

“Angels With Wings”

Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound

Về Quê hương – Hoà hợp và Thống nhất



WORLD
OPERATION BABYLIFT – HOMEWARD BOUND
JUNE 12 – 17, 2005

GROUP



A Story of Generosity, Gratitude and the Circle of Life

by Collin R. Bakse, editor A/TQ

Pam Traynor studied her watch intently as the seconds and minutes following take-off ticked by. Several minutes after we had lifted off from Ho Chi Minh City's Than Son Nhat airport, she rather matter-of-factly said, "That's it."

I was sitting in the row just behind her and asked, "What's it?"

"Twelve minutes out. That's when Bud's plane suffered the decompression," she replied.

"Wow, that's kind of a scary thought. I'm glad lightning didn't strike twice," I said, trying to be light-hearted. "Makes you think though, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," she sighed, as she laid her head back against the head-rest and closed her eyes.

I suspect she was thinking about how proud she was of Bud, how fortunate it was that he and so many others had survived the crash, how sad it was that so many had not. I know that's what I was thinking. I also thought about how lucky I was for having been invited to participate in such a historic event.

We were on the final leg of a very special trip. A trip that had started five days earlier in San Francisco – another milestone in a voyage that had really started 30-plus years earlier during the final days of war in Vietnam.

The trip was the culmination of two years of planning by World Airways to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the evacuation of Vietnamese babies and children from war-torn Vietnam in April of 1975.

World Airways had played the initial role in the month-long evacuation when one of its planes took off without permission, in the dead of night, with 57 children on board – "orphans" on their way to new homes in a new land. Following that first "maverick" flight, President Gerald Ford authorized the use of U.S. Air Force assets for what would become to known as "Operation Babylift."

Now, thirty years later, World Airways was again flying a historic flight out of Vietnam – but this trip had really been about the flight to Vietnam. Christened "Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound," the trip brought together twenty-one young men and women who had been adopted out of Vietnam, their traveling companions, a host of World Airways personnel, several special guests and a cadre of media for an emotional and rewarding "experience of a lifetime." I had been invited to cover the trip for *A/TQ* by General Ron Fogleman, who, as Chairman of Board for both World Airways and the Airlift/Tanker Association, had extended me the proverbial "offer that can't be refused," and placed me in the enviable position of being both an invited guest and member of the media.

Meeting in San Francisco

"Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound" took to the air as World Airways Flight #001 on Sunday, the 12th of June, 2005, departing from Atlanta, Georgia, heading to Oakland, California, with many of the trip's participants on board. That evening they and the other participants, who had arrived from various locations around the country, myself included, along with many local World Airways employees and alumni met for the first "official" event on the trip's itinerary – a welcoming buffet dinner at the Sheraton Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. That first gathering hinted at the emotional roller coaster we were going to experience over the next several days.

Excitement and anticipation filled the air. World Airways Sales Coordinator, Kimberly Williams, who managed the "everyday details" for the trip, was on hand to greet guests as they arrived, doing her best to introduce everyone to one another. There was lots hand-shak-

Opposite: Amid a collection of keepsakes and souvenirs of the "Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound" trip is a photo taken at Oakland International Airport before departure for the ultimate destination of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In the picture are (from L to R) Former CEO of World Airways, Mr. Hollis Harris; World Airways CEO, Mr. Randy Martinez; adoptees Roger Castillo, LeeSanne Guthrie, Tim Holtan, Jason Brown, Lyly Koenig, Tanya Bakal, Jared Rehberg, Tim Bosworth, Kimberly Louie, Tiana Mykkeltvedt, Richard Silver, Jonathon Groth, Chau Le-Tran, Tiffany Goodson, Jennifer Noone, Tim Buchanan, Jason Trieu, Tia Keevil, Wendy Greene, Canh Oxelson, and Jeff Gahr; and Chairman of the Board of World Airways General Ronald Fogleman. (All photos: A/TA by Collin Bakse)

ing, lots of hugging, lots of "watery eyes," and lots of story-telling.

The adoptees related stories of their lives growing up in America and expressed their excitement about the prospect of returning to the land of their birth – many for the first time. Current World Airways employees spoke of how proud they were to be taking part in such a worthy endeavor. World Airways "old-timers" reminisced about the harrowing times they had spent in Vietnam during the war. Military veterans recounted their wartime experiences. Everyone talked about how "Operation Babylift" had affected their lives.

Local and national media were conducting interviews everywhere you looked – in the meeting area, in the hall, on the terrace. Of special interest to me, as editor of *A/TQ*, were the interviews with A/TA members Bud Traynor and Phil Wise, crewmembers aboard the ill-fated first "official" flight of "Operation Babylift." Col.. Dennis "Bud" Traynor, USAF (ret), a young Captain at the time, was the aircraft commander of the C-5A Galaxy that crash-landed shortly after take-off on 4 April 1975. Sgt. Phillip R. "Phil" Wise, USAF (ret), an aeromedical evacuation technician was the senior medical technician on board.

Even though Captain Traynor's extraordinary airmanship and the crew's heroic handling of the situation had resulted in 176 lives being saved, 138 lives had been lost and a cloud of controversy has swirled around the incident to this day. [See *A/TQ* Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 2005, for background and a first-hand account of the mission]. So I was curious and a little apprehensive about what questions Bud and Phil would be asked, how the those questions would be posed and how they would respond. Happily, the questions were fair, for the most part positive and both Bud and Phil handled the answers like pros. Their interviews will be part of a documentary about the trip being produced on behalf of World Airways.

When everyone had finally settled down for dinner, Steve Forsyth, Director of Corporate Communications for World Airways, introduced the company's Chairman of the Board, General Ronald Fogleman, USAF (ret), who said the trip, while a gift to the twenty-one adoptees who would be returning to land of their birth, was also "a tribute to World Airways employees." He went on to say that "Operation Babylift" was a pivotal moment in World Airways history, exclaiming "World did it!" General Fogleman also introduced several World Employees who had participated in



Adoptee mom Lana Noone and A/TA member Pam Traynor at the opening reception for "Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound," in San Francisco.



The A/TA was well represented on the trip. Shown here: A/TA Chairman, Gen. Ron Fogleman (C), Phil Wise (L) and Bud Traynor (R). Phil and Bud survived the crash of a C-5A during "Operation Babylift."



Adoptee Tiffany Goodson and World Airways Sales Coordinator Kimberly Williams at the opening reception. Kimberly took care of trip details such as pre-trip communications, head counts, luggage handling, and much more.

the “maverick” flight, and throughout the Babylift, and would be taking part in the trip, including: pilots Ken Healy and Bill Keating; Ed Daly’s assistant in Saigon, Joseph Hrezo; the Saigon station manager, Phung Nguyen; the Saigon ground operations manager, Thao Nguyen; and flight attendants Atsuko Schlesinger and Janice Wollett. He then thanked all World Airways employees, past and present, for what they had done, and continue to do, for the company.

