

EXCLUSIVE: A powerfully moving interview with the fiancé of the

by **Heidi Kingstone** IN AFGHANISTAN
and **Jo Macfarlane** IN LONDON

AS HE came up the escalator at London's Shepherd's Bush Tube station, Mark 'Paddy' Smith's mobile phone beeped. The former Army captain smiled as the screen showed he had received a text message from his fiancée, Dr Karen Woo, who was on a medical expedition in a dangerous and remote northern region of Afghanistan.

Karen, 36, a former London hospital surgeon, had promised to contact him regularly to assure him all was well and to let him know the team's precise location in the lawless region where she was delivering medical aid.

As he opened the message and read her words, he was filled with happiness and a lump formed in his throat. Karen had sent him the vows she had written for their wedding, penned during her arduous trek, which had been inspired by loving words he had said to her.

They read: 'I love you for the person you are/I accept your strengths and your weaknesses equally. I hope as a team we will share many happy times/May our life together always be blessed.'

But days later, and just two weeks before their planned wedding, Karen was dead, murdered by gunmen when her medical team was ambushed on their way back to the Afghan capital, Kabul. It was the worst

She wrote her own wedding vows and sent them in a text

attack on aid workers in the region for 30 years but the events of that day – and what prompted them – remain unclear. Her team of ten were confronted by gunmen who robbed them of passports and belongings before executing them one by one. Their abandoned bodies were found on August 6 beside their bullet-ridden vehicles.

The Taliban initially claimed responsibility for the attack and said the foreigners had been killed because they were 'American spies and Christian missionaries'.

But in the days that followed the appalling deaths, Karen's family and friends insisted hers was a mission which had no political or religious agenda and was motivated only by a desire to help others.

It is a loss which has been felt most keenly by 36-year-old Paddy, the man Karen fell in love with during a five-month romance in the war-torn country.

The couple met on November 10, 2009, at Kabul airfield as Karen flew back to her job with RMSI, a company which carries out medical evacuations and provides medical services to the expat community in the Afghan capital.

The doctor from Stevenage had left a lucrative job as a medical director at private medical insurance firm BUPA, and a string of surgical posts, after becoming captivated by Afghanistan during a previous visit.

Her career had been impressive, but also unconventional. She had left school at 16 against her parents' wishes to train as a dancer in London, and went to college aged 21 to gain qualifications to secure a place at medical school. Medicine had become her passion, although she had become disillusioned with the NHS.

Northern Ireland-born Paddy, a Sandhurst graduate who quit as a captain in the Royal Engineers in 2001, was in Afghanistan carrying out security assessments for a charity called International Relief & Development [IRD]. He had touched down at the air base after returning from Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in the north of the country.

From another car, Paddy heard Karen's British accent as she tried to hail a taxi and, with characteristic chivalry, helped her with her bags and offered her a lift. Here, in

his first in-depth interview about Karen, Paddy recalls how they felt an instant rapport – and how he soon became captivated by her. Speaking from Afghanistan – the country they were both so passionate about – he said: 'In ten minutes Karen told me all the pitfalls of BUPA and the NHS. I told her all about my family. She was very chatty and easy to talk to and we got on like a house on fire.'

'She made an impression. When I spoke to my mum, I said I'd bumped into a very strong candidate for the position of FMS – Future Mrs Smith.'

The pair met again by chance months later, in March this year during Karen's second trip to the

'I told my mum I'd met the future Mrs Smith'

country, when Paddy visited RMSI to be treated for flu. They went to a St Patrick's Day party together and began seeing each other regularly, eating dinners at Kabul's French and Italian restaurants and conducting lengthy conversations about their pasts. However, despite an obvious connection, both were wary of developing what they called 'Kabul locked-in syndrome'.

He explained: 'A big problem is that you can get wrapped up in the moment. With the backdrop of danger and heightened emotions you can see relationships through rose-tinted glasses.' But just three weeks



into their friendship, Paddy dropped Karen outside the RMSI house where she lived, and kissed her goodnight on the cheek.

