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**American POWs Released from Russian-Controlled Captivity Reunite with Family, Begin Recovery**

Alexander “Alex” Drueke and Andy Huynh, Americans who served in the Ukrainian Army and were held captive by Russian-backed forces, arrived in Alabama September 24, 2022. They were among the ten foreign nationals included in the Saudi-mediated prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine.

After receiving medical clearance in Saudi Arabia to travel, the men’s families arranged for them to fly commercially from Riyadh to New York City and then on to their home state, arriving at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport shortly after Noon on Saturday. Drueke’s mother, Lois “Bunny” Drueke, and Huynh’s fiancée, Joy Black, met them in New York and accompanied them on the last leg of their journey.

“The men are in excellent spirits,” Dianna Shaw, spokesperson for both men, said. “Now our immediate focus is on their physical health. First up will be thorough evaluations by medical professionals who understand the conditions they endured,” Shaw said. “Right after that will be necessary interviews by government officials of Ukraine and the U.S. to document their treatment while in captivity,” she added.

“I’m so happy to have Andy back, and I’m also proud of him,” Miss Black said. “He did what he had to do to stay alive and come home to me,” she said.

“Knowing people were praying for us and thinking of us, that’s what got us through,” Huynh said. “We were made to say some things under duress for Russian media, but we just kept telling ourselves that anyone who knows us would understand that wasn’t us,” he said. “I have no regrets about going,” he added.

“Even though they were captured pretty early in their service, I think they helped draw worldwide attention to the war and really personalize it for a lot of Americans,” Miss Black said. “So they helped Ukraine in a whole different way than they set out to do,” she said.

“I just want to thank everyone who helped secure our freedom,” Drueke said. “Of course, that means all parties involved in the negotiations, President Zelensky, Ambassador Markarova and team, and U.S. Secretary of State Blinken and team,” he said.

“But it also means everyone who took some action no matter how small. Whether you called your congresspeople, told a neighbor about us, prayed for us, whatever you did, you helped make this possible,” Drueke said.

“I woke up this morning to the sight and sound of my boy home,” Mrs. Drueke said Sunday. “That is the definition of happiness,” she said.

After arriving at the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport on Saturday, the men and a few family members went to a small local pub to relax, reconnect, and discuss immediate plans.

“Andy and Alex are so close now, we didn’t want their parting to be sudden,” Darla Black, Miss Black’s mother, said. “They were separated from the UK POWs abruptly in Saudi Arabia, and didn’t get to say a proper goodbye, so we wanted to give them a chance to part on their own terms. And it did take them about two hours to be ready for that,” Ms. Black said. (Photo attached)

Huynh’s first requests were for his favorite fast food and a haircut so he could look presentable when he attended church with Miss Black on Sunday. (Photo attached)

Drueke’s first requests were for a beer and to reunite with his dog, Diesel, a 100-pound part-Mastiff rescue. (Photo attached)

“Alex and Andy will be speaking more about their experiences in the coming days, but there is a limit to what they will be able to tell right now,” Shaw said. “Their concern is for the security of the Ukrainian military as the massive counter-offensive continues, and for the safety of their buddies who are still fighting and the hundreds of Ukrainian POWs in Russian captivity,” she said.

“Our families will continue to advocate for support for Ukraine,” Shaw said. “Ukraine needs all democracies to come together to aid them in this stand against Putin’s aggression. If the democracy of Ukraine falls to Russian dictatorship, then free Europe is in peril, and the United States could be too,” she said.

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Photo credits:

All photos in which Alex appears: Dianna Shaw

Joy and Andy: Darla Black