As Chairman of the Board of World Airways and a Vietnam veteran I was pleased to be part of Homeward Bound, the commemorative trip to Vietnam marking the 30th anniversary of World Airways participation in the first Babylift flight in April 1975. I must confess that it was a strange feeling to enter Vietnamese airspace after an absence of 36 years. When we were approaching Ho Chi Minh City I had the opportunity to look down on Bien Hoa Air Base where I had spend over a year of my life as a young fighter pilot. Many thoughts flashed through my mind, mostly about my friends and squadron mates who had not survived the war. I also thought about the things we had done to keep ourselves occupied during our off duty time. Looking back they might seem silly and frivolous but at the time they were important and helped build morale and make the separation from our families bearable.

Once we arrived in Ho Chi Minh City and had the opportunity to see how vibrant and busy it was, I thought about the legacy of the War. Many would have us believe we lost the war. Perhaps in one sense we did, but if all the veterans could see the clear influence of the United States in the economic growth taking place in this country they would be proud of being part of the effort to stand up to the spread of communism. We may have left the battlefield to the forces of tyranny 30 years ago but today it is clear our ideals and values have prevailed.

Clearly the young men and women, the orphans of the Babylift, traveling with us were part of that legacy. Miss Jane and I got to know many of them during the trip. We came to appreciate how grateful they were for the opportunities afforded to them by the Babylift and a life in the United States. They were an extraordinary group of young folks who, when given the opportunity, made the most of it. They are leading successful and productive lives as American citizens.

We were also struck by the fact that this bright spot was part of the larger human tragedy of war. One of the Vietnamese officials hosting the dinner at the Reunification Hall told Miss Jane that after the publicity associated with our arrival ceremony the Vietnamese government was inundated with calls from mothers/parents who, 30 years ago, had given up their children for adoption and participation in the Babylift. They wanted to know if any of the returning individuals might be their children.

We at World Airways are proud of the role played by our founding chairman, Ed Daly, and the many World employees who made Operation Babylift happen. It is part of our legacy of service to the men and women of our armed forces and the Nation they serve.

Ron Fogleman

World Airways CEO Randy Martinez then made a few remarks concerning the trip and the company. He first thanked all the company employees who had worked so hard to put the trip together, and then, upon explaining that the MD-11 being used for the flight had been re-painted for the trip, in the company’s 1975 red and white livery, he received enthusiastic applause from the company’s employees. In closing, he recounted a number of recent World Airways achievements, among them: the company had recently bought another airline; had been featured in *Time* magazine; had placed 12th on *Business Week* magazine’s list of Hot Companies; and, had just been named the 7th Top Performing Company in Georgia.

If the experiences of the first evening’s event were an indication, it was apparent that World Airways had arranged a fitting tribute to “Operation Babylift,” and that in the morning we would be embarking on a truly remarkable adventure.

Starting in Oakland

We left San Francisco early Monday morning on buses bound for Oakland, and soon arrived at

Airways “home.” Randy Martinez then reiterated that the trip was being taken “to honor our (World Airways) heritage and recognize the contributions of our employees.” Then one of the twenty-one adoptees, Jeffrey Gahr, acting as the spokesman for all the adoptees, delivered a stirring speech in both English and Vietnamese. His remarks centered around how thankful they all were for the opportunities they had been afforded in America, and how much they appreciated World Airways for what it had done thirty years earlier and was now so generously doing again. Their remarks would have made Edward Daly proud.



World Airways VIPs (L to R) Gen. Fogleman, Jane Fogleman, Warren Vest, Jennifer Martinez, Randy Martinez and Hollis Harris in front of the World Airways MD-11, painted in 1975 livery, at Oakland International Airport.

When Ed Daly bought a fledgling World Airways, consisting of a pair war-surplus Curtiss C-46 Commandos, for \$50,000 in 1950, he took his first tentative step on a journey into aviation history. Twenty-five years later when World Airways was bringing hundreds of Vietnamese children to America via Oakland International Airport his reputation as a rough-and-tumble, gun-toting, whiskey drinking, hard-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside aviation legend was assured. Now, thirty years later still, as World Airways Flight #001 stood at the ready on the ramp at Oakland, Ed Daly, who passed away in 1984, was no longer with us, but his spirit was. His audacity, his love of children and his deep belief in humanitarian efforts had been the impetus for



The flight attendants, calling themselves “World’s ‘Senior’ Attendant Crew” had volunteered for the trip from all around the World Airways system.

“Operation Babylift,” and he would have surely approved of his airline mounting such a generous venture.

Walking toward the aircraft following the press conference seemed like a walk back in time. The gleaming white World Airways MD-11, displaying the familiar red stripe along the length of the fuselage and the famous “boomerang and globe” design on the tail, sat alone on the tarmac. Mobile boarding stairs and a red carpet added to the aura of days gone by. The scene made an exceptional photo opportunity, and it seemed that everyone took turns taking keepsake snapshots of one another while waiting to board.

Once on board, we settled in to our seats and buckled up for the first leg of the flight – Oakland, California to Taipei, Taiwan. At 10:45 a.m. we were rolling down the runway with aircraft commander Captain Bob Franklin at the controls. A minute later we were airborne. Approximately thirteen hours later, we were making a landing approach into Chiang Kai Shek International Airport. Having crossed the International Date Line, it was now Tuesday.

First Stop – Taiwan

The flight to Taipei had been filled with activity – more media interviews, story telling sessions, even an impromptu musical session by adoptee Jared Rehberg. The flight crew, four pilots and twelve flight attendants, made sure that the 112 passengers were well taken care of and comfortable. A seemingly constant stream of beverages, snacks and excellent meals made us all



The first leg of the trip was to colorful Taipei, Taiwan.

feel like first-class guests. The flight attendants who had volunteered for the trip from throughout World Airways’ network joked that they were World’s “senior” flight attendant crew. Many, if not all, were 30-

KaiserAir’s hangar at Oakland International, located just across from Hangar 5, the 1950s home of World Airways. After passing through a temporary security checkpoint set-up just inside the hangar we took part in a moving pre-flight press conference. Director of aviation for the Port of Oakland, Steve Grossman, began by welcoming World

year plus employees of the airline who had participated in "Operation Babylift."

