment they were informed that the child had been left behind in Vietnam but that another child needed a home. When they met their new daughter at the Kansas City airport, they realized they didn't even share enough language to ask her if she wanted to use the bathroom.

It was Heather who closed the language gap by naming things as she led Ginger—the name the Seevers gave her—around the house. A happy, sociable child, Ginger poured her energy into becoming an American—she acted in family theatricals, read fashion magazines, excelled in school—and ex-

A fulfilling life, joyously lived

She races from classes to rugby practice to intramural softball, then to her two part-time jobs in a deli and coffee-house. In between, Jennifer Noone, 20, a sophomore at Drew University in Madison, N.J., loves to laugh and play practical jokes with her friends. "I'm so happy with my life that I can't imagine it being any different," she says.



COURTESY NOONE FAMILY

But for Operation Babylift, it would have been. Born in Saigon in January 1975, Jennifer—then an orphan named Nguyen Thi Dai Trang—was evacuated when she was just 3 months old and adopted by Byron Noone, an English professor at Queensborough Community College, and his wife, Lana, an elementary-school music teacher in Long Island, N.Y. Despite a happy childhood filled with piano, gymnastics and dance lessons, Jennifer felt the occasional sting of racial taunts at her mostly white elementary school. For a while she hid the fact that her middle name was Nguyen, the name her parents had retained for her as a vestige of her Vietnamese heritage. "When I was young, being different was kind of hard," she says.

Now she is ready to celebrate her heritage. She has started reading books about Vietnam and was elected secretary of Drew University's Asian Students in America chapter. This summer she wants to start Vietnamese language classes and hopes some day to visit the city where she was born.

Noone wants to become a social worker in an international adoption agency. "The other day I was thinking about how much time it takes to raise a child and how much my parents have done for me," she says. "I don't think I ever sat them down and said, 'Thank you.' But I think they know it."

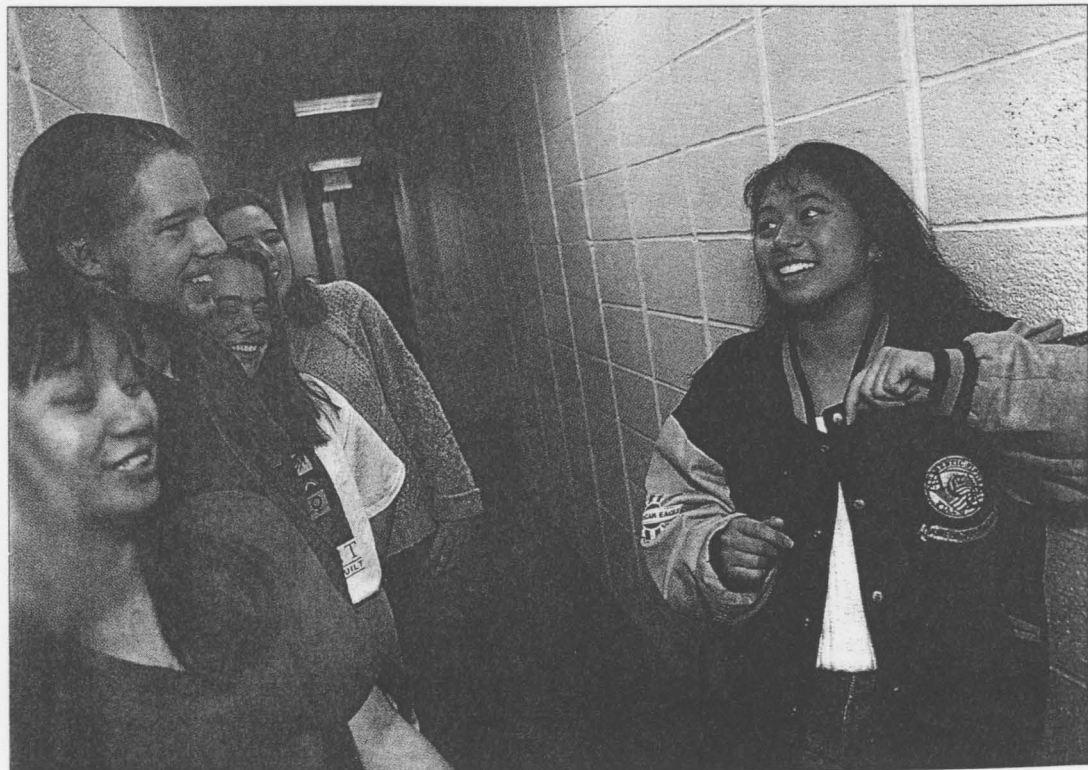
An emotional return to a Vietnamese orphanage

In 1968, 22-year-old college student Gratia Meyer lay in a Denver hospital bed recovering from a near-fatal intestinal inflammation. Too feverish to read, she spent hours watching news coverage of the Vietnam War. "I bargained with God," she says. "I told him if I survived, I would take care of orphans."

Meyer's convalescence lasted seven months, but she eventually regained her strength and made good on her promise. In July 1974, Meyer and her husband, an Air Force captain, gained custody of Nhat, a 1-year-old boy who came from an orphanage near Saigon. Five months later she applied for a second child, Nol, who came to her via Operation Babylift.

Like many of the children evacuated from the country in the late days of the War, Nol, then 2, was both sickly and crippled. His body stiffened when touched, a common reaction among infants who receive too little physical contact. His left arm was paralyzed from birth, and he had never learned to walk. A boy who had survived on the streets before being taken to an orphanage in Saigon, he still ate insects and hoarded food. His teeth were filled with cavities. "Both boys required intense care, psychologically, emotional-

Byron and Lana Noone picked up 5-month-old Jennifer at JFK airport in New York City in May 1975. Now 20, Jennifer (right, in jacket, with dorm pals at Drew University in New Jersey) says, "I'm the one my friends usually pull pranks on. But they do it because I can take it. I just give it right back."



HARRY HILKSON



MIGUEL LUIS FAIRBANKS

ly and financially," says Meyer, 49. "They both had the orphanage survival approach, which is 'I can do it on my own.' But of course no one can make it in isolation. I was consistent and tenacious. They began to trust me."

Meyer taught herself how to get up from the floor using just one arm and then demonstrated the technique to Nol. She spent long hours exercising his paralyzed left arm so that the muscles in his back wouldn't atrophy.

Working by day as a school psychologist in Denver, she completed her Ph.D. in psychology through the University of Pittsburgh. When Meyer and her husband split in 1981, she kept the boys. She tried to make her sons proud of their Vietnamese heritage while remaining true to her own. "I raised them as Jewish Buddhists," she says.

She could not, however, ward off the cruelty of schoolmates who would taunt Nol about his limp arm. "In elementary school I used to slam my arm against brick walls," says Nol, 21, recalling his frustration. "I would rip off a fingernail with my teeth. When I got to be a teen-



NHAT MEYER

Nol Meyer makes his home in San Francisco (above). In 1993, he returned to Vietnam and visited Nguyen Van Vung (left), the director of the orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) where Nol spent his toddler years. "I hope that he sees what he had done is not wasted," says Meyer.

ager, I spent a lot of time trying to hide my paralysis, sticking my hand behind my back, denying its existence." Eventually, Nol had reconstructive surgery, which increased the arm's mobility. "Now that I'm not hiding it, people notice it less!" he says.

Nol flourished in high school, scoring

straight A's and winning a leadership award. A talented artist, he enrolled at the University of San Francisco and the Academy of Art College. It was there he came across a brochure advertising a study program in Vietnam. "I decided I wanted to know about the Vietnamese side of me," he says."



Nol spent part of 1993 in Vietnam. During that time, his brother and mother and her new husband came to visit, and Meyer brought along a surprise: the paperwork from the Santa Maria Orphanage in Saigon, where Nol had once lived. When they paid a call, they found that the director of the orphanage, Nguyen Van Vung, was still there. At first Nguyen didn't understand who his foreign visitors were. But when he saw the papers with the Vietnamese name he had given Nol—Nguyen Van Cuong—he burst into tears. "I remember him when he was only this big!" he said, holding his hands apart. "I can't believe he has done so well."

Nol, who will graduate from both the academy and the college this May—and who is already writing and illustrating a children's book about adoption—was profoundly moved by the visit with the orphanage director. "He was so happy to see me," says Nol. "It was a moment I will remember forever. It was one of those events that helps put your life in perspective."

Despite the entreaties of a friend, MaiLy Wong, 10 (near right), was sullen and angry when she arrived in Denver in 1975. Says MaiLy (above, at a San Francisco school with her son Rudy): "Growing up as an adopted child was hard."



COURTESY MAI LY WONG

Coming to terms with the pain of abandonment

MaiLy Wong is one of the few BabyLift children who remember life in Vietnam. Now a 29-year-old secretary working near San Francisco and the mother of an 8-year-old son, MaiLy recalls her 10 years in a Catholic orphanage in Da Lat, northeast of Saigon, as terribly lonely. "All you could do most of the time was sit and daydream," she

says. "We didn't have toys. We would dig for whatever creatures we could find in the ground. You could hear the whines of babies."

