

He was a baby on 9/11. Now he's one of the last casualties of America's longest war.

By Jack Healy and Dave Philipps

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After Lance Cpl. Rylee McCollum, 20, landed in Afghanistan with his Marine unit, his father, Jim, began checking his phone for a little green dot. Mr. McCollum had not been able to talk with his son, but the green dot next to Rylee's name on a messaging app meant that he was online. That he was still OK.

When news came that a suicide bomber killed 13 American service members outside the airport in Kabul on Thursday, Mr. McCollum checked again for the dot. His son was on his first overseas deployment, had gotten married recently, and was about to become a father. Mr. McCollum messaged his son: "Hey man, you good?"

But the green dot was gone.

"In my heart yesterday afternoon, I knew," Mr. McCollum said.

On Friday, Lance Corporal McCollum became one of the first American victims to be publicly identified in the attack that also killed at least 170 Afghans. It was the highest U.S. death toll in a single incident in Afghanistan in 10 years. His death was confirmed by his father and by the governor of Wyoming, Mark Gordon.

While the Department of Defense has not released an official accounting of the victims, their names began to emerge on Friday. They appeared in social media posts from family and friends and somber announcements from the high schools where the young men had played football or wrestled just a few years earlier.

Some of them, like Lance Corporal McCollum, who was born in February 2001, were still babies when the United States invaded Afghanistan. Others were not yet born. Now, they are among the last casualties of America's longest war.



People outside of the airport in Kabul, after the explosion on Thursday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Lance Corporal McCollum's unit had deployed from Jordan to Afghanistan to provide security and help with evacuations, his father said in a phone interview on Friday. He had been guarding a checkpoint when the explosion tore through the main gate where thousands of civilians have been clamoring to escape the country's new Taliban rulers.

"He was a beautiful soul," Mr. McCollum said from his home in Wyoming.

Mr. McCollum's fears for his son's fate were confirmed when two Marines knocked on the door of the family's home at 3:30 a.m. to deliver the news. Mr. McCollum said becoming a Marine had been his son's dream ever since he was 3 years old.

That night other families in communities large and small were getting the same grim news.

In one small northern Ohio community where Maxton Soviak grew up playing football, his death left a "Maxton-sized hole" in the lives of the people who loved him, his sister Marilyn wrote in an Instagram post.

Mr. Soviak served as a Navy medic when he was killed, according to a statement from the Edison Local School District announcing his death. Mr. Soviak graduated from Edison High School in 2017, the district said.

"Everybody looked to Max in tough situations," said Jim Hall, his high school football coach, who described Mr. Soviak as a deeply loyal friend. "He was energetic. He wore his emotions on his sleeve. He was a passionate kid. He didn't hold anything back."

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Mr. Soviak's social media profile showed an exuberant young man charging into the world — diving off a rocky precipice, rock-climbing, hiking the Grand Canyon. "If the world was coming to an end, I don't wanna close my eyes without feeling like I lived," he wrote in one post.

On Friday, Mr. Hall's phone rang with people calling to mourn and share memories, and one image of Mr. Soviak kept returning to Mr. Hall's mind. It was from a snowy regional playoff game a few years ago in which Mr. Soviak helped sack a quarterback to win the game.

Mr. Hall remembered watching Mr. Soviak celebrate on the field, exultant, snow swirling around him.

At least two of the slain service members were from California. They were identified by local law enforcement and a U.S. congressman as Hunter Lopez, 22, a Marine who is the son of two officers of the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, and Marine Lance Cpl. Kareem Nikoui, a young martial arts champion from Norco, according to his social media accounts.



Hunter Lopez
Riverside County Sheriff's Department, via Facebook

On Friday, Kareem Nikoui's mother, Shana Chappell, posted a photo on her Instagram account of her son with a broad smile, cradling his rifle amid the crowds of civilians and razor wire at the gate of the airport in Kabul. "This is the last picture my son sent me of himself. It was taken on Sunday. I know i am still in shock right now. I felt my soul leave my body as i was screaming that it can't be true! No mother, no parent should ever have to hear that their child is gone," she wrote in the post.

Some of the dead were assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment based at Camp Pendleton, Calif. On Thursday evening, as many families were being notified, the Marine base held a candlelight vigil.

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Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Lance Corporal McCollum loved the mountains where he grew up but could not wait to join the Marines, his father said. Since he was a boy, he could not stand injustice and would stand up for bullied classmates. So on his 18th birthday, he called his father from his school in Jackson Hole to ask him to come sign his enlistment papers.

“He wanted to get in there as quickly as he could,” Mr. McCollum said.

Mr. McCollum said his son had been deeply patriotic and had, from a young age, loved going to Fourth of July and Memorial Day parades and learning about the ceremonies surrounding the American flag. He was a successful wrestler who graduated in 2019, school officials said.

“He’s the most patriotic kid you could find,” Mr. McCollum said. “Loved America, loved the military. Tough as nails with a heart of gold.”



Flowers along the entrance sign at Camp Pendleton in Oceanside, Calif., on Thursday. Some of the dead were assigned to the Camp's 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment. Sandy Huffaker/Getty Images

Regi Stone, a pastor whose son, Eli, was one of Lance Corporal McCollum’s best friends, described him as fiercely devoted. The two young men always had each other’s backs, he said, whether it was at bonfire parties in the Wyoming woods or in their decision to enlist in the Marines at about the same time.

“He wouldn’t back down from anything,” Mr. Stone said.

Mr. McCollum said it was wrenching to watch the chaos unfolding in Afghanistan after so many years of American military occupation and so many deaths.

“It kills me and pains me that we spent 20 years there, and all the lives that were lost there, including my son’s. And we’re back to square one,” he said.

He said he found some comfort in the fact that his son had died helping people — “doing good things,” as Lance Corporal McCollum put it.

“I couldn’t be more proud of him,” his father said. “He’s a hero.”

Sheelagh McNeill and Alain Delaquerière contributed research.