

## 'Daily Mail baby' goes back to her homeland

**In November the Magazine carried the - one of 99 babies airlifted from Vietnam to the UK in 1975. Now she has tracked down many of her fellow passengers and returned to her homeland.**

Thirty-five years ago next month I was plucked from an orphanage in Vietnam and flown 6,300 miles from my birthplace to a foreign country at the behest of a British newspaper.

After years of war, the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, was teetering as the communist North Vietnamese army closed in.



Viktoria Cowley, centre, with airlift babies Le Thanh and Chris Law, then and now

### A PUBLICITY STUNT?



Brian Freemantle (above), foreign editor of the Daily Mail in 1975, was the man who came up with the idea of the airlift. He'd heard about an orphanage in Saigon that wanted to fly orphans to Britain before the city was overrun by communist troops. It was feared the carers in the orphanage would flee when the North Vietnamese tanks rolled into the city. Freemantle decided the Mail could help by chartering a plane and flying the orphans to Britain for adoption. "I organised the whole thing in 3 days," he says. "And we did the flight in 36 hours." But was it just a publicity stunt? "If people want to call it a stunt, then stunt it is, but I think it got 99 children into some sort of protection. And I seriously believe that the children would have suffered if they'd been allowed to stay there."

A mass exodus was under way as thousands feared violent repercussions by the invading troops, and among those helping with the evacuation was Britain's Daily Mail newspaper.

I was one of the 99 babies brought over to the UK on a plane chartered by the Mail - and within 12 months I was living with my newly adoptive family in Eastbourne, East Sussex.

My new family never kept my past a secret and I had been happy with my life as it was. But for years I toyed with the idea of starting a journey into my past. I always knew that searching for information about my history would be a difficult and probably fruitless task.

I didn't know how to go about it so it just seemed easier to ignore it and get on with life. About a year ago, I threw myself into finding and meeting others who had been on the flight to Britain.

They were single meetings at first which then snowballed into reunions as more adoptees got involved and I began to travel further afield in order to meet them.

I felt connected with the other Daily Mail babies who thought and looked the same way I did. But I also felt disconnected as I knew nothing about my country and my culture and it seemed that I was the only adoptee who hadn't been back to Vietnam.

I posted a photograph on the internet of the picture of the Daily Mail's front page showing me as a baby sleeping between two other babies on the plane. Just a few days later the baby on the left saw the photo and recognised himself.

He lives in Wales and his name is Le Thanh. Eventually I also tracked down the baby on the right. His name is Chris Law and he lives, incredibly, just down the road from me in Bexhill.

Eventually, I then discovered my complete adoption file. It contained correspondence which contained the sad news that when I was in the orphanage in Vietnam I was never visited by anyone and no-one ever enquired after me.

### **Tourist at home**

But the yearning to return to Vietnam only grew stronger. The more I found out, the more I wanted to know about where I had come from and why.



Vikki with Chris Law, the baby on the right of the aeroplane picture

So, a few days after New Year, as Britain was in the throes of an Arctic chill, I boarded a plane bound for the tropical climes of my home country.

I'd been in Vietnam for a few days when the feeling of connection suddenly hit me. It was a strange feeling and hard to work out. I felt a part of the society and totally accepted. But at the same time I was still treated as a tourist, perhaps because of the way I dressed, perhaps because I looked a bit lost, but something cried out to the locals that I didn't truly belong. It's strange. I'm regarded as a tourist in the country I was born in, and I'm seen as a foreigner in Britain, the country I've lived in for most of my life.

My first mission in Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it's called today, was to find out whether anyone remembered my adoptive father, Douglas. Before adopting me, he had lived in Vietnam - with my mother Jennifer - where he worked for British American Tobacco.

He would have been able to answer so many of my questions but he died in 1998, so I was hoping to find someone who remembered him. But it was a fruitless excursion. I returned to his old place of work, and to the road where he used to live, but no one could recall this British expat.

### **Orphanage razed**



Viktoria Cowley now and, right, as a baby at the orphanage

It looked like it was going to be difficult to find anything of any significance.

I eventually discovered that my old orphanage had been razed to the ground and is now an elementary school. The only original part of the orphanage is a tree that stood in the corner of the courtyard.

But I did manage to track down a few monks who had worked there when I was a baby, and one of them remembered me.

It was such a relief to find someone who could give me some information about the orphanage and the conditions.

I was told that my single-parent mother dropped me off at the orphanage and that she was a woman in her 30s. Her situation was desperate and she couldn't afford to keep me, so she left me at the orphanage for safekeeping.

I'm very grateful to my birth mother for leaving me in a safe place. And I'm so glad I eventually made the journey back to Vietnam. The Vietnamese are so friendly and accommodating; and it's a country where I've found I love to be. My only regret is that I didn't discover it sooner.

Story from BBC NEWS:

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