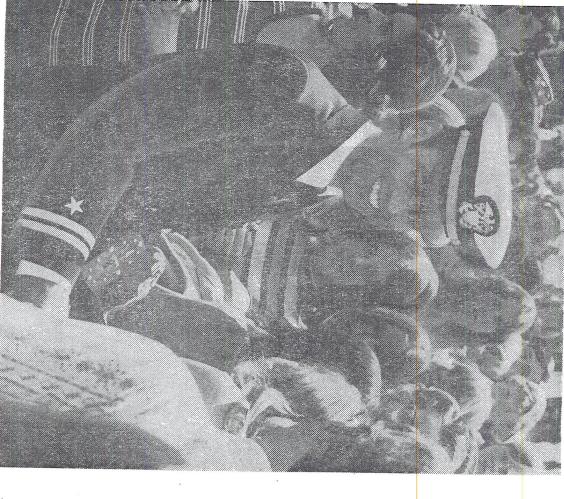
# Porterville Honors Its Back-From-Dead



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

—Examiner photo by Walt Lynott

By Larry D. Hatfield Examiner News Staff

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

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

who returned.

wars, Porterville, with a population of only 12,602, has Auditorium. ble tablet outside the City lost 133 men and women. l'heir names are on a mar-In the four preceeding

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

# Returning Hero

teacher, who remembered him as "a fine boy who always had a good twinkle in It was a show strongly reminiscent of long-ago his eyes." was there, from the returnstice Days throughout smalling hero to his former Latin Fourths of July and Armitown America — everything

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

month he was among the nearly 600 American POWs

# Escorted to School

several carloads of Americaravan was led by a sirenans. can Legion and VFW veter-Convalescent leave from Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in ed with Lt. Thornton, now on his old grade school. The ing police car and contained Oakland, being escorted to Friday's celebration start-

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

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

a prisoner of war and last on Pentagon files as KIA for the next three years. Then action, and he was carried North Vietnam listed him as that he had been killed in His parents were notified erville was proud to send to enough to come home, but 26 war. Many were lucky ice to their country." gave their lives in the serv-

# Porterville Proud

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

Thornton was given the symbolic key to the city and

Tulare Town Gold Star Grateful

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

## Latin Teacher

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

## POW

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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 miser able 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.