In the summer of 1992, Brian Payne was running late and looking for his public speaking class. He popped his head into the room where Katie Welsh was a teaching assistant for the lab. He’d found the right room—and his future wife.

“He waited six weeks until the class was out and grades were turned in and then he asked me out,” said Katie Payne. “And, as he says, we’ve been dating ever since.”

Both graduated from Texas A&M in December 1992; he received his Bachelor of Science in wildlife biology and was commissioned as an infantry second lieutenant. She earned a Master of Arts in communication. They married in May 1993.

“I do not come from a military family. My grandfather served a tour in World War II, but that was the extent of military service,” Katie said. “I really had no idea what I was getting into, but I knew I loved Brian and his passion for military service was contagious.”

Since April 2011, Lt. Col. Payne has been serving in Kandahar Province in Southern Afghanistan as the battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, “The Bobcats,” with the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division based at Fort Wainwright, Alaska.

Before this deployment, he attended the Father Daughter Ball in Fairbanks, Alaska, with his four daughters: Abigail, 14, Sarah, 12, Elizabeth, 10 and Hannah, 8. It was his fourth dance: one for each deployment (he served in Bosnia, Somalia and Iraq.) Wearing his dress mess uniform, he took turns holding each daughter tightly as they swayed to Butterfly Kisses by Bob Carlisle. Payne had tears in his eyes.

“That’s what’s always in the back of my mind. I want it to be a special day for them,” Payne said. “If this should be the last memories, that this is good memories for them.”

“Brian is a devoted dad who invests in his children, giving them a strong sense of security,” Katie said. “There is a scene in the movie We Were Soldiers where a new father is asking his commander about how to be a dad and a soldier. The response is that he hopes that being good at one makes him better at the other. This scene always makes me think of Brian. He is a wonderfully devoted father and I believe it’s made him a better soldier. And being a devoted soldier has made him a better father.”

Payne is equally devoted to his soldiers, his Army family.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Payne donned a Santa suit that Katie had sent him and visited brigade headquarters and three of his battalion’s outposts. He played ping-pong with soldiers in Bravo Company at Sperwan Ghar. He walked into tents and roused sleepy soldiers in Charlie Company at Khenjakak. He posed for photographs with soldiers at Forward Operating Base Shoja. And he jumped into a game of Ultimate Frisbee in Masum Ghar.

“He’s definitely hands on. He loves going out there and seeing the soldiers,” said Sgt. Oscar Canizalez, 25, from Riverside, Calif. Canizalez is the senior vehicle commander for Payne’s Stryker and has been with him for almost a year.

“He cares a lot about the soldiers. You could be the lowest private—he’ll come talk to you. He’s up front about everything.”

When Payne walked into the Tactical Operating Center on Christmas Day, Spc. Thomas Ngorak, 24, from Guam, wrapped his arms around him and said, “I’m going to miss you.”

Payne is not ready to leave. “I don’t want to walk in on Christmas and have my guys missing me.”

leadership in action

by Cheryl Hatch

photos by J.R. Ancheta
around his commanding officer. “I didn't want to hug Santa. I wanted to hug my boss,” said Ngiraked, his former gunner who considers Payne a father figure. “He’s one of the best. He always looks out for his soldiers. Honestly, if I model my career on anyone, it’d be him or my old platoon sergeant.”

Whether on patrol or in administrative meetings, Payne strikes the balance between a determined, focused professional with the approachability of one of the guys. As a leader, he distinguishes between leadership and “likership.”

“Leadership is making the hard calls for the right reason,” Payne said. “Likership is making the easy call for the wrong reason.”

Ngiraked remembered one incident that showcased Payne’s leadership. “We just got hit with an IED. I remember looking down and I saw this orange light,” he said. “He calmed us all down. It was serious for the first 30 minutes. Then we started singing. We do that a lot in the truck.”

Early in their deployment, the soldiers conducted clearing missions—both mounted and foot patrols—to search for weapons and IED components in Dand District. At first they led the patrols. Slowly the American soldiers trained their Afghan counterparts and began to partner on missions. Payne spent time with Afghan police and Army officers, building relationships and trust, intent on restoring the land and responsibility for security to the Afghans.

After returning control to local authorities in Dand in late 2011, Payne and his soldiers moved into Panjawa’i District, known as the heart of the Taliban, where his soldiers continued to conduct clearing missions and engage local leaders.

“All of them are wanting to get up on their legs before we get home,” Payne said. He mentioned a soldier from Omaha, Nebraska, who said he misses his fellow soldiers more than his legs.

“When you have a soldier who misses his buddy more than he misses his legs, it fills you up with a lot of pride and a lot of hope,” Payne said. “These guys have that kind of bond. They’re thinking beyond the bonds of their own limbs.”

For Payne, those bonds of brotherhood will serve the soldiers later in life.

“They know the importance of being part of a team, being bigger than yourself.”

As a leader, he feels privileged to have the opportunity to affect the lives of 800 men and women. And he feels blessed by his own family—his team—waiting for his return this spring.

“All of the Association of Former Students appreciates all the Aggie servicemen and women who serve our armed forces with distinction and sacrifice time with their loved ones in service to our nation. If you have a message of support for our troops, you can share it online at tx.ag/troopsupport.