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SOLDIERS OF V CORPS TASK FORCE HELP GIVE KIDS IN IRAQI VILLAGE A NEW SCHOOL

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TIKRIT, Iraq — In the shadow of the ruins of the ancient Assyrian city of Ashur, beside the Tigris River in northern Iraq, the children of tiny Kassem Village have something special to look forward to as the start of the new school year approaches -

— a brand new school.



SPC ADAM BICE



SALEH TURKI SALEH

TOP: A view of the Ash Sharat school prior to renovation.

BOTTOM: The courtyard of the renovated school.

Soldiers of Task Force 1-7 Field Artillery, part of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, are helping the people of this small community by replacing a nearly 30-year-old thatch and mud brick Othman school with a more modern building.

The original building was built by parents and community members in 1978 with a minimum of locally donated funding and expertise, using what meager materials were readily available -- a thatched

roof and mud bricks made from mud dredged from the Tigris. Without plumbing or electricity, the school was a difficult learning environment for the school's approximately 70 students.

After 30 years of service the building was in a sorry state, but city leaders and Ministry of Education officials were reluctant to dedicate the resources necessary to bring the school up to par. When new desks and furniture were donated to the school system under Operation Pencil Box, community leaders were even hesitant to allocate any for the school since its poor structural condition might fail to protect the furniture from the environment and damage desks badly needed elsewhere.

In the face of so little assistance from local government and the impoverished community, the school's headmaster and sole teacher, Hammada Ahmed Hawad, said he "felt he was alone in his struggle until coalition forces came."

Soldiers who visited the school were impressed with the pupils' politeness and dedication to learning in such a degraded environment, and decided to help.

Sensing the difficulty, Capt. Shannon T. Way, the task force's civil affairs officer, recommended that U.S. forces allocate aid dollars to a project to build a new school. Eager to help once Way got the ball rolling with funding, members of the community pitched in, and a local sheik donated land for the facility. Coalition forces selected a local contractor to build a new school complete with functioning lights, restrooms, air conditioning and heating.

Hammada is perhaps the proudest of the new school. Spc. Adam K. Bice, education specialist for the task force's civil affairs team, visited the school following completion of construction. Hammada brushed aside the traditional Arabic handshake Bice extended to the headmaster, and greeted the specialist instead with an emotional embrace.

In the coming weeks when the children of Kassem Village will return to school, and Task Force 1-7 Soldiers will return, too, to conduct a ribbon cutting ceremony and distribute school supplies donated for the pupils under the division's "Operation I Can" program.

