

# Flying High

A photographer's eye, an entrepreneurial spirit, and savvy business skills—combined with a chance vacation and a few daring aerial escapades—lead to a successful book publishing partnership for J.J. Bissell '88 and Christopher Ladley '88. With one successful book under their wings, the intrepid duo is working on another project in the Dominican Republic.

BY MARCIA HARMON, DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS, AND STACY COLLINS LYNCH '79, DIRECTOR OF ALUMNI AFFAIRS

When J.J. Bissell traveled to Chile in 1998 to meet his old friend Chris Ladley for a three-week camping trip, neither one had any idea the trip would lead to anything more than sore muscles, good times, and a much-needed break from work. J.J., a professional photographer specializing in commercial work, was especially ready for a vacation because his photo archives had been destroyed a few months earlier when his Charlotte studio was flooded. Chris, who was working hard at the sporting goods company he started in Santiago, was happy to suggest Chile as the venue for some downtime before J.J. tackled the process of rebuilding his business.

After meeting up with two other friends in Chile, they packed two trucks full of camping equipment, rafts, and camera gear and set off for three weeks of adventure. Chris and J.J. quickly discovered that they share a passion for flying. They daydreamed about flying across Chile and seeing everything from the air. J.J., with his photographer's eye, fell in love with the gorgeous countryside, and soon the two CCDS alumni began talking about publishing a book of photos.

While they were driving through Patagonia, the talk turned serious enough for the guys to start checking out what was already available in local bookstores. At first they were discouraged to find a plethora of coffee-table

books on Chile. It was their shared interest in flying that salvaged the idea and gave them their real inspiration: they realized there were no photo books capturing Chile from the air.

Chris and J.J. are both licensed pilots, but they needed a professional pilot to take them up initially to see if such a project was actually feasible. As luck, or fate, would have it, they literally bumped into a helicopter pilot in a small restaurant in the next little Chilean town they came to, and plans started taking shape. They made their first flight to secure pictures for the book in February 1998 in Patagonia, beginning a project that was to last almost two years.

In addition to their piloting skills, both young men brought important assets to the joint project. "Chris provided an understanding of the language, as well as a sense of the infrastructure within Chile," explains J.J. "I was in charge of managing the photography and provided the creative knowledge necessary to take on a publishing project." Their differing skills and experience helped them tackle the daunting task of forming their own publishing company, Orca S.A., to produce their book.

After searching for a theme to unite the book, the partners decided to call it *Los Ojos del Condor* (The Eyes of

the Condor) and to use photographs that illustrate Chile from a condor's perspective. This magnificent bird, with its nine-foot wingspan, inhabits the Andes from Venezuela to Patagonia and is important enough to the Chilean people to be incorporated into Chile's coat of arms. In J.J.'s photographs, the topography and inhabitants—both human and animal—are seen from a condor's point of view. The powerful images in the book illustrate an amazing diversity in landscape, color, and form.

With an initial print run of 3,000, *Los Ojos del Condor* was published in November 1999. Copies of the book were presold to corporations, which often present the books to clients as a remembrance of their majestic country.

J.J. and Chris are getting ready to publish a second printing of 5,000 to meet continued demand for the book.

Now that the project is complete, J.J. admits that what they did "was sometimes very dangerous" and recalls many wild and bizarre situations they managed to get themselves into. "But," he says, "it was a wonderful venture and adventure."

Chris believes "the most dangerous times were landing at Cape Horne in 55-knot winds, and being dropped off on a floating iceberg by helicopter

before being whisked off to another spectacular setting." He is proud of the book and of turning a dream into reality:

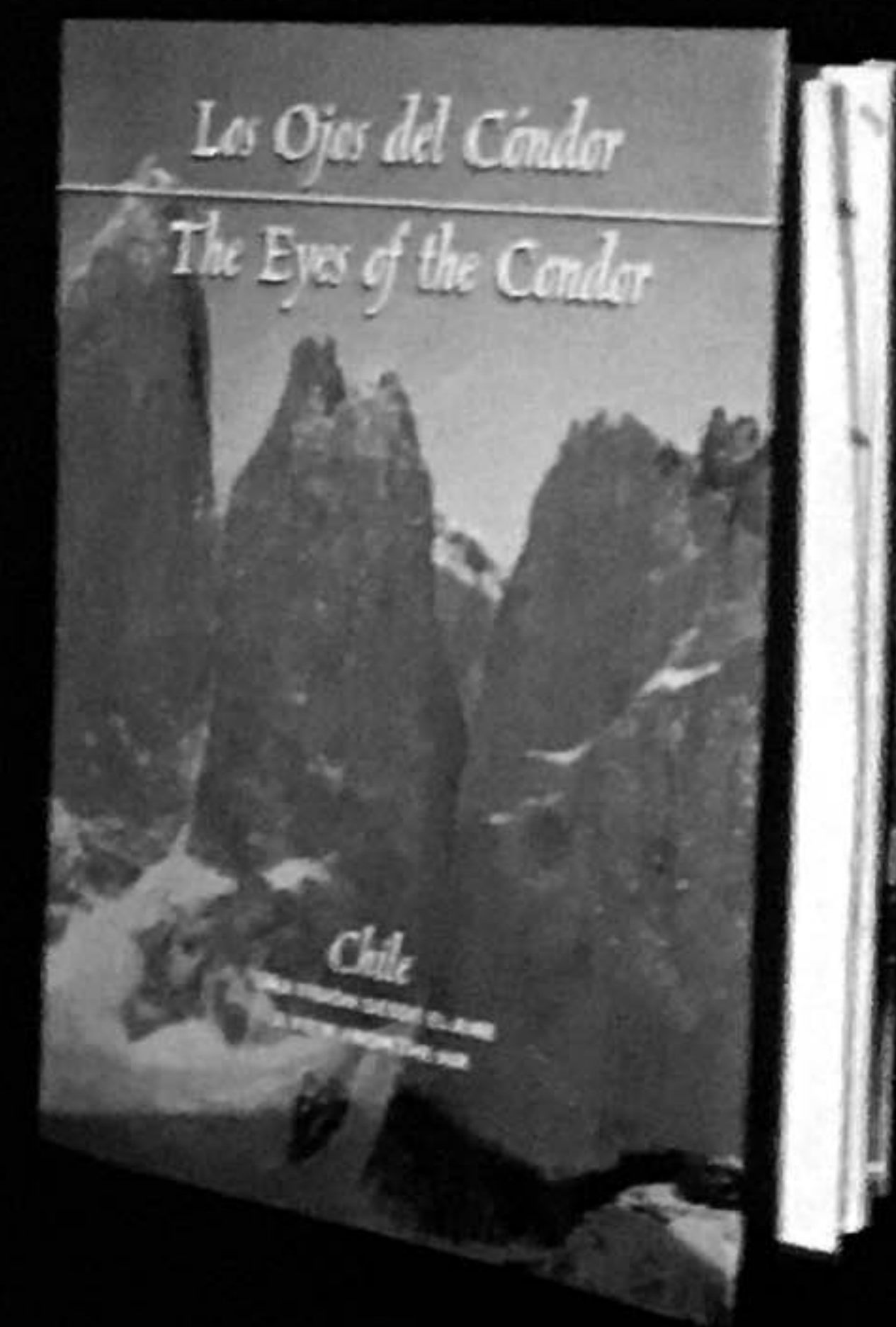
**"The most dangerous times were landing at Cape Horne in 55-knot winds, and being dropped off on a floating iceberg by helicopter before being whisked off to another spectacular setting."**

"We daydreamed about flying and then went out and did it."

J.J. has moved back to Charlotte and is sharing studio space with Paradox Films on Freedom Drive. He

has settled back into life as a commercial photographer and recently completed a multimedia project for an Internet start-up company. Chris is now the full-time business development manager for Orca S.A. The partnership went so well

J.J. Bissell '88 and Christopher Ladley, a Country Day classmate until he left to attend Deerfield Academy, reconnected to produce a stunning book of aerial photos of Chile. They are pictured in Patagonia before taking off on one of their many photography expeditions.



Their book, which will soon be into a second printing, captures the majesty of Chile in aerial photographs. Next on the creative agenda is *Over the Dominican Republic*.

that J.J. and Chris are already working on their next book, *Over the Dominican Republic*, and they are looking into the possibility of photographing other Caribbean countries.

Who knows, maybe these two will someday produce a publication for their old alma mater. How does CCDS from the Air sound?