



THE MISSION PILOT

1975

He loved flying. There was nothing more he would rather do than be in an airplane, gliding weightless through the blue. And on this day, as he sailed through the sky with a student pilot, he floated high in anticipation of his first appointment as a mission pilot. It was a matter of weeks before the assignment would be official. He was a newlywed, his studies were going well, and life was on that perfect arc—everything was going just as he had dreamed.

Suddenly, a strange fog flooded his mind. A time-slowng, color-bending aura whooshed over him in a wave of dread, stunning him into irrepressible silence.

Something was terribly wrong. He had to land right away.

It was the beginning of a strange illness that would end his career as a mission pilot, before it had a chance to begin.

For years to come he would repeatedly ask God why it had all happened. Where was he to go from here? If he couldn't be a pilot, what was in store for his life?

The skies, for now, were quiet.

Karl Schwinn is a tall, burly man with a tangle of blond hair and a beard to match. He has a gruff appearance about him—someone you would not want to upset—but his effusive personality defies physical appearance. He is a talker; he has a story for everything, and he will share them if you give him a chance. He has just picked me up from the airport for an interview with him and his wife, Katie Jo, on their mission experiences. On the short drive to his house, he talks about his truck.

“This is what I call my Maranatha truck,” says Karl with no small sense of pride. “I bought it specifically for Maranatha projects in 1986. It has over 200,000 miles on it, and it’s been all over Latin America with me and my family. My goal is to get it to 400,000 miles.”

The 4 x 4 diesel truck is red and white striped with a crew cab, wide enough to fit six, squeeze eight. If you brush your hands lightly over the fabric covered ceiling, you can feel the indentations of palms and fingers from where Katie Jo used to push to keep from going airborne on rutted rural roads. It’s a faithful truck, but at 55 miles per hour, the four-ton behemoth lumbers down the highway. This is in sharp contrast to the planes roaring overhead out of Phoenix International Airport. Flying, we are not. He tells me he wanted to be a mission pilot at one point in his life. He studied aviation at Andrews University.

I inquire about what happened. He asks that I wait until we get to his house before he starts his story.

“There is a timeline to what has happened in my life, and I don’t want to get out of order,” he says. This is illustrative of his careful attention to detail. It is one of the essential traits to have when coordinating mission projects, and no one seems more made-to-order for such

a job than Karl. Karl knows this, and this is the story he will share.

Up until that fateful day in the plane in 1975, Karl had no other goal than to be a mission pilot. When the illness struck, he and Katie Jo moved back to his hometown of Shattuck, Oklahoma, and he started working as a contractor. Karl’s father had been a carpenter, and construction was in his blood. By the age of 12, Karl ran his father’s lawn mower repair shop after school. When their family became missionaries at La Vida Mission, a Navajo community in New Mexico, Karl learned to operate heavy machinery, drill water wells, and plant and harvest food for the mission from the garden. He learned about masonry, plumbing, and electrical work. Shortly after entering Andrews University, he had obtained a general contractor’s license. A life in construction was the most obvious alternative to his original plan. In any case, Karl didn’t know what else to do.

“I didn’t understand what God had in mind for me. I had married the right woman, someone who was willing to go into missions. I had all this money invested in aviation. I had college experience as a student missionary. I kept wondering why all this had happened,” says Karl.

Yet a divine plan was already weaving into place. While working at the Andrews campus airport, Karl had met John Freeman. Freeman was the founder of Maranatha Flights International, a mission organization. The same year



Karl got sick, he signed up for Maranatha’s one-page newsletter, which listed mission projects, dates, and contact information. In the next nine years, Karl earned his commercial licenses in mechanical, plumbing, and electrical. All the while, he remained a faithful, contributing member of Maranatha. But he never participated on a single project.

In 1984, a light turned on in Karl. It would be the beginning, the rebirth, and the catalyst for the rest of his life.

Maranatha Flights sent out a notice asking for volunteers to participate on a two-week project in Peru. Karl had served one year as a student missionary in Peru, and the country still held a piece of his heart.

“I was sitting at home with my wife and kids, trying to start a business,



trying to make ends meet,” remembers Karl. “But all of a sudden the cost didn’t matter. I was going to Peru no matter what it took.”

When the project leadership discovered Karl had lived in Peru, they paid half of Karl’s airfare in return for his knowledge of the local culture and language. The rest, Karl received through donations from church members.

