

The San Rafael Homecoming

By Larry D. Hatfield

Bill Butler came home yesterday.

In most suburban neighborhoods, the arrival home of one of the local fathers doesn't excite much attention.

But in the Glenwood section of San Rafael yesterday, the homecoming of Bill Butler was a big thing. A very big thing.

It didn't matter to anyone that most of the neighbors had never met him or that, although his family had lived there a long time, Butler himself had not.

What did matter was that Bill Butler had finally come home and, as one tearful woman put it, "Oh God, it took a long, long time."

Captain Butler is one of the more than 400 American prisoners of war who have been released since the Vietnamese ceasefire agreement was reached in Paris.

He came home to Marin County after spending a week at the David Grant Medical Center at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, for treatment of his eyes and an improperly healed foot.

It was a perfect spring day, and a casting director could not have improved the scene. The hero was handsome and humble. His wife, Julie, was radiant and beautiful. Their kids, Peter, 6, and Sheila, 5, were unusually precocious.

And there were Cub Scouts and flags and police sirens and tearful matrons and bagpipes and champagne and an extraordinary assortment of dogs, children, cameras and bicycles.

Virtually every house in the quiet middleclass neighborhood on the Bay side of San Rafael sported an American flag or a hand-made welcoming sign.

Smiling and waving, Butler rode on the back of a yellow convertible on a slow

40-minute ride to his family's comfortable home.

Sheila, whom he had seen for the first time when he arrived at Travis last week, and Peter, an infant when Butler's fighter plane was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967, rode beside him, waving and yelling to the crowd.

Julie Butler, one of the best known POW wives because of her unyielding efforts to get the POWs released, carried flowers and

rode in the front seat most of the way. She climbed up with her husband just before they arrived in front of their house where a crowd of more than 2000 cheered.

Love and Freedom

There Butler climbed atop a wooden rail to speak to the crowd. He told them there are two words that are household words in America, "but have a special meaning to a person being where I have been . . . Those words are 'love and

freedom.'"

He never really knew love fully until he had experienced hatred and had thought little of freedom until he lost his, Butler said.

"The words 'thank you' can never explain what I feel at this time. It has been difficult where we have been but we have served you proudly."

The captain, now on convalescent leave, cut a red, white and blue-trimmed cake, sipped champagne and

mingled with well-wishers.

At one point, he stopped to applaud a group of guitar-playing youngsters from St. Raphael's Church.

Butler told him that he, too, played the guitar, but when it was suggested he join them he said, "I'm afraid you're out of my league."

Mrs. Butler said she and her husband plan to take a vacation soon, "but we're going to go to Disneyland with the kids first. That's our primary concern now, his getting to know the kids.

A similar celebration is scheduled in Santa Clara today for another returned POW, Navy Lt. Comdr. Everett Alvarez Jr. There will be a parade starting at 1 p.m. followed by a massive thanksgiving at the University of Santa Clara Mission church at 5:30 p.m., then a banquet at the University's Benson Memorial Center at 7:30 p.m.



In San Rafael yesterday they knew he was coming and they baked a cake — for Bill Butler, returned POW, that is. Even had a motorcade for all the family

—Examiner photos by Walt Lynott

