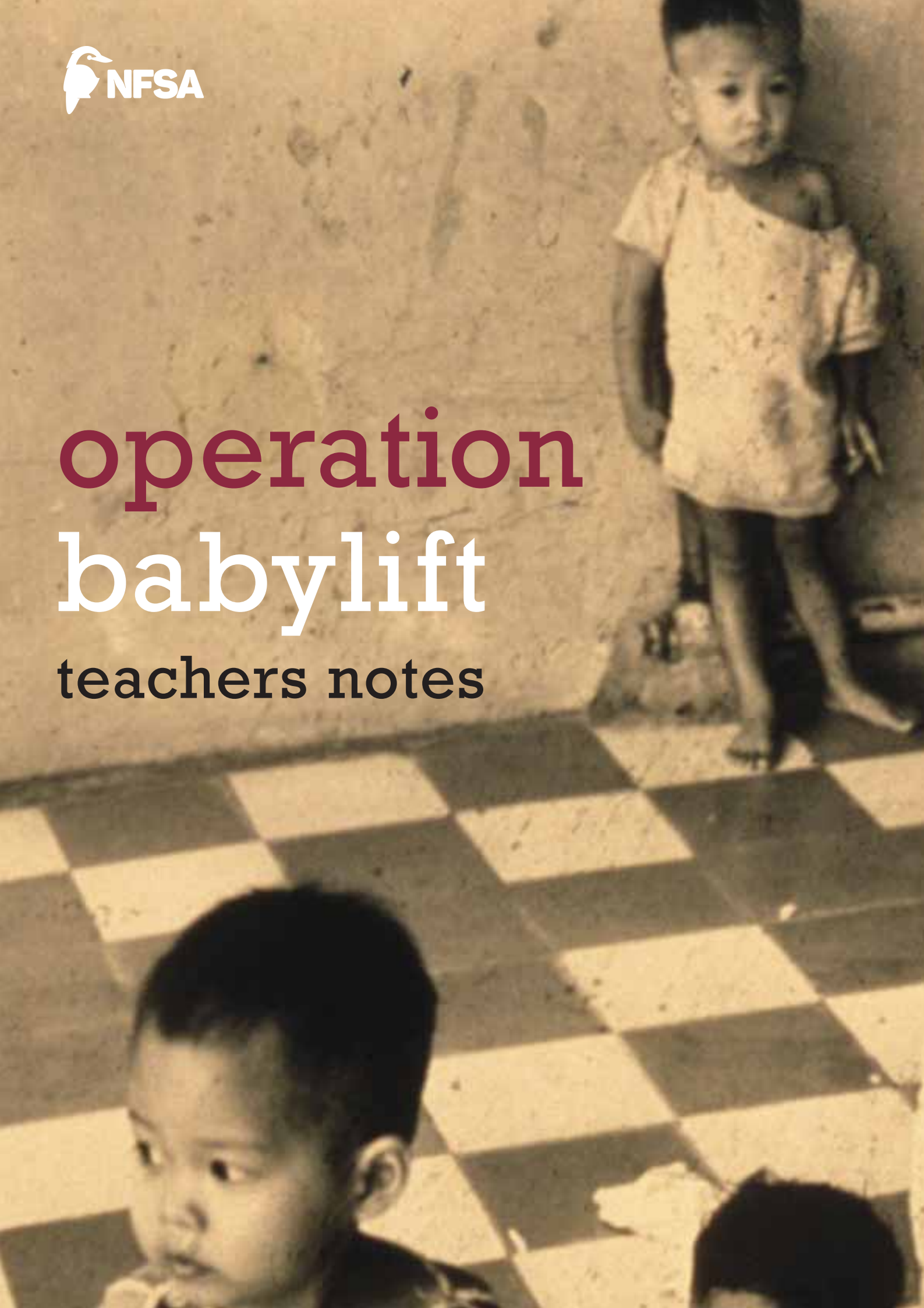




operation babylift teachers notes



In April 1975, in the closing days of the Vietnam War, more than 3000 babies were airlifted from Saigon orphanages and delivered into the arms of waiting couples in the US, Canada, Britain, Europe and Australia. It was the largest act of adoption in history.

Although many Westerners saw Operation Babylift as a humanitarian necessity, many Vietnamese considered it kidnapping — particularly as some children were not, in fact, orphans.

Thirty years on, this powerful documentary tells the stories of three of the 281 children brought to Australia. Who are they today? And how do they feel about themselves and their past? Their personal experiences are remarkably different; their answers likely to surprise you.

