

OPERATION BABYLIFT

THE HUMANITARIAN EFFORT TO SAVE THE CHILDREN OF VIETNAM THAT STARTED SO TRAGICALLY....BUT ENDED WELL

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The Vietnam War was one of the most brutal modern conflicts since WWII. The world was appalled by the bloodshed and the very many atrocities carried out by all sides. Although great horrors occurred, so too did great moments of kindness. During the turmoil, damage, and fear, there were shining instances of help from military forces - and perhaps the most memorable was Operation Babylift.

As the Vietnam War began to draw to a close in the spring of 1975 after nearly a decade of conflict, the United States knew that Southern Vietnam was slipping from its grasp because of the anti-war movement at home, which drove citizens to protest to fight the draft and to combat the government's policies in every way possible. As the U.S. began to pull its troops out of South Vietnam, leaving the people and the nation to fend for themselves. One question remained: what would happen to the children of Vietnam?

The U.S. believed it had the answer with Operation Babylift. As the Army of North Vietnam rocked Saigon with artillery and endless attacks, and the city of Da Nang lay already destroyed, President Gerald Ford announced that the children of South Vietnam would be evacuated to safety. The plan was to remove infant orphans from the war-torn nation and carry them to safer locales where they could live free of fear - the U.S., Australia, France, Canada, and other countries agreed to welcome the Vietnamese children with open arms.



Children came from every corner of South Vietnam. Parents and charitable organizations alike wanted to see their children to safety.

Non-profit organizations, from the Catholic Relief Service and Holt International Children's Services to International Orphans and Friends for All Children, petitioned the U.S. government to evacuate the orphans in their care.

Though Operation Babylift was initially set up to help orphans, many of the children airlifted had parents who were still alive. However, it was the possibility of death, torture, and other horrors that led parents to hand over their children to the U.S. military and send them to far-off places.

(Very similar to the Jews during the Holocaust in WW2) As North Vietnamese forces rapidly advanced through South Vietnam, the people became terrified: what would the Communists inflict upon the South once they took control?

Rumors spread quickly, and the South Vietnamese grew desperate to leave. It was believed that the North Vietnamese would set children fathered by American soldiers on fire and that they would brutally murder any mixed-race infants and toddlers to send a message. Mothers acted to protect their children and saw the evacuation to America as the best option.

All commercial flights into and out of Vietnam had ended months prior, **so Operation Babylift was the only way that they could fly the children out of South Vietnam to safety.** Many parents who chose to take advantage of Operation Babylift planned to leave Vietnam themselves when they could, hoping to be reunited with their children in America.



On April 4, 1975, the first Operation Babylift flight took off - but its children were not destined to make it to safety. Because military aircraft were present in South Vietnam and needed to evacuate the country, too, the orphans were placed on Military Airlift Command C-5 Galaxy and C-141 Starlifter cargo planes.



Operation Babylift. A C-5 Galaxy takes off with 258 Vietnamese orphans on board. Minutes later, it crashed into a rice paddy, killing 138. April 4, 1975

On that very first flight, just twelve brief minutes after takeoff, the C-5 Galaxy plane exploded.

The plane's lower rear fuselage tore apart, and the loading ramp failed to lock in place, ripped the door open, and rapidly decompressed the plane. In mere minutes, the C-5 decayed in mid-air as cables were torn to pieces, wing spoilers and half of the hydraulic systems failed, and the crew lost control of the flight.

Acting with speed and desperation, the aircraft's crew regained as much control as they could grab - they quickly dropped their altitude to 4,000 feet and steered back to the airport runway.

[The pilot and others discuss the crash itself.](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4q71T-SQro>

As the nearly dismantled plane rushed towards the ground, the crew angled for the gentlest landing possible in a rice paddy near the airport. After skidding for a quarter of a mile, the C-5 lifted back up into the air - and then immediately flew into a dike, smashing into pieces and igniting in flames. Seventy-eight infants perished, along with 35 adults, with the Defense Attaché Office of Saigon. Only a few of the adult passengers, including some U.S. Embassy personnel covertly leaving Vietnam, managed to make their way to the limited oxygen masks.

