

## NEWS EXTRA - ITV's Carl Dinnen



Carl Dinnen with wife Samana

**ITV's Carl Dinnen: I'm a slightly older dad now and I'm getting on a bit for this dad thing, but it makes me appreciate more and I will enjoy it even more. I'm really looking forward to watching him growing up**

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He holds political leaders to account and has escaped machine gun fire in Iraq - ITV political correspondent Carl Dinnen's career on the front line is never dull. He talks to Stephanie Bell of the Belfast Telegraph, about growing up in Belfast and Hillsborough, the admiration he has for his rector father, and family life with his wife and baby son.

He has dodged bullets to bring news from war zones, but Carl Dinnen now has another, more challenging job - looking after his two-week-old baby son, Zidan Patrick.

The ITV News political correspondent has just become a dad for the second time and is enjoying two weeks' paternity leave, taking his turn at night feeds with wife Samana Haq.

There were some extra helping hands this week when Carl's parents, Jane and the Very Rev John Dinnen, flew to his home in London to meet their new grandson.

The Rev Dinnen is a prominent figure here, having served as Church of Ireland Dean of Down Cathedral and Rector of the Parish Church of St Malachy, Hillsborough, before his retirement in 2007.

His mum is also well-known as a former teacher in the science department at Dromore High School and Banbridge Academy.

Carl (47), the eldest of three boys, has been a familiar face on our TV screens for more than 20 years, working for Channel Four News, GMTV and, for the past six years, ITV News.

His job has taken him all over the world and he has been at the centre of many major events, including wars.

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Reporting on the fortunes of our politicians also sees him following Prime Ministers and other political leaders on their travels across the globe.

Catching up with him as he celebrates the arrival of his new son, he talks about his childhood growing up in a rectory in Northern Ireland, his successful TV career and what fatherhood means to him.

Today sees Carl's two weeks of paternity leave from ITV News come to an end - and leaving his new son next week to return to work, he says, will be a major wrench.

Carl also has a 13-year-old son, Harper, who lives in Belfast with his first wife, Pauline.

He travels to Northern Ireland as often as he can - at least once a month - to see his son, and says he can't wait for him to meet his new brother.

He says: "It has been absolutely brilliant. In fact you forget how brilliant it can be to have a little newborn in your arms. I've had two weeks' paternity leave and already it feels that it isn't enough. I have to go back to work next week, which will be tough on all of us, but that's life. I just want to spend every day with him.

"We called him Zidan because his mum is from a Muslim background. It means 'to prosper', which we hope he will.

"It means a huge amount to me that my older boy now has a brother. They have each other for the rest of their lives. As parents, that is something which is wonderfully reassuring to know.

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"Even though they live in different countries, they are still brothers and will always have each other.

"I'm a slightly older dad. I'm getting on a bit for this kid thing, but I think it makes me appreciate it more than ever, and I will enjoy it even more. I'm really looking forward to watching him grow up.

"I watched my first boy grow up through all the different stages, and it is wonderful to have that all again.

"I go to Belfast and stay with Mum and Dad quite a lot to see my son.

"There has been a lot of computer game-playing. I was just about able to keep up with Minecraft, but now he is into things like Fortnite, which I haven't a clue about."

Samana (43) worked as news editor at ITN before taking up the post of head of news at the Ministry of Justice a year ago.

The couple worked together before they started to date four years ago. They married last year and are regular visitors to Northern Ireland, where Carl grew up.

Carl's two younger brothers also live in England - Andrew (42) is in the RAF and 43-year-old Paul is a teacher.

His earliest memories are of his father's time serving as chaplain at Queen's University. He recalls a happy yet busy home where students were always popping in to see his father.

He says: "I remember growing up with lots of students running around the place, which was great fun as there was

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always something a bit daft going on, with students fooling around in the way that they do.

"We lived in the Church of Ireland chaplaincy house in Elmwood Avenue, and had student houses next door. On the top two floors of our building there was student accommodation.

