

Left by the Ship

About the Film



In the 1970s and 1980s, the world was touched by the stories of Amerasian children, the offspring of U.S. military personnel stationed in Asia and the Pacific in the aftermath of World War II, and during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Many of these children were born to impoverished prostitutes who worked on the outskirts of the American military bases, and left behind by their American fathers as soon as their deployment ended.

In 1982, the United States Congress passed the Amerasian Act to allow Amerasian children and their parents from Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, and other Asian countries, to relocate to the United States. One of the exceptions was the Philippines, where the United States military maintained active military bases into the 1990s (Japan was also left out of the legislation). Children of U.S. soldiers and Filipino citizens are not covered by the Amerasian Act — they have to be claimed by their American fathers to be permitted to claim a right to relocate or take advantage of the Child Citizenship Act, which gives citizenship rights to children of American citizens.

Before it closed in 1992, the U.S. Naval Base in Subic Bay was the largest military installation outside the U.S. mainland. For almost 50 years, the base served to repair and resupply ships, and also to house sailors and Marines who were on leave for rest and relaxation. An entire town — Olongapo — went up almost overnight just outside the base after World War II. Catering to the needs and desires of the servicemen was the foundation of the local economy: 15,000 women worked in the bars and clubs in town; Olongapo developed one of the largest red-light districts in all of Asia. Servicemen were often stationed in Subic Bay for long stretches. Local women often served as “wives for rent,” living with the sailors and Marines, bearing children, cooking, cleaning, and effectively functioning as stand-ins for the sailors’ family back home. Many soldiers left without even knowing (or caring) that they had children on the way in Olongapo.

After the fall of the Marcos regime, the Filipino Senate voted to rescind the leases of all U.S. military bases in the country. Subic Bay closed in November of 1992. Multiple charitable organizations concerned about the Olongapo population filed a class-action lawsuit against the United States to include Filipino children of American servicemen in laws governing the immigration and citizenship rights of the children of U.S. service personnel. A federal court ruled that since the children were largely born to unmarried women who worked as prostitutes, and because prostitution is illegal, the claimants had no right to sue.

An estimated 50,000 Amerasians live in the Philippines today. As in other Asian countries, these mixed-race young people (especially kids of African American servicemen) often face discrimination and are ostracized. Some were abandoned as infants, and many are teased for being “illegitimate” children of presumed prostitutes and fathers who abandoned them. They are routinely labelled “Iniwang ng Barko” (left by the ship).

It has been 20 years since the bases closed. What is it like to be a young Amerasian adult in the Philippines today? What kind of future do these young people have, when their socioeconomic opportunities are limited by the bias of Filipinos and the disregard of the American government?

The Filmmakers:



Emma Rossi-Landi, is an Italian American dual citizen. She was born in Rome in 1971, studied the history of cinema at the University of Rome, and then obtained a diploma in filmmaking at the London Film School in 1998. She worked as an editor, directed eight short fiction films, and directed her first documentary in 2001. Her documentary films include *Giuseppe's Journey*, (2001); *Forty Days* (2004); *Veronica's Thread* (2005); *Looking for Eden* (2006); and *La Canzone di Vaccarizzo* (2007).



Alberto Vendemmiati is a graduate of the University of Bologna and of Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. He directed the fiction feature film *Cadabra*, a few short fiction films, and then moved into making documentaries. His films include *Jung (War) in the Land of the Mujaheddin* (2000), co-directed with Fabrizio Lazzaretti, which aired internationally and won numerous awards including the Silver Wolf Award IDFA, the Nestor Almendros Award, the Human Rights Watch International, and the Freedom of Expression Honor by The U.S. National Board of Review; *Afghanistan Collateral Damages* (2002); and *The person De Leo N.* (2005).

Ref.: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/left-by-the-ship/film.html>

Documenting the Children Left Behind by American Soldiers in the Philippines

Posted on **May 22, 2012** by **Brooke Shelby Biggs**



We caught up with Emma Rossi Landi and Alberto Vendemmiati, co-producers and directors of [Left by the Ship](#), which premieres on Independent Lens Thursday, May 24 at 10 PM (check local listings). They talk us through what brought them to the subject, and where the young people featured in the film are now.

What impact do you hope your film will have?

We hope the film will be a step towards correcting the injustice suffered by Filipino Amerasians. There is still a lot that can be done to help Filipino Amerasians even though they are not children anymore. If only U.S. and Filipino authorities would do more to acknowledge their existence, their situations at home would improve, for sure.

What led you to make *Left by the Ship*?

