A Brief History of International Adoptions of Vietnamese Children 1954-1975

The civil war in Vietnam began long before the South Vietnamese government asked for American military training in 1956. By then, orphanages were established in Vietnam.

Madam Vu Thi Ngai fled the north in 1954, taking more than 100 children left homeless by the fighting. Assisted by former military physician, Dr. Tom Dooley, she founded An Lac orphanage in Saigon. In 1961, Betty Tisdale, an American promoting the Dooley Foundation, visited An Lac and began to support the orphanage by raising funds, supplies and returning regularly to work in the orphanage.

At that time, legal adoption was not a common practice in Asia since the extended family generally cared for children who lost their parents. Like most Vietnamese, Madam Ngai was unfamiliar with intercountry adoption and believed the Vietnamese were capable of taking care of their own children. After so many years of war, that system was weakening and in 1961 the South Vietnamese legislature passed its first adoption laws.

In 1964 the U.S. Congress adopted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which fell short of a declaration of war but had the same consequences. By the end of the year, 23,000 additional U.S. combat troops were in Vietnam. This contributed to escalating numbers of refugees and orphans. Reports began to reach the U.S. through the media.

Duane and Wende Grant from California were among those who learned of the orphaned and abandoned children in Vietnam and hoped to adopt a child from Asia. Through friends they found and adopted their daughter, Thi, who arrived in the U.S. in 1965. Thi was one of the first Vietnamese children adopted to the U.S.

During this period, Terres des Hommes, a European relief agency, began working with some Catholic nuns in Vietnam to identify children who might be adoptable. Before 1967 a number of Vietnamese children were adopted by families in France, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland.

Partly due to restrictions of Vietnamese law and policies in the U.S., it was extremely difficult to adopt a Vietnamese child during the 1960s. There were no established procedures for international adoption, and often it took up to two years to complete.

After meeting U.S. and Vietnamese requirements, families had to find a child in Vietnam who was available for adoption. A number of Americans found children to adopt through friends or acquaintances working for the U.S. civilian government in Vietnam or through individuals connected with the military.

Many children were left in orphanages by parents who intended to return for them. Children were frequently abandoned in maternity wards of hospitals or on the steps of orphanages. The birth certificates of these abandoned children had little or no known information to include. At first, many orphanages, including An Lac,
refused to release children for intercountry adoption. Later many relented as the years of war dragged on and the numbers of children in their care increased.

In 1967 Rosemary Taylor, an Australian volunteer, began assisting families by identifying children relinquished for adoption and facilitating the adoption process in Vietnam. She also helped establish three nurseries to care for homeless children. During her eight years in Vietnam, Taylor had contact with more than 4,000 children adopted abroad.

The Tet offensive of 1968 increased the refugee and orphan population. At that time only International Social Services (ISS) had permission from the South Vietnamese government to process intercountry adoptions. ISS reluctantly supported intercountry adoption believing other domestic programs would reach more children. They stressed that intercountry adoption should occur only when a family could not be found for the child in Vietnam.

Conflicting reports indicate that in 1971 between 90 and 130 Vietnamese children were adopted by U.S. citizens; according to one report, that figure increased to almost 400 in 1972. At the end of 1972, U.S. combat troops were leaving Vietnam.

The media reported that child welfare programs in Vietnam desperately needed help as U.S. troops and military supplies had informally supported a number of these efforts for many years. The increasing number of Vietnamese children adopted by U.S. families was heightened by an ever-growing interest in adoption. It also increased complaints about Vietnam's antiquated adoption laws. African-American families joined the criticism feeling excluded from adoption proceedings although hundreds of African-American-Vietnamese children were in orphanages.

I feel blessed for being able to have a family adopt me. It was and is a learning experience which made me to be the person of "strong mind and will" that I am today. With determination and strong faith within your belief anything is possible.

Amanda Roberson
As an adoptee I am very grateful to my biological mother for loving me so much to give me up; giving me a better life.

Stacy Meredith

The Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, and Holt International Children’s Services began its Vietnam programs later that year. Friends of Children of Vietnam (FCVN) and Friends for All Children (FFAC) became two separate agencies licensed in Colorado and Vietnam. U.S. adoption agencies certified to work in Vietnam included International Social Services (ISS), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Pearl S. Buck Foundation (PBF), Traveler’s Aid International, World Vision Relief Organization and An Lac Orphanage/ Tressler Lutheran Services. Other organizations and individuals also placed a limited number of children for adoption.

An NBC documentary in June 1973 further increased interest in adoption from Vietnam, especially the multiracial children. Prompted by continued complaints from adoption and child welfare agencies operated by African-Americans, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) hosted a conference in July. This led to the formation of the Interagency Vietnam Adoption Committee (IVAC), whose purpose was to assist African-American families in adopting mixed-race Vietnamese children.