In Peru, Karl’s background in local construction was invaluable, and Maranatha asked him to lead another project in the Bahamas to build a large gymnasium complex. The three-week project stretched into nine as the team ran into problems with obtaining materials.



Karl and Katie in Phoenix, Arizona where they make their home.

“I hadn’t expected to be away from home for that long,” says Karl. “So Katie and I decided that any project with the potential of having me stay for an extended period of time would require me to take the family too.”

The transition of going from solo mission trips to “family” mission trips came in 1985 when Maranatha asked Karl to oversee numerous consecutive projects. For the next year and a half, Karl and his family hopped from the Bahamas to Peru to Haiti and then Mexico. Through makeshift plumbing and primitive living standards, the Schwinn family conquered culture shock with aplomb.

“Living in another country wasn’t much different from doing it at home,” says Katie Jo. “I guess I’m pretty flexible, and because of Karl’s abilities, I never had to suffer much. If something didn’t work or if I needed something done, he figured out a way to do it. Karl is very cognizant of what it takes to run a household.”

Simply cognizant is an understatement. It’s no wonder his peers call him MacGyver, a 1980s television character who saves the day by being extraordinarily resourceful. Karl has built radio towers out of bamboo in Ecuador, figured out ways to ship washing machines to Haiti, and designed and constructed a puff rice factory in Peru.

“All the work experiences from my past have directly helped me in the mission field,” says Karl. “I realized that for all these years, God has been preparing me for this type of work.”

Little did he know the greatest work was yet to come.

In 1990, Karl and his family moved to Zambia, Africa where he oversaw the building of a Maranatha-constructed hospital. For one year, they survived in the most primitive of conditions. Shortly there-after, he headed to Honduras and then fifteen months in Guatemala. It would all be basic training—boot camp—for what God had in store.

On an ordinary day in the Spring of 2000, Karl received a phone call from Karen Larsen, vice president of projects at Maranatha.

“Karl, how would you like to go to Kabul, Afghanistan?” she asked.

The world’s knowledge of Afghanistan didn’t come into full bloom until a nightmare day in September 2001. Prior to U.S. television sets lighting afire with the threat of terrorists, the average American could not point Afghanistan out on a map.

In the first few seconds between Karen’s question and his response, three associations flashed through Karl’s head: Khyber Pass, Panjsher Valley, and a faded illustration of a nomad standing next to a camel in the desert. The latter was a relic image from a childhood storybook.

“I couldn’t have told you where Kabul was on a map,” says Karl. “I knew that the Russians had fought a war and had been kicked out.”

Immediately, he wanted to go. But the next fifteen seconds brought a gut-walloping reality. He had heard enough to know Afghanistan was not a safe place for his wife. And what would happen to his business? He had already abandoned two businesses for extended mission projects. With two boys in college, could he afford to walk away once more?

“Who else is on the list?” he asked.

“You’re it.”

The project was in collaboration with Loma Linda Medical University (LLU). They wanted to initiate a medical program and reconstruct a portion of the Kabul Medical Institute. At one time, Kabul Medical Institute had been a shining star in medicine, producing top-notch doctors for the country. But due to war and other social conditions, the institute was severely damaged and many of the country’s doctors fled, depleting health care resources. Hopefully, a new medical education center would plant a fresh crop of doctors and nurses in Kabul. (LLU asked Global Mission to help with funding and logistics, and they in turn petitioned Maranatha to coordinate the re-construction of the medical education center, library, and staff housing.)

Before accepting such a project, Maranatha would need to find a person who could oversee it. The person had to be resourceful, skilled, detailed, and resilient. The person would have to work with three different currencies to



Karl with M. Khalid Rasheed, who served as the principle contact between Maranatha and the Afghan government. Rasheed worked extensively with Karl during the 10-month project.

manage the budget, communicate well through translators, and adapt easily to foreign cultural norms.

Karen told Karl that other names had been thrown on the table for this project, but they were taken off just as fast. They knew the only person who could handle this level of difficulty was Karl.

At the end of the silence, he told Karen he didn’t see how it could work.

In the next several weeks, Karl and Katie Jo discussed the possibilities, always coming to the same conclusion: it wasn’t possible. Yet Karl couldn’t shake the feeling that he had to go. Afghanistan was a country of the weary and downtrodden. It was a country in need of a second chance.