Filmmaker Dai Le, herself a Vietnam War refugee, takes us on a journey of discovery that presents a human face to decisions made with 'the best of intentions'. She accompanies one of the adoptees on an emotionally turbulent trip back to Vietnam, in search of her past.

Through candid interviews with the children (now grown), their adoptive parents, those involved in the airlift and Vietnamese families and politicians, this compelling film explores complex issues of inter-racial adoption and cultural identity, as well as providing an insight into the political background to this controversial operation.

Curriculum Links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media, Studies of Society and Environment, Family & Community Studies, Studies of Asia and Modern History.

Historical Context

The following is a brief overview of the backdrop to the war in Vietnam. Students will benefit from gaining an understanding of this historical context, and may also find it useful to refer to a map. (Place names in this guide appear in bold for their first mention.)

Today Vietnam is an independent country, but for centuries the nation's history has been one plagued by upheavals and revolts. Going back, Vietnam was ruled by national feudal dynasties including the Ly Dynasty (11th and 12th centuries), the Tran Dynasty (13th and 14th centuries) and the Le Dynasty (15th, 16th and 17th centuries). During this 500-year period the Vietnamese people managed to repel invading enemies such as the Song (11th century), the Yuan or Mongols (13th century) and the Ming (15th century).

The 17th and 18th centuries saw feudalism in Vietnam weakened. Many peasant revolts led to the Tay Son movement (1771-1802) whereby the feudal lordship that divided the country into two parts was overthrown. This period also saw the Qing (Manchu) invaders from China chased off.

However, in 1858 French colonialists began invading the country and by 1884 they controlled the whole territory of Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese people constantly revolted against French rule, it wasn't until 1930 when Nguyen Ai Quoc (who later became President Ho Chi Minh) founded the Communist party that the uprising began having an impact. In August 1945 the Great National Uprising under Communist leadership drove out both the French and the occupying Japanese (during World War 2 the Japanese government had wrested control of much of Vietnam from the French colonial government).

On 2 September 1945 the Communist party established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

After WW2, France tried to win back areas it had previously controlled. However in March 1954 the Communist Viet Minh under the leadership of General Vo Nguyen Giap launched a massive artillery barrage. The siege at **Dien Bien Phu** lasted 55 days and resulted in a devastating French defeat.

The Viet Minh victory led to the 1954 Geneva Accords that partitioned Vietnam into Communist administered north (under Ho Chi Minh) and pro-French (later pro-American) administered south. This divider was meant to be temporary; the nation was to be reunited in the national elections of 1956. When the Communist regime set up its headquarters in **Hanoi** in the north under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, many people fled to the newly proclaimed Republic of Vietnam in the south of the country (its capital was **Sai Gon** (known in the west as Saigon) and it was under the rule of Ngo Dinh Diem). The Sai Gon government tried to prevent the national election but the National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam was established on 20 December 1960, with the intention of unification of the country.

The United States of America funnelled aid directly to the Sai Gon government and agreed to train the South Vietnamese army.

In the 1960s half a million American and Allied troops fought the Communist government. Australia's involvement began in 1962, when the first members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam arrived in South Vietnam. From August 1964 America bombarded North Vietnam. America feared the threatened Communist takeover because they had seen communism advance in Eastern Europe, Korea and Cuba and feared another country falling to communist ideology. The Cold War escalated.

- What do you think is meant by the 'Cold War'? Why was this period so named?

- Visit <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/languages/vietnamese/context-statement>

for a comprehensive account of the Vietnamese war. Make a timeline of events that built up to the war. Many Australians and Americans protested vigorously over their countries' involvement in the Vietnam War (known in Vietnam as the American War). Finally, pressure prevailed on the US President Richard Nixon and a ceasefire negotiation known as the Paris Agreement was signed in January 1973. Foreign troops began leaving the country. In July 1976 North and South Vietnam united officially as a single Communist State. It is estimated that over 2.5 million people from both sides died in the bloody conflict that was the Vietnam War and many more were maimed and injured. Some of the ramifications of those deaths and injuries can be seen in *Operation Babylift*.

People in the Film

In this documentary, viewer interest is held primarily by the emotional life-journeys of a number of characters. Although the focus is mainly on the experiences of three adults who arrived in Australia when they were very young, the story is also portrayed through the accounts given by birth parents, adoptive parents, media and those who took part in the airlift.

- Discuss the benefits of including such a diversity of people to tell this story. How do personal accounts contribute to our understanding of historical events?

Dai Le is the film's writer/director and is herself a Vietnam War refugee. We also see that she accompanies Christina on her return to her Vietnamese birthplace.