The one joy in her life was Paul Markson, a U.S. Army Intelligence officer, who began making regular visits to the orphanage in 1969. "I would cling on him," she recalls. "He used to take my picture, and I would feel like a superstar. At night I would dream about what it would be like

if a guy like that took me away.”

Markson was taken with MaiLy too. In January 1975, he persuaded his wife, Cheryl, who had just begun to work for FCVN, to visit the orphanage with him. “They asked me if I wanted them to be my parents,” says MaiLy. “I didn’t know what a parent was. I thought it meant for them to keep visiting me. I said, ‘Sure. As long as you keep bringing me cookies.’”

But the nuns who ran the orphanage held the Marksons off, saying they wanted to send MaiLy to a convent school in France. Then, in March 1975, Da Lat was overrun by Communist troops. The 60-odd children and 15

apart. “Everything just hit me,” she says. “Something told me I’d never see my country again. I burst into tears. I was scared and full of hostility. I refused to sit next to Cheryl. I hated her. I hit her and kicked her. Believe me, that woman regretted the idea of adopting me. It was a long ride.”

MaiLy seemed to adjust quickly to life with her new parents and their five other children. But as the Marksons continued to adopt—they would eventually take in seven more children—MaiLy felt a little lost. “You’re the president of an adoption agency,” MaiLy says she used to kid Cheryl. “You can’t keep them all for yourself.”

numb for a day,” says MaiLy. “Always in my heart I knew she was alive.”

Cheryl Markson says she understands her daughter’s lingering anger. “The most central question for these kids is dealing with their abandonment, their loss,” she says. “Even if they were babies at the time, they still wonder why. Sometimes having parents that love them just isn’t enough.”

MaiLy rebelled. Although she excelled at Denver’s East High School, getting straight A’s, she decided not to go to college. Working first for her mother’s adoption agency, then as a grocery store clerk, she became pregnant at 21 with her son Rudy and moved to Las Vegas with the boy’s father. The two soon separated, and in 1988 MaiLy met Ronald Wong, 41, an ex-Marine who works for a computer equipment company near San Francisco.

The two married in 1991 and are expecting a child in October. At last her long search seems ended. “I pray every night to God not to send me anything more,” says MaiLy. Now she wants to give back something of what she has received. “I want to reach out to troubled kids,” she says. “I want to help children who are neglected by their parents.”



▲ MaiLy’s mom, Cheryl Markson, with daughter Dahra (right) and grandchild MacKenzie.

nuns of the orphanage were taken to the coast by truck, then loaded onto a makeshift raft. After three days on the South China Sea, the raft put in near Saigon. “I remember sitting for a long time,” MaiLy says of the voyage. “I don’t recall eating anything.” On April 9, MaiLy and others joined the Babylift and were flown to Travis Air Force Base in California.

The Marksons, back in Denver, received welcome news from FCVN that MaiLy would be aboard an Operation Babylift flight. Cheryl Markson met her at Travis AFB, and the two boarded a bus for San Francisco, where the children were processed. Watching the strange countryside roll by, MaiLy fell

The Marksons say MaiLy spoke little of her past. “It was so difficult to get her to talk about Vietnam, to do any grieving,” says Cheryl. “I think it was just too scary to remember.”

One issue that came between adoptive mother and daughter was MaiLy’s birth mother. Cheryl says she and Paul were told only that MaiLy was abandoned on the steps of the orphanage. But MaiLy insists she remembers visiting her mother, who lived nearby. The matter was finally resolved in 1994, when Paul and Cheryl returned to Vietnam and were told by the nuns that MaiLy was correct, and that her mother was alive and selling vegetables in the local market. “I was shocked. I went

When anxious hope gave way to agonizing fear

Shane Dewey lived through one of the bleakest moments of the national disaster that was our time in Vietnam: He was aboard the C5-A packed with orphans that crashed shortly after takeoff on April 4, 1975. Strapped to a seat on an upper deck, the infant was one of 167 children pulled from the wreckage. Shane experienced oxygen deprivation when the cabin decompressed prior to the crash, but otherwise survived the experience unscathed. For nearly two weeks afterward, half a world away, it was his would-be adoptive parents who suffered.

Fred Dewey, now a chemistry professor at Metropolitan State College of Denver, and his wife, Karleen, studying for a master’s degree in counseling, had waited a year to adopt a Vietnamese baby. On April 2, they were told that they had finally succeeded and that their son would be flying out in two days. Fred was driving to work on April 4 when he heard news of the crash on



his car radio. "I was just crushed," says Fred, 55, tears welling in his eyes at the memory. "I had to pull off to the side of the highway. I sat there and wept and prayed for 5 minutes."

Says Karleen, 55: "We mourned the loss of all the children, not knowing if Shane was one of them. I was not able to eat or sleep. It would have been easier to have known."

The Deweys received no news for 13 days. Then, just after Karleen remembers saying a prayer, the phone rang. It was the adoption agency announcing that their son was alive and had arrived in Denver. When Karleen first saw Shane at the reception center, he was lying on his stomach. "He lifted his head up kind of like, 'Hi, Mom! Where have you been?' and gave me this big smile," she says. "I totally lost it and began sobbing."

Though Shane was healthy, he was later diagnosed with learning disabilities believed to have been caused by the minutes he had spent starved of oxygen. He spent kindergarten and



Shane Dewey, 20 (with parents Fred and Karleen at their home in Denver), was less than a year old when he survived the April 4, 1975, crash of a Babylift plane. "For years afterwards, whenever a fire siren went off, Shane would shriek and run to me," says Karleen.

first grade in a special school for children with learning problems—"Memory type of things are still hard for me," he says—but was successfully mainstreamed through the rest of his school years.

Shane fit in easily with the Deweys' nine other children, now 13 to 35—three of whom, like Shane, were adopted—and he attended Silver State Bap-

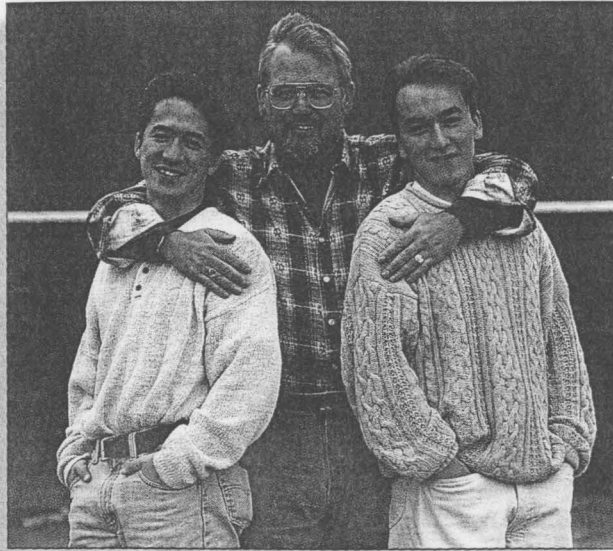
tist High School in Denver, where he played on both the football and basketball teams. In the year since he graduated, he has enrolled in chef school and is working with his brother-in-law building redwood decks. He wants to save enough money to go to business school, but now he has a new responsibility. Shane, 20, and his girlfriend Angela Delagarza, 17, are expecting a

baby daughter, due early in May.

The Deweys, meanwhile, keep finding new ways to be useful. An organization they started eight years ago teaches parenting skills to Denver teens—while encouraging sexual abstinence. Another of their projects has been sending teams of nurses and counselors to Romania since 1991. “It’s all about helping children,” says Karleen Dewey. “That’s what counts.”

A dedicated single dad takes on twin sons

Steve Johnson remembers the precise moment in 1974 when he first laid eyes on the two scrawny Amerasian boys in the orphanage in Da Nang. “They were two pathetic babies, twins,” says Johnson, then a 25-year-old production controller for ITT who had become acquainted with the orphanages during an earlier tour in Vietnam as a GI. On his days off, Johnson would help shuttle supplies, clothing and children between FCVN facilities in Saigon and Qui



LORI GRINKER/CONTACT PRESS IMAGES

At the Da Nang orphanage in 1974 (below), 25-year-old Steve Johnson (with a friend) held Christopher, one of the twins he would soon adopt. (The other, Anthony, lies near his feet.) “Growing up with a single parent, they had to be more independent,” says Johnson (with Chris, left, and Anthony near their DeKalb, Ill., home).

Nhon, a city on the coast. Johnson was single at the time, but he just couldn’t help himself. “I told FCVN that I wanted to adopt them,” he recalls. “Everyone was doing so much for these children. I wanted to do my part.”

Johnson had the twins transferred to

Saigon. Then, in January 1975, he married Carol Kim, a Vietnamese singer he had been dating. In April, the boys were assigned spaces on a Babylift transport. (They were scheduled to leave on the ill-fated April 4 flight, but were bumped.) The arrival of the babies, by then almost



COURTESY STEVE JOHNSON

ANN STATES/SABA

2, in the little, all-white community of Geneseo, Ill., where Johnson's parents lived, made local headlines.

