**4.1 Miles**



[Op-Docs](https://www.nytimes.com/column/op-docs)

By DAPHNE MATZIARAKI SEPT. 28, 2016

*Note: This documentary short film won a*[*2016 Peabody Award*](http://www.peabodyawards.com/stories/story/2016-peabody-award-winners-76th-annual-peabody-30)*and*[*was nominated*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/movies/oscars-2017-nominees-ballot.html)*for a 2017 Academy Award.*

When I returned home to Greece last fall to make a film about the refugee crisis, I discovered a situation I had never imagined possible. The turquoise sea that surrounds the beautiful Greek island of Lesbos, just 4.1 miles from the Turkish coast, is these days a deadly gantlet, choked with terrified adults and small children on flimsy, dangerous boats. I had never seen people escaping war before, and neither had the island’s residents. I couldn’t believe there was no support for these families to safely escape whatever conflict had caused them to flee. The scene was haunting.

Regardless of the hardship Greeks have endured from the financial crisis, for a long time my home country has by and large been a peaceful, safe and easy place to live. But now Greece is facing a new crisis, one that threatens to undo years of stability, as we struggle to absorb the thousands of desperate migrants who pour across our borders every day. A peak of nearly 5,000 entered Greece each day last year, mainly fleeing conflicts in the Middle East.

The Greek Coast Guard, especially when I was there, has been completely unprepared to deal with the constant flow of rescues necessary to save refugees from drowning as they attempt to cross to Europe from Turkey. When I was there filming, Lesbos had about 40 local coast guard officers, who before the refugee crisis generally spent their time conducting routine border patrols. Most didn’t have CPR training. Their vessels didn’t have thermal cameras or any equipment necessary for tremendous emergencies.

Suddenly, the crew was charged with keeping the small bit of water they patrolled from becoming a mass grave. Each day, thousands of refugees crossed the water on tiny, dangerous inflatable rafts. Most of the passengers, sometimes including whoever was operating the boat, had never seen the sea. Often a motor would stall and passengers would be stranded for hours, floating tenuously on a cold, volatile sea. Or the bottom of a dinghy would simply tear away and all the passengers would be cast into the water. The coast guard felt completely abandoned, they told me, as if the world had left them to handle a huge humanitarian crisis — or allow thousands to drown offshore.