

TELEVISION REVIEW

TELEVISION REVIEW; When Those Orphaned by War Return to Vietnam

By JULIE SALAMON
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"Operation Babylift," the 1975 transport of 2,700 orphaned or abandoned Vietnamese children to the United States, was regarded by many as a noble rescue, by others as paternalistic intervention. Either way, it proved to be a tragically emblematic coda to the Vietnam War. The first plane out, carrying 330 adults and children, crashed 15 minutes after takeoff, killing 154 of its passengers.

But the rest of the children, many of them the offspring of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers, survived their journeys. While Vietnam was imprinted on many of their faces, as they grew up it would seem a distant place.

"Precious Cargo," a beautifully filmed and sensitively reported documentary, follows a group of these children, now adults, returning to Vietnam for the first time since they left. While any adopted child's search into the past almost always carries complex and difficult emotions, the quest of these children is even more subtle and elusive. Some know who their birth parents were; others don't. But they share a feeling of dislocation that extends beyond their immediate family.

Raised in the United States, they now have accents and inflections that are notably American. They call themselves Todd, Jennifer and Saul rather than Truong Thang, Phuong Hong Lan and Tran La, their original names. They don't know much about their Vietnamese heritage except that it made them look different from the rest of their family and that kids sometimes teased them at school. It's fascinating to see how little these adopted children -- now men and women in their 20's and 30's -- know about the war that helped create them. They are shocked, visiting the War Crimes Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, to see American soldiers portrayed as brutal invaders. They speak of feeling connected to their birthplace, but some of them are also appalled by its poverty.

Most of them seem to have warm, loving relationships with their adoptive parents as well as sympathy for the parents who gave them up. The documentary becomes more textured by also including a woman who openly expresses anger toward her Vietnamese mother, a feeling that remained so strong that 25 years after they separated she hadn't yet introduced her children to their grandmother.

Interview subjects include American and Vietnamese nurses who worked at the orphanages and the pilot of the Operation Babylift plane that crashed. The filmmakers met with Trinh Thi Ngo, once known as Hanoi Hannah, whose radio broadcasts on behalf of North Vietnam caused her to be reviled by many in the United States. She appears here as a sharp-edged elderly woman, speaking sadly about the young Vietnamese women who went to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) during the war to make money and ended up pregnant. Many of the fathers were American soldiers. She criticizes the American

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adoption program, arguing that the Vietnamese could have taken care of the children themselves.

With "Precious Cargo" the producers Pham Quoc Thai and Janet Gardner (who also directed) provide an exquisite window into the aftermath of war and what happens to children when the soldiers stop fighting. Among the layers of poignancy: adoptive parents remembering the frustration of not understanding when their new family member cried out in Vietnamese for water, and then the happiness of hearing him utter his first English word, "home."

PRECIOUS CARGO

On some PBS stations Sunday night (check local listings)

Janet Gardner, producer and director; Pham Quoc Thai, producer.

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