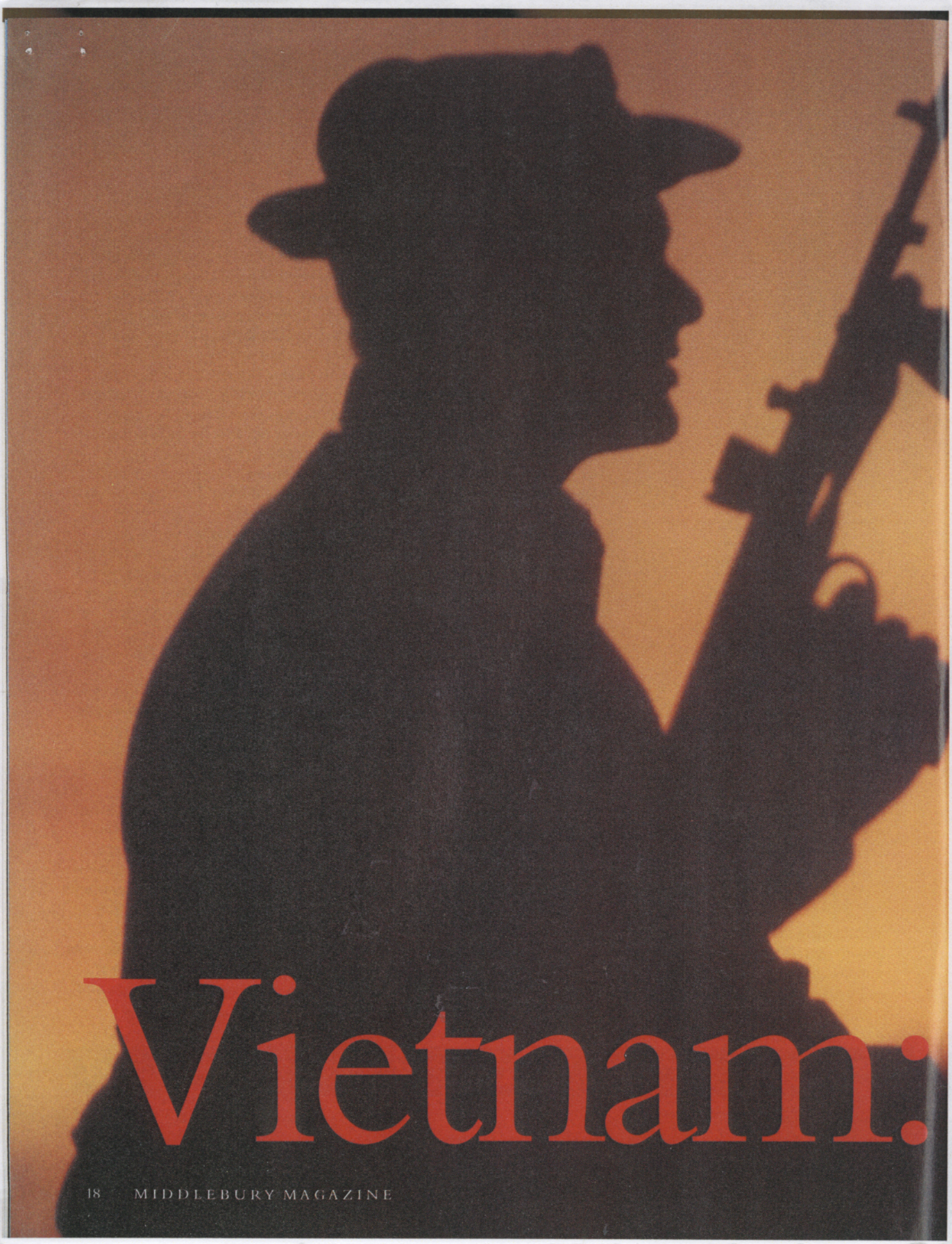


# Vietnam:

## As we were changed by the war, the children of that war are changing us

By Karl Lindholm '67

America was changed, irrevocably, by the Vietnam War. It defined a generation of young Americans—some protested and dodged the draft, others fought and died, but all were affected, some in tragic ways. At Middlebury ROTC was mandatory in the sixties. Between the years 1964 and 1968, approximately 400 young men from the College entered the military. Over 160 served in Vietnam. Six died.