- Why do you think Dai appears on screen? What visual clues show us that Dai is of help to Christina?

Dai says she wanted to make this film because she understands what it is to have two identities. She 'left Vietnam at the age of seven. When I arrived here, I initially felt Australian. When you get older you realise you are not. You realise you are Vietnamese as well as Australian'. It was in 1975, the same year as Operation Babylift, that Dai Le left her homeland as a refugee with her mother and two younger sisters. She ended up in camps in the Philippines and Hong Kong before her family was granted refugee status and arrived in Sydney in 1979.

- Is it important to know what makes you unique, to know your personal identity? Give reasons for your answer.

The film shows that cultural identity can have a big influence on one's personal identity.

- Do you believe that as we become older we understand more about our identity? How do you believe your identity, or your understanding of it, has changed over the years? Is it to do with your personal or cultural identity?

- Choose two examples of your own cultural identity and examine what importance these aspects play in your life.

Assignment

- Choose a segment of the film that you believe strongly reveals Dai Le's personal voice and state your reasons for choosing this scene. How do you think the scene would change if written by an

- o American soldier who fought in Vietnam?

- o Australian woman who spoke out against her nation's involvement in the Vietnam war?

OR

- Find examples of details included in the film that alert you to a:

- o Vietnamese voice

- o female voice

- o refugee voice

- Summarise your understanding of the term 'personal voice'.

Christina's Story

Christina Tinker-Casson returned to Vietnam in the hope that she would find her birth parents.

- List reasons that could propel people into a search for their birth parents.

- If you found out that you had been adopted, how interested would you be in finding your birth parents? Give reasons to support your answer.

Many South Vietnamese children were abandoned in the panic that gripped their parents in their flight from the attacking Communist forces.

- Why might Christina's need to find her birth parents be heightened by her knowledge that she was abandoned in a horrendous war zone?



Christina

- What other reasons do you think motivated her search?

The process of seeking out her birth parents took an emotional toll on Christina. Watch the scene where Christina looks at the **Nhi Dong** hospital steps.

- What is involved in confronting one's past? What was involved in these moments for Christina?
- Choose a second scene that conveys Christina's highly charged emotions and discuss what she might have been feeling. Does the action of the scene resolve anything for her?

Look at the scene in the taxi after Christina and Dai arrive.

- What is the mood created? How does sound contribute to the atmosphere?
- What can you say about the frame of mind of each woman?

A big part of Christina's satisfaction in finding her birth parents initially relied on positive identification through DNA tests.

- Speculate on the reasons this evidence is so important to her.
- Several scenes add to our understanding of Christina's character. What do you learn about her from the following:

o Christina doesn't believe Mr Tho is her biological father and says, 'I sort of feel sorry for him and would like to make him happy'

o her reactions at Mr Tho's large family gathering where his sister, Mrs Huong, gives her a small remembrance

o at the shrine in a ceremony of thanksgiving with Mr Tho

o her initial meeting with Mrs Huong

Mrs Huong relinquished her daughter because being a single mother in Vietnam was shameful.

- What holds Christina back from accepting Mrs Huong into her life?



Martine's Story

Martine Bach led a very different life from Christina. She returned to Vietnam when she was 27 to 'connect with my roots'. Finding her birth family would 'be nice' but the likelihood of that seemed remote.

- Explore the differences in motivation between Martine's and Christina's return to their homeland.
- What do you believe Martine means when she talks about 'a part of me...that stopped growing by eight years old'?

Mrs Chinh explains very practical reasons for relinquishing her daughter to the 'two Aunties' and thus the orphanage.

- Why do you think she was able to make that decision?
- Describe, with evidence, Martine's emotions as she remembers these moments.
- What do the pictures of Martine at the orphanage tell you about her personality as a child? Does this match her outlook as an adult?

The issue of the Aboriginal 'stolen generation' continues to create social and personal problems, as does the Vietnamese baby adoption program.

- Look at the similarities and differences in both government motivation and personal outcome.
- Is it possible that an Aboriginal person from the stolen generation could give different answers from yours in the above task? Why?

Martine vividly recalls Mrs Chinh 'whipping off my sandal and looking at my toes'.

- Why is this a good image and what does it tell you about both characters?
- Why is the music in this scene so suitable? What mood does it create? Compare it with the mood created by sound and music in the street scene where Christina seeks her birth mum.

Martine says she knew straightaway that Mrs Chinh was her mother. The Dudman family are all looking at the photos and laughing with Martine.

- How would you describe the adoptive family in this scene?

