

# Craig A. Parisot

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## Not Just One Path

Craig Parisot had wanted to fly his whole life. When he was finally given the chance, he was the cadet commander of the Air Force ROTC unit and a senior at the University of South Carolina. It was a Friday afternoon, and he had until Monday to give his answer. "Becoming a pilot meant I'd have to make, at that time, a 15-year commitment," he recalls today. "It was all I had wanted to do since I was a kid, but something didn't feel right about it."

At home that weekend, he had a heart-to-heart with his mother. She asked about his goals and the life he could see himself leading. He envisioned freedom for himself and his family to pursue service, learning, and experience, allowing them to make decisions based on true value instead of financial constraints. He spoke of making the most out of the one life he had been given, harnessing his time and talent to have a positive impact on the lives of others. And he considered posterity—his hope that one day, his story could be used to motivate and inspire future generations.

Hearing all this, his mother said something so simple, yet so important. "Craig, all you have to do is imagine the life you want to have but accept that there are lots of different ways to get there," she explained. "There's not just one path. Always know where you want to go, but be open to the various paths that can lead you there."

Craig prayed and allowed those words to lead him down a different path—one that compelled him to decline the pilot categorization a few days later. Now the CEO of Advanced Technology Applications (ATA), President and CEO of AvalonBridge, and an active community leader, he pinpoints that decision as critical in landing him where he is today, driven all along by the will to orient his life around the tenets of freedom, impact, and legacy. "Early in my career, I was less concerned about what I'd be doing, in

terms of industry or function, as long as it had those qualities," he affirms.

Today, ATA uses talent and technology to solve complex issues surrounding the management and consumption of large volumes of data. "This new information paradigm is having an extreme impact on the human experience, and society is just in the beginning stages of grasping the true nature of what is happening," Craig points out. ATA was founded in 2008, and Craig now joins his two new partners to create version '2.0' accelerating growth and providing an even greater capacity to have a positive impact on this looming global problem.

At the same time, he leads AvalonBridge, a company launched in 2015 to bring the best out of people and companies, aiming to lay blueprints for constructing and sustaining high-performing organizations and building futures of choice. "To achieve this, we use proven practices, exercise extreme confidentiality, and bring people and

technology to facilitate execution where and when it makes sense to do so," Craig says.

Based upon this premise, AvalonBridge excels in the art and science of the intangible economy. While around 30 percent of the real value of a company can be attributed to its business fundamentals, considerable weight must be allowed to the company's intangibles. Does the company exude a sense of innovation and market leadership? Does it care for its people? What is the business's overarching vision and value system? Are the people, plans, and policies aligned with what matters? "We help companies harness these ideas, shape them, and really run with them, so that at the end of the day, their stories are complete," says Craig. "It's this substance and purpose that sets them apart from other companies in a given space."

Craig experienced this firsthand from an



outsider's perspective as the COO at Invertix Corporation when, in 2010, he and his partners hired an outside consulting firm to collaboratively enhance both the real and the intangible value of the company. The work ultimately made Invertix a higher-value acquisition target when it was sold to a private equity syndicate, which ultimately led to the founding of Altamira Technologies Corporation. At that time, Craig also took on the role of chief strategist, leading the company to huge wins with new customers. Though Craig was focused on a successful merger and rebranding effort, remaining with the new company over the next year and a half, he was hungry for a new mental challenge. He took six months off to dive into his nonprofit work and reconnect with the community—this time, not as an executive, but as himself. "In thinking about what I might do next, and what was important to me, I felt drawn to the human side of things," he recalls. "I was looking for alignment of business and community service where I could pursue interests, and where my success would be tied to the success of many."

Guided by this goal, Craig founded AvalonBridge, took the helm of ATA, and began angel investing, developing technology solutions and serving in an advisory role to other local businesses. And in these opportunities, Craig saw more than just a chance to pursue meaningful work—he saw a way to shepherd companies and leaders through the waning days of the industrial age and into an era where the models and lessons of the past no longer apply. "How the management and technology consulting industry is changing is among the most central conversations of the day," he says. "As our country adapts to a new globalized, knowledge-driven economy, we're undergoing a massive redefinition and relearning of what's important, what's valuable, and how to realize futures of your own design. In this context, being a great consultant and corporate leader is about figuring out how to give your clients a competitive edge and adapt more quickly."