We were fascinated by the Philippines and its culture. We learned about the Amerasians issue through Emma's mother, who is a peace activist and through a family friend, who is very active in the Filipino human rights groups. Being half American herself, Emma has always been compelled to tell the stories of people born between two cultures, as it is part of her personal experience. We were really surprised to find out what

little media attention this topic has had in past years.

What were some of the challenges you faced in making the film?

The Amerasian issue is a very complex one and we had to make a choice between giving all the historical information or concentrating on the personal experiences of the Amerasians we met. By spending time in the Philippines, we discovered that the largest consequences suffered by the Amerasians who were left behind were psychological.



So we decided the most effective way to communicate the depth of the loss these young men and women are suffering would be to document the problems they face in their daily lives. We believe emotional bonding with the subjects in a film can do more in raising consciousness on a issue than a lot of information — facts and figures — which can be found in other media.

One problem that we had to face (not during the filming, but rather later, when promoting the film) is a certain resentfulness and distrust that many Amerasians feel towards people (Americans, Filipinos, activists, journalists, etc.) who are trying to help. This is, I guess, a normal reaction to having been neglected for so long, and it was not at all the case with our main subjects or, in general, with the Amerasians left behind in the Philippines.



How did you gain the trust of the subjects in your film?

Time was the main element. We spent several months living in the Philippines close to our subjects and I think they got to know us and understand what kind of work we were doing and why we were doing it. We made friends. There is always a sort of untold “pact” between the subjects of a documentary and the filmmakers, which is very delicate and must always be respected. We tried not to impose ourselves, but rather to disappear behind the camera and let them decide what they wanted to show. Of course, our common goal was to let the world know about the Amerasian issue. Hopefully, it was an empowering experience for all of us.

What would you have liked to include in your film that didn't make the cut?

We followed several other stories that did not make it into the final cut. We interviewed more than 50 Amerasians, plus several mothers and several women who currently work in the bars, and even a few retired U.S. servicemen who live in the Olongapo area. Several other documentaries could be made there! It was a hard choice to make.

Also the version shown on TV does not include Margarita, who is a second generation Amerasian, an amazing girl who we are very sad to have had to cut out. Fortunately, her story can be seen in the feature-length version of the film

Tell us about a scene in the film that especially moved or resonated with you.

JR's arrival on the island was a very touching moment. It was so amazing to be with him when he realized he

did somehow have a family after all. Also, the relationship between Charlene and her mother was very touching to us. There is such a strong bond between them. It was incredible to see how much these women did to do to raise their children even if they were alone and without regard to the stigma surrounding them.



What has the audience response been so far? Have the people featured in the film seen it, and if so, what did they think?

Audiences are generally very touched by the film, though the most common reaction we get is surprise. Very few people know about the Filipino Amerasian issue and in the U.S. in particular, they find it hard to believe that half-Americans like them are denied birth rights.

The people in the film have seen it several times. As we mentioned earlier, we think it was a healing experience for all of us. It was great to see how being part of the filmmaking helped the subjects with their self-esteem issues. Being part of the film made them special with their peers and that was very important.

What has become of the subjects of the film since shooting wrapped?

JR is now living in Olongapo again after remaining on Cagutsan Island for almost one year. He is now himself a father to a baby boy and is working as a driver for a water company. Charlene is living in the United States and is working in a department store to support her family. She has given birth to her second child (another baby boy) with her American partner. Robert is working as a journalist in Olongapo and living with his family.

Independent filmmaking is a tough one. What keeps you motivated?

Working with untold stories and difficult social issues and getting them out to the world. It is also really good to be able to live with people who are far away from you culturally and see how many things we all have in common. It is very humbling to find out how resilient and optimistic people can be in the face of real hardship. We hope we are able to get that across in our work.

Why did you choose to present your film on public television?

Public TV in the United States is just the perfect medium for our film. We know PBS audiences will be touched by this story. And who knows, maybe some of those men who have kids in the Philippines will try to contact them and make their lives a little better.

What didn't you get done when you were making your film?

The whole production of *Left By The Ship* was a very intense experience for us. We shot the film as a two person-crew so it took all our attention, our resources and most of our time. So we did not get much else done during the three years of making the film. One thing we *did* do is get married in 2010, when we were in the final editing stages of the film.

What are your three favorite films?

Too many mention. Some of the last years documentaries we really liked are *The Interrupters*, *Marathon Boy*, and *Life in a Day*.

What advice do you have for aspiring filmmakers?

Seize the moment, follow your idea, and immerse yourself as much as possible in your story.

What do you eat when you're making an independent film to keep yourself sustained?

Eat the local food, in every sense. And a good glass of wine after filming.

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