In 1973 USAID reported 682 intercountry adoptions from Vietnam, with 375 of the children coming to the U.S. Another report claimed that between 1964 and 1973, approximately 1,130 Vietnamese children were adopted by families in the U.S.

In 1973 Holt International placed its first Vietnamese child in the U.S. and in early 1974 won a victory for international adoption when the Vietnamese government granted Holt permission to acquire legal custody of the children it was sponsoring for international adoption.

By the end of 1974, adoptions were processed in as little as five months. The Vietnamese government began permitting “proxy adoptions” that greatly streamlined the process. The number of intercountry adoptions of Vietnamese children in 1974 soared to 1,362, with 845 of those children adopted by U.S. families.

By early 1975 the Paris Peace Accord broke down and the North Vietnamese were attacking the South. By March some Vietnamese citizens were asking to be evacuated. Concerned officials at relief agencies worried about the safety of the children. Orphanages and agencies began evacuating children to Saigon as fighting progressed southward.

Although the last days before the fall of Saigon were uncertain and filled with confusion and desperation, staff and volunteers throughout Vietnam tried to not panic and to maintain a sense of calm as they continued to care for the children. Everyone worked heroically around the clock for days to get children and documents ready.

Pressure from both U.S. and Vietnamese officials in South Vietnam led President Gerald Ford to announce that on April 3, 1975, all Vietnamese children currently identified for adoption to U.S. families would be airlifted out of Vietnam to the U.S. This action later became controversial due to the dramatic activity of the final days in Vietnam, the large number of children brought out of Vietnam together and unprecedented media coverage of “Operation Babylift.”

Ed Daly, president of World Airways, previously announced that he would person-
ally evacuate several hundred children on April 2. Holt International and Friends for All Children, the agencies with the largest number of eligible children in their care, declined the World Airways offer. Approximately 45 to 60 children were taken on that first unauthorized World Airways flight.

Holt also declined an offer by the U.S. government to fly their children out of Vietnam. Instead Holt negotiated with Pan American Airways to charter a Pan Am-747. Due to the deteriorating conditions in Saigon, Holt was required by Pan-Am to purchase security insurance. Only Lloyds of London would agree to ensure the 747 at a cost of $50,000 for each hour the plane would be on the ground in Saigon. The total cost for the flight was $185,000.

The first official flight of “Operation Babylift” was scheduled for April 4. More than 228 children, most from FFAC-sponsored facilities, were placed aboard a C-5A plane designed to carry cargo, not passengers. Tragically, the C-54 crashed in a field about a mile from Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon. Seventy-eight children died, along with fifty adults who were escorting the children.

The Holt flight left Saigon at 6 p.m. on April 5 with 409 children and escorts on board. Another Pan Am plane chartered by FFAC evacuated 323 children an hour later. President Ford greeted the FFAC plane when it arrived in San Francisco. Just after midnight, April 6, the Holt flight arrived in Seattle.

Throughout April as “Operation Babylift” flights left Vietnam bringing children away from war to their adoptive families, an army of volunteers met
Being adopted is the most hallowed experience in my life. In a world full of uncertainties, I am certain the good Lord blessed me with the most wonderful family. Bless my birth mother for her strength, courage and love.

Adam Jackson

them at airports around the country. These volunteers welcomed and cared for the scared, exhausted and bewildered children as their grueling journey came to an end. Many children were ill when they arrived and required immediate hospitalization. As news reports told the story of these children, even more volunteers came forward and became part of this historic event.

Two additional unauthorized World Airways flights, a few charter and regular commercial flights along with a number of military flights, evacuated approximately 3,000 children between April 2 and April 29. Almost two-thirds of the children—1,945—were destined for families in the U.S. Almost 1,000 more passed through the U.S. en route to families in Europe and several hundred children were adopted in Australia and Canada. Only the U.S. took children regardless of their final destination. No other country would allow children in transit.

Before the fall of Saigon, adoption agencies attempted to evacuate Vietnamese staff who had worked for U.S. agencies, tirelessly caring for children and preparing them for adoption.

More than 100 Vietnamese staff worked for Holt. Thirty one of them accepted an offer by the U.S. Embassy for evacuation, and on April 27 went with their families to the airport. Holt's three remaining U.S. staff were directed to leave Vietnam immediately but were reassured by Embassy officials that the Vietnamese staff would be evacuated on the next plane. They reluctantly departed on a chartered DC-3 to Singapore, taking all the child documents and records of the Holt Vietnam program.

A few hours later as the airport was officially closed and preparations had begun to destroy military facilities, Holt's Vietnamese staff were loaded onto buses and returned to the Holt office—abandoned by the U.S. officials who promised to evacuate them.