It had been thirty-five years since I had last been in the "Far East," so I soaked in the exotic sights during the long bus ride from the airport to the Sheraton Taipei Hotel. I admit it, I'm enthralled by just about everything Asian, the beautifully friendly people, the spicy textural food (though I find some "jellied" offerings less than enthralling), the exquisitely ornate architecture, the skillfully sculpted gardens, the calligraphic quality of the signs – even the hectic traffic with its "pint-sized" trucks and thousands of cars and motorbikes.



The three most famous pilots of "Operation Babylift" in the lobby of the Sheraton Taipei Hotel. (L to R) C-5A pilot Bud Traynor, and World Airways "maverick flight" pilots Bill Keating, next to his wife Billie, and Ken Healy.

that my dad, Bill, had been willing to take on a life-long responsibility and share his name with me – and how much I admired those willing to give children a place in their homes and hearts. She then told me the story of how she and her husband, Brooks, had come to the decision to adopt a second child, a baby brother or sister for their son David, who they had adopted in 1971; and how circumstances and good fortune had played a role in their receiving a "Babylift" baby. I could tell from the sparkle in her eye and the joy in her voice just how proud she was of both of her children. That simple conversation had a profound effect on me for the rest of the trip – it had somehow made me feel connected to the group, that I belonged, that I was no longer just a media type "along for the ride."

The Sheraton Taipei Hotel proved to be worth the long trip from the airport. Its delicate entrance way garden, spacious lobby, glass elevators, beautifully decorated banquet room, and handsomely appointed rooms combined eastern esthetics with western convenience. It was the perfect place to recharge our batteries, both figuratively and literally, before the next day's flight to Ho Chi Minh City.



Adoptees Jason Trieu (L) and Jeff Gahr (R) with pilot Captain Bob Franklin, MD-11 flight commander for the trip at the hotel in Taiwan.

Wednesday morning in Taipei started out overcast and cloudy. But the weather was no indication of the mood in lobby as we gathered for the bus ride back to the airport, playing the continuing game of "dueling cameras" that had started the day before. As if on cue, the clouds lifted while we were in route to the airport – it was going to be a beautiful, emotional day.

On to Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh AKA Sài Gòn

When the pilot announced that we had passed into Vietnamese airspace the plane erupted with applause and cheers, a great excuse to burn off some of the nervous energy that had been building during

The bus ride also gave me time for a quiet conversation with one of the adoptee's parents, Cheryl Greene, who had adopted her daughter, Wendy, through Holt International in 1975. I told her that my fascination with the "Operation Babylift" story was due, in part, to my being "half" adopted myself – how fortunate I felt

willing to take on a life-long responsibility and share his name with me – and how much I admired

those willing to give children a place in their homes and hearts. She then told me the story of how she and her husband, Brooks, had come to the decision to adopt a second child, a baby brother or sister for their son David, who they had adopted in 1971; and how circumstances and good fortune had played a role in their receiving a "Babylift" baby. I could tell from the sparkle in her eye and the joy in her voice just how proud she was of both of her children. That simple conversation had a profound effect on me for the rest of the trip – it had somehow made me feel connected to the group, that I belonged, that I was no longer just a media type "along for the ride."



Then and now. The red globe of World Airways' 1975 livery on the wing tip of the MD-11 passes by a World Airways aircraft showing 2005 colors.



On the flight from Taiwan to Vietnam, Bud Traynor talks with adoptees and others about the C-5A Babylift crash as he flips through photos of the crash site.

was granted. When the aircraft door opened we were hit by a wave of hot, humid air and the spectacular sight of twenty or so young women, dressed in traditional ao dias (long silk, shirt-like, dresses featuring splits on both sides and worn over floor-length silk pants) and waving American and Vietnamese flags, lined up on the concrete ramp.

I soon learned that being part of the media has its advantages and disadvantages. On the upside, being on the ground ahead of the other passengers allowed me to position myself for some great photographs of a small contingent of Vietnamese dignitaries greeting World Airways executives and the returning adoptees as they came off the aircraft, and to find a spot in the airport's small VIP reception room ahead of a crush of local Vietnamese media there to cover the formal arrival ceremony and press conference.



On the ground in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, we were met with great fanfare by city dignitaries and a group of young women dressed in traditional ao dias and waving Vietnamese and American flags.

Their remarks were followed by a gift exchange – Randy Martinez presented the city with a large, beautifully framed photograph of the Homeward Bound MD-11, Mr. Lan Van Ba presented World Airways a wonderful golden collector's plate depicting the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee Building.

Following the press conference, in what can best be described as a symbolic entrance to the city, we were ushered back out into the bright sunlight along a red carpet to the steady beat of not too distant drums. At the end of the red carpet we gathered to watch an all male drum and dance troupe, dressed in red from head to toe, perform a traditional "Lion Dance," an apt choice for welcoming

the three-and-a-half hour flight from Taipei to Ho Chi Minh City. During the flight I had decided to play my "media" card and asked Steve Forsyth if I could join the journalists and cameramen who, to facilitate their coverage of the arrival ceremonies, were being afforded the opportunity to exit the aircraft ahead of the other passengers. My request put a "fly in the ointment" since the Vietnamese government had planned for a limited number of media to be on hand, but in the end my eleventh-hour request

was granted. When the aircraft door opened we were hit by a wave of hot, humid air and the spectacular sight of twenty or so young women, dressed in traditional ao dias (long silk, shirt-like, dresses featuring splits on both sides and worn over floor-length silk pants) and waving American and Vietnamese flags, lined up on the concrete ramp.

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The arrival ceremony began with a trio of female performers, one from each of the three major regions of Vietnam, the south, the central highlands and the north, beautifully attired in traditional regional dress, performing songs and dances indigenous to each region. Their graceful performance

was followed by remarks from Randy Martinez, on behalf of World Airways; Jeff Gahr, on behalf of the adoptees, delivered emotionally in Vietnamese; and, Mr. Lan Van Ba, Deputy Chief of Ho Chi Minh City's People's Committee Secretariat, on behalf of the city.

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An aerial view of a river winding through the Vietnamese countryside. For many of the adoptees this was their first look at the land of their birth.



As part of the welcoming ceremonies at Ho Chi Minh City, three Vietnamese women performed traditional folk songs and dances.

the returning adoptees in that it is associated with new beginnings and believed to bring happiness and good luck. The performance



World Airways CEO Randy Martinez accepts a welcoming gift from Mr. Lan Van Ba, Deputy Chief of Ho Chi Minh City's People's Committee Secretariat.

ended with the dance's customary "Little Buddha" character taking "Welcome to Ho Chi Minh City" banners from the mouths of the lions.