In 1980, Johnson and Kim were divorced. The boys, Chris and Tony, stayed with their father. Both are now students at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, where Johnson is a public programming director. Chris, a junior, is a psychology major who wants to work in

public relations. Tony, a sophomore, is majoring in electrical engineering.

Both boys are musical—Chris has had some singing roles in community theater productions—and they wonder if their talent is inherited. But like many of the Babylift immigrants, they don't know their biological parentage. Even their true age is somewhat in doubt. In the early days of 1975, the Saigon courts

invented birth records for children needing documents to leave the country. The boys' official birthday, Sept. 8, was arbitrarily selected by a local official.

The lack of documentation gnaws at Tony. "I'd like to find out who my parents are," he says. "I want to know who I am."

A U.S. adoptee turns toward home to help

Timothy Holtan was, in many respects, the all-American boy. He played Little League baseball for five years. His bedroom in the Whiteford, Md., home he shared with his adoptive parents, Andrew and Barbara Holtan, and their four other children was festooned with pictures of rock stars. He played percussion in his grade school band and joined the chorus. At the John Carroll School in Bel Air, he was elected president of his freshman class and lettered in track and football. (He established the school's record for the 100-meter dash—11.3 seconds.)

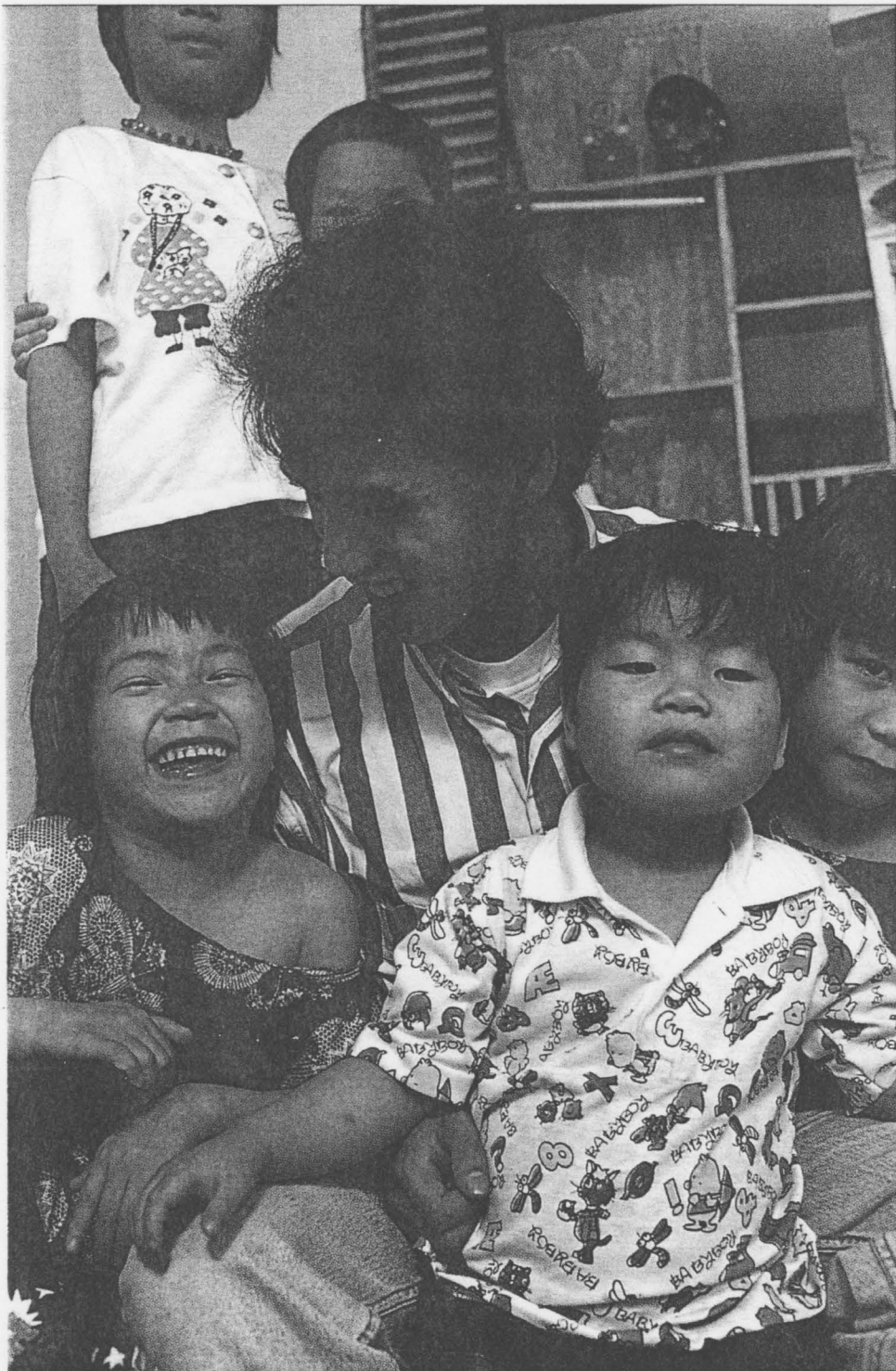
Yet it is also Timothy Holtan, now 21, who has returned to Vietnam to discover his roots. Five years ago, a Vietnamese family in Whiteford invited him to a celebration of the Vietnamese new year, Tet, at the University of Maryland. "I started thinking about Vietnam," says Holtan quietly. "I realized I wanted to know what it was like."

Last October, with his family's blessing and \$1,500 he had saved working as a busboy, he took a year's leave from Foothill College in Los Altos, Calif., and headed for a job with the Maine Adoption Placement Service in Hanoi. "At first it didn't hit me," he says. "Then after a week I thought, 'Wow, it feels great not to be different.' I could cruise on by and no one would look at me weirdly."

Holtan sips tea with neighbors at a shop near his Hanoi office, snacks on local delicacies from street merchants and is dating a Vietnamese woman. But it is the children who move him most. "They love being held and hugged," he says. "I know. I was in the same place at one time."

■ SUSAN REED

■ VICKIE BANE in Denver, JONI H. BLACKMAN in DeKalb, JOANNE FOWLER in Munich, LORNA GRISBY in Madison, LAIRD HARRISON in San Francisco, KATE KLISE in Kansas City, ANDREA PAWIJNA in Hanoi, JANE SIMS PODESTA in Washington and JAMIE RENO in San Diego



▲ "I feel accepted here," says Tim Holtan, at the Hanoi adoption agency where he works.



Dean Krakel/Rocky Mountain News

Participants in the reunion of young people airlifted as infants from Vietnam 20 years ago pluck ribbons of remembrance from a memorial wreath at YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch.

Vietnamese airlifted to U.S. 20 years ago connect at reunion

Cribmates become soulmates

By James B. Meadow
Rocky Mountain News Staff Writer

TABERNASH — With lips that trembled, voices that broke and eyes that glistened, they bore witness to a curious-yet-comforting truth: 8,500 miles from their birthplace, they had finally come home.

Tuesday was the farewell segment of Reunion '95, the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the last infants airlifted from Vietnam in Operation Babylift, the innocent refugees from a war that few would ever understand. For four days, these 50 young men and women coalesced at the YMCA's Snow Mountain Ranch.

They had been among those helpless orphans — some sickly, some half-doomed by their mixed Amerasian blood, all imperiled by the war. They arrived to find adoptive parents

who loved them and cared for them and raised them.

Yet there had been something missing.

"There were things, we didn't know we felt; a lot of us didn't really know who we were," said Ethan Brady, 22, one of the reunion organizers.

"In the United States, Vietnam is a war, not a country," said Brady, one of those Vietnamese babies who arrived 20 years ago. "At this reunion, there was finally a place to be among those who have similar backgrounds."

Not surprisingly, the paths to enlightenment took diverse routes. One level was social — hiking, horseback riding and 3 a.m. star-gazing. But on another, more searingly personal level, the four days represented an epiphany.

"For me, this reunion has been very cathartic," said Kate Pickup, a 21-year-old senior at

Princeton University. "I grew up in South Florida, and there's not much of a Vietnamese community there. It wasn't until college that I thought of myself as Asian."

Helping Pickup were the many seminars and discussion groups the attendees held, discussing a litany of issues.

"Everything from what's it like to be part of a trans-racial adoption, to who *am* I, to did my birth mother abandon me, and if so, why?" said Brady, who became so emotional at the closing ceremonies, he had to stop his impromptu talk on several occasions to compose himself.

But it wasn't just the final event that inspired roiling emotions.