Both ATA and AvalonBridge ground their offerings in actions and results through deployment of proven methodologies helping partners address bespoke challenges and design a future of choice with the resources to quickly operationalize strategies. "We start with a dialogue about the future, creating roadmaps and building blocks that mark each step toward success and

culminate in a business that is aligned to the global shifts and therefore best-equipped to meet the accompanying challenges," says Craig. "Our ideal customers are those with vision—those who aren't afraid of the future, or of declaring and pursuing a bold future for themselves," Craig says. "I love businesses with big dreams. If a business leader is willing to swing for the fences, we can help lay out and meet the step-by-step goals to hit the ball out of the park."

Craig has always been goal-oriented, even from the time he was young. He was born in Phoenix, Arizona, while his father was stationed at Luke Air Force Base as a maintenance officer. A few years later, the family moved to Colorado for a brief stint and then ultimately to South Carolina, where his father was stationed at Shaw Air Force Base. Shortly after the family got settled there in Sumter, divorce fractured the young family, leaving Craig and his mother and his sister in a precarious state.

When Craig's mother reentered the workforce, she found that her two-year Associates degree in nursing wasn't enough to earn her a living and provide for her two children, so she went back to school to become a registered nurse. "She had class all day and then worked the night shift," Craig recounts. "Now, as a father, I understand how incredibly difficult that must have been, and I'm so grateful."

Craig, only four years old when all this began, dealt with the loss of his father in his own way, and the initial feelings of abandonment and sadness evolved with the passing of time. Though it would be several decades before he would truly come to grasp and embrace the meaning and healing of power of forgiveness, he came to see the silver lining to the situation early on. With little parental supervision, Craig had ample time to explore the world around him and develop his own ideas. He flourished in an environment where he was free to structure his own time, and he sought mentors and adult male figures that represented a wide range of strengths and perspectives. "I know I lost something by not having a father present, but I believe things worked out for the best," he explains. "Instead, having freedom underpinned by my mother's love and support was tremendously positive, allowing me to be open to the influences of many wonderful figures that became an important part of my life."

That person turned out to be a responsible,

engaged, and highly capable young man, who naturally rose to leadership positions in every environment he entered. He developed strong friendships with classmates, many of whom also came from humble beginnings and broken homes, and together, they found that it was possible to put the pieces together again to create rich experiences and strong character. "Spending time with other families paved the way for what my mother would teach me down the road—that there's not just one way to do things," he remarks. "Life has a lot of twists and turns, and sometimes things don't work out the way you thought they would, but nontraditional models can be highly successful as well. In Scout Leaders, in my friends' fathers, in the priest at our church, in the biographies of people I admired, I identified qualities I loved and then worked to internalize them."

Through this exposure to a wide range of lifestyles, Craig began to see how financial concerns could limit opportunity. As he watched his mother work so hard to make ends meet, he resolved to strive for a future where money didn't have to be a limiting factor in his decision-making process. "I was the typical lemonade stand kid," he remembers. "On a hot summer day, I'd put up the table in the front yard and hang a sign to sell each glass for 10 cents. When business would trail off, I'd evaluate my inventory and lower the price to 5 cents."

Beyond entrepreneurship, he knew education would be key in realizing his goals, and was always markedly focused and engaged in the classroom. Identified as one of the higher performers in his class, he was placed in the Talented and Gifted Program and an afterschool program called Olympics of the Mind. "I think my real learning took place in athletics and in these afterschool creative endeavors, where we were charged with engineering structures out of balsa wood, or performing musical interpretation, or coming up with manufacturing and production solutions," he explains.

Through that time, Craig earned spending money via chores. When he was 15, he got his first real job at his stepfather's jewelry store, and later at Wendy's and TCBY Yogurt. During his senior year of high school, though he had risen to the rank of cadet commander in junior ROTC, he still found time to pursue various yard work jobs, saving up \$650 through the year that he used for spending money during his first trip abroad to

Spain the summer after he graduated. "Nothing was ever just handed to me," he says. "I worked for everything I had. I resented it at the time, but now I see how this shaped my character and work ethic."

Craig went to college on an Air Force ROTC scholarship and began studying environmental engineering, later deciding to study computer science through the College of Business. He liked technology but strongly identified with the business curriculum. At the University of South Carolina, he was able to rekindle an old lifelong friendship, land an appointment by the Speaker of the State House of Representatives to serve as a page, secure a summer internship for the House Ways and Means Committee, and get a job as a runner for a local law firm.