We were now officially welcomed to Vietnam, and it was time to clear customs. This is where I learned about the downside of being with the media. Without explanation those of us who had declared ourselves to be members of the press were taken to the customs area in a separate group by a military escort who motioned for us to take a seat in a row of chairs at the back of

the customs hall. As we sat there without knowing why, I noticed that there were twelve of us in the group and made a comment about us being the "dirty dozen." No one thought it was funny but me. As it turned out, we had been singled out to simply put us at the end of customs line so the inspection of our photography equipment wouldn't slow down everyone else. We soon found ourselves reunited with the rest of the group and standing in the front of the terminal waiting to board buses for the trip to our hotel.

As we waited for the buses we passed the time by commenting on the heat and humidity, checking on our luggage, taking pictures and generally acting like tourists. I looked up and tried to read the large blue and white sign mounted to the leading edge of the terminal roof: CẢNG HÀNG KHÔNG QUỐC TẾ TÂN SƠN NHẤT. I surmised that it probably said something like Tan Son Nhat International Airport, but I really had no idea what it meant, although the "Tan Son Nhat" part had a familiar, if slightly off-key, ring to it – the airport had been called "Tan Son Nhut" during the war.

Busing Through Bustling Sài Gòn

The first indication of the "first class" treatment we would enjoy during our stay in Ho Chi Minh City came as we boarded ornately decorated, modern buses for our ride to the five-star Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Towers. "Motor coaches" is a better term to use to describe these comfortable, air-conditioned vehicles, sporting lace window appliques, curtains and oddly, Christmas decorations. Each motor coach boasted a "crew" of Trails of Indochina tour personnel including two hostesses dressed in ao dias, and a tour guide neatly dressed in slacks and a company tee-shirt.



Trails of Indochina tour guide, Thang, explaining the Saigon itinerary and offering tidbits about Vietnam's culture and history, on the way to Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Towers.

The hostesses immediately began handing out bottled water as we all fiddled with the overhead air-conditioning vents – both a welcome relief from the sweltering heat and humidity – and the tour guide launched into a colorful "welcome to Vietnam" spiel in melodic, heavily accented English.

The guide on the bus I was on introduced himself as Thang, saying it was pronounced like "thank" but with a "g," and began explaining what we could expect to be doing during our visit, providing a lot of useful and interesting information in a humorous, friendly manner. He asked us to pay special attention to his instructions for the



The "lions" rear-up for a mock confrontation during the "Lion Dance" performance, the finale of the welcoming ceremonies.

simple act of crossing the street, saying that "if you wait for the traffic to stop, you will still be waiting next year." The instructions were simple, just boldly walk out into the street and keep a slow steady pace and the traffic will negotiate around you – don't speed up, don't slow down and don't stop – if you're involved in an accident it will probably be deemed your own fault. Good, if scary, advice.



Some of the 5,000,000 motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City, still called Saigon by many of inhabitants. The estimated population of the city is 8,000,000. Counting the surrounding area, the region's population is estimated to be a staggering 12,000,000.

Upon entering the hotel it was easy to see why the Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Towers was named by *Business Asia* magazine as the "Best Business Hotel in Vietnam" in 2004. The lobby features an expanse of gleaming marble floors, Asian inspired furnishings and overhanging balconies. A trio of Vietnamese musician filled the space with the soft sounds traditional folk music, massive arrangements of freshly-cut flowers graced the tabletops and the air carried the aromatic scent of ginger. Thang reminded us that we should be upstairs at 6:00 p.m. for the hotel's welcoming reception.



The Sheraton Saigon Hotel & Towers offers spectacular views of the city, which seem to stretch on forever.

received a brief education on post-war Vietnam including recent Vietnamese economic developments, a quick guided tour of many of the city's sights and tips on where to go for shopping and entertainment. Our passports were collected before we left the bus as it is customary for hotels to hold the passports of their guests.

"Welcome the World Airways Group to Saigon"



The reception at the Sheraton Saigon included a loud and energetic performance by a children's drum and bugle corps.

entered a nearby banquet room to hear a few more remarks from our World Airways hosts.

The banquet room stage was dressed with a large blue and white backdrop draped in formal yellow satin curtains. The backdrop featured the World Airways logo and the whimsically worded greeting: "Welcome the World Airways Group to Saigon." We were then treated to a sumptuous buffet dinner that included dozens of

As I watched the traffic whizzing by outside the bus it was quite apparent that he wasn't kidding. There were motorbikes everywhere, millions of them. Thang explained that Saigon (many locals still call the city Saigon in everyday use, pronouncing it "shy-gone") has a population of 8 million with 5 million registered motorbikes – and that's just the registered ones. By the time we reached the hotel we had

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The hotel staff, who all seemed to be under thirty years old and eager to speak English, made sure that our stay at the Sheraton Saigon started with a bang. When we entered the reception room at 6 o'clock, we were greeted by a youthful and enthusiastic 15-member Vietnamese drum and bugle corps dressed in red and white uniforms, and glasses of cold champagne. Once it was determined that everyone had found their way to the reception we



Steve Forsyth, Director of Corporate Communications for World Airways, in front of a rather ironically worded greeting, welcomes everyone to Saigon.

Vietnamese offerings accompanied by many western dishes with a distinctly French influence.

Following dinner we were free to explore the city. Some groups headed to Saigon's famous markets, others went in search of nightclubs. I joined a small group, including Bud and Pam Traynor, Phil Wise, Associated Press photographer Ric Feld, and a few others, for a short excursion into the nearby shopping district. Our street crossing

skills were tested, as was our ability to negotiate with the merchants. The narrow shops and stores, only 12 to 15 feet wide, were crammed with tourist trinkets, decorative objects and all manner of weird and exotic merchandise. One particularly curious item, a bottle of rice wine with a large snake inside, had us all wondering how one could get a full-grown snake into a bottle.

Although I had plans to spend my tourist dollars buying small keepsakes from street vendors, I did buy an intricate little tea set that included a tray, four cups and teapot shaped like a Vietnamese temple. It seemed almost criminal to try to haggle the price down from the marked price of only 142,870.00 VND (\$9.00), but everyone encouraged me to try. The young lady helping me dropped the price, first to \$8.00 and finally to \$7.00. She then spent about 10 minutes wrapping all the pieces in foam sheeting and rubber bands to insure that everything would

make it home. When we left the store, the others chided me for giving in on the price too quickly, saying that if I had left the store before committing I probably would have been chased down and offered a final price of \$5.00. Lesson learned.

Not all the stores we visited were geared to the tourist trade. Ric Feld needed some CDs to transfer photos to, so we stopped at a small office supply store we jokingly nicknamed "Office Depot." That little 12-foot-wide store had virtually everything a giant American retailer would carry, and the price for the CDs was quite reasonable. We then crossed a wide boulevard, following the traffic "rules of engagement," and continued shopping, visiting several wonderfully unusual shops.

