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REWIND

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Zion's story



PRESENTED BY PETER GEORGE
 PRODUCER: LAURIE CRITCHLEY
 RESEARCHER: SOPHIE EMTAGE
 BROADCAST 22 AUGUST 2004
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A young man's journey of discovery to find out about his lost past in Vietnam.

In 1975, hundreds of children were airlifted out of Saigon to a new home in Australia. One was Zion, whose name was chosen from a bible.

Nearly 30 years later, he has grown into a happy and successful young man, but one without a history.

Zion has no idea who his parents were. He has only two clues to his identity: a birth certificate and a photograph of a malnourished baby.

'Rewind' follows Zion on his first trip back to Vietnam.

MICHAEL CATHCART: Now, in 1975, the long and bitter war in Vietnam was coming to an end with the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese. Australia fought in that war for 10 bitter years. But our troops were well and truly gone when the Americans were driven out in one of the USA's most humbling moments. But amidst the horror and the bloodshed of those final days, an extraordinary act of humanity played itself out as hundreds of babies - many abandoned or orphans of war - were rescued from the chaos and flown out to new lives in America, Europe and Australia. One was a baby with a name plucked from the Bible - Zion. Tonight, then, history at a very personal level as Zion journeys back to Vietnam for the first time since he arrived on our doorstep in a cardboard box. The storyteller is Peter George.

ZION MITCHELL: Deep down, deep down, I want to know where I'm from. I want to know bits and pieces about how I got here.

PETER GEORGE: Zion Mitchell is 30 years old, lives in Melbourne and embraces Australia. He's been lucky. A loving adoptive family, good school grades a keen sportsman. Zion's not an outsider, but he does know that he's different.

JENNY MITCHELL, ZION'S ADOPTIVE MOTHER: He's always wholeheartedly entered into the Australian culture. He's more Australian than many Australians I know.

PETER GEORGE: Still it's not surprising he feels an overwhelming need to find out who he really is.

JENNY MITCHELL: I do remember that you had this little scratch on your nose when you arrived.

ZION MITCHELL: When did you think I was yours, though?

JENNY MITCHELL: It felt like you were mine from that very first day.

ZION MITCHELL: It was born out of panic. The South

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Vietnamese capital Saigon was falling to the Vietcong and in the days before capitulation, 271 babies and children were flown out for adoption. Operation Babylift was one of Australia's most celebrated humanitarian efforts.

JENNY MITCHELL: I have a memory of the air hostess handing over the baby and unwrapping him to see if his nappy needed changing. And I remember taking off his little baby outfit and thinking, "This boy'll never walk," because his legs seemed so skinny. He arrived with chicken pox. He had scabies. He seemed sad. He didn't smile for quite a time. Even though he was tiny, his eyes were quite unlit. I guess one of the things that seemed important to me was to make him smile and make him healthy. I'd take him out shopping or walking, and we were mobbed! Suddenly we'd find ourselves surrounded by people saying, "Is that one of the babies?" Wanting to touch him. So there was some sense of rescue around these babies.

PETER GEORGE: Not all rescue attempts would prove successful. But many fought hard for the orphans of war. This is the woman who helped bring Zion to Australia.

ELAINE MOIR: That was a very frightening time. We had 600 children in our care and we had to get them all out. Elaine Moir now lives just around the corner from Zion in Melbourne. 30 years ago, she was part of a group of women who made it their mission to find homes in America, Europe and Australia for children from Vietnamese orphanages.

ELAINE MOIR: And so that's how the airlift first started - working out, "How are we going to get all these kids out?" It was late at night, I know. Very late at night. We were surrounded by reams of paper associated with all the children who had to be evacuated. We said, "Well, we're going to have to...divide up the babies." One for America, one for Australia, one for America, one for Australia. And you landed on the Australian group. It's one of those lotteries in life. The terrifying thing, of course, is had you been on the American list, you would have been on Galaxy.

PETER GEORGE: The Galaxy disaster started as a baby airlift provided by the American forces. It crashed on take-off. More than 200 children and adults were killed.

ELAINE MOIR: That was a terrible time. I had lots of friends on that plane. I knew a lot of the kids on the plane.

