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V CORPS INFANTRY BATTALION HELPS BRING FIRST ELECTIONS TO IRAQI VILLAGE

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WYNOT, Iraq — Ahmed Mutlok Oda creases his ballot slowly, seemingly worried he will fold it wrong. He starts to place it in the cardboard-and-tape ballot box and then pulls it back, unsure if he's doing it right.

He looks to an interpreter for V Corps' 1st Infantry Division to be sure he's doing it correctly. Reassured, Oda drops the ballot in.

If Oda seems unnecessarily timid, consider that he -- and perhaps no one in this tiny village about 15 miles from Tikrit -- has ever voted before.

But after Oda, another 145 voters representing almost every household in the village cast their ballots.

The September 13 city council elections came after months of work and planning by Soldiers of the division's A Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry.

The strong turnout completed a turnaround in how Wynot residents view the U.S., said A Company commander Capt. David Krzycki.

"This was probably the most anti-coalition town in (our) sector when we first got here," Krzycki said. "Kids and adults were throwing rocks at us and calling us names. But we established a 'knock-and-talk' program, where we'd go to six to eight houses per night. We'd ask people what they needed and what they thought of us. Eventually they realized we're here to make their way of life a little bit better."

Krzycki singled out the efforts of 2nd Lt. Scott Robinson and Sgt. 1st Class Todd Carlsrud in spearheading the election effort. Robinson cited perseverance as the key to bringing democracy to Wynot.

"We ... had meetings once a week and explained what we are trying to do, and why having a city council would be good," Robinson said. "Initially they weren't too favorable, but we explained that with a city council, you could solve your own problems."

Wynot residents elected new leaders to seven positions: director, vice director, city manager, and directors of agriculture, education, transportation and utilities. Krzycki said his company will help the city council get on its feet, but the long-term goal is for the council to be self-sufficient.

Building up to the elections, Soldiers encouraged residents to work together and set goals. One week, for instance, they encouraged everyone to clean their front yards, so the residents could see the benefits of working together.

All the voters were males over 18 years old, but such decisions were left to the Iraqis, explained 1st Lt. Matthew Angliss, a fire support officer. "We didn't want to

impose an American style of democracy on them," he said. "We let them decide how to run it."

The town's first election had some bumpy spots, but they were quickly overcome.

Few residents here have personal identification cards, so company officers relied on common sense and honesty to determine if those who cast ballots were of voting age. Then, just as the sun set, the electricity went out. Soldiers remedied the problem with flashlights and Humvee headlights. Later, residents of another town attempted to vote, but were pointed out by Wynot residents.

A Company Soldiers had previously helped bring city council elections to the nearby town of Owja. Krzycki thinks success there helped bring encourage Wynot residents to vote.

"In Owja, people are happy because they get police patrols through town and they coordinated and funded a city cleanup program," Krzycki said. "And people here can see the effects city councils are having."

"It feels good to vote," Oda said. "A city council will help our community."