Having brazenly walked out into traffic and successfully lowering

the price on everything we purchased, we headed back to the hotel with a wide assortment of goods including musical instruments, wall decorations, lamp shades, a framed tarantula, and a pith helmet. Phil Wise would put that helmet to good use the next day, and I would be putting my street vendor buying plan into action.

Completely Full and Ready to Tour the City

Thursday was a long and busy day. It started with a five-star buffet breakfast and ended with a buffet dinner at a palace. The period in between would prove to be an emotionally draining, yet spiritually uplifting experience.

Food was the glue that held all the events together. We seemed to be enjoying one repast or another at all times – we ate so often that we started joking in between meals, saying things like "it's been 15 minutes since we last ate, my blood sugar is getting low," and "I don't feel completely stuffed, will we be eating soon?" Silly question. After partaking of a buffet breakfast of fresh fruit, hand-made omelettes, spicy Vietnamese soups, noodle dishes, country ham, sausage and bacon, hash browned potatoes, French pastries and more, accompanied by freshly brewed home-grown coffee, we boarded the motor coaches for a tour of the city. First stop, Notre Dame Cathedral, the oldest



Religious pagodas are scattered around Saigon, lending the city a sense of Asian charm.

Catholic church in the city.



The oldest Catholic church in Saigon, Notre Dame Cathedral.

Located next to the Central Post Office in the heart of the downtown district, Notre Dame Cathedral was built between 1877 and 1883, and its twin 132-foot high towers once dominated the city's skyline. Mass is still held there each Sunday, and the cathedral is a major tourist stop. After touring the cathedral we crossed the street to the Central Post Office, a French Colonial building with an art deco interior, built between 1886 and 1891. Though it is by far the largest post office building in Vietnam, it was crowded. Locals were there for post

office business and tourists were there for souvenirs. Most of us got in line, the universally accepted post office procedure, joining the other tourists in buying keepsake stamps and greeting cards.

When we left the post office I got my first chance to haggle with the street vendors. I bought several small booklets of obsolete Vietnamese coins and paper currency – some real, some obviously fake. It really didn't matter, it was the "experience" I was after. How much? "Five dollars American!" No, too much. "Four dollars!" No, too much. "Two for five dollars!" I only want one. "Three dollars!" No, still too much. "Okay, three for six dollars?" Okay, I'll take three. "Six for ten dollars?" No. I'll take three. I paid with a 20 dollar bill and several of the vendors pooled their resources to make change. It was worth every penny, and then some. I couldn't wait to re-engage with a different group of vendors.



The interior of Saigon's largest Post Office, the central post office in Vietnam.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Next on the itinerary was a visit to the place where "Operation Babylift" had really started, Orphelinat Phú.Mỹ. We entered through a large cast-iron gate into a paved courtyard filled with palms, shade trees, hanging baskets and playground equipment, this was obviously

I don't know what I was expecting; but this wasn't it...

Ho Chi Minh City – Saigon, as the locals prefer to call it– is very much like I remember Kadena or Korea was back in the '70s – hustle-bustle, street vendors selling sunglasses, watches, hammocks, electronics and the most interesting (and forbidding) food items. But that shouldn't surprise me, I suppose: Just as it has been 30 years since the Viet Nam war, it was 30 years after WWII back then in the '70s. The attitude then and now: War? What war!

I don't know anything about the politics; but on the surface, it seems as though Viet Nam turned out pretty much the way we hoped it would – a thriving, growing, country with a strong future. (So did we really "lose" the war?)

World Airways (now World Air Holdings) was in the forefront then, taking care of people; and it is in the forefront now, reintroducing some of the most fortunate of the unfortunates to their native homeland – and I was lucky enough to be invited along. Upon arrival into Saigon, I tried desperately to see the 1975 Babylift crash site but the area that was so isolated then, now is so urbanized as to be unrecognizable from my passenger window. Tan Son Nhut is still the same old airport, though. Some of the old revetments are still there sheltering fire trucks and utility vehicles. Some of the old French buildings remain with their red tile roofs. Some of the old hangars are collapsing with age. But under construction is an exciting mega-terminal complex that will rival Dulles.

While I had a great personal interest in returning to Saigon after my own brief participation in the Babylift operation, being surrounded by all the emotion was at times overwhelming. Everyone had a story to tell. There were of course the children-now-adults who were evacuated in the face of mortal uncertainty; but there were indigenous World employees whom World protected at great risk.

The trepidation that was so thick in the air on the way over was replaced by elation on the return flight. New friendship bonds were forged that will endure a lifetime. I can't wait to go back.

Bud Traynor

a much different place from what it had been thirty years earlier. But you could sense that it is still a place filled with love and caring.



The most emotionally charged part of the trip was a visit to the Phu My Orphanage, from where the 57 children on the first "maverick" flight of Operation Babylift had started their journey to America.

The new government has renamed it the Thi Nghe Center for Orphans and Disabled Children, but to "Babylift" era adoptees, their parents, and those who did so much to help them, it will always be the Phu My Orphanage. It was from here that, thirty years earlier, on April 2, 1975, Ross Meador, then the 19-year-old director of overseas operations for Friends of Children of Viet Nam, had started 57 children and babies on a journey that would change their lives forever, and led to the eventual evacuation of approximately 3,300 children from Vietnam.

We assembled in the courtyard for a quick exchange of gifts. In yet another display of corporate generosity, Randy Martinez presented the orphanage with a \$5,000 donation on behalf of World Airways. The orphanage director reciprocated with three delicate paintings done by children at the orphanage. Many of us then presented individual donations. We then split



into groups for a tour of facilities. Walking from room to room was heart-wrenching and heart-warming at the same time. Heart-wrenching because there were so many children with so many medical problems. Heart-warming because the children in each room we entered seemed genuinely happy to see us and excited about our visit. Each room we visited was used for a specific purpose. The walls of the art therapy room were decorated with tiny hand and foot prints in primary colors, the music therapy room contained several keyboards and other instruments. In one room a small group of older children afflicted with cerebral palsy worked diligently at sewing machines. We were told by the staff doctor conducting our tour that they made all the clothes the children wore at the orphanage, and that they tended to get quite upset if they weren't allowed to sew. In the day nursery a group of children gathered to sing for us. Though a little worse for wear, a piece of tile chipped here and there, the entire facility was well maintained and exceptionally clean.



Randy Martinez (L) and Jennifer Martinez (R) accept a gift of three paintings, done by children at the orphanage, from Phu My Orphanage staff members.