PETER GEORGE: Despite the horror, there was no time to grieve. There were still other children to get out of the country.

ELAINE MOIR: We had these big cardboard boxes and we put two, and sometimes three, and I think in one case, four, babies in a box because it was such an easy way of dealing with them.

ZION MITCHELL: Wow!

PETER GEORGE: Boxes of babies being sent to a foreign land.

ELAINE MOIR: It's just that there was a war on. And that's what dictated bringing you to Australia. Not leaving you in an orphanage in a war-torn country where your future would have been very dim.

ZION AND ELAINE EMBRACE

ELAINE MOIR: Oh, and you turned out so beautiful. You turned out so beautiful.

PETER GEORGE: In his new country, the only official proof of Zion's existence is a photo and a copy of a Vietnamese birth certificate. And there's not much that Elaine can add about his previous life. She simply drew his name from a pile of cards.

ZION MITCHELL: I do want to know what happened to my parents. The best outcome would be to know how I got to the orphanage.

PETER GEORGE: He may never know what happened to his parents but to get some inkling of who he is, he feels the need to return to the country of his birth.

ZION MITCHELL: I'm looking forward to getting on the plane. (Tearfully) I'm a little bit scared. That's all.

JENNY MITCHELL: Isn't it good that we all find all the parts of ourselves? And if this journey allows him to explore all the corners of himself I think that's a very good thing. He can only become a stronger individual through doing that.

PETER GEORGE: And so the stranger returns to a strange land.

ZION MITCHELL: Oh, wow. Look at this! I'm lost.

(Speaking to local girls) I'm Vietnamese, but, um, uh...
Um...brought up in Australia.

There's definitely a connection. It's odd. (Laughs) Really odd.

PETER GEORGE: The first way station on his journey home is a meeting with an American nun who helped choose children for the airlift. She's Sister Mary Nelle. She remembers a very different time and a very different city.

SISTER MARY NELLE GAGE: Because of the war, because of poverty, because of military encampments here, then orphans were in abundance.

ZION MITCHELL: Do you...do you know...

SISTER MARY NELLE GAGE: (Holding photo of baby Zion) Oh, look!

ZION MITCHELL: Do you know me?

SISTER MARY NELLE GAGE: My God! (Tenderly) Look at this. Oh! Oh! Oh, wow, you're so much more relaxed now.

ZION MITCHELL: Oh, I know. Oh!

PETER GEORGE: Mary Nelle is able to answer some of Zion's questions. His name, she says, was picked at random from the Bible. More importantly, she gives him the address of the orphanage from which he was plucked.

ZION MITCHELL: Can't believe I'm going back to my orphanage, but I am. It is called 'Hope' and so I was probably at that last little end of my straw that I was either going to die or survive. I can't speak Vietnamese. I've got a translator, which is great. So I'm very fortunate. She'll try to help me to try to find as much as I can.

TRANSLATOR: This is your school before.

ZION MITCHELL: Over here?

TRANSLATOR: Yeah. That over there. The whole...this is the whole play area.

PETER GEORGE: They're directed to the orphanage known as 'Hope'. But the orphanage is now occupied by a military newspaper and strictly off limits. Then in an alley by the side, Zion makes a remarkable discovery about his past.

TRANSLATOR: Ah, there's a woman work in the orphanage before, I think.

WOMAN: Come in, please. You want...?

ZION MITCHELL: Come in? Yes, please. If that's OK? Take my shoes off?

TRANSLATOR: Yeah. Take them off.

PETER GEORGE: Although Zion may not remember, he's met this woman before.

ZION MITCHELL: (Laughs) Tell her that I'm doing very well.

PETER GEORGE: It turns out that Han worked in the orphanage. She nursed a sick baby Zion back to health.

HAN: You are strong. I very happy.

ZION MITCHELL: (Tearfully) Yeah, thank you. I'm very happy. I have some serious guardian angels, and this is one living.

PETER GEORGE: But there's another nurse who remembers him - another guardian angel. Han's sister, Ngan. It was she who collected him from a provincial orphanage in the Mekong Delta and brought him to Saigon.