The overcrowded transport plane should have been carrying no more than 100 children rather than the 243 who had been loaded aboard. With enormous difficulty, the pilot managed to turn the plane around and crash-land two miles south of Tan Son Nhut, skidding 1,000 feet into a rice paddy. Nurses, volunteers, and crew aboard, many injured themselves, did all they could to save as many children as possible.

Before the fatal C-5A crash, New York's Cardinal Terrence Cooke had sent a plea to President Gerald Ford for federal support and an immediate waiver of immigration red tape for more than 4,000 children living in Catholic orphanages in South Vietnam.

With South Vietnam's reluctant agreement, the order for Operation Babylift had come from the U.S. president, who told the press: I have directed that C-5A aircraft and other aircraft specially equipped to care for these orphans during the flight be sent to Saigon. It's the least we can do. As Saigon fell, President Ford ordered all in-country U.S. orphans to be airlifted out for asylum and adoption. Although he allocated \$2 million for the operation, many flights were made in aircraft not outfitted to carry passengers.

When that first flight crashed, the rest of the C-5A fleet was grounded temporarily. That only added to the pressure on the mission and the workload at Clark Air Base, which more than doubled. All flight lines and ground crews immediately went to high-alert status. The usual turnaround ground time for C-130 and C-141 aircraft was eight hours. On high alert, it shrank to three hours. With C-130s coming in at the rate of three per hour after dark, an air traffic control nightmare developed. The logistics of the operation were staggering, and the cycle was nonstop. Often, the flight crew members ran close to the maximum flying time or crew rest limit.

Because of the differences in aircraft capabilities, the C-141s flew during daylight hours, and the C-130s flew at night. The C-141 required a longer runway for landing and takeoff. The C-130 was capable of short-field approach and takeoff, meaning it could land by diving to the end of the runway when it was directly overhead, and it could take off with less than 2,000 feet of runway.

So, despite the lives saved by Operation Babylift, not all believed it was the right choice to be made in those final wartime days. Its rocky start with that first fated flight led critics back in America to debate whether it was indeed an operation conducted for the right reasons and in the right way.

Newspapers throughout the U.S. ran emotionally charged headlines, deeming Operation Babylift an act of desperation and cruelty.

Attorneys, members of Congress, and journalists all proclaimed that the evacuations were poorly planned and even more poorly executed. Some believed that the entire evacuation effort was nothing more than a ploy to gain sympathy for the Vietnam War, a final chance for the U.S. to prove that it was making a difference during the confusing and complex war.

Many people in America were skeptical of the political motives behind the operation - why did the U.S. government believe that Vietnam children would be better off in a new country, torn from their homeland and their parents? One of the most significant points of contention was the fact that so many of the children airlifted out of South Vietnam were not orphans. Those in opposition to the operation felt it was morally wrong to send these children to new homes with new families.

To a number of the American people, Operation Babylift was viewed as an attempt to remove Vietnamese children from their culture, their community, and their families. Some individuals, including some in Congress, called it a war crime.

It was commonly believed that the U.S. government was acting out of fear because President Ford and his advisers feared that the children of South Vietnam would be treated with brutality by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong and that they were trying to save the lives of these innocents.



South Vietnamese babies on a flight from Saigon to the United States during Operation Babylift, the mass evacuation of children from South Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam War from April 3 to April 26, 1975

As attacks from the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong continued throughout the spring, the U.S. found it increasingly difficult to fly the children of South Vietnam to safety. When artillery attacks on Tan Son Nhut Airport, the site of Operation Babylift, prevented planes from safely taking off, the U.S. knew it was time to end the effort.

The last Operation Babylift flight lifted off from South Vietnam on April 26, 1975. Over the evacuation's three weeks, more than 3,300 infants and young children were airlifted out of their home country.

Upon arriving on foreign soil, whether in the United States or another nation, the children were adopted by new families. Many, however, never forgot their Vietnamese roots. In fact, in the years since Operation Babylift and the end of the Vietnam War, the children who found new homes and new families in new nations have worked to reconnect with the parents they left behind.