When the group I was with reached the nursery we happened upon Lyly Koenig holding a 3-week-old baby, tears running down her cheeks. Ironically, Lyly, who had been among the 57 children on the first flight, had herself been only three weeks old when she left Vietnam. Now, thirty years later, she was back in the place where she had started from, holding a sleeping baby in her arms as her mother, Karen Koenig, tried to steady her video camera, tears running down her cheeks as well.



Adoptee Wendy Greene, her mom Cheryl, and Babylift flight attendant Ann Lloyd share a moment of quiet reflection during a tour of the Phu My Orphanage.

It took a little coaxing, but Lyly finally persuaded another adoptee, Tim Buchanan, to take the baby she had been holding. Gently taking the baby into his arms he whispered, "I really don't want her to wake up," and he too began to cry. By now, there wasn't a dry eye in the nursery, save those of the sleeping babies. I felt like I was intruding on a special moment best left to those with a special bond. As I turned to leave the nursery I heard Lyly say, "I want to come back here to adopt a baby to give her the chance I had."



Adoptee Jason Trieu's guest, Jaclyn Danh, hands out gifts to orphans in the shaded courtyard of the Phu My Orphanage.

I would later learn that scenes like these had played out throughout the visit. Many of the adoptees had never been to an orphanage before, at least not one they could remember. They played with orphans, shared gifts of candy and brand new boxes of crayons, and wept openly, in part for these children's situation, in part for the opportunity for a loving family that they had been given.

Just before we left the orphanage, I asked Ross Meador, who is now a leading American authority on international business and law, how different the conditions at Phu My are now as compared to thirty years ago, he answered, "...concrete floors and flushing toilets? I could only dream."



Orphans at the Phu My Orphanage enjoying coloring with a brand new box of crayons and colorful markers.

Time to Eat, Again

At first, the bus ride to our next destination was rather solemn, a time for us to reflect on our visit to the orphanage. An enterprising pair of street vendors, riding a motorbike along side the our bus, helped to change the mood. As the driver deftly balanced his cargo of several large plastic bags stuffed with tee shirts, his rider pulled one shirt after another out of a bag on his lap, holding each up for our approval. With each new shirt we signaled our approval or disapproval, thumbs up or thumbs down, then he would fish through his bag for yet another design. The "Good Morning, Vietnam" shirt made us laugh, and definitely got the most thumbs up. By the time we reached our next stop we were in much better spirits.



An enterprising pair of street vendors rides alongside the bus showing their wares.

As we were walking to the Mandarin Restaurant, located down a narrow alleyway well out of the reach of buses, we were inundated by more street vendors. They were offering all sorts of wares – tea pots, jewelry boxes, baseball caps, the ever available coin and currency sets, even hand-made, two-foot-long models of three-masted schooners. It was all I could do to keep my head down, my mouth shut and my hands in my pockets. Another "novice vs. vender" match-up would have to wait until after lunch.



Lunch at the elegant Mandarin Restaurant was accompanied by traditional Vietnamese music.

The elegant décor and excellent fare of the Mandarin Restaurant was a feast for the eyes and the taste buds. The clean, simple lines of the Chinese inspired architecture and table settings provided a relaxing ambiance, and the delicious multi-course meal was served by

attentive and efficient waiters. Perhaps a little too efficient – at some point during the meal a small notebook I left laying on the table while I wandered around the restaurant taking pictures disappeared, probably snatched up when the waiters were clearing the tables between courses. Losing the notebook was my own fault, I had broken the journalist's "guard your notes with your life" cardinal rule. Our tour guide, Thang, made a valiant attempt to find it for me, returning to the restaurant later in the day, searching to no avail (he even called me from Vietnam three weeks after the trip to tell me he still had not found it). Luckily, I had transposed most of the notebook's contents the night before and I was able to reconstruct most of the rest.

When we left the restaurant we were met by the throng of street vendors, who had waited patiently just beyond the invisible "no vendors past line" barrier around bona-fide businesses. I haggled the price down a bit on a black lacquered jewelry box and few other odds

and ends and then went in search of the motorbike tee-shirt vendor. In the end he had convinced me to buy four tee-shirts and two baseball caps – novice 10, vendors 10 – everyone was a winner and we all parted happy.

We returned to the hotel had a couple of hours to relax and freshen up for the next excursion, a boat ride on the Saigon River.

Song on the Sông Sài Gòn

On the bus ride to the hotel on the first day, as we skirted along a portion of the Saigon River, we had seen several long, shallow fiberglass covered tour boats queued up along the docks. I remember thinking that, in the heat and humidity we were experiencing, the

the "Bonsai I" came into view, our eyes widened in amazement. This was no floating sauna. She was 100-foot-long mahogany and teak beauty with a large dragon head at her bow and a tiled roof over her forward deck. On board was a band and a large staff eager to entertain us. This was a party boat!



The beautiful "Bonsai I" sits dockside in a park on the Saigon River, prior to a song filled trip back to the city.

As we boarded we were offered hors d'oeuvres and frozen daiquiris which were a big hit (once we had been assured that they had been prepared with ice made from bottled water). We soon cast-off and began a leisurely, fun-filled hour-and-a-half cruise on the river. The female captain of the Bonsai I, an Austrian born Saigon transplant, told me, in excellent European accented English, that her father came to Vietnam after the war and had the Bonsai I built by local craftsmen. They now operate two boats on the river.

The band, playing music ranging from traditional Vietnamese Folk and Vietnamese Pop to American Rock'n'Roll, soon had everyone tapping their toes and clapping their hands. Not too long into the cruise, a sudden squall on the river threatened to dampen the party,

but didn't. As crew and staff dashed around lowering bamboo shades along the perimeter of the deck, rainwater streaming from downspouts along the roof, the band played on and everyone kept on singing and laughing. The rain provided a temporary respite from the heat, and the cool breeze washing over the deck made it cool enough to "get down and boogie." At one point, in a surprising and touching tribute to the adoptees, the tour guides and bus hostesses got together and sang a karaoke-style rendition of "Take Me Home Country Roads."



Adoptees Jared Rehberg, Roger Castillo, Tiffany Goodson and Jennifer Noone join the tour guides for a karaoke number.

Once the karaoke light had been lit many on board took turns at the microphone. A group of adoptees sang, "I Just Called to Say I Love You." Atsuko Schlesinger, a retired World Airway flight attendant who had taken part in both the last, harrowing flight from Da Nang and Operation Babylift, asked the band to play a tune she



Phil Wise and Pam Traynor twister on the river.

had learned as a child. When she began singing it became apparent, to our delight, that she was singing the Japanese version of "If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands." Everyone joined in, singing along and clapping. Vietnamese and Americans singing in Japanese and English on the Saigon River – priceless.