"We had the first two floors and there was a door linking our house upstairs to the student accommodation and the Church of Ireland centre next door.

"My dad got to know the students really well. He still plays golf with and is friends with some of them today.

"That was a really happy time. I went to Botanic Primary School, which was just around the corner."

Carl was 14 when his parents moved to Hillsborough, where his father became the rector of the local parish church.

He remembers it being much quieter than the city, but the biggest shock for him was having to get the bus to Methodist College, where he where he went to school.

He believes his father's approach to handling sensitive issues as a clergyman during the Troubles was a skill which was passed on to him and which has served him well in his own career covering the sensitivities of modern politics.

Carl says: "Growing up in the church, I saw that Dad was always was careful not to take sides.

"As a clergyman during the Troubles, and sometimes being involved in funerals or having loyal orders wanting to come to the church... things like that, dad always steered a

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careful line between sides as best he could during that time of Northern Ireland's difficult politics.

"I think that is something I might have inherited from him - a caution about taking sides or taking political sides, which I think has helped in what I do now because my job involves me taking an independent view but also calling things out that are wrong when you see them."

Surprisingly, journalism wasn't even on his radar as a career when he was growing up.

He was very involved in drama at Methodist College and loved acting so much that he planned to pursue it as a career, even while studying social and political sciences at Trinity Hall College, Cambridge.

At university he and his fellow students won an award for a play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

He tells the story of how one of his fellow students went on to become an internationally acclaimed star while he turned to TV journalism.

Carl says: "At university I wanted to be an actor, acting was my big thing.

"In my last year at university, I was in a play, The Function of the Orgasm, and we won an award at the Edinburgh Festival.

"I was in the play with Sacha Baron Cohen - of course, he has done a bit better than I have.

"I'm not in touch any more, but he was a lovely chap. Very charismatic, extremely clever and generous too.

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"After Edinburgh I went and stayed at his parents' house in north London for a few days while I found a flat.

"I was an enthusiastic but ultimately very poor actor, but I always enjoyed it and it was very exciting.

"We did a huge production of West Side Story at school, and that was the first production that I was in at Methody. It was huge fun and I had an absolute ball doing it."

It was at the awards event in Edinburgh that Carl was approached by someone who suggested he should apply for an internship at CNN.

He took the advice and spent three months at the American broadcasting network as a script runner. He then worked freelance for a few months before getting a place on ITN's graduate training scheme.

Carl says: "When I started working for CNN, it had the same buzz for me as acting.

"It was my job to bring the scripts to the director in the gallery, autocue and the presenter in the studio, and that was brilliant fun, being involved in live TV.

"We had one presenter in Washington, one in London and I think the director was in Atlanta. It was all very exciting for someone who had never been involved in anything like that before.

"It was a bit of an unusual journalistic path, because most people start with their local newspapers."

His career has been largely in front of the camera, although he first joined Channel Four News as a producer.



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His first TV report for ITN during his training was back home in Belfast, with Carl covering a shift for John Irvine, who's now a senior international correspondent with ITV News.

He recalls: "As part of your training, you did an attachment at one of the regional bureaus, and I got mine in Belfast. Johnny Irvine had just become the Ireland correspondent. He was on his Christmas break and I was the cover.

"I remember my first report was an incident when some shots were fired through a window somewhere in north Belfast, but no one was seriously hurt."

Carl has worked as Ireland correspondent for GMTV, Midlands correspondent for Channel 4 News and as a Channel 4 News reporter specialising in defence and Irish affairs. He joined ITV News as political correspondent in 2012.

His career has taken him to some of the world's biggest war zones and conflicts.

He was part of a team at Channel 4 that won a BAFTA in 2012 for a report on the Japanese tsunami.

Carl also reported from Norway in the days following the massacre on Utoya, and from Dublin during the Queen's historic visit.

