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BY DAVID MACDONALD

Up the Cliff

Drama in Real Life®

Vern Bagley may not have *looked* like a hero, but in those 90 harrowing minutes above the raging Bay of Fundy he proved that he *was* one



THE CALL for help came at 12:30 a.m. It was an icy night, February 26, 1963, and a gale was howling across the Bay of Fundy. The Seal Cove telephone operator first roused a dozen able-bodied fishermen. Then she thought to ring Vernon Bagley, a bandy-legged little man of 46 who doubled as game warden and village wag. Vaguely mindful of the wind outside, Bagley stumbled sleepily to his phone. The operator's words shook him awake: "Someone's over the cliff at South West Head!"

Bagley shuddered. Like most folks on Grand Manan, a small Canadian island just off the New Brunswick and Maine coasts, he knew that rugged, rocky precipice well. It rose 200 feet above the sea, and on this savage night he could almost feel the fury of the wind and waves that were lashing at it. "Wal," he drawled, "I'd best get crackin'."

As Bagley dressed, his wife tucked spare mittens into his hip pocket. Then he slid into his heat-up car and set out for South West Head, six

miles away. The twisty road was slippery, swirling with snow. Being a prudent person, a former fisherman who'd taken a safer job ashore, Bagley drove cautiously: no sense taking unnecessary risks.

THE night's events, shaped by the raw forces of nature and human need, had actually begun the morning before. Fifteen miles across the bay, at Haycock Harbor, Maine, two men had cast off in a leaky motorboat. Billy Jones, 42, and his brother Floyd, 36, who eked out a living from odd jobs, were hoping to gather periwinkles to feed their families. But a gale struck from the north, the engine failed, and for 12 hours, in thrashing seas, both men bailed, vomited and prayed. After dark, the storm drove them toward a winking lighthouse on the southern tip of Grand Manan, then flung them aground below towering South West Head. There the brothers managed to drag themselves up beyond the surf. Floyd, numb with cold, could go no farther. Billy started climbing up the cliff. "I'll make for that light," he yelled. Floyd didn't answer.

Three hours later, lightkeeper Ottawa Benson and his wife heard a thump at their door. Mrs. Benson opened it—and shrank back. Crouched on hands and knees, covered with snow, a man stared up with half-crazed eyes. "My brother . . .," he stammered. "Me and my brother's been blown ashore. I got up the bank, but he's still down there."

Benson was dumfounded: he knew that it was next to impossible to scale that almost vertical cliff. He quickly rang the telephone operator at Seal Cove, nearest of the island's seven fishing villages.

On Grand Manan, a close-knit community of the sea, 2500-strong, any cry for help is a command. Soon the Seal Cove men began arriving, 17 in all, including Vern Bagley. They conferred briefly with Benson, then trudged through the blizzard to the place where Billy Jones had come up the cliff and begun crawling to the light—a mile away. Far below, roaring breakers slammed at the ink-black bluff, hurling spray high into the night. Searchers yelled Floyd's name, but the 50-mile-an-hour gale tore their words to muffled shreds.

"It's murder to send anyone down there now," one man shouted. There was a rumble of agreement. "Let's wait till daylight."

"No!" came a high-pitched protest. "That'll be too late." Out of the crowd stepped Vern Bagley, his face grave, his manner untypically firm. "Tie a line on me."

The others stared in awe. Vern Bagley was regarded as the local "character," always joking and good for a laugh. "That Vern," islanders often observed, "he'd poke fun at his own grandmother."

But tonight wasn't for fun. The little man secured a nylon line around his waist, took a flashlight, and began inching down toward the Hog's Back, a ridge of loose

rock sloping sharply to the sea. He'd gone only a few yards when slabs of stone slid out from under him and went hurtling down the bank. In panic, Bagley clambered back to the top. "No use," he panted. "I can't do it."

With the line still knotted at his waist, he walked slowly away. Sensing his embarrassment, the others quietly resumed debating what to do. And then a strange thing happened. Bagley suddenly looked up. "Yessir," he said aloud—though no one had spoken—"I sure would!" He went straight to the brink of the bluff. "I've got to go down again."

This time Bagley swung wide of the treacherous Hog's Back. Beside it ran a steep gully, the quickest way down—for him, or for a rockslide. Edging across the top of the gully, he vanished behind another almost perpendicular ridge, hesitated, then began to feel his way down the cliff's jagged face. Some 150 feet down the crag, he paused on a flat rock and flashed a light to either side—no sign of Jones—and then up the bluff. High above, to his horror, he saw that his lifeline had hooked over the gnarled root of a fallen tree. Instead of running straight down, it ran horizontally across the gully to the snag, and then down, in the shape of a figure 7. If he moved any farther, his weight could unsnag the line from the root, and the sudden slack would drop him to the cliff's bottom.

Frozen with fear, Bagley pondered his precarious position. His only

hope, he saw, was to flick the rope free, so that the resulting slack could be noticed and pulled in. "More line!" he yelled. But it remained taut. "More line!" In the thunder of wind and sea, no one above could hear him.

Somebody else did, however. From off to Bagley's left, beyond the Hog's Back, came a feeble cry: "Over here!" Floyd Jones was alive.

Bagley now faced an agonizing choice. If he continued his descent to save Jones, his rope could pull loose at any second. Yet if he held back, Jones would surely die. "Oh, God!"—the wail was weaker—"Help me!"