He recalled: 'It became a proper kiss. It all developed very naturally, and didn't require any effort.'

'We agreed on many things, including a love of children's television programmes like Mr Benn and Bagpuss. We would spend hours on YouTube looking at these shows and challenge each other to quizzes.'

'I knew what she was thinking – sometimes we didn't need to speak, although Karen was rarely silent. There was a completeness when we met. She didn't have a cynical bone in her body, and I have many in mine. She rejoiced in the human spirit, and always expected the best

of everyone but was very down-to-earth. I told her early on I thought she would make a great wife and mother. I told her, "I would marry you in a heartbeat".'

They moved into a flat together in Kabul. Paddy said that Karen, the eldest of three children, wanted to have two babies and adopt a third. In preparation, he bought Karen three plastic parrots which they put in their bedroom and referred to as 'the children'.

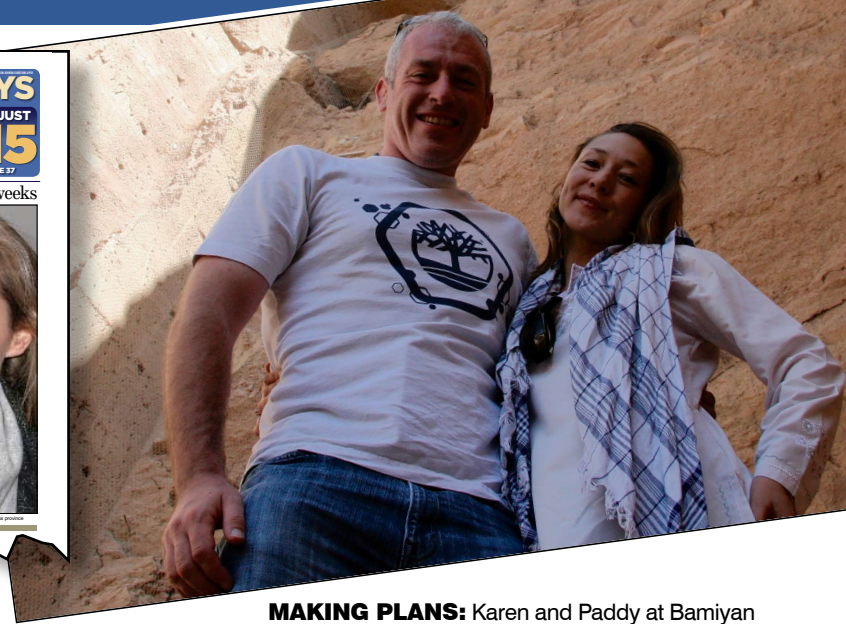
'Karen would tease me and say, "The children are squawking". She thought the weirdest things were romantic. She said one of the rea-

sons she fell in love with me was because of my reversing ability in the car, but the week before I had reversed into a hedge. She also liked a man who could dig a trench.'

'In turn, I was impressed that she had a poncho that turned into a ground sheet. She was this odd contrast – she had this tremendously feminine side, she loved shoes and clothes and they were everywhere in the flat, but when it came to holidays, she liked digging holes, walking through the forest in the rain and had a passion for kit.'

She also loved animals and insisted on keeping dog food in Paddy's car

I wear Karen's wedding ring on a piece of string around my neck. In my heart I am married to her