One of the most intense gatherings occurred Monday night, when some of the men and women who had been back

See **BABIES** on 14A

Pictures of Vietnam tap wellspring of emotion at reunion

BABIES from 10A

o Vietnam showed slides and poke about what it was like to return to their homeland. Perhaps o one received more rapt attention than Jessica Medinger. Last spring, Medinger was

researching Catholic schools and orphanages in her homeland. Medinger ran into a nun who "knew my mother and recognized me because I looked just my mother did when she was my age."

Soon, Medinger met her birth mother. And a younger brother. And a grandmother.

"That whole experience brought a sense of peace and completeness to me that I can't really describe," said Medinger. Then she added, "But this reunion has been like that also. It's like being with my family."

"Everyone came here from all over — separate, bewildered, with

a lot of questions," said 20-year-old Tim Hoye. "But we leave with answers. We leave as true friends. We leave as brothers and sisters."

Or something even deeper. As video cameras recorded the spirited singing, and tissues were passed around, and long embraces were exchanged, it became clear

why many of the participants weren't willing to wait 10 more years before the next reunion.

"Our looks, our backgrounds, the prejudices we've faced — they won't go away," said Pickup. "Now, we have people to turn to as a support group. We don't want to give them up now. Or ever."



Over the past three years, Binh Nguyen Rybacki (far left) has spent only two hours with her own relatives in Vietnam, preferring to devote her time to the hundreds of Vietnamese children without families, such as these toddlers at a typical state-run orphanage in suburban Hanoi.

Raina Zeeh

Champion for “the dust of life”

Vietnam expatriate
adopts orphanage
in former homeland

By Michelle Mahoney



was on another kind of mission as she swept through the Vietnamese shopping district on South Federal Boulevard.

Dressed in stylish wide-leg jeans, leotard, silk scarf and black linen jacket, Rybacki also wore a broad smile that conveys both confidence and her take-no-excuses determination. In less than an hour, she whipped through the business of applying for a visa and getting

Denver
Post
3/19/96

Binh Nguyen was an 18-year-old college student when she fled Saigon, just hours before the South Vietnamese capital fell to communist troops from the north.

She took along a pair of yellow sandals but left behind a sweetheart without a goodbye. In the rush to evacuate, a lot was left behind that day in 1975.

Twenty-one years later, Binh Nguyen Rybacki is an American citizen who is fast becoming a guardian angel to hundreds of Vietnamese orphans who have grown up under the communist regime she fled. The Loveland wife, mother of two and successful computer systems specialist has begun a lifetime mission to bring back hope to her former homeland.

She's doing it one child at a time.

In three years, the 39-year-old Rybacki has spent more than \$7,000 of her family's savings and gathered more than twice that in donations to support nearly 400 orphans living at a Vietnamese orphanage she adopted. She has founded a free clinic to help the poorest of the poor in Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City), and is now working to reopen the same private high school in Saigon that she attended.

"These children, the homeless ones, they call them *bui doi*," Rybacki said, pronouncing the words slowly, "bwee doy." "It literally means 'dust of life,' as if you could just blow — poof — and they would go away.

"To live on the streets, to have no one — it's not normal. The natural base of a family is a mom, a dad and a bunch of kids. My natural base was my parents. I never felt shaken by any adversity. Every child deserves that."

□ □ □

On a recent Saturday morning, Rybacki



Nguyen Ngoc Anh Dung



Special to The Denver Post / Binh Nguyen Rybacki

CHANGES: Top: Just \$6,800 in donations from a Utah church built Good Shepherd House, a dormitory that houses 30 orphans. Above: Donations gathered by Rybacki in the U.S. now support nearly 400 orphans at Saigon orphanage.

turn to Vietnam.

Rybacki easily alternates between fluent English and the clipped consonants and elongated vowel sounds of Vietnamese. In Vietnam, her knowledge of the language has opened doors for her humanitarian efforts. But it hasn't shielded her from some of the hazards of trying to bring a taste of free-market philanthropy to a slowly opening socialist society. Even as Vietnam opens its doors to investments by corporations like PepsiCo and Nissan Motor Co., it must grapple with issues like corruption, bribery and bureaucratic roadblocks.

Rybacki steers conversations away from such subjects. But if she's reluctant to reveal exactly how she's been able to persevere in her efforts for the orphans, she's more than willing to divulge the reasons why.

"I remember as a kid my world was pretty solid — I had my mom, my dad and my siblings," she said. "Even when we were in the refugee camp, I had no fear of what was going on around me, because I was with my family. But, because I experienced that, I want all children to have a mom and a dad."

□ □ □

Her family left Saigon before the communist takeover, evacuated with American personnel because her sister had been a longtime employee for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. With just hours notice, Rybacki's family and her brother-in-law's parents — 13 people in all.

"I remember that for days what I was wearing was all I had," Rybacki said. "This was *escaping* — you don't know you're going to the U.S. — you just know that you'd be

Please see **VIETNAM** on 2E

akes perfect sense as a replacement series

Joanne Ostrow

TV/Radio



Our hero, Detective Ellison (Richard Burgi), is out of control. He doesn't know how to use his hyper senses or how to turn them off.

Funky anthropology student Blair Sandburg (played by Garrett Maggart) has been studying just this sort of super-sensory phenomenon. In primitive cultures, he explains, a tribe's survival depended on a "sentinel," a guide whose sensory awareness was extraordinarily sharp. They trained themselves by

rest of the world. That's why sentinels traveled with partners, to push them out of harm's way.

In this case, he needs a partner because cop shows depend on buddy dynamics to sustain odd-couple tension, move the story forward and allow for continuing dialogue. Also to push him out of the way of oncoming trucks.

The name for the vulnerable time when the sentinel goes momentarily blank is "zone-out." Beware the zone-out factor, Sandburg warns Ellison.

Likewise, UPN knows that young, male viewers seek action and special effects. The network knows that's the way to beat the zone-out factor. Viewers giving "The Sentinel" a try won't zone out since the premiere builds toward a climax that is more than a little reminiscent of the feature film

thing.

Fans of "The Flash" and "The Rocketeer" will be impressed. The creators and executive producers of "The Sentinel," Danny Bilson and Paul DeMeo, previously produced those features. Their credentials for action-packed scenes of destruction, endless gadgetry and blowups, narrow escapes and fast-paced drama are impeccable — if you like that sort of thing.

"DATELINE SUNDAY" made a decent debut against "60 Minutes" this week, pulling 17 percent of the viewing audience, but "60 Minutes" remained No. 1 with a 25 share. ABC took the low road to solid ratings, running two "America's Funniest Home Videos" shows back to back, averaging a 15 share.

"X-FILES" FANS are looking forward to fall '97 when Channel 31 will run a double dose of the reruns each weekend, likely in a

TONIGHT ON TV

■ **"THE CLIENT,"** at 7 on Channel 4. Reggie (JoBeth Williams) helps a delusional young man, who may have committed murder to save a woman's life. Naomi Judd guests as a psychologist.

■ **"ANOTHER STAKEOUT,"** at 7 on Channel 31. This comedy drama reunites Richard Dreyfuss and Emilio Estevez as bickering Seattle cops who take on a new partner, a wisecracking assistant DA played by Rosie O'Donnell. Dennis Farina and Cathy Moriarty co-star.

■ **"3rd ROCK FROM THE SUN,"** at 7:30 on Channel 9. Dick enrolls in an art class with Harry, whose work shows a flair that catches the eye of Dr. Albright — to Dick's dismay.

■ **"FRASIER,"** at 8 on Channel 9. In a repeat from January, Frasier declares his love for Kate (Mercedes Ruehl), who reveals she is taking a job in another city.

CHAMPION FOR 'THE DUST

Rybacki on a mission to give Vietn

VIETNAM from Page 1E

evacuated."

Once at the airport, the family had to sacrifice the few carefully packed items they had so more Vietnamese evacuees could be crammed into the waiting U.S. Air Force C-130 cargo plane. Elders and pregnant women sat, while the rest stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the oppressive heat for the 5½-hour flight from Saigon to the Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines.

In a frantic blur of days, her childhood began disappearing hundreds of miles behind her.

"It was like having the rug pulled out from under me," Rybacki said. "But when you're 18, the only thing that matters is your stability. And I knew I had my parents with me." But years later, her abrupt departure would compel her to return.

"I don't care for things that are unfinished. I have a lot of disdain for the unknown. I like to know the variance and the facts so that I can deal with the situation. I'm in the business of knowing facts," said Rybacki, referring to her job as an information technology specialist for UNIX services at Hewlett-Packard in Fort Collins.

"Also, in Vietnam there is a saying that for every beginning there has to be an end, for every up a down, every high a low. My beginning in Saigon didn't have an end. I never properly said goodbye to anyone or anything. So, for years the thing nagging at me was that I needed to go back and properly say goodbye."

□ □ □

It was tragedy that brought her full circle to Vietnam. In 1987 Rybacki's second son, Garrett, became ill with an unknown illness. After 88 days at Children's Hospital, he died.