In between karaoke songs the band kept things moving by playing upbeat dance tunes. Watching the World employees, Vietnamese bus hostesses and others dance made for great entertainment, but for my money the best dance moment came when the band played "Let's Twist Again Like We Did Last Summer," and Phil Wise and Pam Traynor showed that they could really "cut a rug."

As we neared the end of the cruise, and the tall downtown buildings came into view, many on board leaned on the side rails, gazed at the skyline and reflected on the day's events. By the time we reached the dock the heat and humidity had returned with a vengeance.

Reunification and Coming Full Circle

We had just enough time to refresh ourselves and get dressed for the crowning event of our trip to Ho Chi Minh City – a Dinner Gala

During the latter part of the war, 1971-1972, my husband, Bud, was stationed in Viet Nam at Cam Ranh Bay AB. He always talked about what a beautiful country it was.

I have wanted to visit there ever since, so I was particularly thrilled to be invited to participate in the World Airways Babylift Homeward Bound trip to Viet Nam in June. The fact that we were to experience the trip along with 21 adoptees and several orphanage workers, aircrew members and ground support personnel from the original Operation Babylift, made the opportunity even more exciting.

I did find that Viet Nam is, indeed, a beautiful, lush green country. In spite of the size of Saigon and the number of people there (most of them on motor bikes, it seemed!) it was actually very clean. The people were very friendly and helpful (most that we encountered spoke English) and seemed genuinely glad to see Americans – not necessarily what I had expected.

It was particularly emotional to make the visit with these young people, most of whom were returning to their native land for the first time. They were all so grateful to have been given the opportunity to grow up in the US and quite often spoke of how different their lives would have been had they not been airlifted out in 1975.

World Airways gave these "kids" two wonderful gifts: the first by assisting with their evacuation to new lives in America and the second by making this fantastic return journey possible. It was an amazing trip for all involved and I feel very honored to have been included in the experience.

Pam Traynor

tour boats looked like floating saunas – a ride down the river in one of them didn't seem all that appealing. Nevertheless, wanting to see more of the city along the 10-mile route to the tour's starting point and to learn what life was like along the river, I decided, sauna or not, that I would go.

The ten-mile journey to the boat was eye-opening. Up to this point we had only been in the city's main, and most affluent, district. As we got further out, we began to see riverbank shanty's constructed of little more than weathered boards and corrugated tin, and block after block of crowded apartment buildings. A stark contrast to the tourist rich environment we had left, where some merchants make upwards of \$7000 a month. Here, in the working-class part of Saigon, the average monthly income is more like \$300 a month – still well above Vietnam's overall annual income average of \$600 a year.

Reaching the tour boat required a short walk along tree-shaded paths through a riverside park. When we rounded the final turn and

at the Reunification Palace. As we gathered in the lobby before departure, we were asked to take turns signing a quilt that laid neatly folded on a tabletop. We would learn later in the evening what an honor it was to have done so. When everyone was present and accounted for, it was off to the Palace.



Everyone on the trip was invited to sign the quilt which would be presented to the people of Vietnam later in the evening, as part of a Gala Dinner celebration at the Reunification Palace

The fall of Saigon to communist North Vietnam began and ended at the Presidential Palace headquarters of South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, in April of 1975, while Operation Babylift was in progress. On April 8, 1975, Captain Nguyen Thanh Trung entered Vietnam's history books with an incredible act that accelerated the end of the war. One of the most experienced fighter pilots in the South Vietnam Air Force, he bombed his own president's palace before defecting to North Vietnam. Saigon fell to the Communists three weeks later, on April 30th, with tanks crashing through the palace fences. After the war the building was renamed, and is now called the Reunification Palace. Considered a Vietnamese national hero today, Trung's F-5 is enshrined on the Palace grounds.

Before dinner we toured the upper floors of the Palace where president Thieu's private quarters, lush indoor garden (where Bud Traynor and I were happy to see a "Saigon Elephant" proudly displayed), austere office, antiquated war room and lavish meeting rooms are now museum exhibits. Following the tour we gathered in a large room on the main floor for a reception before moving to the main banquet room.



Now known as the Reunification Palace, the building was formerly the palace headquarters of the South Vietnamese government.



The indoor garden, part of a historical museum located on an upper floor of the Reunification Palace.

"Operation Babylift - Homeward Bound" was the first visit by returning adoptees to be sanctioned by both the Vietnamese and American governments and the list of dignitaries attending the event reflect as much. Representing the Vietnamese government were: Mr. Lan Van Ba, Deputy Chief of Ho Chi Minh City's People's Committee Secretariat; Mrs. Luang Bach Van, Vice Chairperson of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Ho Chi Minh City; and, Mr. Tran Xuan Vu, Deputy Director of the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Seth Winnick, U.S. Consul General, Ho Chi Minh City, represented the U.S. government.

The banquet itself was, of course, wonderful - an elegant buffet offering a wide variety of delicious, traditional Vietnamese fare; as was the evening's entertainment, including several performances by Vietnamese dancers and musicians, including a troupe of graceful young girls, as well as adult female and male dancers, singers and musicians. A poignant and touching moment came when two of the adoptees entered the spotlight. Jared Rehberg, accompanied by Tiffany Goodson, performed "Waking Up American," the title song from Jared's CD dedicated to "everyone involved



The office of former South Vietnam president Nguyen Van Thieu is now a museum exhibit.

with Operation Babylift." Jared later wrote that "...my journey as an adoptee had finally come full circle."

Another "full circle" moment occurred when the quilt we had signed in the lobby of the hotel was presented to the Vietnamese people of the Republic of Vietnam.

Hand-sewn quilts are an American tradition, and with good reason. Often times they reflect history and the excitement of the times. More importantly, if they represent a significant event, they can achieve the status of a historical artifact. The "Operation Babylift" commemorative quilts that hang in the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at World Airways in Atlanta, and the one presented to the Vietnamese people at the Gala, are destined to go down in the annals of history as artifacts of one of the greatest humanitarian gestures of the past century.

During April and May 1975, hundreds of Babylift children, including the 57 on the World Airways maverick flight, were shepherded to The Continental Care Center in Denver, Colorado, before being relocated to their new homes all over the world.

It doesn't take a vivid imagination to realize the effort required to sustain such an undertaking...not only in providing adequate sheltering facilities, food, medical supplies and equipment...and even the toys that were essential to cheer the broken hearts. Clothing too, was a high priority, not only for comfort, but for self-esteem as well; each child was freshly dressed for the journey to their new home.