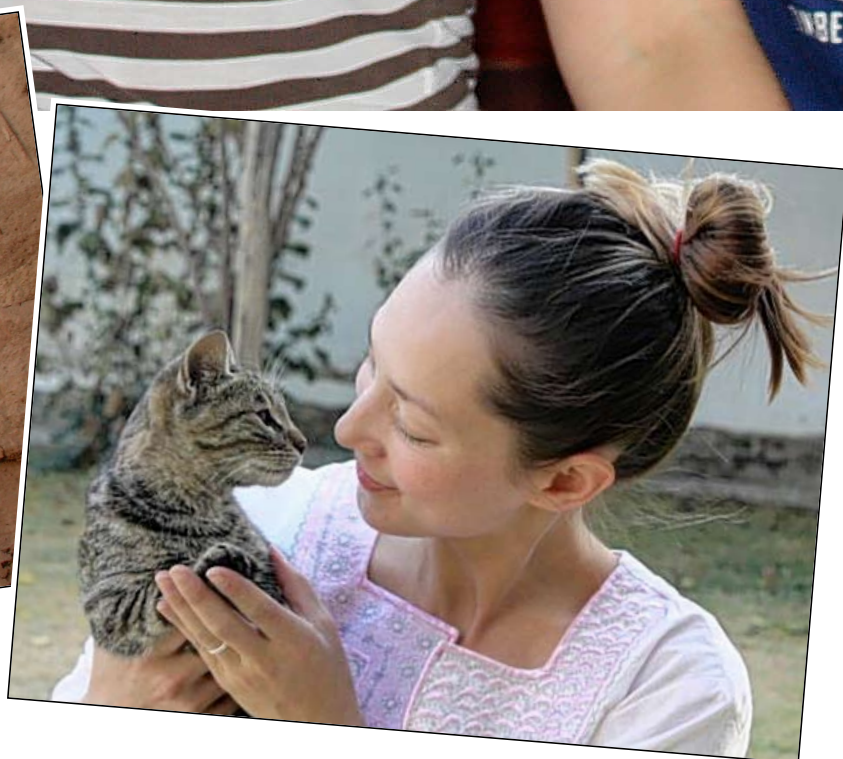


MAKING PLANS: Karen and Paddy at Bamiyan in Afghanistan days before her murder. Left: How The Mail on Sunday reported the tragedy and, right, a snap from animal lover Karen's Facebook page

doctor shot dead in Afghanistan two weeks before their wedding



TORN APART: The couple pose happily for a snap during their visit to Moscow's Cat Circus



to allow her to feed strays. And she loved adventure. She had learned to scuba dive and wing-walk on planes and told Paddy that she had once harboured a desire to become a stunt woman. She also said that she was desperate to visit the Cat Circus in Moscow, a show featuring a performing troupe of cats trained in acrobatics.

On a visit to London in May they picked up Russian visas to make the trip. But Karen made a detour. Paddy said: 'On the way back from the consulate we took a cab and suddenly Karen asked the driver if we could go to Hatton Garden, the jew-

ellery quarter. The next thing I knew we were in a shop, buying two platinum bands. That is how we got engaged. Karen said, "I can't believe we've just done that," with a big smile on her face and we hugged.'

But Paddy was one step ahead. During the shopping trip, Karen had spotted a pair of sapphire and diamond earrings which she fell in love with and Paddy secretly decided they would make the perfect engagement gift. He said: 'I arranged to buy them and convert one into a ring. She was so delicate it would have been perfect.' From London, the couple went to Moscow, attend-

ing two performances at the Cat Circus and two at the Bolshoi Ballet, and then flew back to Kabul.

Karen was preparing to join the trek to the remote region of Nuristan in Northern Afghanistan. After that, she wanted to return to Britain for a family holiday at Cheddar Gorge in Somerset, before getting married in London on August 20.

Before she left for Nuristan, the pair took a romantic trip together to Bamiyan, in the centre of Afghanistan, a mystical site where huge Buddhas were once carved into the rock, although they were destroyed

'We wanted a farm with dogs, cats and kids'

by the Taliban in 2001. 'It is amazingly beautiful. Karen wasn't religious but she was spiritual,' Paddy said. 'We stood there for half an hour, arm-in-arm, talking about our plan. I think that was the most romantic moment we had.'

'We decided I was going to work in the national parks in England, and we would have a farm with a stream and a water mill, with dogs and cats and geese and kids. We planned to live happily ever after.'