"No one knew what was wrong with him. After he died I kept asking 'How can this country, where people travel in space, not know how to save my son?' We fought nail and teeth to get him the best of care. I started wondering what do people in Vietnam do if their child is sick? What do you do in a country lesser than this one?"

The questions simmered and grew into a resolve to return to Vietnam. In 1993, Congressman Wayne Allard's office helped secure a visa for Rybacki, who was then a resident alien. (Rybacki became a U.S. citizen in 1993, even though she was eligible for U.S. citizenship as early as 1978.)

Her first trip to Vietnam was in March 1993, when she traveled as a translator for another Vietnamese-American who was returning for a reunion with her long-lost family. While there, Rybacki began asking questions, trying to locate an old Catholic nun who years before had been a close friend of her

Buddhist mother. Rybacki's mother had died recently, and she wanted to tell the nun and perhaps reminisce about her mother.

She hadn't counted on discovering what was to be her life crusade. Following directions from another Catholic nun, Rybacki journeyed to a tiny convent compound nestled in a beachside coconut grove. In a cramped school, a handful of nuns was caring for children who had been abandoned — some found in the streets, others in trash cans, still others dropped off by their families at the compound.

"Most of the children living at the orphanage, the nuns know their parents," said Rybacki, who declined to reveal the convent's location in Saigon for fear of jeopardizing the children or their caregivers.

She says that what she saw there immediately triggered a decision to help. Then, as now, the orphans range in age from newborns to teenagers, but all are Vietnamese. Nearly all Amerasian children — the youngest of whom would now be 22 or 23 years old — were long ago brought to the United States, Rybacki said.

Some of the orphans are handicapped, others are simply innocent victims of their country's poverty and an aggressive family planning campaign that strongly encourages parents to limit their families to two children. Abortion and contraception are scarce — opposed by the Vietnamese, who are primarily Buddhist and Catholic.

"The population is largely Buddhist, and they believe that the bad you do in this life you pay for in the next life," Rybacki said. "So if you have a state policy for two children only, some people would rather give away the extra ones."

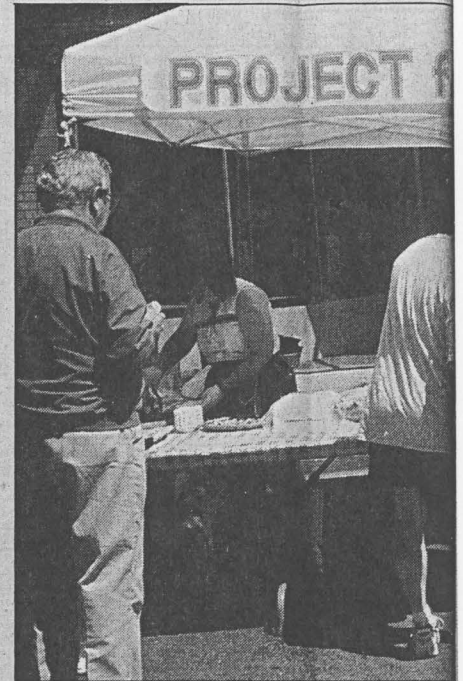
Rybacki said she first tried to give the nun \$100 in American dollars, but she was rebuffed gently. "At first I didn't understand, but she simply said that if I was willing to help, God would be willing to provide a way," Rybacki said. "She simply said, 'Ask God, he'll provide.'"

Rybacki prayed to God for that answer on her way back to her hotel. In the days that followed, she met with Vietnamese government officials who at first were suspicious of a foreigner wanting to help support orphans. Still, she pressed on with letters and phone calls after she returned to the United States.

She's been back twice since that first visit. "I told them for whatever they require of me I would give," Rybacki said. "I have told the nuns: 'Don't hesitate to bring children here. I'll see to it that you'll have money to care for them.'"

The first group of kids from her mother's friend's convent have been joined by more than 300 others, all cared for at the orphanage in Saigon.

Vietnam remains one of the world's poorest



TAKING IT TO STREETS: Binh Nguyen. American friends have raised \$2,800 at t

countries, with an average per capita income of just \$300 per year in U.S. dollars. But the staunchly socialist government is working to rebuild its economy as well as polish up its image in order to re-establish diplomatic relations with countries like the United States. So far, foreign aid has been welcomed, from private American citizens such as Rybacki to international aid organizations like UNICEF and the Red Cross.

But Rybacki pointedly avoids criticizing Vietnam's government.

"We've never had any hints from the government that we're not welcome there," Rybacki said. "Passing judgment on what happens in Vietnam — that is not my place. The need of the money to run this agency of mine is not heavy enough to sacrifice the future and well-being of those orphans in Vietnam. Those children and their future outweigh anything I've ever had. I want to help. And little by little we'll make it a better place."

Rybacki sends money monthly, most of it transferred to bank accounts or hand-carried by business people or tourists traveling to Vietnam. Or she takes the money over herself in her once-a-year solo trips that have replaced family vacations for the Rybacki family.

Using proceeds from selling Vietnamese egg rolls for \$1 apiece at the annual Loveland

No experience needed to teach study sk

Let's smash the myths of Vietnam war



TONY SNOW

The Vietnam War marked the first time in American history that we waged war not only against a foreign enemy, but against ourselves. Truth was the first casualty of that internecine

fight, which means that now, on the 25th anniversary of our departure from Vietnam, many younger Americans know little about the war other than the grim idiocies passed on by the professors and the press.

Let's refute some of those popular myths.

■ Vietnam was an unjust war.

Members of the self-described New Left argued in the 1960s that the people of Vietnam loved communism and that the South Vietnamese hungered for the ministrations of Ho Chi Minh. That proved thumpingly untrue. Within weeks of the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the Vietnamese people expressed their feelings about communism by crafting crude boats and trying to drift to freedom — much as Cubans do today.

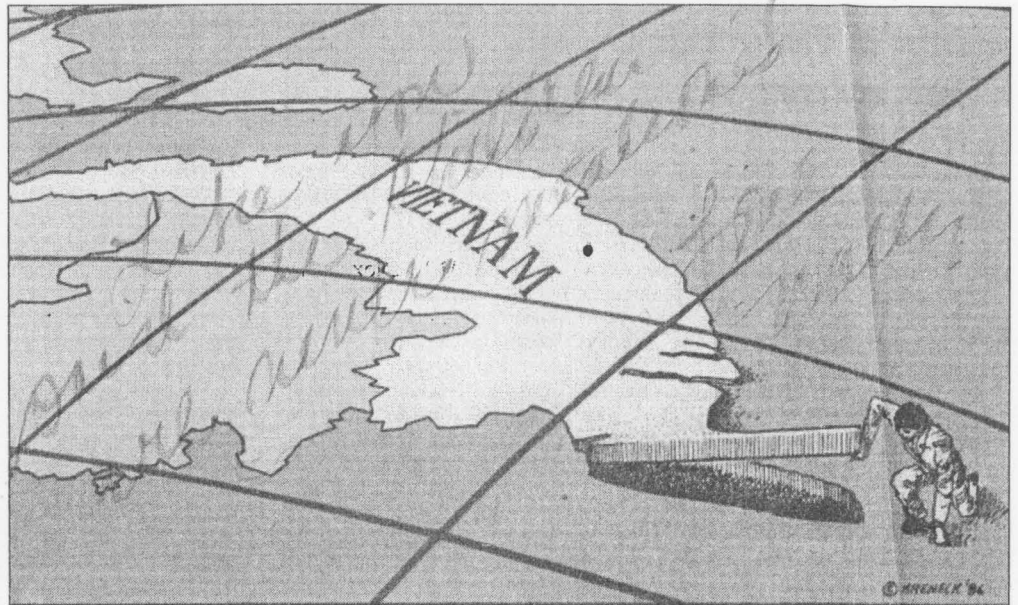
■ We had no reason to enter the battle.

Vietnam differed from previous wars in that the Vietnamese could not conceivably bring the fight to American shores. But President John Kennedy, the architect of the war, perceived a different reason for engagement. He was deeply anti-communist and believed in the "domino theory" — that if one nation in the region were to fall to communism, others would follow. Although college students of that era jeered at the notion, it turned out to be true. After Vietnam fell, so did Cambodia and Burma (now Myanmar). Millions subsequently died in communist "liberations."

■ The United States was an imperialist aggressor.

Just the opposite was true. The United States, like France before it, was attempting to prevent communist imperialism. Like France, it failed. The Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations, following the lead of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower in Korea, refused to call the war a "war," designating it a "conflict" instead.

This verbal sleight of hand spared the presidents the trouble of having to seek a congressional declaration of



Kevin Kreneck / Los Angeles Times Syndicate

A strong military is necessary not just to fight wars, but to prevent them. No sane outfit will mess with a superpower that not only has the means to fight, but the will to punish aggressors.

war. But in failing to seek Capitol Hill's blessing, these presidents doomed the effort. Congressional debates force planners to sharpen their war aims and make presidents make a popular case for sending young men and women into harm's way.

