

Buckner Vietnam orphans return to homeland they fled

June 23, 2010

NHA TRANG, Vietnam—Thomas Ho holds his cousin's right leg and foot in his hands as his wife, Trina sits nearby with a calculator. They are surrounded by a dozen family members from the Quang Nga Province of Vietnam who have made the day-and-a-half journey here by bus.



Ty (Thang) Cope scoops up dirt from the site of the abandoned Cam Ranh City Christian Orphanage during a reunion of orphans in Vietnam. The orphans and their leaders fled at the end of the Vietnam War and came to Buckner Children's Home in Dallas in 1975. (PHOTOS/Scott Collins/Buckner)



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It's been seven years since Ho's cousin has had a new leg, and the group is trying to figure out what a new one will cost. It can be purchased in Danang, and before he returns to the United States, Thomas promises to provide the money to buy the leg. Everyone's best guess is \$300.

When he set up the meeting with his cousin, Ho's intent was to buy her a wheelchair. And while she is grateful for the offer, the cousin says a new leg is better. Life is too hard for a wheelchair, and it would complicate her work making rice cakes.

The leg is a causality of the Vietnam War, lost in 1973 when Ho's cousin was just 14 and she stepped on a land mine. Two years later, the cousins lost something else—each other.

For some in the crowded hotel room, this is a reunion with a relative they haven't seen in 35 years. For others, this is the first time they've ever seen Ho.

"I'm very emotional," he said. "You didn't see me earlier, but I was crying."



Thomas Ho looks at the prosthetic leg of his cousin, Dong, 52. She lost her leg to a land mine during the Vietnam War when she was 14. The cousins had not seen each other for 35 years, when Ho fled Vietnam for Buckner Children's Home in Dallas. (PHOTOS/Scott Collins/Buckner)

Thomas was part of a group of orphans returning to Vietnam, many for the first time, since fleeing the country for [Buckner Children's Home](#) in Dallas. It's a trip that's been in the making for years and the group timed their return to coincide with their arrival at Buckner 35 years to the day they stepped off buses on June 12, 1975, and filed into Pires Dormitory on the Buckner campus.

The arrival at Buckner ended a harrowing flight that started April 2, 1975, from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. The group of 69 orphans, 13 staff members and their 13 children made the trip on land, sea and air, being shot at and stranded in a leaking boat before arriving at the Vietnamese Relocation Center in Fort Chaffee, Ark. From there, they spent several days as guests of West Memorial Baptist Church in Houston before finally arriving at Buckner.

The connection to Buckner came through Jim Gayle, a former Southern Baptist missionary in Vietnam who served as chaplain at the orphanage when he lived nearby. Gayle and his wife, Margaret, participated in the June reunion trip with the group.

Gayle, who grew up at Buckner Boys Ranch in the 1950s, called Buckner President R.C. Campbell in 1975 and asked if Buckner Children's Home in Dallas could take in the Vietnamese group.

And while individual members of the group have made pilgrimages back to Vietnam over the past 35 years, the trip this summer was the first organized return for the orphans of the Cam Ranh City Christian Orphanage. The theme for the trip, emblazoned on T-shirts and caps, was "Get Love, Share Love," something the orphans say they learned from their Vietnamese leaders and from Buckner.



Cam Ranh City Christian Orphans attend the Hoi Thanh Baptist Church during their reunion trip. Southern Baptist missionaries started the church in the 1960s. (PHOTOS/Scott Collins/Buckner)

The trip included family reunions with relatives many of the orphans have never met. A banquet June 12 was hosted by Buckner International. In addition, a group of the Buckner orphans joined Buckner staff visiting orphanages in the north part of Vietnam where Buckner works with government officials to help orphans.



Holme Oltrogee consoles his mother, Nguyen Thi Thuan. Oltrogee was among a group of orphans fleeing Vietnam for Buckner Children's Home in Dallas in 1975. His mother took him to the Cam Ranh City Christian Orphanage during the Vietnam War and the two had not seen each other for 35 years. He was also reunited with his five brothers and a sister he'd never met.

(PHOTOS/Scott Collins/Buckner)

During their return, the orphans visited the original site of the Cam Ranh City Christian Orphanage, now an elementary school. As they wandered around the grounds, some of the orphans knelt with empty water bottles in hand to scoop up sand from the ground as a souvenir.

Holme Oltrogee, of Frisco was overcome with emotion when his mother, whom he had not seen since he was 10, arrived along with his brothers and a sister he'd never met. Now 42, Holme said he is thankful for the way his

life has turned out, including his adoption from Buckner by Gene and Alice Oltrogee.

But he admitted a long-standing desire to return to Vietnam and see his long-lost birth mother. "This reunion forced me to come back," he said. "I needed to come back. I learned more about myself."



Cam Ranh City Christian Orphans attend the Hoi Thanh Baptist Church during their reunion trip. (PHOTOS/Scott Collins/Buckner)

For Kelli St. Germain, who now lives in Hopedale, Mass., the return connected her with a past she never really knew. St. Germain was one of the youngest of the group of 69 orphans fleeing Cam Ranh. She had been placed in the orphanage by an aunt, who took her in after her parents were killed by a land mine explosion while walking through a rice field.

She managed to find the aunt, now 87, who placed her in the orphanage. The aunt still lives in Cam Ranh in the wooden house that's been her home all her life. It's also the home St. Germain lived in briefly before going to the orphanage.

"My husband and I have always said that we wanted to learn more about my roots," she said. "We would eventually like to travel here with our kids

to learn more about the culture. We feel it's important for them to know where they came from."