Karen left for her trek on July 21. She texted morning and evening by satellite phone to give Paddy their co-ordinates and let him know all was well. While she was away, the white satin wedding dress she had secretly ordered arrived at

their flat. It was a week later when Paddy was in London for a colleague's funeral that Karen texted him her vows. 'I felt immense joy at that. I imagined her trekking, with a lot of time to think. It made me smile thinking of her, thinking of me and of us.'

A couple of days later, on July 31, Karen called Paddy as he drove through the countryside near Swindon. He recalled: 'Karen was in good spirits. It was raining and cold, but she said it was a brilliant experience and the team had been well-received. She said she felt safe. We discussed the vows and how happy we were. I decided to surprise her when she got back and get down on bended knee to propose properly.'

On Wednesday August 4, Paddy returned to Kabul and texted Karen to say he was happy to be closer to her again. She replied they would see each other again in three days.

But that was the last Paddy would ever hear from her.

The following day he wasn't worried when Karen's usual text messages didn't come through. On the Thursday evening when he still hadn't heard from her he topped up the account for her satellite phone in case her credit had run out.

By Friday lunchtime he was worried enough to report his concerns to the British Embassy in Kabul. Soon after that, chilling reports started to filter through about people being killed in the area. There were no reports of survivors. Paddy said: 'I called Karen's mum in the UK and told her what I suspected, and to prepare for the worst. I've been in

this place too long to think there might have been a miracle, that it might have been another group.'

Confirmation of Karen's death came on Friday night. When the bodies were returned to Kabul, he went to see Karen. 'I kissed her on the forehead. I needed to know whether she'd been through an ordeal before she'd died. Fortunately she'd been spared that.'

Karen's body was flown home a week later and Paddy flew back to help her parents - Malaysian-born Tehaun, a retired television engineer, and Lynn, a psychiatric nurse - with arrangements. He had only met them once before but they treated him like a son.

On what should have been his wedding day, Paddy went to the register office in Chelsea where Karen had booked a room. He couldn't bear the idea of cancelling it. They had planned to get married under an archway of flowers and have dinner accompanied by a string quartet. Instead, he paid quiet tribute to her alone, reflecting on what would have happened on the day. He said: 'While we put our rings on we were going to say, "My wife, my husband, my best friend".'

The funeral, a humanist celebration, took place on September 1 in a 15th Century barn near Stevenage, where Karen's family come from. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony, where her mother, brothers Andrew and David, and three friends gave readings. Afterwards, her coffin was carried out to Art Garfunkel's song Bright Eyes. Paddy said: 'Karen would have wanted her life celebrated. She

'It's too soon. I still can't look at photos of her'

packed more into her 36 years than many people pack into a much longer life.'

The deaths of Karen and her aid team are being investigated by the FBI, who are leading the case because the group was made up of mostly American citizens.

Meanwhile, Karen's family and friends have set up a charity in her memory, which they hope will help carry on the work she was doing. The charity, A Conflict of Interest (The Karen Woo Foundation), aims to provide grants to promote better healthcare in Afghanistan - and is helping the family create something positive in the aftermath of her death. There has already been generous support and an evening event in London on October 21 will help raise funds.

Karen's father Tehaun, 67, said: 'It's still too soon for us to understand. I still can't look at photographs of her. We are keeping our fingers crossed that the Foundation will help keep her spirit alive. It is a tribute to her.'

Her mother Lynn said: 'She's not here with us, but she's here in my heart and mind. We hope the Foundation will complete Karen's work.'

Paddy has started to write everything down, so he does not forget a thing about his time with Karen. He wears his platinum band on his wedding finger and Karen's on a string around his neck. 'I tied it with a particularly strong knot used to attach a parachute to its harness, the way Karen would have wanted. I was 100 per cent committed to her and, in my heart, I am married to her.'

Neither Paddy Smith, Tehaun Woo nor Lynn Woo were paid for this interview. Donations can be made to A Conflict of Interest (The Karen Woo Foundation) by visiting the charity's website www.karenwoofoundation.org.