What the war signified is open to debate. Regardless of how the history of the Vietnam War is written, whether it is Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's "tragic mistake," or President Ronald Reagan's "noble cause," one of the positive results of our involvement in Southeast Asia was that it brought many Vietnamese to America.

They arrived here by different routes. Some, like Hieu Nguyen '92 and Germaine Trong '94, began their journey during the frantic emigration triage as the Americans withdrew from Vietnam in April 1975. Others, later in that decade, came over the high seas in rickety boats. Binh Vo '96 was one of these "boat people," many of whom lost their lives in the desperate effort. One of the most powerful images of the end of that war for many Americans was the "babylift" of 1975, when 2,000 Vietnamese orphans were flown out of the country and into the arms of waiting American families. Kara Delahunt '97 was one of these babies who, at five months old, was adopted by Bill '63 and Katharina Delahunt.

Now young adults, these students and others like them are graduating from Middlebury and other colleges and moving on into adulthood, trying to understand their identity as Americans and their history as Vietnamese. Many are choosing to return to Vietnam, to study or to work, and are finding a country much changed from the one their parents fled.

For Vietnam itself is much changed, mindful of the "American War," yet keen to engage Americans and American interests in commercial alliances. David Rosenberg, the Vietnam expert on the Middlebury faculty, spent his sabbatical year in 1993 in Southeast Asia and encountered a Vietnam in the midst of great change. "After decades of war and grinding poverty," he says, "Vietnam is ready to take its place in the world's economy."

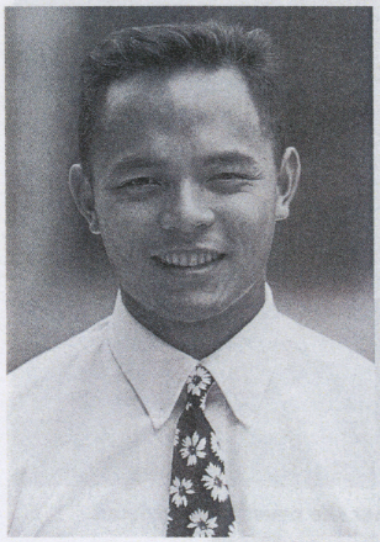
For those who know Vietnam only as a war, here are some portraits of the next generation. The life stories of these young people reflect this painful period in our history, and their achievements bring joy and distinction to the Middlebury community.

# THE NEXT GENERATION

## HIEU NGUYEN '92

He was big at Middlebury, bigger even than President McCardell. In the fall of 1994, Brainerd Commons "jailed" for charity famous local figures. It cost $50 to send President McCardell to jail; Hieu cost $100. Nobody else even came close.

Hieu's popularity was well-earned. As the assistant director of residential life, he was famous for his energy, concern, competence, and good will. He was also famous for his athletic accomplishments. While majoring in American civilization, he played varsity soccer and lacrosse, earning All-American honors as a goalie on some excellent Middlebury lacrosse teams. In the spring of 1994, he and his best Middlebury friend, Ted Leach '93, literally skated across America, from L.A. to Boston on roller blades, earning over $30,000 for cancer research.



Hieu's life story begins in 1969 in Dalat, Vietnam, a former French resort town in the highlands about 75 miles northwest of Saigon. He is the only child of a devoted mother. "I don't know who my dad is," he says. "I think probably he was an American or French soldier."

Hieu recalls the "craziness" of the departure from Vietnam and the journey to America: a week in Na Trang; a boat ride to Saigon; a month there; then the evacuation by airplane on April 27, 1975 (just two days before the Communists swept into Saigon); a month in a refugee camp in Guam; two months at Fort Chafee, Oklahoma, before heading to Glastonbury, Connecticut, with his mother and grandmother, sponsored by the Congregational Church.

"My mom had a lot of pride," he says. "We lived in the low-rent part of Glastonbury. She was fluent in French and English and got a job at a travel agency, which got us off welfare." With the encouragement of his mother, Hieu gravitated to sports. He was playing soccer by the third grade.

Another soccer parent took an interest in Hieu and suggested he attend a private high school, the Loomis Chaffee School. There, he played soccer, basketball, and lacrosse; was the vice president of his class; and earned an appointment to West Point, which he entered in the fall of 1988.

