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## Chile Mourns a Heroic Pilot

By Gideon Long/Santiago

The last thing Nelson Bahamondes saw before he died was a landscape of snow, mist and the lush vegetation of his native Patagonia. Then, the 65-year-old father of three slipped into a deep sleep cradled in the arms of a man whose life he'd saved, never to wake again. Bahamondes' death was a tragic moment in a remarkable story that has gripped Chile over the past week — a tale of sacrifice, stoicism, comradeship and, ultimately, of survival and hope.

A week ago, Patagonia Airlines pilot Bahamondes had guided his Cessna 208 onto the runway at Puerto Montt airport and taken off into a foreboding grey sky. His plane carried nine passengers bound for the remote airstrip of La Junta in the foothills of the Andes. As the Cessna banked inland from the Pacific, it ran into a storm so violent that it forced Bahamondes to make an emergency landing, skimming the treetops before ditching in the undergrowth. That all on board survived the hard landing is a tribute to his skills as a pilot. Bahamondes suffered the worst injuries, but still managed to clamber from the cockpit.

What happened next is the stuff of movies. For four days, Bahamondes guided his passengers in the art of survival as they huddled together in the forest, waiting to be rescued. Battered by biting wind, rain and snow, they survived on a diet of grass, berries, biscuits and powdered milk. As the temperature dropped to 14 degrees fahrenheit, they kept warm by burning fuel siphoned from the plane's engine. Each night, they crawled into the Cessna's wreckage to try to sleep.

Rescue crews searching for the missing flight were hampered by atrocious weather, and were repeatedly forced to call of their search and return to base. Last Monday, two days after the crash, Bahamondes died from internal bleeding. By all accounts, his was a quiet, stoic passing. He died in the arms of Victor Suazo, a policeman just 22 years old. "He realized he was going and he told me to close his mouth," Suazo recalled. "Those were his words: 'If I go soon, close

my mouth'."

For two more days, the passengers waited for salvation, following the instructions their pilot had given them. They could hear the helicopters overhead but, invisible through the thick blanket of mist, they had no way of signaling their rescuers. "We felt impotent," said Jorge Uribe, another of the survivors. "Why can't they see us? Why can't they get close? we said."

At midday on Wednesday, the skies finally cleared and rescuers spotted the mangled wreckage of the Cessna, carrying the survivors to safety in Puerto Montt. They were cold, in shock and and hungry, but — remarkably — none had serious injuries.

In the days since, Chileans have been enthralled by accounts of their ordeal. "It's striking, speaking to the survivors, just how emotive they are when they talk about the role that Nelson Bahamondes played," said Osvaldo Gasc, head of the hospital. "He directed them, he kept them together, he gave them all sorts on instructions on how to survive, right up until the end of his life." Nancy Perez, the wife of one of the survivors, said she was "immensely grateful to God and to the pilot". She added, "For me, the pilot was a hero — a hero who saved all his people."

Inevitably, this week's drama has drawn comparisons with the infamous crash that inspired the film *Alive*. In that accident, a group of Uruguayan rugby players survived in the high Andes for over two months after their plane came down en route to Chile in 1972. Alone in the mountains, they were forced to eat the flesh of their dead friends to stay alive. This week's survivors were never pushed to such horrific extremes but, even so, their ordeal was a reminder of the perils of flying in the turbulent skies over Patagonia.

Within hours of the rescue, the weather had changed again. The mist came down and the helicopters were unable to get back to the Cessna to recover Bahamondes' body. It lay in the forest for three days and nights before it was recovered by the Chilean Air force. The pilot will be buried in the coming days in what is likely to be a hero's burial for a man whose grace and courage has captivated a nation.

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