

Vietnamese orphan given a home in Wales goes back to his roots

Apr 4 2010 by Julia McWatt, Wales On Sunday

THIRTY-FIVE years after being airlifted from the Vietnamese war zone and taken in by a South Wales couple, one of the young orphans rescued in a dramatic airlift is retracing his roots.

Le-Thanh was one of 99 babies rescued as part of 1975's Operation Babylift in the dying days of the Vietnam War, and found himself in the care of Canon John Thomas and his wife Binkie at their home in Penygraig, Rhondda.

The 37-year-old software engineer, who lives with his wife, Rufi and their two daughters in Pontypridd, is now back in Saigon (or Ho Chi Minh City, as it became) with some of the other orphans on the mercy flight, for a fortnight of celebrations for the 35th anniversary on April 6.

The operation was organised in just six hours and saw youngsters gathered up from homes in a panic after rumours that the Vietcong intended to massacre them caused widespread panic.

The babies were found homes across Britain and grew up leading separate lives.

But 18 months ago, Le-Thanh was contacted by fellow orphan Viktoria Cowley on social networking site Facebook.

The two appeared in a BBC documentary shown in South-East England, The Airmail Orphan, about Viktoria's quest to trace her roots.

And they bonded after Le-Thanh recognised himself in a photograph Viktoria had posted online of three children asleep on the plane.

He said: "I have always had the photo, ever since I can remember. When I read Vikki's profile I saw she had the same photo saying she was the one in the middle. What are the chances?"

But despite having a few photos from his time in Vietnam, he has no memory of his life before the airlift.

He said: "Some say it could have been the trauma, but I could have simply been too young to remember. I do not remember any of the language either, even though I may have understood basic Vietnamese at that age."

Le-Thanh initially started to trace his past in 1992 when he set up Project Return to reunite some of the airlift babies and go back to Vietnam. He visited the orphanage in 1996, where he managed to speak to a monk who had taken care of him there.

The monk told Le-Thanh all his documents had been destroyed to protect his identity.

"I have no history and no means to trace my blood relatives," he added. "Their reasons were noble but it means that I and so many others will never really be able to find their families. After this I gave up the chase and stopped trying to track down my blood relatives. I decided to try to help others like myself reconnect with each other."

He started Project Return II: Out of the Ashes to try to help other orphans to trace their roots, and is hoping some might still be in Wales.

Le-Thanh says after meeting with some of the other orphans they have found they have shared many of the same experiences.

He said: "There are many Vietnamese adoptees living out there who are still isolated and feel that they're on their own. They are not, we share the same background and story.

"At some point in the future I would love to organise a reunion in Cardiff to show my fellow adoptees what a beautiful city Cardiff has become."

Despite having travelled to Vietnam on a number of occasions, Le-Thanh says he feels he is Welsh.

"I've lived in Wales for the most part of my life, I even sport a hint of a Welsh accent. Wales is my home, every time I cross the bridge I know I'm back home," he said.

But his childhood was not always easy.

The family moved from their home in Rhondda in 1983 and Le-Thanh spent most of his childhood in Pontypridd.

Both his father, a canon in a local church and his mother, a magistrate, were open about his early years, but he found growing up in the South Wales Valleys as a Vietnamese boy during the 1970s could be difficult.

He said: "I had my friends but I also had an equal number of bullies too. Being different, kids found that easy to pick on.

"Even as a teenager or young adult I only had to walk down the street and I'd have people shout racial comments. They didn't see it as racist, they saw it as a joke.

"There was obvious stuff, such a Chinkie and Fried Rice. I worked in one place where one of the managers wouldn't call me by my name, they would only call me Charlie Chan."

He would often find himself crossing the street to avoid groups of people who would make comments.

"People seemed to genuinely think it was acceptable to make these comments just because I looked different to them. Even now you get it sometimes, usually in pubs when people have had a few, but it is nothing as severe as it used to be," he said.

Le-Thanh decided to move to London when he was 21 and found he felt more comfortable there as he was ignored.

He no longer felt different in a multi-cultural city, but after a short time he decided to return to his home town.

Social historian Peter Stead said it would have been difficult for any Vietnamese orphan to have come to Wales at that period.

"It would have been a tremendous difference for them to cope with," he said.

But he explained that Wales has often played host to refugees from around the world, including Greece, Italy and Chile.

"There is a record of Wales being a place where people come to. One of the most attractive features about Wales is that it takes refugees in.

"I remember we felt very strongly about the war and there were many demonstrations and protests at the time. Vietnam was such a big thing back then, people were divided all over the world, and there are those infamous pictures of the children running and crying."

Meanwhile, despite his many trips to Vietnam, Le-Thanh says he has no plans to return for good.

He said: "It's amazing to be back in Vietnam and I've always thought about moving back, but it's more about the practicalities. But I will definitely come back to Vietnam as often as I am able to, and whenever the opportunity arises."