"I liked the challenge of West Point," Hieu says now. "I could handle the physical part, but something important was missing." He called Jim Grube, then Middlebury lacrosse coach, applied to Middlebury as a transfer student, and the rest is history. Hieu called Middlebury home for the past seven years. Recently, however, he left his position in the Dean of Students Office and hopes to return to his homeland. "I've never had a clear idea of my future," he says, "but now some things are coming into focus. I know I want to be in Vietnam."

**An All-American lacrosse player at Middlebury, Hieu Nguyen spent his early years in Dalat before escaping to America.**



Photograph, above left, by Erik Borg

## GERMAINE TRONG '94

Difficult is how she would describe that semester in 1992, which she spent studying in Vietnam, a country she hadn't seen since she left at age three. Germaine was shocked by the "poverty and despair" of her homeland and inoculated herself as best she could by considering herself "just a student, a foreign student," doing research and going to class. Then one day, as she explains it, "This protective wall came crashing down around me.

" 'Anh Thi has been wanting to see you,' my aunt told me one afternoon. I climbed on the back of her motorbike, and we rode through the filthy back alleys of Saigon before finally stopping at a squalid shack. A young man of about 20 greeted us. '*Chao, Anh*' [Hello, brother],' I said, using the customary way of greeting an older male. After a few moments, the young man asked me, *'Emut'* (youngest sister), tell me, how is mother?' 'She is healthy, thank you,' I replied.

"Suddenly the meaning of the brief exchange struck me. *Emut* is a strictly familial title, a term of endearment between siblings. I became aware of the strange tension in the room, of the silence. Anh Thi looked at me and smiled nervously. He was malnourished and had rough dark skin and blackened teeth, but the similarities between us were undeniable," Germaine recalls. "I had his eyes; I had his smile. I glanced at him from over my glass, afraid to look at what so easily might have been my fate."

Eighteen years earlier Anh Thi, Germaine's older brother, was sleeping over at a friend's home, not knowing that his family would have but 10 minutes to flee the country that night. He was left behind.

"At that moment I realized why I had made the journey back to my homeland. At Middlebury I had prepared myself intellectually to return. But now I was finally confronting the land and people I had left behind. I don't know why I was the one who was able to escape and he wasn't. I'll never know what I lost by not growing up in my homeland," she says, "but I know what I gained living in America—the privilege of an education."

**Rhodes Scholar Germaine Trong met the brother she never knew existed during her junior year of study in Saigon.**

Germaine has made much of her opportunities. While in Vietnam on the School for International Training (SIT) Program, she completed an independent project on family planning, interviewing government officials, medical doctors, and social workers from national to local levels. "The most memorable part of the research," she adds, "was the three weeks I spent going from house to house along the city's backwater canals interviewing 60 women."

In her senior year, Germaine produced an honors thesis in sociology on contemporary U.S. refugee policy, graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and was one of 32 Americans awarded a Rhodes Scholarship. She is now in her third year at Magdalen College, Oxford, where she began studying comparative social research but switched to physiological sciences. She plans to apply to medical school.

Germaine's ultimate goals remain constant. She sees herself working with immigrant and refugee populations in the U.S.: " I remember when my family first arrived as refugees in America. I will never take for granted the kindness people showed us."

Photograph by Erik Borg

**Binh Vo was reunited with his grandmother during his junior year of study in Vietnam. Binh's fluent Vietnamese made him feel right at home.**

## BINH VO '96

"Even though I was only five years old," Binh Vo says, "I can still remember the night we escaped Vietnam vividly." He describes his family's terrifying boat trip—the first step on their journey to the U.S. They left during a tropical storm, "perfect for escape," Binh explains, "because the soldiers weren't expecting anyone to leave." Women and children boarded first, the men carrying the smallest children. Waves pounded the shore and rocked the frail boat. As families stealthily boarded, a baby girl was accidentally dropped by her father and not recovered.

"As we were leaving," Binh says, "the soldiers opened fire. Their boats were easily capable of catching us, but because the storm was so bad they didn't want to risk their lives. They thought we would perish at sea."

Binh, his family, and the others drifted at sea before an American helicopter spotted them. A Norwegian ship picked them up and took them to Singapore.

"We were very lucky not to be attacked by pirates. That was very common," he says.

After three months in a refugee camp in Singapore, they finally found sponsors. By December 1979, they were in the U.S., settling in Denver where they had relatives.