“The more we thought about it, the more we realized I would be like Jonah, refusing God’s call to go,” says Karl. “And just about every time we turned around, God threw water on our fleece.”

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Weeks later, Karl received another call from Maranatha. He and Katie Jo were asked to meet with a small group of people at the Adventist-Laymen’s Services and Industries (ASI) Pacific Union Chapter Convocation to discuss Afghanistan once more. In April, following the meeting, Karl and Katie Jo met with the group over breakfast. By the time the meeting came to a close, Karl and Katie Jo had clasped their hands to take the biggest leap of faith to date.

Karl was going to Afghanistan.



Members of the 90-person crew wait for lunch to finish stewing in the vats. The crew often used this outdoor kitchen to cook large meals on the construction site.

Katie Jo doesn't remember much about the day Karl left. She calls herself an optimist in denial. Up until the day of her husband's departure, she chose to push fear into the back of her mind and focus on the life racing past in front. In the last weeks, they spent time with the extended family at a gathering in Lake Tahoe, California, and then Karl drove his youngest son to his first year at Southern Adventist University in Tennessee. One by one, Katie's house was emptying itself. Finally, Karl was gone. She was alone for the first time in 25 years. Was this an indication of a life to come?

"I felt Karl was under divine protection," says Katie. "I also went into it with full knowledge that there was a possibility Karl would not come back. But I knew this was what the Lord wanted us to do. I knew it was His will and I was prepared for anything that might happen."

She buried herself in projects, staying up late. She pushed herself at the

retirement village where she works as a nurse. Her family supported her with constant phone calls, and her boys called more than she ever dreamed. Maranatha staff kept in touch with her on a regular basis, sending email prayers, cards, and gifts. On

Fridays, she waited anxiously for her weekly satellite phone conversation with Karl. They spoke in long two-minute paragraphs, outlining their days and questions for each other. Dialogues weren't easy to conduct because of the two-second delay in voice transmission. Every other day she received emails from Karl. She told him about all the people who wrote to tell her they were praying for Karl.

"These were things I could count on. It made a huge difference," says Katie Jo.

Not that there weren't moments of absolute nail-biting anxiety. One day, Katie Jo received a terse email that read, "I had a gun put to my head today. I'll tell you about it later." Then Katie Jo's Internet server broke down and for the next four days she couldn't communicate with Karl. She had no way of knowing if he was safe.

But for the most part she kept up with Karl's whereabouts. They were excellent communicators. Karl would send her every document he wrote or read, so

Katie Jo would have a basic understanding of his work.

"I knew everything that was going on because he shared everything. It helped me know where he was coming from and what was happening in his world."

Back in Kabul, Karl's world was a mess.

Imagine the devil's demolition backyard. Imagine a city reduced to three feet of rubble for miles around. The stillness of destruction unable to recover, loss so tremendous it weighs heavy on everyone who sets eyes upon it. There is an eerie atmosphere of surrealism as shrouded people shuffle by in staggering heat, resigned to the devastation around them. In this neutral desert of beige, the only bursts of color are the lavender veiled headdresses worn by women. The vast level of destruction shocked even Karl, a man rarely surprised. This project would be different from the others.

Yet it wasn't until he set off to build the medical education center library that he discovered how difficult this project would be. There were no supplies. What had once been a parade of architectural marvels constituting Main Street was a row of deteriorating concrete. His shopping mall was a series of street vendors selling bits of equipment salvaged from junk heaps. Skilled workmen were nowhere to be found. Modern tools didn't exist. No one could have anticipated the dearth of resources in Kabul. He had to draw from every single experience he had ever had in his past to make up for the desolation of this place. If Kabul was the ultimate challenge, every other

mission project had been a preparation for this moment.

Much of the intricate work had to be done by Karl, as he was the only one who knew how. He trained others, asking them to bring any tools they could. Most came armed with antiquated saws and hammers. Karl designed tools that weren't available by stripping blown out Russian tanks for parts and taking them to metal workers for reshaping. Sometimes he would find that the parts he purchased were broken, and he had to return them. Two stores down he bought another set, only to discover they were the same parts he had just returned next door. Store owners were buying inventory from each other, taking Karl and his crew on a wild goose chase for parts. Deadline after deadline of his estimated finish date disappeared into the daily list of complications.

