The Taliban killed my best friend

by Joe Lapp
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Or maybe it wasn't them. Honestly, they don't even seem to know themselves.

Glen Lapp, my cousin and best friend, should have come home from Afghanistan to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in mid-October. That was when his two year tour of duty with the Mennonite Central Committee – a humanitarian organization focusing on peace and justice work – was supposed to be complete.

Instead, someone shot him in the head, along with nine of his friends, medical workers killed in the north of Afghanistan in early August. Returning from an expedition to provide eye care and other medical services to villages in Nuristan, one of the most remote corners of the country, they were waylaid and executed.

The Taliban's official spokesman rushed to claim responsibility for the killings, but local commanders rejected this as a lie. They spoke out against the murders and offered condolence to the families of those killed. We still don't know who decided that the lives of Glen and his companions – a mix of foreigners and Afghans, men and women – should be taken.

My cousin was a compassionate humanitarian and adventurer. He was not a diplomat, whisked around in a sleek SUV, ripe for kidnapping. He was not a soldier, staring down combatants and civilians alike through the barrel of a gun, jittery with combat.

Instead, he walked and rode his bicycle around his Kabul neighborhood, stopping often to speak with children on the street. He learned Dari – the local language – and grew a beard. When he put on Afghan clothes he was easily mistaken for a local. His work with the International Assistance Mission's mobile eye camps helped thousands of Afghans in remote villages who otherwise had little access to eye or other medical care.

Already known for an adventurous spirit and a willingness to help others, Glen was excited about being in Afghanistan and about his humanitarian work there.

By the time he landed in Afghanistan in the fall of 2008 he had trekked extensively in Nepal, lived at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, summited Mount Rainier, and climbed a series of mountains in Chile with famed adventurer Phil Buck.

In Afghanistan, insecurity and the threat of violence curtailed Glen's adventurous instinct. But still, where some foreign workers see little except the inside of their home and office compounds, he chose a much deeper experience of the country.

When Kabul was quiet, Glen and a group of trusty friends often hiked the hills in safe areas around the city. He tried hard to do a mountain biking trip in the Wakhan corridor in the northeast of the country, a more peaceful region where his friend David James founded the organization Mountain Unity to promote trekking and climbing. When that didn't work, he went instead to Afghanistan's central highlands, another relatively safe region. Friend Andy Burton remembers riding with Glen as "some of the best mountain biking I have done in my life."

But his compassion was what set Glen apart.

As a volleyball player in college, Glen was a setter, consistently delivering the ball for others to get spiking glory. Later, as a nurse, patients and co-workers learned to rely on his quiet, caring nature. Even on his adventures his kindness came through: a less-prepared friend suddenly wearing Glen's own jacket on a cold hike up a volcano in El Salvador, a less-in-shape cousin (myself) grateful for his wind-blocking lead as we pedaled from Pennsylvania into the Midwest on a ride across America (Glen's second crossing by bicycle).

Glen's choice to get a more up-close experience of Afghanistan meant that many there came to know his compassionate nature as well. He traveled to several provinces in the country managing mobile eye camps that served over 60,000 Afghans last year. His supervisor David told how Glen, loathe to close a problematic clinic site, gave administrators one more chance when David's own patience had worn out. The local staff in the compound where Glen lived called him simply "brother."

During a recent visit to Kabul, I heard an Afghan co-worker describe his apprehension when he took Glen to participate in a local volleyball game, afraid Glen's foreigner status would attract unwanted attention. But Glen dressed up in

a *shalwar kameez* – the local loose-fitting shirt and pants – and with his dark skin, beard, and ability with Dari was never recognized as an outsider.

There was no good reason for anyone to want to take such a dedicated worker and sensitive adventurer away from a country that needed his abilities – and those of his nine other friends – so much.

In fact, these killings ran contrary to the hospitality deeply embedded in Afghan culture. This tradition is epitomized by the constant offer of a cup of tea, a gesture well-known from the recent bestseller outlining Greg Mortensen's work in Pakistan. For most Afghans, the welcome and protection of guests is a serious business. To those who hosted Glen and his friends during their humanitarian journey, this killing is an outrage.

Afghanistan has had its fill, now, of violence and executions. It has had its quota of armies, bombs, and drone attacks. It needs more people willing to live compassion.

For Glen and for his friends, the hardships of life in a country at war were much less than the soldier's daily risk of being shot and killed on patrol or in battle. And yet they, too, chose to leave the relative safety of their compounds in Kabul and take a calculated risk to carry out vital humanitarian work, a chance that proved fatal.

In June, Glen wrote to me that his upcoming trip to Nuristan – three days of driving then three days of hiking over a 16,000 foot pass to reach an isolated valley – "would amount to a trip of a lifetime for many." And for him, unaccountably, it did.

As a friend and a cousin, I mourn. As an advocate of peace, I can only applaud.