

Lagunari bolster Rapid Guardian with elite troops

Story and photos by Spc. Catherine Caruso

BILINCI, Kosovo- The Lagunari's patch told their entire story, if you knew how to read it.

The winged lion of San Marco holds a sword in one paw, a book in the other. According to legend, when the sword is lowered and the book is opened, the Lagunari's home in Venice is at peace, said Sergente Jacopo Bettio. When the book is closed and the sword is raised, the city is at war.

But the Lagunari, an elite unit of the Italian Army, is always ready for war.

"The first thing you need to know is we are Italian Army. Second, we are a NATO ally, and third, we are Lagunari," explained Caporale Maggiore Diego Chavez.

The Lagunari are marine experts on amphibious assaults, infiltration, and reconnaissance. During an interview earlier this month, Chavez spoke on behalf of the platoon, condensing everyone's answers into a single voice.

They pride themselves on being soldiers before everything, he said. They are here to complete their missions to standard. So what each mission happens to be is irrelevant.

In other words, the fact that their platoon had just returned from a search, which uncovered three automatic weapons, ammunition, and several magazines, wasn't a big deal.

"It's normal for us," said Corporale Maggiore Pietro Carlo, who discovered two of the weapons. "It's routine. We've found weapons before. If we find a weapon, that's good. If we don't find a weapon, that's better."

The Lagunari were in Bilinci for Rapid Guardian 03-1, an exercise designed to demonstrate the interoperability of KFOR's multinational brigades, and its ability to rapidly deploy forces throughout the province.

As part of the Spanish Coy or Company, the

Lagunari augmented a group of Spanish mountaineers and for two weeks monitored a Multi-National Brigade (East) sector normally covered by the 2-2 Infantry Battalion.

"We are not here to prove we are better than anybody else," Diego said. "We are not here to show off. We want to be known for our mission – what we do."

While the mountaineers patrolled the hills above the town, the Lagunari searched buildings in the valley below.

Bilinci is a community on the border of the Administrative Boundary Line. It was once a multiethnic community, but now the approximately dozen Serb homes interspersed throughout the predominately Albanian town stand abandoned, a resident told the Lagunari troops.

Caporal Maggiore Carlo Piras uncovered a pair of automatic weapons in a barn. Then Sergente Alessandro



Vicente found a magazine of ammunition in the hay.

A Bilinci resident had initially claimed the crumbling building as part of his property, then recanted when the weapons were found. The barn was on land abandoned by another family during the war, he said.

In a garage, another weapon was found inside a car. A search of the owner's home yielded more magazines, and a handful of bullets was found on a rafter in his barn.

Platoon Chief Marciello Marcello Lupoli said while Bilinci's residents still fear a Yugoslav military offensive across the ABL, his platoon's job was to protect everyone.

"The people of Bilinci understand we are

here for the safety and security of both groups, K-Albanian and K-Serb," he said.

While United Nations and KFOR officials have stressed the way to achieve safety and security in the region is to respect municipal authority and the rule of law, "they still have bad memories of the war," Lupoli said.

According to Bettio, there was another piece to the story of the lion of San Marco. In the legend, the profile of the lion was visible in the shoreline of the Balkan Peninsula, across the Adriatic Sea from the Lagunari's home station in Venice.

For the Lagunari, the lion is always ready for battle. But for today, the Lagunari's mission was to reach across the sea and help bring peace.

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Sergente Alessandro Vicente clears an automatic rifle found during a search of an abandoned barn, Feb. 5. On preceding page, Platoon Chief Marciello Marcello Lupoli patrols in Bilinci.