

## Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Gentian Marku

### Bravo Company Infantryman Returns Home to Albania

By Gunnery Sgt. Mark E. Bradley, 26th MEU (SOC) Public Affairs

ABOARD USS IWO JIMA - When Lance Cpl. Gentian Marku arrived in the U.S. from Albania nearly six years ago, the only English phrases the 14-year-old boy knew were, "Hello, how are you? Fine, thank you. And you?"

Marku recently returned to Albania during the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit's (Special Operations Capable) two-week amphibious landing exercise, ADRIATIC PHIBLEX 3-03. An assistant automatic rifleman in Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, Marku demonstrated his present day English language proficiency by serving as the MEU's principal Albanian linguist.

"I never thought I would come back here as a Marine," Marku said. "It makes me proud to be here and do something for both my countries." Marku's language skills were in high demand during the training exercise. For example, Marku translated for the Marine and Albanian guards manning the gates to the Tirane-Rinas Airfield, the site of the MEU combat operations center, enabling the Marine and Albanian guards to communicate with one another and members of the local populace approaching the gate. By translating Albanian newspaper articles and television broadcasts each day, Marku advised the 26th MEU (SOC) leaders of the local community's support for the Marines' exercise there. Additionally, Marku accompanied and translated for the MEU commander during an official visit with several Albanian military and civilian leaders.

Marku said that watching the surprised reactions of the Albanian citizens and military leaders when they first heard him speak to them in nearly perfect Albanian was one of his most memorable experiences. "I feel that the Albanians have a lot of respect for me for being a U.S. Marine," he said. "I also enjoyed meeting people in town and seeing how things have changed since I left."

In particular, Marku noticed the increased physical presence of the Albanian military. Marku left the former Soviet republic of Albania in the late 1990s, at the height of civil unrest. A government scandal left the already impoverished country bankrupt. The bankruptcy caused widespread unrest and Albanians lashed out at the government and overran military installations, causing the country's government to collapse. Marku said that before he and his family fled Albania in 1997, Albanian military arsenals were looted, leaving the Albanian military presence virtually ineffective.

Marku's path to becoming a Marine began in 1997 when his Albanian father won the U.S. State Department's Diversity Visa Lottery and moved his family to Warren, Mich. This immigration program affords randomly selected foreign applicants, like Marku's family, the opportunity to migrate to the U.S. in search of better opportunities.

Marku said that this welcome opportunity resulted in positive changes in his behavior. As a teenager in Albania, Marku was a troublemaker and was suspended from school for throwing an eraser at a new teacher, he said. Marku recalled the unrest that gripped Albania at that time, and said that as a youth he often did not attend school and chose instead to spend time with his friends.

"Everything changed when I got to the United States," he said. His father enforced stricter rules than Marku had previously been accustomed to. With his limited English skills, Marku initially had difficulty making new friends. "I started studying. I stayed out of trouble and I got my first job as a busboy at a Bob's Big Boy restaurant. I had never worked before in my life," he said.

Marku's father, a former 'first captain' in the Albanian military police, had a favorable impression of the Marines, after having participated in a 1995 Marine training exercise in Albania. Upon learning of his son's interest in U.S. military service, Marku's father recommended that he join the Marine Corps, and his father's recommendation was a significant factor in Marku's decision to join the Marines in April 2002. After completing recruit training and the School of Infantry, Marku joined Bravo Company in August 2002, where he was assigned to Third Platoon.

Six years after leaving Albania via the Tirane-Rinas International Airport, Marku stood at the airport again as he prepared for the challenging two-week training exercise. Although his extended family in Albania had no idea that Marku was coming home, his favorite uncle, Ndue Marku, began to piece together the clues and made his way to the airport to meet his nephew. Ndue explained that his local television news program announced that U.S. Marines were landing in Durres, Albania for a military exercise. When the report indicated that the Marines were from North Carolina, Ndue said that he became very emotional and thought his nephew could possibly be one of the Marines. He was overjoyed when he learned that his hunch was right.

"Six years ago, a kid left Albania and today a man stands before me who is part of the greatest military force in the world," Ndue said. "I am happy he decided to join the Marines. It shows me that he is very proud of the country where he now lives."

The Marku family quickly learned that their Marine was home. During the busy exercise, the Marine Corps provided Marku an opportunity to visit with his entire family at his grandparents' home.

Following the successful exercise in Albania and with the MEU back at sea, Marku rejoined his platoon on the USS Nashville. He is still undecided as to whether he will reenlist in the Marine Corps, he said, and he looks forward to what lies ahead on this deployment. It will be a tough decision whether to stay in or leave the Corps after this first enlistment, Marku said. Marku's future plans include becoming a Warren police officer and possibly getting married, he said with a smile.

Today's Albania is much different than the chaotic one Marku left as a boy. With a growing economy and vast improvements in nearly every area, Albania is "well along the path to full membership" into NATO in the years ahead, said U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld during a recent visit to the Albanian capital. Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell also visited Albania to sign an agreement supporting the admittance of Albania, Macedonia and Croatia into the alliance.

Marku is happy with the MEU and is proud to call himself a Marine. "The best part of being a Marine is the honor associated with it," he said. "There are many out there who would like to call themselves 'Marine,' but few have the courage to try it."

Marku feels blessed to have had the kinds of opportunities that he has had and credits many people for assisting him along the way. Among them, Marku recalls an English teacher who spent countless hours with him at Warren Woods Tower High School and with whom he continues to correspond today.

"When we talk, she still teases me by saying, 'Hello, how are you? Fine, thank you. And you?'" he said.

Since the MEU's exercise in Albania, Marku has rejoined his platoon aboard the USS Nashville as the 26th MEU steams forward on its deployment.



Ndue Marku greets his nephew at Tirane-Rinas Airfield



Lance Cpl Marku translates the daily newspaper in Albania