

Fall 2005

Babylift Is Pivotal Moment in Four Lives

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Recommended Citation

Mileham, Mardi (2005) "Babylift Is Pivotal Moment in Four Lives," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol2/iss2/8

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Babylift is pivotal moment in four lives

An event that changed the lives of four women 30 years ago in war-torn Vietnam came full circle this spring on Linfield College's Portland Campus.

Joyce Harrington '08 was a young nurse on a flight to rescue 409 Vietnamese orphans from Saigon on April 5, 1975. Also on board that plane was 8-month-old Nguyen Thi-Ly, soon to become Elizabeth Wheeler, daughter of Pamela Wheeler, associate professor of nursing at the Linfield-Good Samaritan School of Nursing. Pam Wheeler is now Harrington's advisor.

Joyce Harrington was 23 and working at the Hong Kong Adventist Hospital School of Nursing in Tsuen Wan when she was asked to serve as an escort for a planeload of Vietnamese orphans headed to the U.S. for adoption through Holt International Children's Services. She was one of 10 volunteers including one doctor and eight nurses and a crew of nine stewardesses to care for over 400 children – 300 of them under the age of 18 months. A

steady stream of babies were loaded, some even handed over by their mothers. Many were ill, some from heat rash, some due to the change in food and others with far more serious illnesses. They were crammed into every available space on a Pan Am 747 that had been filled with diapers, bassinets, bottles and formulas.

"None of us got any sleep during the 30-hour flight to Seattle," Harrington remembers. "We had to keep our watches set to Saigon time to ensure maintaining medication and feeding schedules. When I would start to nod off while feeding a baby, someone else would remind me there were more who needed attention.

"I can't begin to describe how it feels to look back on what seemed, at the time, to be a brief side trip and get a glimpse of the bigger picture from many different angles: the adoptees, the adoptive parents and other volunteers on the babylift."

Pam Wheeler and her husband already had one birth child when they decided they would complete their family through adoption. They had been accepted by Holt and were expecting their daughter to arrive from Vietnam in June. But as the war escalated and the fall of Saigon became imminent, their concern heightened. When the first of the babylift charters crashed in Saigon, they were among other frantic parents calling Holt. They finally received word on Wheeler's birthday that Elizabeth was arriving that Sunday at O'Hare International in Chicago via Seattle.

"We thought she was the most gorgeous thing ever," Wheeler said. "She was like a little doll because she was 8 months old, but weighed less than 12 pounds."

Although she was severely malnourished, Elizabeth had no lingering health problems. "She's what I call a survivor," Wheeler says of Elizabeth today, who works in a lab for the American Red Cross. "She was a tough little girl."

While talking with Harrington last spring about her experiences, Wheeler realized that she could have been on the same plane as Beth.

"Joyce showed me some photos and there is a photo that looks like Beth," Wheeler said. "It's just the smallest world."



Joyce Harrington '08 with one of the 409 Vietnamese orphans on a plane out of Saigon on April 5, 1975.



Becky Boehne, circa 1975

Becky Boehne, associate professor of nursing, also played a small role in what was known as Operation Babylift.

Boehne had no direct connection with Elizabeth Wheeler, but she did spend May 5, 1975, at Fort Lewis near Tacoma, Wash., caring for Vietnamese orphans. The

children were among the last to be evacuated and were later flown to France for adoption. Boehne, then a senior nursing student at Pacific Lutheran University, found herself in charge of all operations for some 100 children. She administered medications while volunteers were assigned as caregivers, changing diapers, feeding and playing with the children.

“It was chaos,” Boehne remembers. “I couldn’t figure out what meds were supposed to go to what children, so I tried to create medication records so they would have some kind of record and some consistency.”



With 409 orphans on board, the children and babies were strapped into seats, bassinets and every available space on board the Pan Am flight.

Even though she had just a small role in the entire airlift, taking care of those children was really an experience of a lifetime, Boehne said. “I sometimes wonder whatever happened to those kids, or this one little child named Dubec. My part was just a little snippet, just an eight- or nine-hour day. But I hoped I helped those kids in some small way.”

— Mardi Mileham



30 years later, Elizabeth Wheeler, center, is a young married woman who works in a laboratory for the American Red Cross. Those who helped in getting her safely to the U.S. were, from left, Joyce Harrington '08, and Pam Wheeler, her mother. Although Becky Boehne wasn't involved in Elizabeth's flight, she did assist with one of the last babylift flights out of Vietnam.