"We lived in the worst part of Denver," Binh explains. "My parents went to the local community college. My brother, sister, and I were often alone and had to take care of ourselves. We got beat up and called names. I struggled in school. I had no clue."

Binh's father, a high school math teacher in Vietnam, began a lawn service business in Denver, and the family's life got better. By fifth grade, Binh's English had improved to the point that he could succeed in school. He qualified for the prestigious International Baccalaureate program at a high school "across town" and applied to Middlebury at the suggestion of a friend. "I came to Middlebury," he says, "because it offered the best financial aid.

"Before college I had lost interest in Vietnam. Then I went to a lecture by Professor Rosenberg, and he sounded so optimistic. He said Vietnam was opening up. So I started reading about Vietnam on the Internet, and I took Asian politics with Professor Rosenberg. Then, I knew I really wanted to go back," he says.

Binh attended the SIT program in the fall of 1994. "I was surprised how comfortable I was right away in Ho Chi Minh City. The first day I walked the city talking to anybody—beggars, cyclo drivers, anybody. I practiced my Vietnamese all the time and eventually could pass for an ordinary Vietnamese." Binh was in Vietnam for both the 20th anniversary celebration of the liberation of the South ("a very big deal") and the normalization of relations with the United States. He was also the focus of a magazine article on American Vietnamese returning to Vietnam.

Binh graduated from Middlebury last May as an international politics and economics major. His goal is to return to Vietnam after training in business and finance in the U.S.

## KARA DELAHUNT '97

The plane carrying Kara Delahunt from Saigon to her new home in the United States left on April 4, 1975. She was a part of Friends of All Children, a program organized in the tense months before the Communist takeover and the American evacuation to provide homes in the U.S. for 2,000 of Saigon's 25,000 orphans. Kara was on the operation's *second* flight. The first plane, a C5A transport, the world's biggest plane at the time, carrying 243 orphans and 62 adults, crashed just after takeoff, killing over 140 of the children. *Time* magazine called the deaths of these babies escaping a war zone "a tragedy of colossal proportions, . . . a ghastly symbol of the unending agony of Vietnam."

"Kara's mother and I were paralyzed," father Bill Delahunt says, recalling the events of that day. "We didn't know if Kara was on that first plane or not. There were delays and delays. Finally the babies were cleared to come to America." He describes the hours before they learned that Kara was on the next plane out as "searingly painful."

Nearly 18 years later, on a college visit to Washington, D.C., Bill took Kara to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. "I went to look up the name of a Middlebury fraternity brother, Rick Rosbeck '61, a helicopter pilot who died in Vietnam." While at the wall, he met a woman who was also paying respects to a friend, an Army nurse who died in the tragic crash of the orphan children. Bill then introduced her to Kara. "It was a poignant moment for all of us," he recalls.

Kara grew up in Quincy, just outside of Boston. "In a way," she says, "I denied my roots. My parents encouraged me to learn about Vietnam, but I was just an American kid. In Quincy, there were lots of Chinese and Vietnamese. We'd meet in the supermarket and they would talk to me in Vietnamese, but I couldn't answer. I felt no connection to the Asian community."

Her perspective began to change when she came to Middlebury. Attending the Pre-Enrollment Program (a three-week academic introduction to the College for students in August before their first year) really helped, Kara says. "It was the most diverse group of people I had ever been around."

Spending last year studying in Spain and Germany for her double major in the two languages also helped. Her travels further stimulated an interest in Vietnam. "I met people from all over the world, Asians and others, who had been to Vietnam. Now I think I'd like to go for a visit. I wonder, 'Do I have family there? Do I look like my brother?'" Her future plans include an M.A. in Spanish, a stint in the Peace Corps, and a career in teaching or international business.

Now, in the 1990s, these Middlebury students again bring Vietnam into our lives. They connect us to a vastly changed Vietnam. From the ashes of war, the bomb craters, and burned huts still so vivid in our recollections of the Vietnam War emerge these avatars of hope. ■

*Karl L. Lindholm, a member of Middlebury's Class of 1967—on campus during the Vietnam War—now serves his alma mater as dean of advising and assistant professor of American literature and civilization.*

**Kara Delahunt was one of the babies airlifted from Saigon just prior to the evacuation in April 1975. She was adopted by Bill ('63) and Katharina Delahunt *(right, with sister Kirstin)*.**