

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.