He recalls how in his early days at CNN he dreamed of covering international stories and how he once envied a more senior colleague going off to cover a war.

He says: "From when I started in CNN, the people I was around were always going off to do these big exciting international stories.



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"One night, when it had emerged just how serious things were getting in Rwanda (during the genocide there in the Nineties), Nic Robertson, who was one of the big correspondents at the time, put his flak jacket on his desk and attached his name and blood group to it.

"At that time, that just seemed to me like such an exciting thing to be doing.

"Now it seems utterly ridiculous, especially now that I have a family, but then it just seemed like a very cool, exciting thing to want to go and do - to tell those types of stories and get that sort of story out. When I went to ITN and Channel Four, that's what I wanted to do."

He got his chance in 2003, when he joined US troops as they invaded Iraq.

It remains for him the most memorable of all his many reports.

It was also the incident where he came closest to serious injury - as it turned out, from allied troops.

He explains: "I got to wear my flak jacket when I went to Iraq during the invasion in 2003. I was with a US artillery unit.

"There were moments when we weren't quite sure what was going on. The funny thing is that while it is happening, you often don't know if you are in real danger or not.

"The most dangerous thing was towards the end. Baghdad had already fallen and we had come up through the country to Baghdad, where we camped in an old Iraqi army facility.

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"We were sitting around one day when the hostilities had more or less finished, but then we came under heavy machine gun fire.

"I saw the rounds hitting the ground 50 yards away. It later turned out that it was actually US special forces, who had seen the sentries posted on the walls outside and thought they were Iraqi and opened fire on them.

"Afterwards, when we went to see what had happened, we saw they had been using 50-calibre rounds that had punched holes through the concrete. It was astonishing that no one was hurt.

"One of the most spine-chilling things I have ever heard was not the gunfire itself.

"Of course, when you hear that, everyone jumps, everyone is worried and the adrenaline is pumping, but when you hear someone shouting 'medic, medic', your heart really skips a beat because you think someone has been hurt. But actually, in that incident, nobody was hurt. It was a fairly frightening time."

It is hardly surprising that it remains the most memorable story of his career. "Being on the back of a humvee as you roll across someone's border as part of an invasion force rarely happens, and it was an amazing thing to see and be part of," he says.

The political world is keeping him busy these days, especially with the ongoing negotiations on Brexit.

His insightful questioning of politicians often leads to him breaking stories which rival news outlets have no choice but to also run with.

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For Carl, there is a great sense of professional satisfaction from this. A recent example was an interview with Theresa May in Japan last year, when a quote he elicited from her made front-page news in the next day's papers.

He says: "Last year, she gave me a great quote about standing in the next election and said 'I'm no quitter'.

"A lot of the newspapers had those words on their front pages the next day. It's a great feeling when something someone has said to you is picked up all over the place and becomes the story.

"The great thing about doing the political job is you really get to spend time with a politician and ask them questions they don't really want to answer.

"When you spot that little weakness - and you don't always spot it - and you burrow away and push them and push them, you can sometimes get them to reveal something about themselves that maybe they didn't intend to, and that is satisfying."

As for Brexit, you can picture the eye-roll as he talks down the line from his home in London. "It feels like I do nothing but Brexit," he says. "It is a very slow, very detailed process. Sometimes, it seems a little bit boring, although it is very important.

"It can be tedious for the public and difficult to cover because sometimes you don't know what is going on in the negotiations."

His working hours, he says, don't allow much time for outside interests, but when he does have free time, he likes to spend it with his family.

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He and Samana spend their time - at least before their new baby was born - watching box sets, and this year watched all of Game of Thrones for the first time.

"I will be spending my time changing nappies now, and I also try to find time to go and see my son in Belfast," Carl says.

"I'm lucky that my work is my hobby as well, because it is all-consuming sometimes.

"My wife and I like nothing better than chilling in front of the telly on a Saturday night with a burger and chips."

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