Up on the cliff, a bonfire cast an eerie glow on the weathered faces of the rope-handlers. Bagley's cousin Horace lay at the very edge of the precipice, "reading" the line. It quivered in his hands, and he saw a flash of light far below. "Pay out more line," he called. "The little fellow's going into the gully!"

Bagley had made his choice. Crossing the gully, he slipped on ice-crusted snow. But the lifeline—his sole hope and greatest fear—held fast. To keep his mind off it, Bagley concentrated on Floyd Jones as he crept up the flank of the rocky Hog's Back. Atop the ridge, he lay flat and shone his light over the other side.

About 25 feet below, just out of reach of the surging sea, Floyd Jones knelt on a narrow ledge, arms and face pressed into a crevice. His

clothes were stiff with ice. Only his blond hair moved in the wind. Now Bagley completely forgot his own predicament. While the men above felt his motions and released more rope, he backed over the edge. Hanging over the sea, arms and legs straight out from the rough rock, he made his way downward.

Suddenly, atop the cliff, Horace felt the line go limp. "We've lost him!" he screamed. Frantic, he hauled in the rope—30, 50, 70 feet of it. Then, just as suddenly, he again felt his cousin's weight and a reassuring yank on the line.

Far below, Bagley crouched beside Jones, trembling. He had just been brushed by death. At the very instant that he stepped onto the ledge, his slender lifeline had finally jerked loose from the snag. Over and over he told himself, *I'm alive!*

But Floyd Jones appeared to be dead. Bagley removed a glove and touched the man's frigid, uncovered head. "Can't move," came a hoarse rasp. "I'm froze from the belt down."

"Don't worry now," Bagley replied. "We'll get you up in no time."

Brave words. For the problems ahead were as large as the cliff itself. The semiconscious Jones couldn't be hauled up alone; the savage winds would batter him against the rock. There was only one possibility. With the rope still tied to himself, Bagley got Jones to his feet and eased his hands into the extra mittens his wife had given him an eternity ago. Then he wrapped Floyd's arms

around his own waist, from behind, jammed them under the rope, and tightened it securely. "Hang on!" he shouted.

After three sharp tugs—the haul-up signal—the lifeline strained. The two men dangled in space, then began to rise. Jones, a 180-pounder, clung to his rescuer with the strength of desperation. For Bagley, the ascent was agony. The rope tightened around him so terribly he thought he was being cut in two.

As he neared the Hog's Back, Bagley felt Jones slipping. He caught him by the neck and wrestled him over the hump. There they lay, Jones unconscious, Bagley gasping for breath and trying to figure out his next move.

The little man was now too tired to make a wide detour, the way he'd come down. And on Hog's Back itself were tons of loose rocks, flung down by an earlier landslide; one false step there could be fatal. That left only the steep gully, where the lifeline might dislodge stones and start an avalanche.

Bagley retied his line around Jones and signaled to the top. Buckling under the inert body's weight, he descended into the gully and began the long climb. Clinging to the rope with one arm, using the other to protect Jones, he pushed and pulled up the slope. At times, he had to lift Jones over fallen trees. Other times, he straddled and dragged him.

About 25 feet from safety, Bagley's tortured legs gave out. Wedging the

unconscious Jones behind a boulder, he crept on up the rope alone. Ninety minutes after he'd left on his impulsive mission of mercy, Bagley was hauled back over the edge at the top. "He's just below," he gasped to the waiting men. "But I'm all done in."

Assistant lightkeeper Sid Guptill went down on another line, while Bagley dropped into a snowbank and lay there, waiting. Within half an hour, Floyd Jones was pulled up, still alive. Gently, he was covered with coats and rushed to the hospital.

Exhausted, aching in every fiber, Vern Bagley stood at the cliff's edge and gazed down in silent disbelief, a man tested and proved solid. As he turned and trudged away, two fishermen linked their arms through his, supporting him. "We're mighty proud of you, Vern," said one.

Next day, at the hospital, the Jones brothers tearfully thanked the little man who had risked his life in their behalf. Billy couldn't remember how he'd scaled the cliff, except

that the wind at his back had helped keep him from falling. All that Floyd recalled of his rescue was the touch of Bagley's hand waking him. "It felt," he said, "like a hot flat-iron." Doctors doubted that Floyd could have survived another 15 minutes of his ordeal. Though both men were pain-racked from exposure, they quickly recovered. As Bagley phrased it, "Them two's tougher'n tripe."

A YEAR later, 300 islanders packed the Grand Manan high-school gym to see Vern Bagley awarded the Carnegie Silver Medal for heroism. After the ceremony, Bagley was asked about the strange remark he'd made—"Yessir, I sure would!"—before he went to Floyd Jones' rescue.

"Wal," Bagley replied, "I'd been tellin' myself all the reasons why I couldn't go back over that cliff. But then this idea hit me: *Would you go if it was your own brother?* That's when I talked out loud, I guess. 'Cause, when you get right down to it, we're *all* supposed to be brothers."



Grassroots Opinion

NOT LONG AGO I found myself in a small, mid-Kansas town and fell into conversation with a bright-eyed, 70-year-old farmer who asked, "Where you from, son?"

"Washington," I replied.

"Washington, D.C.?"

"That's right."

"You've got some pretty smart fellas back there, ain't ya?" he asked. I nodded. "You've got some that ain't so smart, too, ain't ya?" Again, I agreed. "Damn hard to tell the difference, ain't it?" he concluded.