"There were four of us on the pre-construction site visit. Between us we probably had more experience in construction in this type of situation than any person on earth. We figured three months for this project and budgeted four. It actually took more than ten months. We all miscalculated how bad it really was," says Karl.

He survived, he says, by taking things one day at a time.

"If I had known from the beginning that this project would have taken as long as it did, I would have never made it," says Karl. "God would only let me see two to three weeks in advance, making me believe I'd be done in just ten more days. I would tell myself I could survive ten more days out here.

But I would have never been able to make it if the date was two or three months away."

It wasn't just the project bringing down his morale. Karl missed home. He missed Katie Jo.

"If I would have had Katie with me, I could have put up with everything for years. She is my rock, my psychiatrist, my help-mate," says Karl.

Indeed, the psychological pressure was fierce. Each day, Karl had to contend

with the ever-present danger of living in a country held hostage by the Taliban. On more than one occasion he felt the blunt chill of a gun barrel to his head from a wrongly communicated conversation. His mortality was never more vulnerable than in the past year. Kabul was a minefield of trouble, but his fear had to be contained in something greater.

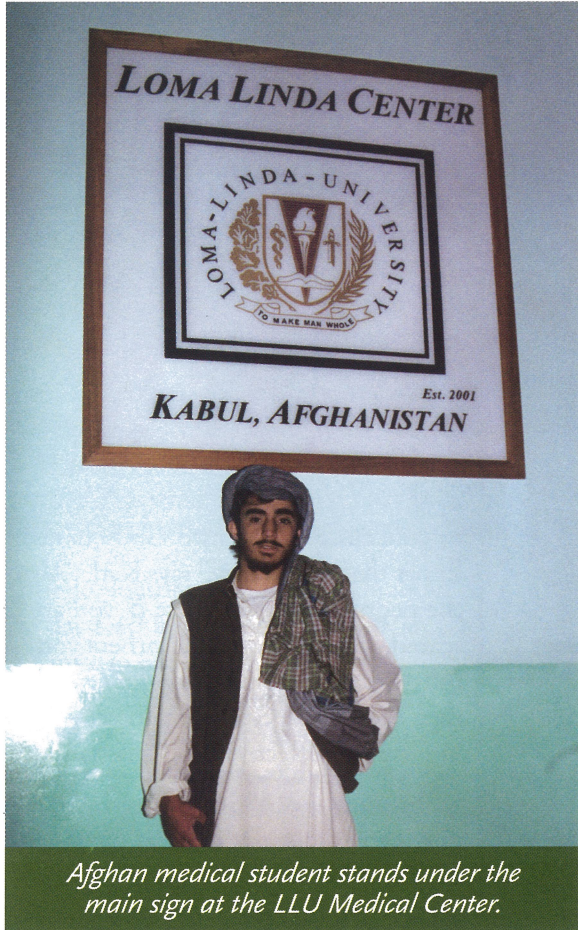
"You can't afford to be scared. You can't be productive if you are fighting fear all the time. Even though I knew that I could be dead in a heartbeat, I had to constantly put it into God's hands. Either that or go crazy," says Karl. "Also, the people there can sense if you are scared. How can you tell others you believe you are on a mission for God, but then not believe God will protect you? You can't be effective as a Christian."

So he went about his work each day, praying without ceasing and pressing apprehension under his skin like a jack-in-the-box ready to burst.

If Kabul was the ultimate challenge, every other mission project had been a preparation for this moment.



Karl with Afghan medical school staff at the LLU Medical Center.



Afghan medical student stands under the main sign at the LLU Medical Center.

“Katie has always been my stabilizing force. Every time we’ve gone to a new country, Katie has created a nest for us, our own cultural bubble,” says Karl. “But she wasn’t there. Without question, the hardest part of the project was not having her there.”

He tells me a revealing story about a night in Kabul. He and Don Noble, president of Maranatha, had traveled to Kabul together. Karl would be staying for good; Don would leave after Karl settled in. On the night before Don’s departure, they prayed together.

“I started out by praying for Katie,” remembers Karl. “When I got to that

point, I broke down and sobbed like a baby. Knowing Don was leaving the next day was when the full realization hit me that I was by myself. That was the realization that Katie wasn’t with me. I was really torn up that night.”