Although a long, challenging, and emotional process, it has led many grown-up children to find their way back to Vietnam and to rediscover the families they spent so little time with.

Nonetheless, more than 2,000 babies and children were flown out by military and smaller private chartered planes and eventually adopted in the United States. Another 1,300 were adopted in Canada, Europe, and Australia.

While Operation Babylift remains a controversial point within the more significant controversy of the Vietnam War, it may have saved some children from possible ill-treatment and even death.

ADDITIONAL VIDEO INFO AVAILABLE

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/TheBabylift>

VIDEO'S:

https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=ush-mailn_02&hsimp=yhs-att_001&hspart=att&p=Operatiojn+Baby+Lift#id=53&vid=0ef878b3b12689e20cfe0e1b871c807d&action=view

https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?fr=ush-mailn_02&hsimp=yhs-att_001&hspart=att&p=Operatiojn+Baby+Lift#id=41&vid=0d3c0810742daad85ad0751cddbcd9ad&action=view

U-TUBE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxUIQe-oMMI>

THE CRASH SITE



THE BACK DOORS OF A C-5

THE CRASH INVESTIGATION

Given the explosive manner in which the rear doors failed, sabotage was initially suspected.

Many of the components were looted from the crash site, thereby complicating the investigation; the U.S. Air Force paid a bounty for parts from the wreckage to recover them from the local populace. The United States Navy amphibious cargo ship USS *Durham*, frigate USS *Reasoner*, and command ship USS *Blue Ridge* were assigned to search for the flight data recorder in the South China Sea. The recorder was found, and U.S. Navy ships and helicopters also discovered wreckage from the doors in the South China Sea, as well as the body of a C-5 crewmember.

When the rear doors were eventually recovered from the sea, the investigation determined that some of the locks had not been appropriately engaged. **Maintenance records showed that locks had been cannibalized for spares and then subsequently improperly refitted so that not all the door locks were engaging correctly.**

Accounts also indicated the initial maintenance inspection noticed 5 of the seven locks were not operating and failed the aircraft to fly. With external organizational pressure to get the flight airborne, a second off-shift maintenance team was called in. They subsequently missed the locks during inspection, and the aircraft was cleared for flight. **Furthermore, the flight crew confirmed that they had encountered difficulty closing the doors before takeoff.** As the air pressure differential increased with altitude, the few locks that were working correctly were unable to bear the load, and the door failed.

THE STORY IN PICTURES – EVERYBODY HELPED



Some of the little ones are loaded and ready for takeoff.



April 4, 1975. Before the flight, the pilot allowed reporters to go through the cargo compartment and take pictures. The two Combat Photographers (MSgt Castro and Sgt Nance were in this compartment for the flight and continued filming right until the end)



April 1975. Hugh Hefner provided his plane, the "Big Bunny," to transport Vietnamese children to New York City. Here, the babies are cared for by Playboy bunnies.





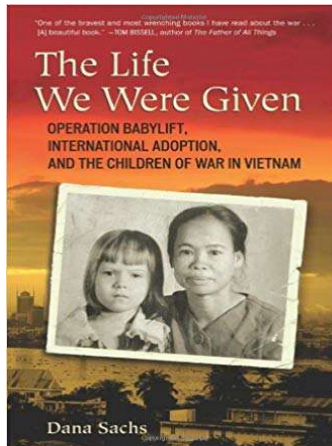
Denver Post Archives
April 11, 1975 - April 13, 1975

New Lives Begin Here Harmon Hall at San Francisco's Presidio is packed with mattresses, volunteers, and Vietnamese orphans in Operation Babylift. Orphans flown to the United States from South Vietnam lived on the mattresses for four days as they were being processed for future adoption.