To boot, Craig decided to switch his major to English, where his heart truly lay. "Robert Frost used writing as a way to make sense of the world," he explains. "That resonated with me, and I realized that studying English helped me think critically and organize my thoughts so I could be more compelling with my speech and written words. Studying classics like Shakespeare and Joyce, while exploring poetry and creative writing, really helped develop my worldview and capacity for expression, which foundationally made all the difference in the world for everything that happened next."

During his senior year, Craig became the cadet wing commander of his Air Force ROTC unit. Indeed, leadership was not a destination he someday hoped to arrive at, but instead a process that he employed routinely throughout his coming of age as each experience served as a stepping-stone for the next one. "I would always try to position myself to engage in decision-making, guidance, and strategy," he affirms. "Intuitively, I had the sense that that was how I could have the most impact—by considering alternatives, making decisions about resource deployment, choosing the course, and leading others."

That spring marked a moment of achievement for Craig and his family—Craig's sister earned her masters degree, while Craig and his mother both attained their bachelors. The alignment of family accomplishments was chronicled by the local paper, and again through a resolution passed by the South Carolina Senate. "My two lifelong goals at that point were to get a college degree and become an officer in the Air

Force, serving like my father had and like my grandfather and great-grandfather had before him," he recounts. "I realized both within 24 hours of each other, and I'll never forget walking on campus in uniform and shiny Lt bars, saying to myself, now what?"

Craig had been the photo editor of his high school's national award-winning literature journal, and with his English literature degree in hand had hoped to become a combat camera and public relations officer in the Air Force, but he was instead assigned a role as a contracting officer at Hanscom Air Force Base just outside of Boston. In that capacity, he worked in the research and development contracting division, utilizing his unique background in engineering, computer science, business, and English to work on the Air Force's high tech business transactions with leading labs and universities. He mastered the tasks of the job quickly and was able to complete them within a matter of hours each day, leaving the rest of the day to pursue extracurricular activities on base. "I couldn't just sit around twiddling my thumbs, and I couldn't just head out for the day," he explains. "I wanted to do something meaningful to earn my keep, so I got involved with a number of things around base that had impact, quickly raising my profile."

In going the extra mile, Craig got exposure to the civilian executives, commanders, and general officers. In no time, he was plucked from his first assignment ten months early and put on a new program targeting major information technology services reform. As a second lieutenant, Craig suddenly found himself responsible for designing a billion-dollar transformation initiative, quickly becoming the resident expert on the General Services Administration (GSA) Federal Supply Schedule 70. His work took him to the Pentagon, where he met with senior leaders in the Department of Defense and GSA to write acquisition policy.

Through that time, Craig pushed the envelope with the support of the executives, colonels, and top generals around him, which helped to define his role as a leader of leaders. He became the face of the IT reform trend, traveling the nation to speak with GSA officials and Air Force bases about where the movement and industry were headed. "We were the first out of the gate," he remembers. "It was transformational for the space, but also for me. I was just naive

enough to believe I could do it and had high-level support behind me saying, 'Go, be bold, transform.' And we did."

The day Craig pinned on first lieutenant, the new Director of Contracting asked him to be his Executive Officer. Craig agreed, on the condition that he could bring his program with him. "That's when I realized what hard work really was," he laughs. "Each job was more than full-time. It taught me true commitment. The long days, early mornings, and high-stakes atmosphere changed my internal chemistry and my capacity for work." Craig became the Director's right-hand man, an advisor to a three-star general, and was named President of the Company of Grade Officers Council. He became, and remains, the youngest recipient of the O'Neil Award given for Acquisition and Military Excellence, and he was given the honor of choosing his next assignment. By that time, Craig was ready for a change of scene, so he asked to go as far away as possible while staying in the Continental U.S. He was Los Angeles-bound.

His California assignment marked the end of his five-and-a-half years of active duty service in the Air Force. While there, and working full-time, he earned an MBA from the California State Polytechnic University—Pomona, worked as the Air Force in-plant representative at a Boeing facility, led a division, earned a promotion to Captain, and tried sushi for the first time. After seizing every opportunity to make his unit better and expand his faculties, skills, and palette, he came to the realization that he was again in need of a change. "I was full of energy with a strong desire to again test my potential," he says. "I knew I needed to try my hand in the private sector in a smaller firm where I could have organizational impact and connection to the leadership."