The arguments used in Vietnam failed both tests. The case for fighting was abstract in nature. Johnson and Nixon did not stimulate the patriotism that sustained us through World War II. They issued no clarion calls to national interest or American greatness. The Pentagon instead tried to justify the war by tossing out body counts — estimating that we were inflicting 10 times as many deaths as the Vietcong were inflicting on us. That wasn't good enough for those who had to bury loved ones.

■ Vietnam War protests set off an age of youthful idealism.

Vietnam War protesters — of which I occasionally was one — began their opposition to the war in earnestness and ended it in fecklessness.

Most protesters got involved not because they had lofty feelings about war and peace. They joined in because they were bored, because disobedience was exciting, because the movement provided the next best thing to a dating service and because they wanted a high-minded way to dodge the draft.

In retrospect, the tactics were wonderfully stupid. The moratorium, which Bill Clinton helped organize in England, was built on the premise that college students could put an end to global conflict merely by standing around in the street and chanting slogans. Instead of inspiring peace, the young scholars goaded communists into waging a broader war on human liberties. The Soviets and their proxy armies concluded that Americans lacked the spirit or will to fight back.

Even worse, anti-war organizations proved to be every bit as delusional as the Pentagon's bean counters. The boat people proved beyond all reasonable doubt that the Vietcong were peddling death and misery — and yet, left-wing commentators refused to acknowledge the fact.

Many still do. Only communism could have turned the Vietnamese people into paupers. Here in America, Vietnamese immigrants have demonstrated their entrepreneurial and economic genius.

■ We're finally giving Vietnam veterans their due.

Although Ronald Reagan and subsequent presidents have lavished Vietnam veterans with praise, we can never give them what they deserve, which is their youth. We lost nearly 60,000 Americans in a war plagued by shabby planning on one side and a narcissistic anti-war movement on the other. Young people were instructed to fight, but not given the means to win. And when they stumbled home from the hell of jungle warfare, they had to endure taunts from a protest movement that viewed its cowardice as a form of nobility.

This sorry legacy does, however, permit us to formulate a pithy summary of the "lessons of Vietnam." First, if you enter a war, declare war and build popular support. Second, fight to win. Third, honor those who serve. And fourth, remember: A strong military is necessary not just to fight wars, but to prevent them. No sane outfit will mess with a superpower that not only has the means to fight, but the will to punish aggressors.

Tony Snow writes for *Creators Syndicate*, 5777 W. Century, Suite 700, Los Angeles, Calif. 90045.

At 78,
Lillian Turner has
some tales to tell.
She started her
medical career with
the invasion force
poised to attack
Japan in 1945,
spent years in
Vietnam and in
other spots around
the globe. Now at an
age when most people
are retired, she's pro-
viding medical care
in the tiny town of
Hanna, Wyo.

Story by Lee Olson



Above, Lillian Turner, 78, checks the throat of Jennifer Smith, 7. Left, Turner holds a young napalm victim of the Vietnam War.

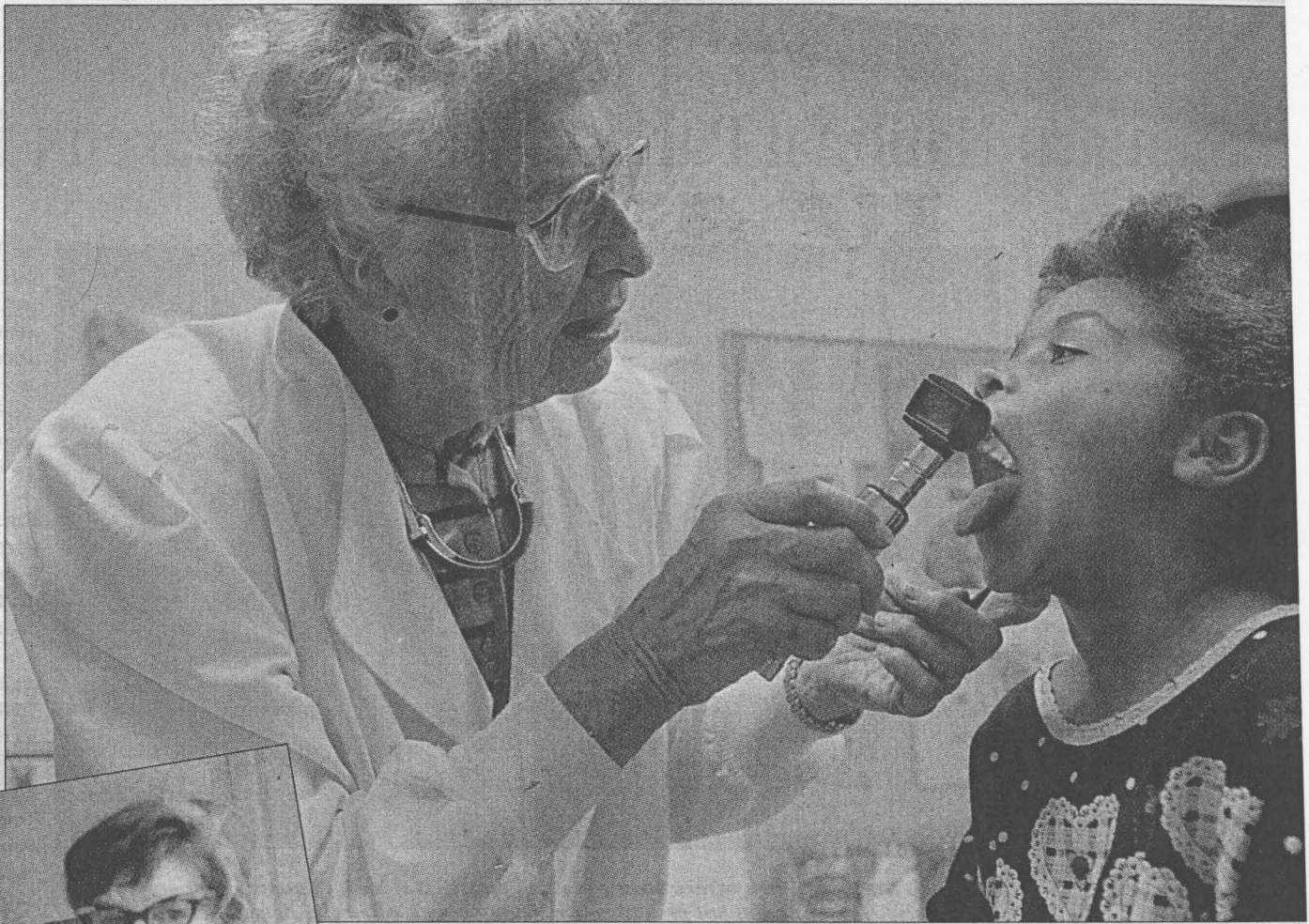


Special to The Post / Lee Olson

WAR STORIES

At 78, Lillian Turner has a lifetime of tales to tell. She started her medical career with the Japanese invasion force that landed on Iwo Jima in 1945, spent years in Vietnam and in various spots around the world. Now at an age when most people are retired, she's providing medical care in a tiny town of Hanna, Wyo.

by Lee Olson



Above, Lillian Turner, 78, checks the throat of Jennifer Smith, 7. Left, two decades earlier, Turner holds a young napalm victim of the Vietnam War.



Special to The Post / Lee Olson

WAR STORIES

NEARLY three decades ago I spent eight days in South Vietnam. I'd been on a press tour of India for The Denver Post and made a stop in Saigon on the way home to Colorado in November 1967.

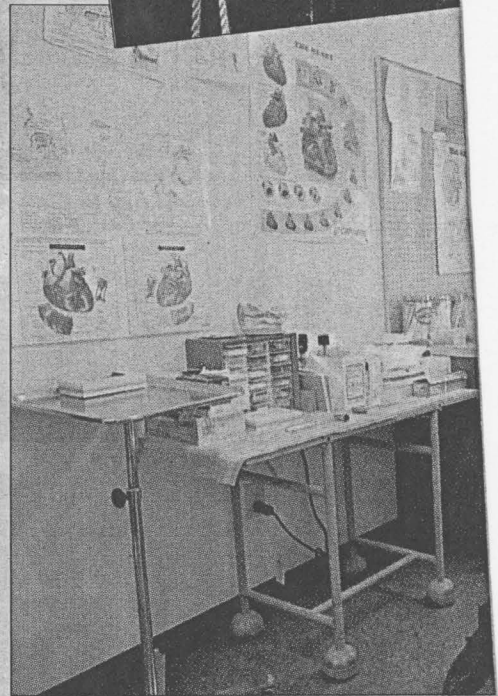
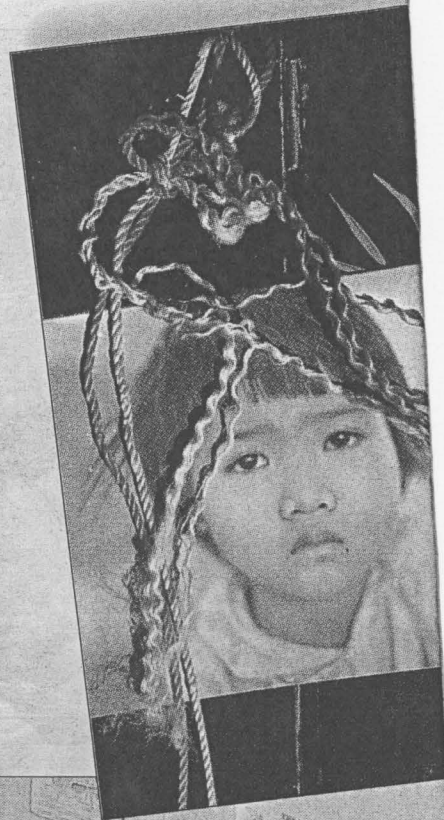
It was a trip I'll never forget. The sights and sounds of Southeast Asia, the thump of mortars, the nightly flares over the surrounding jungle and the tensions of civil war still are fresh in my memory.