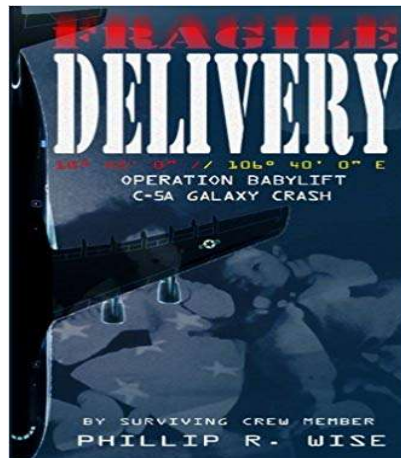
Shirley Barnes was an administrator for Continental Care in the mid-seventies when it became home to about 600 Vietnamese orphans around the time of the fall of Saigon. The building is now Denver North Care Center and is located at 2201 Downing Street. The plaque shown above commemorates Operation Babylift.

BOOKS AVAILABLE



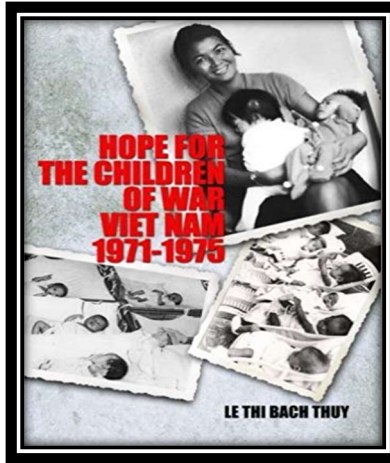
[@ AMAZON](#)

In April 1975, just before the fall of Saigon, the U.S. government launched "Operation Babylift," a highly publicized plan to evacuate nearly three thousand displaced Vietnamese children and place them with adoptive families overseas. Chaotic from start to finish, the mission gripped the world with a traumatic plane crash, international media snapping pictures of bewildered children traveling to their new homes, and families clamoring to adopt the waifs. Often presented as a great humanitarian effort, Operation Babylift provided an opportunity for national catharsis following the trauma of the American experience in Vietnam. Now, thirty-five years after the war ended, Dana Sachs examines this unprecedented event more carefully, revealing how a single public-policy gesture irrevocably altered thousands of lives, not always for the better. Though most of the children were orphans, many were not, and the rescue offered no possibility for families to reunite later.



[@ AMAZON](#)

Fragile Delivery: The Operation Babylift Crash is about the horrible C-5A Galaxy Crash as it was attempting to airlift orphans out of Vietnam on April 4, 1975. It is the story of the life of surviving Crew Member Phillip R. Wise and how he stopped asking why and concentrated on meeting and fellowshiping with the adult Babylift orphans.



[@ AMAZON](#)

As the war in Vietnam neared its end, thousands of children were left in orphanages around the country. Many were of mixed race, which was considered a disgraceful heritage; they faced lives of abuse and servitude if the communists succeeded. In addition, children around the country were suffering from heart conditions that required medical treatment only available in other countries. Le-Thi Bach-Thuy grew up in Vietnam during World War II and the years and wars that followed. She became a social worker with Partners Aiding Children Today, helping pediatric heart patients obtain care in the United States. She also worked with Friends of Children of Viet Nam (FCVN), helping with the documentation and placement of orphans with new families abroad. She adopted two children of her own while helping raise her sisters' families and care for her mother. Her second adopted child, a son, joined her family in March 1975; just weeks later, she put him on the historic World Airways flight that brought 57 orphans to the United States and inspired the creation of Operation Babylift. That program went on to rescue another 3,300 orphans within just a few short weeks. With no foreseeable means of escape, Bach-Thuy stayed in Saigon, helping care for the orphans, streaming into the FCVN Center, and finding ways to get her daughter, nieces, and nephews to safety in the United States. As more and more cities surrendered to the communists, she feared being left behind when her American colleagues were evacuated. She would be viewed as an enemy by the North Vietnamese and likely imprisoned or killed for her work sending children out of the country. Thanks to the help of her friends, she was able to escape just days before Saigon fell. Yet her story does not end there. Her life and work in America continued to focus on assisting and supporting Vietnamese refugees as they adjusted to their new lives, helping them learn new trades and get their papers in order.

The 40th anniversary of Operation Babylift in April 2015 has brought new attention to this forgotten piece of Vietnamese and American history. Le-Thi Bach-Thuy's story is an extraordinary, emotional, personal account of life in Vietnam in those years. Her life, work, and spirit are indomitable.

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