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2 POWs Are Home —For Real

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BILOXI — Two returning prisoners of war were in such good physical condition they were allowed to spend last night with their families rather than in the Keesler Air Force Base hospital as had been scheduled.

Lt. Col. George R. Hall, 42, of Hattiesburg, and Lt. Col. Thomas Curtis, 39, of Alexandria, the first two POWs flown into Keesler, were pronounced in good physical condition after their arrival here last night.

The medical OK climaxed a heart-warming homecoming for the two Air Force pilots who were captured within a week of each other in 1965.

After passing physicals with flying colors, the men were permitted to spend the night with their families who had greeted them earlier in the night.

HALL AND CURTIS are to be joined here tonight by three other returning POWs—Maj. Murphy Neal Jones of Baton Rouge, a former Tulane University football star; Maj. Thomas Collins III of Jackson, Miss., and Lt. Col. Bruce G. Seeber, a native of West Monroe.

Another Louisianian, Army Specialist fourth-class Keith A. Albert of Thibodaux, will be reunited with his family tonight at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

ALTHOUGH THE U.S. Department of Defense is attempting to keep the reunions as "low-key" as possible, a crowd of approximately 200 people stood in the cold last night at a Keesler flight line when the plane carrying Hall and Curtis arrived.

Hall strode to a microphone near the plane, said "thank God we're home," and praised the American people for having faith in the POWs. "We never lost faith in you," he added.

FIVE OTHER Louisiana and Mississippi war prisoners were scheduled to arrive today at various military posts. They are:

Army Spec. 4 Keith Albert of Thibodaux, Brooke Medical Center, San Antonio.

AF Maj. Collins III, Utica, Keesler.

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Glenn H. Daigle, Napoleonville, Memphis Naval Hospital.

AF Maj. Jones, Baton Rouge, Keesler.

AF Lt. Col. Seeber, West Monroe, Keesler.

THE HALL and Curtis families stood shivering and anxious at the front of the welcoming crowd until shortly after 7:30 p.m., when the medical trans-

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port plane carrying their special men taxied up to within a few hundred feet of them.

Keesler's commanding officer, Maj. Gen. Frank Madsen Jr., led the way, escorting both wives to an area beneath the plane's tail, where they stood waiting a few tense moments as baggage was unloaded.

Hall was the first down the short flight of steps, and Curtis soon joined him to make the traditional military salute. Then they lunged toward their wives.

The children and parents of both men raced toward the plane. Clapping and cheering accompanied the chain of embraces.

CURTIS, SMILING and waving his cap, declined to make a statement for the press.

The couple entered a staff car which whisked Curtis to the base hospital, where he will undergo medical examination and debriefing.

Hall, smiling and looking fresh after the long flight from the Philippines, said he had been the junior officer among the returnees through much of the flight and thus had been unable to be a spokesman.

He quoted a fellow officer who he said expressed the feelings of all the POWs: "Thank God we're home!"

Said Hall, "All of us want to thank you — our commander-in-chief, President Nixon, and all of you wonderful, good American people—for never losing faith in us. We never lost faith in you."

IT WAS ALL over—the excitement and the tears of joy (even from some usually hardboiled reporters) by 8 p.m.

Yesterday was a long—but wonderful day for the Hall and Curtis families.

It was particularly exciting for young Steven Hall, whose 10th birthday present was to welcome the father he hadn't seen for eight years.

In an afternoon conference, members of the Hall family talked to the press.

Mrs. Hall said she'd had two calls from her husband since he was freed by the North Vietnamese last Sunday.

"The first was 20 minutes and the next one lasted an hour." What did they talk about? "We covered quite a number of subjects," said she, adding that mostly the conversations centered on news of family and friends.

HALL TOLD his wife his health was good. "The only thing he said he needed was reading glasses," said Mrs. Hall.

Hall's 16-year-old son Robert remained silent and somewhat pensive throughout the brief interview, but when asked about his dad, he said, "He looked the same . . . he sounded a little different . . . but we'll get back and play some golf or something."

Laura Hall, 11, told newsmen: "I only remember him from pictures and slides." She didn't show doubts about it, however. She ran up to put her

arms around her daddy's neck.

She probably took her cue from her mother: "The way he sounded on the phone," said Mrs. Hall Thursday afternoon, "I don't think it will take long at all." She made the statement when asked how long she believed it would take her husband to readjust to freedom.

The Hall family had a long wait for the Thursday night reunion. Twelfth District Judge Stanton Hall, the returnee's father, told reporters, "For 16½ months we thought he was dead." The family had been told Hall was missing in action.

"WE WAITED 4½ years before we ever got a letter from him," the judge added, noting one of the first things his son wanted to know after his release was, "Did you get my Christmas (1972) letter?"

During their stay at Keesler, Hall and Curtis will live in specially decorated rooms opposite each other at the base hospital.

Maj. Pellow told the press corps the operation homecoming team had tried to make the rooms "as homey as possible." The decor includes burnt-orange bedspreads, carpets and individual telephones and television sets. Each man will have his own physician and debriefing officer, Pellow said.

The families of the two men will live in partially vacated bachelor officers' quarters while at the base.

More than just happy families and homey accommodations awaited the former POWs at Keesler Thursday night.

The people they didn't know who stood in the cold to see their arrival brought more than just curiosity. They brought a sense of patriotism and, in many cases, Air Force spirit.

ONE WOMAN, the wife of an Air Force career officer, said she thought the welcome should have been bigger, brighter, with bands. "They gave the men from the moon a big welcome—and I think they (the POWs) did more."

"My husband could be them . . . it could very well be mine," chimed in another Air Force wife. "I've always looked at the military as one big family," said another woman.

All three said they thought it important the POWs know right away—and in a big way—that Americans are glad they're home. Letting them know, they said, would make the returnees see that not all Americans protested the war effort.

One woman, a civil service employee at Keesler, said she came to take pictures of the arrival for herself. Had she heard much talk at the base about the arrival during the past few days?

"People wanted to come," she said. "They were kind of disappointed it was being held down . . . that's the impression I got."

"HELD DOWN" was the woman's way of expressing the stated intention of the Defense Department to keep the reunion returns of the POWs "low-key."

Operation Homecoming, however, has flexibility, said Maj. Pellow. It's designed, he added, to be able "to allow for human nature."

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