When the last child departed on May 17, 1975, the Continental Care Center building was silent and abandoned. Left in the wake of the hundreds of children were walls covered with crayon drawings,

My participation in "Operation Babylift - Homeward Bound" resulted from a chance meeting while fulfilling a promise. On April 1, 2005, my wife, Tessie, and I left home from Flint, Michigan, destined for Washington D.C., with an enroute stop in Holmdel, New Jersey. We stopped in Holmdel so I could honor a promise I had made to Lana Noone, a Babylift mom, and her friend Katie Witzig, the volunteer coordinator for the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Vietnam Era Education Center, to be the guest speaker at the Center's Operation Babylift 30th Anniversary Celebration held on April 2nd.

Among those taking part in the celebration was Jared Rehberg, a Babylift adoptee, who had performed songs from his hit CD "Waking Up American." When Lana Noone introduced us, Jared, who had been touched by my story, said, "Phil, your story was powerful and I appreciate all you've done to help save the children of Operation Babylift." He went on to say that he had heard that I was not going on the Homeward Bound trip, and that he had not selected a guest to go with him. Then he asked me if I would be his guest, saying "I can't think of anyone more deserving to go than you." I immediately turned to my wife and said, "Honey did you hear that? Jared wants me to be his guest on the World Airways Homeward Bound trip!" Needless to say, I accepted his offer and said to him, "...you are so kind to make such a generous offer. Jared, you are truly a blessing."

My friend Shirley Peck-Barnes had told me earlier to remain positive about getting to go on the trip because she believed that once any of the kids heard my story something would work out. Thank God she was right.

On April 3rd we traveled on to Washington, D.C. and met with Col. Marcie Wirtz Tate, her husband Marty; Harry and Denise Johnson, son and daughter of MSgt. Denning C. Johnson, who died in the crash; Maj. Jim Harden; CMSgt Wayne Everingham and many others to take part in a wreath laying ceremony to honor our fallen crew members on the 30th anniversary of the Operation Babylift C-5A Galaxy crash. The ceremony took place on April 4, 2005 at 1000 hours at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall.

The trip back to Vietnam was amazing and I thank World Airways for a great experience. I also thank Jared Rehberg, Lana Noone and Shirley Barnes for helping to make it possible for me to participate. Although I did not get to fulfill my desire to visit the crash site, returning to Vietnam was good enough.

Phil Wise

toys, unmade beds, baby bottles and the ubiquitous piles of clothing. Continental immediately put out a call for anyone who had need of the items, and boxes departed daily, but there always seemed to be as many left behind.



Entertainment during the Reunification Palace Gala featured these elegantly dressed dancers as well as various other singers and dancers.

Shirley Barnes, the administrator of Continental Care, did what any devoted quilter would do – she saved the remnants of the clothing that was to be discarded. Over the years the clothing was cut into squares of various sizes, then boxed and shelved. During the course of writing, “The War Cradle,” Shirley Peck-Barnes remembered the remnants and was struck with an idea – they would make great quilts. She decided that the simple pattern of “postage stamp” quilts, using small squares of cloth, would accommodate the few scraps of each design, often all she had, and she began making quilts. Occasionally a tiny shirt, a pair of shoes, or pieces of clothing were added. The quilts were also inscribed. The quilt in the Presidential Library reads: “Wrought with gratitude and affection for President Gerald R. Ford – ‘Operation Babylift’ April 3, 1975. A true friend of the children of Vietnam.” The World Airways quilt bears a similar inscription: “Wrought with gratitude and affection for World Airways Maverick Flight. April 2, 1975. A true friend of the children of Vietnam.” The quilt presented to the people of Vietnam reads: “Vietnam, my homeland. My heart grows for thee. A child of the world, yet your child, where ever my home may be.” It also bears the signatures of those who participated in “Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound.” Quite an honor.



The performances by this dance troupe of young Vietnamese girls were remarkably graceful and quite entertaining.



Jared Rehberg and Tiffany Goodson perform Jared’s song “Waking Up American” as part of the Reunification Palace Gala.

At the end of the evening, as we left the Reunification Palace, we each received a small gift – a small handmade, wooden souvenir of Saigon to serve as a remembrance of our visit. A thoughtful gesture, though I doubt any one of us can ever forget the warm welcome we received in Vietnam.

Back to the Beginning

The bus ride back to the airport and the long flight home provided ample time for reflection. As for myself, I thought about how the trip had been, in many ways, like the quilt that Shirley Barnes had so lovingly pieced together.

World Airways had generously given us all the chance to “come full circle,” individually and collectively. The twenty-one adoptees had been able to return to the land of their birth, and express the gratitude they felt for the gift of freedom they had been given; the caring orphanage system volunteers were able to put nagging doubts behind them, assured that they had indeed done the right thing; the Vietnam war veterans on board were able to



Randy Martinez, Jeff Gahr and Mr. Lan Van Ba display the quilt made by Shirley Barnes from scraps of adoptees’ clothing collected during “Operation Babylift.” The quilt was a gift to the people of Vietnam.

return to a place they had left during the fog of war to find a thriving, energetic people whose way of life incorporates many American ideals; the media was afforded the opportunity to cover a story that had started with the tears of frightened children and now included happiness and a sense of fulfillment; some were able to keep solemn promises they had made long ago; and most importantly, the employees of World Airways, in a continuing legacy of caring and generosity, had finished a task they had started thirty years earlier – they had symbolically brought *all* Babylift adoptees home.



The 21 “Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound” adoptees, joined by four other Babylift era adoptees, at the end of the Reunification Palace Gala, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, June 16, 2005.

We reached San Francisco about thirteen and half hours after leaving Ho Chi Minh City. During the trip everyone was given a copy of the Spring 2005 *Airlift/Tanker Quarterly* which contains a story about “Operation Babylift” featuring Bud Traynor’s first-hand account of the C-5 crash. I passed my copy around for everyone to sign, as did others. When I got it back I was happy to see short notes from many of the adoptees, parents, orphanage system caregivers, A/TA members and World Airways employees. It is definitely my favorite memento of the trip.

How do you say ‘thank you’ to World Airways? It’s hard to find the words to express gratitude for acts so grand and generous, so I’ll end with the words written in my copy of *A/TQ* by one of the adoptees, referring to everyone involved in Operation Babylift, and especially World Airways –



Taxing for the final takeoff of “Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound,” the 1975 World Airways globe logo passes in front of hardened aircraft reventments, a stark reminder of those days thirty years ago when “Operation Babylift” was taking place.



“You are angles with wings.”

– Wendy Greene
Operation Babylift Adoptee
Aboard World Airways MD-11
“Operation Babylift – Homeward Bound” Flight
June 2005