With that, Craig put in his paperwork to leave the Air Force in January of 2001 and received a separation date of October 1. When 9/11 struck, he was on terminal leave. A military stop loss was instituted for October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and though he offered to return to service, the agreement was honored, rendering him among the last service members to separate before the stop loss went into effect. "Timing played such a big role," he remarks. "My life would have been incredibly different had I not separated when I did. There's no telling where I would have gone and what I would have done. I served giving it my all." Craig spent another three

and a half years in the reserves available for recall at a moment's notice.

With 9/11, the National Security Agency's (NSA) budget ballooned, and the agency lacked the acquisition, programmatic, and system engineering infrastructure to meet the massive influx in responsibility. Seeing new and unconfined opportunities to serve his country, Craig joined Bridge Technology Corporation, a startup geared at helping NSA rise to the new challenge. Applying his previous experience to bring speed and agility to the agency, he quickly distinguished himself as a disruptive force in the acquisition space, and he tried to bend his experience toward working directly with the President and CEO of the company. "I became the operations lead, working to run and grow the business," he says. "It was my post-grad education in entrepreneurship. I was doing contracting, human resources, strategy, and business development, and when we began talking about a company exit, I was one of the few people really working the back end of that deal. It was everything I had hoped my transition out of the military would be, and I'm grateful that I chose my path by being true and honest with myself from the beginning, following my passions and taking risks."

Through this honest pursuit of happiness and truth, Craig crossed paths with a young woman named Kristin, who he hired to join the Bridge team. Later, after she had left the company, their paths crossed again at a Bridge alumni function, and they recognized something in one another. The following year, they were engaged, and a year later were married. "She's incredibly supportive and grounding," he says. "She's very passionate about horseback riding, and we've loved being partners in helping one another fulfill our dreams."

Craig found himself one step further advanced down the road to his goals when Bridge was acquired by SI International in 2004, allowing him the opportunity to stay on and learn everything he could about building and selling companies. In that capacity, he was connected with the Association of Corporation Growth, where he dove in and got involved on the Programs Committee. After several years of ascension and mental expansion, Craig happened to find himself in deep conversation with Art Hurtado, someone he'd met early during the sale of Bridge. Art had a

business that was struggling following the telecommunications bust. Craig agreed to partner with Art and Bryan Judd and took over the startup as COO on July 10, 2006. He had carte blanche to implement his ideas and went on to build a diversified company that grew from under \$1 million that first year to \$64 million in revenues over a six-year period. Over the next year, Invertix was bought by a private equity syndicate and merged with Near Infinity Corporation. As a result, six months after the deal closed, Craig was one of the founding executives to create Altamira Technologies in 2013.

Craig was walking on the beach in San Diego with Kristin and her mother when he got the phone call that lifted a lifelong weight off his shoulders. The deal to sell Invertix was officially done, which meant that finally, after decades of diligent work and careful planning, he had reached an important milestone in achieving the level of financial security he had set his sights on when he was a boy. And now, in advising young people entering the working world today, Craig stresses the importance of patience and belief. "I'm an impatient guy by nature, so it's a constant struggle for me," he remarks. "Everything's moving so fast in the hyper-connected world we live in, so it takes wisdom to know when to slow yourself down and focus on creating depth of experience. But mastery is important, and it's crucial that people reflect to truly understand the nature and substance of their work. Reflection allows you to create a value system to guide your actions, rather than leaving things up to blind pursuit. Live and learn in a substantive, intentional way. And in doing so, don't be afraid to believe in yourself and take risks if you're willing to put in the work to create a little luck."

Now, through ATA and AvalonBridge, Craig's work is about helping companies lean in to the curve of the future by reaching for the stars with intelligent confidence. It's about growth, creating possibility, and breaking through, as he has done so many times in his own life. Like the moment he completed the Boston Marathon in a remarkable manifestation of mind over matter. Like the moment his son was born. And like the moment he decided to run for Delegate in Virginia's 34<sup>th</sup> District, with plans to bring a rudder to the institutions that can help society navigate our morphing economy and security environment. It's about working on big problems

on a big scale and with big impact, finding ways to transform today's challenges into tomorrow's edge and changing lives for the better. "I've always felt that, whether an experience is positive or negative, you can always reflect on it and take away a lesson," Craig says. "I look at life as a series of lessons that form building blocks toward creating the kind of person you want to be. There's not just one road, so I'm open."

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt*

*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

