

# Porterville Honors Its Back-From-Dead



Porterville goes all out to welcome Lt. Gary Thornton, ex-POW

—Examiner photo by Walt Lynott

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**PORTERVILLE** (Tulare County) — Flag and country are big things in this little orange and cotton town hard by the High Sierra.

Twenty-six men died in Vietnam from the Porterville area, more than from any American town its size. And it has always been that way.

In the four preceeding wars, Porterville, with a population of only 12,602, has lost 133 men and women. Their names are on a marble tablet outside the City Auditorium.

On Friday, Porterville got a chance to honor one native son who, almost literally, came back from the dead.

### Returning Hero

It was a show strongly reminiscent of Long Ago Fours of July and Armistice Days throughout small-town America — everything was there, from the returning hero to his former Latin teacher, who remembered him as "a fine boy who always had a good twinkle in his eyes."

Navy Lt. (j.g.) Gary L. Thornton, now 31, was radar man on a F4B Phantom jet shot down over North Vietnam Feb. 20, 1967. Other American fliers saw no parachutes, and it was assumed all aboard were lost.

His parents were notified that he had been killed in action, and he was carried on Pentagon files as KIA for the next three years. Then North Vietnam listed him as a prisoner of war and last month he was among the nearly 600 American POWs who returned.

### Escorted to School

Friday's celebration started with Lt. Thornton, now on convalescent leave from Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland, being escorted to his old grade school. The caravan was led by a siren-ing police car and contained several carloads of American Legion and VFW veterans.

At the school, he was introduced in the gymnasium, sung to by a girls' chorus, played to by a band and given a plaque saying, in essence, welcome home. Some of his old teachers were introduced from the crowd. ("Raise your cane, Mabel," the master of ceremonies said to one) and the lieutenant quietly thanked the crowd and was whisked off to the next event.

On the steps of City Hall the longest speech of the day was heard. It came from Mayor Lawrence Cotta, who said of Thornton, "Gary is the living representative . . . of the young men Port-

erville was proud to send to war. Many were lucky enough to come home, but 26 gave their lives in the service to their country."

### Porterville Proud

Cotta said only history would tell whether the United States should have been there, but he repeated that as long as the U.S. was there, he and other Porterville residents were proud to do their part.

Thornton was given the symbolic key to the city and

## Gold Star

## Tulare Town

## Grateful

Cotta proclaimed Gary L. Thornton Day. A group of 1st and 2nd graders gave him a paper flag they had made.

### Latin Teacher

Then it was off to another alma mater — Porterville High School — where the award-winning school band in which he used to play trumpet played "Anchors Aweigh" and brought tears to his eyes with the National Anthem.

# POW

☆☆☆ Section A Page 3

April 8, 1973

S. F. Sunday Examiner  
& Chronicle

It was there that, even as the scriptwriter would surely have it, his old Latin teacher was the one to reminisce about Gary Thornton, the student, and to welcome back Gary Thornton, the hero.

Minerva Gay recalled him as a polite, respectful, well-liked boy who always did his lessons on time. He also wrote in a very neat hand, the Latin teacher said in the precise way one expects from former Latin teachers, "always in ink, sometimes in black ink."

Then Thornton spoke.

"I very definitely do not deserve this kindness you have shown me," he told the cheering and whistling students, some of whom had participated in this town's few antiwar demonstrations. "I — all of us (former POWs) — served our country the way we thought best . . . in the defense of freedom."

## Scene Repeated

He was given a pen set, a lifetime pass to high school events and recordings by the band.

The scene was repeated at the town's other high school, Monache, where once again Mayor Cotta spoke. Miss Porterville and the Veterans Day junior Queen were introduced along with Thorn-

ton's parents and 11 year old daughter Desti.

He got another plaque, heard "Anchors Aweigh" and "The Navy Hymn" and told the students, "Remember this great country and what it stands for. And serve it with faith."

It almost seemed untoward then to subject Thornton to a press conference where reporters would ask hard questions. And as a matter of fact, there were only a few hard questions, and he didn't answer most of them, preferring instead a "no comment."

## Was Tortured

He was, he said, tortured, but not as much as others. Like others before him, he said the diet was poor and meager.

On antiwar activities: "I personally feel the protesters did us, the POWs, a disservice. They made our stay more miserable than it might have been."

Would he do it again? "In the cause of freedom, I certainly would."

Who won the war? "I haven't examined the political and military situation."

The questioning over, Lt. Thornton returned to the role of the homecoming hero and was the star of a big banquet Friday night. The banquet was a sellout.