I flew out to the carrier Oriskanyu for a wonderful story: an interview with a Colorado fighter squadron that had engaged in a rare aerial dogfight and had shot down a MiG fighter over Hanoi. I was in a Jeep accident in Da Nang that resulted in a three-hour stand-off with a hostile crowd. It took the Shore Patrol to rescue us. Both were memorable events.

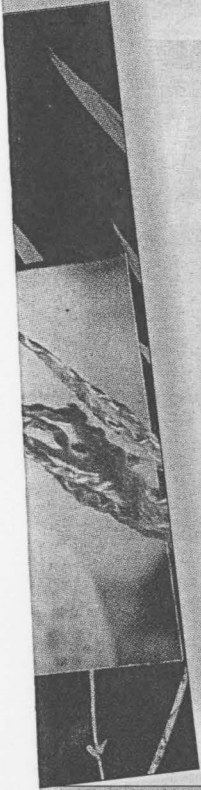
But with the passage of time the image that stayed with me is a picture I took at the Da Nang Medical Center. This was a civilian hospital staffed by American volunteers paid by the U.S. Public Health Service under President Kennedy's "Hands Across the Sea" program of peaceful aid.

The center's burn ward was a gloomy place, but I took a photo of a nurse from Walden, Colo., holding on her lap a child who had been severely burned by napalm. The sincerity of the picture seemed to sum up the hopes that Americans still had for Vietnam in 1967.

In the hurry of journalism, I wrote the hospital story and went on. But earlier this year I came across that picture and wondered what had happened to the woman. A little research turned up Lillian Turner, now



Turner comforts Amanda Tugya during a visit



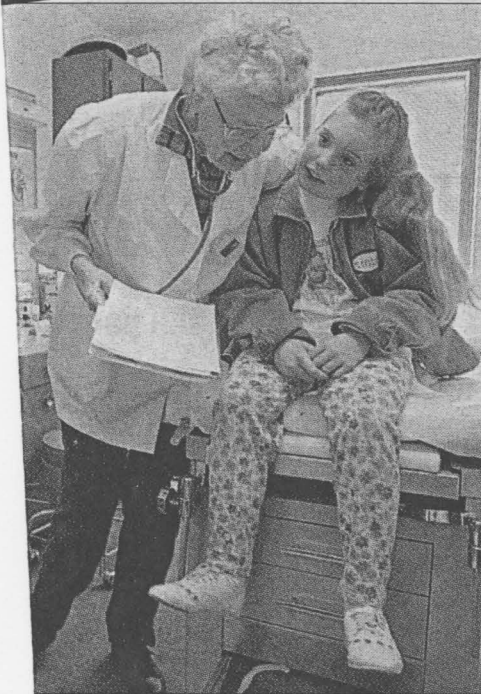
78 and still going strong. She runs a clinic for the ranching and coal mining community of Hanna, Wyo., not too far from Walden.

But between her school days in Colorado (CSU's class of 1940) and today, she has had a remarkable life.

From CSU and a short teaching career, she went to Columbia University for nursing training and joined the U.S. Japanese invasion fleet in 1945. When Japan surrendered, she worked for a year as an Army nurse in the Philippines, then left the military and took a job as a nurse and dean of women at the University of

Left, Lillian Turner shot this photograph of a Vietnamese child during the war.

**Photos by
Shaun Stanley**



at her office in Hanna, Wyo.

Alaska in Fairbanks.

After various other jobs, she went to South Vietnam in 1964 to serve in the Da Nang Medical Center. She signed on as a surgical nurse but soon expanded her knowledge as supervisor of the burn ward.

She and other nurses learned that the military had a strict rule against using outdated blood plasma, so they besieged the Navy and found that the discarded blood was perfectly good. They used the plasma to treat their tiny patients, many of whom were desperately in need of blood. Infection-carrying flies also were a big problem, so Turner talked a Seabee construction crew into screening off a large corner room for her most vulnerable patients.

Cleanliness was a struggle. One of Turner's innovations was to use a well-scrubbed 55-gallon barrel as a tub for her patients.

She would fill the drum with hot water and a mild soap from the PX, and then lift her patients - most of whom weighed less than 90 pounds - and dip them in the mix. It worked wonders, taking off burn scale and leaving clean wounds.

Turner survived the 1968 Tet Offensive and the explosion of an ammunition ship that shattered the front windows of her house a half-mile away. Then she went off to Hawaii in the late 1960s for more medical training and went right back to Vietnam in 1970, this time to a Saigon children's hospital treating communicable diseases and leprosy.

There were hundreds of unsung American civilians doing such work all over South Vietnam. When the end came with the American

*Please see **War** on page 16*

War from page 13

withdrawal in 1975, there were painful partings for many people. Perhaps the most difficult one for Turner was saying good-bye to the orphaned children she had cared for. Susan McDonald, a young nun from Akron, Colo., who ran a Saigon orphanage, recalled the departure of the orphans' plane.

The giant C-5A transport plane

at Tan Son Nhut Airport was loaded with hundreds of orphans to be sent to the U.S. for adoption. Moments after takeoff the huge plane crashed in a swamp, killing 155 passengers, many of them children.

"There were children I had cared for on that flight, and they died," McDonald said. "Just seeing their little injured bodies was like a scene out of a

nightmare."

She and Turner did not know each other, yet they share memories of that night. Now a Sister of Loretto in Kentucky, McDonald, 51, said for a long time she had a recurring dream:

"I am at the crash site. There are little pieces of paper flying all over in the air, like snowflakes. I pick one of them out of the air. And on it is a pic-



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ture of a child. Then in the dream, I turn to others and shout: 'It's all right! There weren't any children on the plane. There were just pictures. Just pictures of children.'

Turner was supposed to be on that flight, but missed it. She went on to serve in the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean and since 1989 as a physician's assistant, providing medical care to the 2,000 or so people in the coal and ranching town of Hanna.

Turner didn't come home until she reached an age where overseas jobs demanded younger people. But she didn't retire - she began working for a doctor in Rawlins, Wyo., in the mid-1970s. Then, when she qualified as a physician's assistant at the University of Utah Medical School, she was assigned in 1989 to run a clinic at Hanna, where she alone treats up to 20 people a day.

Her Energy Basin Clinic operates as a branch of the Carbon County Memorial Hospital in Rawlins. The hospital acquired the clinic when Hanna's last doctor left in 1989. It's a busy place because Turner's fees are reasonable and she has the trust of the community. Turner also does pre-employment physicals for the three coal mines at Hanna. She does her own charts for patients and her own instrument sterilization.

Anita Midkiff, the clinic's office manager, has enormous respect for Turner but says that, even after six years of working together, "she's still a very private person."

Turner has some big fans among her patients.

"I go to her. My mother goes to her. My daughter goes to her," said Barbara Smith, assistant clerk-treasurer of Hanna. "We're very comfortable about seeing her - and confident. She's very personable and checks later by

telephone to see if there are complications. . . . It's nice to have someone who cares."

Dr. Daniel Klein, now of Laramie, was her employer in Rawlins and her sponsor when she attended the University of Utah Medical School to become a physician's assistant, a degree that qualifies her to do limited medical practice under a doctor's supervision.

"I'm a fan of Lillian's. Her experience is incredible," Klein said. "When I left Rawlins in 1989 I thought she might retire. But she didn't. I was delighted when the clinic job opened up for her."

But an old injury may change all that. When Turner was a girl, a horse fell on her and damaged her right knee. The injury has flared up and she recently underwent knee replacement surgery.

She'll use some vacation time for rehabilitation and then decide whether the time has come to retire. One thing, however, is certain: It will be a sad day when she retires.

"We're on pins and needles about her retirement," said I.W. "Bill" Coffman, a coal mine supervisor and Hanna's mayor. "I'm on the board of the hospital, and we're concerned about what to do if she does retire."