Katie Jo sits next to Karl as he talks. Throughout the interview, he reaches out to touch her shoulder. His brawny, he-man exterior is betrayed by this story and his tenderness.

Outside, dusk is settling over Phoenix. In the dimming light I can imagine two grown men kneeling on the floor, huddled in a desperate prayer for courage.

On July 4, 2001, Loma Linda University, Maranatha Volunteers International,

Global Mission, and Afghan officials celebrated the opening ceremonies for the new Loma Linda Center. Anyone who qualifies can apply to Kabul University to attend the medical school, including women. Health care programs in Kabul are taking shape and the future is showing signs of hope.

The next day, Karl left Afghanistan and returned home.

The Schwinn home is a three-dimensional scrapbook of their mission adventures. Cultural artifacts from a dozen countries line the shelves, hang on walls, and occupy corners. There

is a story for each vase, rug, drum, and painting.

In August, when Karl came home for good, he added memorabilia from Afghanistan: old tools, a chisel made from tank parts, a prayer rug, a traditional water pitcher and basin from which to wash your hands. When placed among the other objects, which represent three decades of service, Afghanistan could blend into a distant memory. Except Karl is still recovering from the experience. The months of repressed fear and loneliness have surfaced, and he has been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress syndrome. He spent the first several months of his return waiting for the tension to release from his mind like a ball of yarn unraveling its shape.

“It’s taken ten years off his life. He’s definitely aged from the experience,” says Katie Jo. “He has a lot more aches and pains than he used to.”

But while the healing is a slow process, it hasn’t slowed Karl down. His business, thanks to the hand of God, is doing well. He says he’s so busy he doesn’t know where to turn next.

“I am booked up,” he says. “I have so much work ahead of me. God is good. He always provides.”

It’s time for me to head back to the airport. My plane is scheduled to leave in 45 minutes. Karl is growing anxious; he doesn’t want me to miss the plane. He tells me that if we don’t make it, there will be another flight to California in the next hour—just in case, he knows the details.

We skip Karl's sluggish truck for Katie Jo's sedan. He says it's faster. I ask Karl if Afghanistan was his last mission assignment. Would he be retiring from this tough line of work?

"No. No way. Not done. Not unless the Lord is done with us," he answers, adamant. "And I haven't given up on the dream of becoming a mission pilot yet."

Karl's strange bout with illness ended in 1977. It had lasted two years, just long

He spent the first several months of his return waiting for the tension to release from his mind like a ball of yarn unraveling its shape.

enough to veer him off *his* path so that God could prepare him for His.

"What is it that you like about flying, Karl?" I want to understand this fascination.

For the first time all day, Karl is at a loss for words. He stumbles to answer.

"I can't describe the feeling. It's the greatest feeling—every time I see a plane in the sky I want to be up there..."

"Karl, I think you *might* be getting a little too old for that," says Katie, with a mix of jest and caution.

Overhead, the planes soar in and out of the airport. We watch them cut through the air and disappear into the sky. We are crawling through traffic, but for just this moment it feels like we're flying. 🌐

—Julie Z. Lee

Rebuilding Hope in Kabul

In 1996, a team of representatives from various Adventist organizations in North America headed to Kabul, Afghanistan after receiving a request from Kabul University medical authorities for assistance on rebuilding their curriculum and the buildings on campus. Loma Linda University organized the project, taking the lead on restoring the curriculum; for the construction aspect, they called on Maranatha Volunteers International.

The site visit revealed a campus devastated by twenty years of war. Maranatha's crew spent more than ten months constructing a new teaching center, repairing existing structures, and a housing complex for visiting faculty members from Loma Linda University.

The new teaching center officially opened on July 4, 2001. The center will help to rebuild the teaching program at the medical school and was equipped with four computers, a copy machine, and a small library of books. As part of the initial negotiations between Loma Linda and Afghan leaders, women will be allowed to use the center. The new reading room has partitions allowing both men and women to study at the same time.

Loma Linda continues to work with the medical center to provide current literature for the library and assistance in teaching.



Karl and Katie with members of the crew at a feast in their honor. Ayub (second from the right), who Karl affectionately refers to as his "Afghan brother," served as project engineer and Karl's bodyguard. Wakiel, (far left) was one of Karl's translators. Katie visited Karl in Afghanistan twice during his stay.