

## Flown away to a new life

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**WHEN Jen Fitzpatrick was a toddler, she would hide when trucks drove down her street. Low-flying planes caused nightmares. She thought the war was back.**

There are many colours and faces in the patchwork of Queensland's population. Stories about how they came to be here are as fascinating as they are kaleidoscopic.

But there can be fewer dramatic tales than a group of Vietnamese orphan babies, ferried to Australia for adoption. Their stories are documented at a State Library of Queensland exhibition, *Water, Trees and Roots: Stories from the Queensland Vietnamese Community*.

Fitzpatrick was born Nguyen Thi Thu-Ha about six months before Australia withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1972.

Her parents died during the fighting, and she ended up in Saigon's Sancta Maria Orphanage.

By the time Australian troops withdrew, she was a World Vision charge. While the US was realising it wouldn't win the war, the Tempest family from country Victoria was falling in love – by way of a photo – with a thin, sick girl.

But how do you transport a war orphan out of a country in chaos?

Try as they might, they had to wait until 1975, when the South Vietnamese government agreed to speed up adoption processes to get some of the estimated 10,000 war orphans to safer ground.

By that time, it was plain to see that Saigon, the capital, would fall to the North Vietnamese forces. Western governments were bowing to intense public pressure for the "war waifs" to be evacuated.

Many were children of Western servicemen, and public sentiment had painted them in mortal danger. Australians lined up to be pre-approved for adoption, and all state premiers declared they would smooth the bureaucratic path for their arrival.

The US loaded 900 of the children on to huge C5 planes.

The North Vietnamese decried the move as "an act of war", as *The Australian* reported at the time.

The International Union for Child Welfare was staunchly against taking the kids away from their homes. Neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia, shared that view.

On April 5, 1975, RAAF Hercules aircraft transported 208 children from Saigon to Bangkok.

From there, a Qantas plane took them to Sydney.

On board was that thin girl Nguyen Thi Thu-Ha, who by then had been dubbed Hope by her new carers.

"I have no memory of it," Fitzpatrick says of that trip. She met her parents a short time later at a rural Victorian adoption agency. She was renamed Jen Thu-Ha Tempest.

She now works as an adoption educator and lives in Brisbane with her husband and two sons.

She finally was able to return to Vietnam to see the orphanage that was her refuge. "It was a huge step for me, going back," she says.

"I do believe that adoptions should be a last resort. It's in the child's best interest for that child to stay in their own country with their community and family members."

Jen's flight out of Vietnam was almost the last. The Australian government organised another Operation Babylift, as it was then being called, for April 7.

But a few days after the first mission, the South Vietnamese government pulled the plug. They said the quota for overseas adoptions had been reached.

There was speculation that the decision was an attempt to deflect political attacks from neighbouring countries.

A short time later – after what some believed was pressure applied by the adoptive countries – AAP reported that the way was cleared once more. The flights were back on.

Two Hercules were dispatched on April 17 to take another 78 children to Bangkok to meet another chartered Qantas plane bound for Melbourne.

RAAF pilot Ian Frame was behind the stick of the last Operation Babylift Hercules. He has donated pictures he took of that flight to the State Library exhibition.

"My main motivation is that nobody knew what the air force did during Operation Babylift," he says.

"The children came back to Australia by Qantas, but they only flew out of Bangkok. I just want to fill the whole story in."

The children arrived at the airport on time, but they had to wait for an hour until embassy staff in Bangkok joined them.

"In many ways it was just another flight," he says.

"(Pilot) John Stone had the (other) flight (on the 17th) that had all the boxes with kids in them. The kids were so small so they ended up in cardboard boxes, wrapped in blankets, strapped down and made secure as best we could."

National Archives state that 286 kids were ferried to Australia. Thirty-seven children were put in

hospital and eight died due to ill-health after they arrived in Australia. Eight ended up with Queensland parents. Most went to South Australia (83), New South Wales (59) and Victoria (49). Five were sent to different countries, and 13 were reunited with their natural parents.

**Water, Trees and Roots: Stories from the Queensland Vietnamese Community, The Studio, Level One, State Library of Queensland, South Bank, free, until July 11.**

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FORMER RAAF pilot Ian Frame and orphan Jen Fitzpatrick.

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