"She's more than a town asset. She's wonderful. When you have a world traveler in your midst - like she is - it shows in many ways. We're privileged to know her." Whatever her decision, Turner will have plenty to keep her busy. Her hobbies include "yelling at the Broncos on TV, wood carving, reading, rock-hounding and looking for arrowheads."

"I want to get as much out of this life as I can," she said. □

Lee Olson is a former Denver Post staff writer.

Opposite page, bottom, the artist Carlos Frésquez and, above, his mixed media 'Barrio Pieta.' This page, 'Teatro de mi Corazon,' (Theater of my Heart).

Paintings courtesy of Carlos Frésquez

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Denver Post
8/16/96

Vietnamese orphans

'Angel of Saigon' saved 200 kids at war's end

EDITOR'S NOTE — She was called the Angel of Saigon, a petite American woman who arranged for more than 200 orphans to be airlifted out of South Vietnam in 1975 as the Communist forces were closing in. The children found a new life in the United States, but as adults they still haven't forgotten "Miss Betty."

By James L. Eng
The Associated Press

SEATTLE — The children of Vietnam's An Lac orphanage are men and women now, scars slowly fading more than two decades after their war ended.

Rescued as babies from an uncertain fate in war-torn Saigon, adopted by American families and schooled in U.S. colleges and universities, they have gone on to share in the American dream. Many now have families of their own.

But they do not forget the petite, dark-haired American woman who gave them a second chance. Nor has she forgotten them.

She is Betty Tisdale, but the children of An Lac knew her as Miss Betty or Miss Sweet. Some called her the Angel of Saigon.

Tisdale raised money for and helped run the orphanage. She scrubbed floors, changed diapers and taught English to hundreds of abandoned or orphaned babies.

When the North Vietnamese army closed in on Saigon in 1975, she organized an airlift of more than 200 An Lac orphans to the United States, where all were adopted by American families. Tisdale and her then-husband, Army doctor Patrick Tisdale, adopted five of the children themselves.

"It became my life. I just felt I was meant to do this," Tisdale said in a recent interview at her home in Seattle's Queen Anne neighborhood, where she has lived since 1982.

"The Vietnamese people that came here are still part of my life. The ones that I left behind are still part of my life. And my children. I can't imagine what life would be without them."

The mission that would take Tisdale half a world away began in the late 1950s, when she read a book about Dr. Tom Dooley, a U.S. Navy lieutenant who devoted much of his life to helping the sick and poor of Southeast Asia

and New Year's holidays — visiting "An Lac." She saved money for the trips by skimping on lunch — "Howard Johnson's had the best hot dogs for 30 cents" — and buying her clothes at discount stores. She stayed in Javits' office after hours to use the office typewriter.

By the early 1970s, the orphanage had added washing machines and dryers, a new kitchen, indoor showers, a station wagon and bicycles that made it easier for the children to attend school.

In the spring of 1975, when bombings were routine and the fall of Saigon was imminent, Tisdale returned to An Lac one last time

with actress Ina Balin, intent on rescuing all of the approximately 400 orphans then at An Lac.

They persuaded Vietnamese government officials to allow an airlift of all the children to the United States. But at the last moment, trying to avert pandemonium, the government decreed that only children under 10 could leave.

Working for three days straight with little sleep, Tisdale and Balin rejiggered the list and drafted identification papers to comply with the ultimatum — a task complicated by the fact that none of the children had birth certificates. Some of their documents showed

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Dr

Dooley helped found the An Lac orphanage in Saigon in the mid-1950s with Madame Vu Thi Ngai, a wealthy, college-educated widow who fled to South Vietnam after the Communist takeover in North Vietnam.

Ngai assumed a caretaker role as she made her way south, taking under her wing homeless children she encountered along the way. Over the ensuing years, she cared for thousands of youngsters at An Lac, which means "happy place."

Trip changed her life

In New York City, Tisdale — then Betty Moul — started working for Dooley as a volunteer, helping with typing and other office duties. After Dooley's death in 1961, Tisdale, then in her late 20s, took over fund raising for the orphanage and made her first trip to Southeast Asia.

Her up-close look at An Lac changed her life.

In a dilapidated former French military barracks at No. 116 Nguyen Dinh Chieu St. in Saigon, toddlers sat on overturned pots. Stools and urns of water served as makeshift showers. Food was cooked in pots placed on charcoal burners on the dirt floors.

"I walked in and saw the rusty cribs with hammocks and rags hung between them, the tiny, emaciated babies lying there with rags," Tisdale recalls.

"I knew that I couldn't go back to New York and be the business girl, the swinging single, everything that New York portrayed. I knew that I had to change my life."

After a second trip to An Lac in 1963, Tisdale returned to New York and landed a job as private secretary in the New York City office of the late U.S. Sen. Jacob Javits, R-N.Y., where she worked for the next six years. She began courting donations from society's movers-and-shakers.

Soon she was sending as much as \$5,000 a month to the orphanage, as well as corporate gifts — tons of diapers from Johnson & Johnson, cartons of mislabeled baby food from Heinz.

Cultural differences

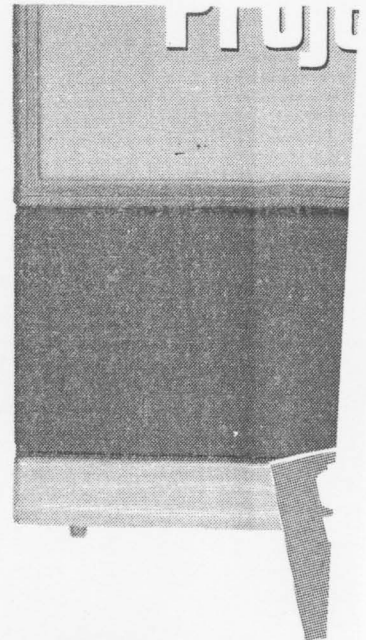
There were some cross-cultural complications.

"Someone said Tang had a lot of vitamin C. I wrote to Tang and got stacks and stacks of it. When I got to the orphanage, there it was, all stacked in a room. I said, 'Madame Ngai, why aren't you using this?' She said, 'They (the children) don't like it.'

"I said, 'Let me try.' She didn't know it had to be diluted in water. The minute we did that, they were drinking it like mad."

Tisdale spent her vacations — a few weeks around the Christmas

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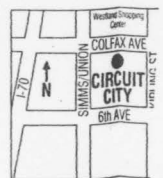
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various older children to be 8 or 9, though one reportedly began shaving the next year. As the children were loaded onto Air Force planes — the babies were placed in boxes strapped to the floor — Tisdale stepped inside the An Lac nursery one final time.

"I went to get the last baby and I looked and you couldn't hear a sound, which is not like An Lac. There wasn't a baby crying. There wasn't a gurgle. There wasn't anything but silence," Tisdale recalls.

"And it was then that I thought to myself, 'Am I playing God? What am I doing taking all these children?'"

In all, 219 children were flown out of An Lac on April 12, 1975. One 3-month-old boy died en route. On April 29, 1975 — the day be-

fore South Vietnam fell to the Communists — Tisdale flew to Guam and arranged for Madame Ngai and her two assistants to come to the United States. Ngai lived with the Tisdales in Columbus, Ga., until her death three years later at age 74.

The An Lac airlift was the largest from a single orphanage. All the children found permanent adoptive homes through Tressler Lutheran Services of Pennsylvania. The story was made into a 1980 television movie, "The Children of An Lac."

More than 150 older An Lac orphans were left behind, many of them carted off to work camps in the jungles when the Communists took over. In April 1995, 20 years after Saigon's fall, Tisdale and

adopted daughter Kim returned to Vietnam and visited the old An Lac building, which had been converted into low-income housing.

When word got around that Miss Betty was in town, several of the An Lac orphans who had been left behind — most now in their 30s — began showing up in the lobby of her hotel.

These days, she says she spends most of her time acting as an information resource and go-between for others involved in philanthropic work. She is active in the Tibetan human-rights campaign. She also sits on the board of the Variety Club, a children's charity, and the World Affairs Council, an educational organization.

But the children of An Lac remain at the heart of her life.

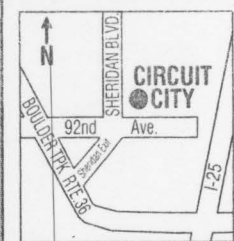
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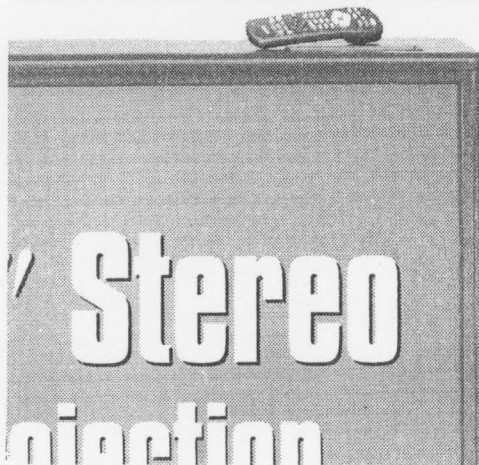
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