Martine is able to recall many details from her early life in Australia.

- List some of these details. Do they tell you anything about her place in the Dudman family?
- Did the age that she left Vietnam and memories of her house make it easier for Martine to accept her past than for Christina?

Martine & her birth mother



Shane's Story

Shane Bolt says 'I definitely don't want to search for my parents'.

- What images of Shane show his contentment? Explain.
- Find examples of family support from Shane's childhood. Explain how each one made him feel as a Vietnamese-Australian.

Shane came into a family that had already adopted a Vietnamese baby.

- Would this have made Shane's life easier?
- Do you believe the love he experienced contributed to his easy-going nature or was he just born this way?
- Do you think Shane is missing out on anything by not pursuing information on his birth parents?

The Evacuation

Getting the orphans out of Vietnam is a central dramatic focus of the film.

- What is the 'ticking clock' or time factor that the Western alliance is racing against?
- How does the duration of each shot during the airlift scene add to a sense of urgency?
- Visually, why do we understand the urgency to evacuate?
- How does sound (including dialogue) add to the desperation? List examples and their effect.

The story becomes very graphic because of recollections from several people who were involved. Elaine Moir, an orphanage worker, describes how a guard closed the gate at **Tan Don Nui** airport just as they arrived.

- Why does this detail add drama to the scene?
- Choose other details from people who were present at the airlift and say why they interest you.

Ian Frame, RAAF pilot, relates some humorous incidents.

- What does this lightness contribute to the scene?
- How did you feel at seeing the smoke rising over the buildings? What mood is sustained by this image?

Dr Ron Lucas gives us a verbal image of a Vietnamese mother who 'burst out of the bushes, opened the door and pushed her baby in' the bus.

- What is added by this recount?
- Would footage as a re-enactment have been as successful as Dr Lucas's verbal description? Support your answer with evidence.
- Describe the feelings you get from looking at the images of children in-flight in the program. Do the images make the 'rescue' seem more heroic?

The safety of being on Australian soil is often contrasted to the dangers of being in Vietnam.

- How does the music change once the flight lands in Australia?
- Find some symbols that evoke security and explain their significance.
- What do the pictures of the malnourished babies add to the story?

Care workers packed the babies in cardboard boxes.

- Why?
- Comment on the effectiveness of using images of babies in boxes as anti-war symbols. What other symbols could have been used? How do you interpret them? What changes, if any, can you notice in anti-war protests then and now?

The media help tell the story.

- What does 'archival' mean?
- Name at least four types of archival media featured. Give an example of each type and evaluate its effectiveness.
- For each example named, decide whether you think it gives facts or is biased in sensationalising/persuading. Always back up your ideas with evidence.



Political Ramifications

The displacement of people caused by this war was sure to produce world problems. Geoffrey Price, Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, prepared Canberra for the consequences of a Communist victory in Vietnam.

- Because of Australia's proximity to Vietnam, what might some of these consequences have been?
- Why was the lack of time for normal immigration formalities (medical checks/identification) perceived as a threat to Australia?
- Explain how the telex and audio tape are effective devices in the film. What sense or mood do they help create?

We learn from Richard Palfreyman's ABC interview that 'Gough Whitlam and the Australian government did not want a big surge of Vietnamese refugees coming into the country...' However, after US President Gerald Ford's approval of the airlifts to America, Australia changed policy and took 281 babies. Canada, Britain and Europe joined the humanitarian effort.

- Why might the American President have agreed to the airlifts?
- Is it easier for a government to decide policy when humanitarian issues are involved? Why?
- Does the presence of humanitarian issues change your opinions about certain situations? Think of such examples.

The film exposes two points of view about adopting Vietnamese orphans. A Salvation Army spokesperson expresses fear about taking the children from their culture, whereas Freya Bolt (Shane's mum) states, 'We're not living in an ideal world'. When war produces homeless children, Freya sees adoption into a loving family as the next best thing to the birth family.

- Name other people in the film who align with each viewpoint. Whose stories give credence to each opinion?
- Who was Hanoi Hannah?

Summing Up

- What do you consider to be the predominant point of view of this documentary?
- What do you think the filmmakers value?
- What is the overall proposition (theme) of this film?

References/Further Resources

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- Vietnam Online www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam
- Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia
www.vvaa.org.au

Operation Babylift

A Film Australia National Interest Program.
Produced in association with SBS Independent.

Writer/Director/Narrator: Dai Le

Producer: Helen Barrow

Executive Producer: Anna Grieve

Duration: 55 minutes **Year:** 2005

For information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

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