ZION MITCHELL: And I feel like I've got two grandmothers, or two mothers at least. And for me to meet them out of the blue...it means that I existed.

(ZION MITCHELL WALKS WITH HAN AND NGAN INTO THE STREET)

ZION MITCHELL: Oh, what a great day!

PETER GEORGE: Zion now knows the region where he was born. His home province had been one of the biggest US Army bases during the war. He's often wondered about his own

appearance and whether, in fact, his father could have been an American serviceman.

The next stop is the provincial records office.

(ZION AND A TRANSLATOR MEET PROVINCIAL RECORDS OFFICE OFFICIALS)

ZION MITCHELL: Is this a real certificate? Is this really... Is this a genuine birth certificate?

PETER GEORGE: Zion's been told that his papers might be matched up with the records here. In just half an hour, he could have his full birth details - including his parents' names.

ZION MITCHELL: (Sighs) It's going to be the longest half hour...

TRANSLATOR: Oh, my God, huh?

ZION MITCHELL: Isn't that unbelievable?

TRANSLATOR: Maybe we can find something out.

PETER GEORGE: But it turns out that the original of the birth certificate has been lost.

TRANSLATOR: 264. Your birth certificate's lost.

PETER GEORGE: Is lost?

TRANSLATOR: Yeah.

PETER GEORGE: So it's only up to 200?

TRANSLATOR: Yeah.

PETER GEORGE: My heart went up and down, because... I can't... It was like a lottery ticket. It was...I had a number, they were gonna match that number with another number, I was thinking, my goodness, this could be like...yeah, it could be my parents. But...didn't know what to think or what to feel.

PETER GEORGE: The officials send him on to Vin Long's main cathedral. Its baptism records stretch back well beyond 1975. And this time, Zion's number comes up.

(ZION MITCHELL EXAMINES FILES)

ZION MITCHELL: 264.

TRANSLATOR: Ah... Five kilometres from here.

PETER GEORGE: The first record of Zion's existence was made by a priest from a nearby village. It's time to return to the place where he was born. But as Zion is about to discover, there are no simple answers in a time of war.

ZION MITCHELL: Especially on the motorbike getting there, and in the courtyard, I was thinking, "This is my village," and you are, you're looking around going, "Do they know me? Are they relatives? Are they my parents?"

PETER GEORGE: Father Khieu was a pastor in a provincial nursery that cared for abandoned babies.

ZION MITCHELL: How are you, Khieu? Pleased to meet you.

FATHER KHIEU: I came from time to time to say mass for them...

ZION MITCHELL: Fantastic.

FATHER KHIEU: From '73 to '75.

ZION MITCHELL: So were the babies just dropped off at the door?

FATHER KHIEU: Usually left outside of the hospital.

ZION MITCHELL: In the door?

FATHER KHIEU: In the door or in the...the street. Near to the hospital and around the hospital.

PETER GEORGE: Zion, it turns out, was indeed a foundling. He was one of two or three children left here each day with no hint to their identity.

ZION MITCHELL: Do I look Vietnamese?

FATHER KHIEU: Yeah. For me...

ZION MITCHELL: Yes?

FATHER KHIEU: ..you look a bit like a Philippine...

ZION MITCHELL: Philippine, yeah... So I could be a half baby from the US Military and Vietnam? So I could be a mixture.

FATHER KHIEU: Yeah.

PETER GEORGE: Father Khieu has no doubt that Zion is a GI baby, but despite that, he is accepted as both Vietnamese and part of the village.

FATHER KHIEU: I'm very happy to have you as a man of my village. We are in the same village.

PETER GEORGE: For Zion, returning to his birthplace has solved one mystery - he truly is a child of war. His past is Vietnam, his future, Australia. He may never find his parents, but he does feel he's found himself.

ZION MITCHELL: I have solved who I am and what...and what I am. My life story is real, it's confirmed. I feel more secure, I feel more at peace. I feel like I've found Zion. I'm not scared of being someone else.

MICHAEL CATHCART: Zion's still in Vietnam, and he tells us he's struggling with the language but really starting to enjoy the experience of being back in the country of his birth. He's actually been contacted by another American nun with more information, but he's decided he's content with his history as it stands.