

GLOBE MAGAZINE

An ice climbing disaster on Mount Katahdin. A desperate race to save lives.

It was a mild winter day in 1974 when six climbers set out on a route no one had ever attempted. Then came Pamola's Fury.

By David Goodman
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Illustrations by Daniel Hertzberg for the Boston Globe

Bob Proudman slowly slid his hand up from inside his sleeping bag to check his watch. It was 7 a.m. They were already running late.

He and five other ice climbers — some experienced, some less so — were about to embark on the first ascent of a steep route up Mount Katahdin, Maine's tallest mountain. The climb would be challenging, and he knew daylight would be precious.

Proudman stepped outside the bunkhouse. It was January 31, 1974, clear and weirdly warm for northern Maine, heading toward 40 degrees. He looked across frozen Chimney Pond to their day's climb in the distance: two ice-filled gullies that lunged like hungry snakes 2,000 feet up Pamola Peak, a massive wall of rock and ice.

Katahdin, a Penobscot word that means "greatest mountain," comprises six major summits. The highest, stretching a mile above sea level, is Baxter Peak. From there, hikers and climbers can head over South Peak and then clamber — via the vertiginous Knife Edge Trail — across Chimney Peak to Pamola. At the foot of this

circle of peaks lies Chimney Pond, where the bunkhouse and some lean-tos stood near a cabin reserved for park rangers.

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The 1970s marked the dawn of the modern era of steep ice climbing, amid roiling cultural division. New Hampshire ice climbers, centered around North Conway, were a renegade and freewheeling bunch. Baxter State Park, in contrast, was a place governed by myriad regulations enforced by no-nonsense rangers. Still, Proudman had navigated the rules and made two Katahdin expeditions the previous winter, claiming several first ascents of ice-climbing routes.

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Back inside the bunkhouse, Proudman woke his friends. "Time to climb," he announced loudly. He opened the wood stove, blew on the coals, and stuffed it with wood. He placed a pot of water on top of it for coffee. Slowly, the others began to rouse themselves from sleep.

Proudman, 25, had organized a six-man group of current or recent staff of the [Appalachian Mountain Club](#), where he'd worked since 1965. He was especially pleased that Paul DiBello was coming. The previous March, they'd made the first ascent of the Diamond, a demanding Katahdin ice climb. The 23-year-old DiBello originally moved to Pinkham Notch in New Hampshire to ski, but discovered ice climbing "put me more on the edge than anything I'd ever done."

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As the most experienced climbers on the trip, Proudman and DiBello would each lead a team.





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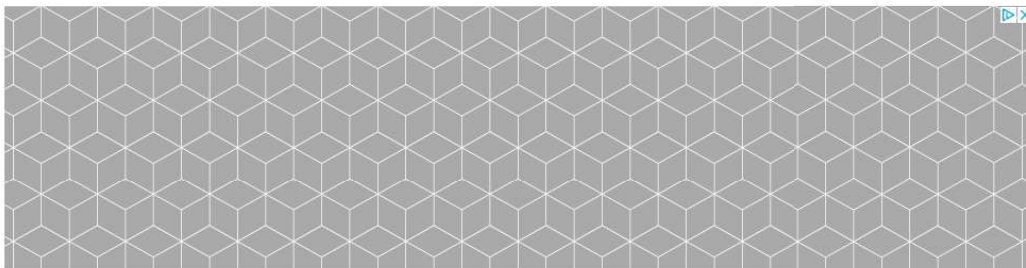
Joining Proudman was Mike Cohen, the expedition's oldest member at 30. He'd been on the Katahdin trip the previous winter. Doug George, 23, was a senior at the University of New Hampshire. He'd worked several summers in the AMC huts, but had limited ice experience.

DiBello's team included the trip's youngest member, Page Dinsmore, a 19-year-old taking time off from Dartmouth College to work in an AMC cabin at Tuckerman Ravine on Mount Washington. He'd done some rock climbing, but not much on ice. The third member was Tom Keddy, a 26-year-old Vietnam veteran from Wakefield, Massachusetts. A member of the AMC trail crew, he'd been climbing with DiBello, who was impressed by how Keddy had kept his cool on a previous difficult climb. When another climber couldn't come to Katahdin, DiBello got the OK to offer Keddy the spot.

As the January trip approached, [Keddy reassured his nervous parents](#) back in Wakefield that he was ready. "I have a natural ability on ice," he wrote them. "One thing we're not planning to do is to have accidents."

After breakfast, the six climbers emerged from the bunkhouse around 9 a.m. and were greeted by a stunning — and unsettling — sight. The sky over Katahdin glowed a brilliant red. It made them think of the old nautical adage, "Red sky at morning, sailors take warning." Still, the conditions seemed in their favor.

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The crunch of their crampons on frozen Chimney Pond echoed around the mountain as they trudged to the base of Pamola Peak. The mild temperatures led several of them to pack light: Proudman and Dinsmore carried down jackets; the others threw in a sweater or vest for extra warmth. DiBello brought just a wool shirt.

They reached the bottom of the two Pamola gullies in a half-hour. Proudman was quietly concerned that this was a late start for a full-day climb, but seven hours of daylight ought to be enough to get up the mountain and back.

Proudman unshouldered his pack and pulled a 150-foot coil of orange rope, while Cohen took out a second. Each man tied into their waist harness. DiBello's team moved left about 100 yards to the start of their gully and repeated the clipping-in ritual with their own ropes.

The teams would be within shouting distance of one another throughout the

climb, though not always in sight. They'd rejoin below the summit of Pamola, then hike down the popular Dudley Trail. By dinner, they'd be back in the bunkhouse, telling stories around the wood stove.

It was about 10 a.m. when the two teams finally began their ascent, excited and expectant like explorers striking out for a new world.

According to Penobscot Indian legend, Katahdin is inhabited by Pamola, a fierce protector of the mountain. When Henry David Thoreau tried to conquer it in 1846, poor weather struck and his Penobscot guides refused to continue. "Pamola is always angry with those who climb to the summit of Ktaadn," Thoreau wrote.

The six young men who set out under clear skies to tackle a new ice climbing route knew nothing of this legend. And as they began to climb, they didn't know the National Weather Service in Portland had issued an ominous forecast for the area earlier that Thursday morning.

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The forecast would prove to be an understatement. By evening, the climbers would be pinned to the side of the mountain in a storm of unimaginable ferocity. One by one, each would face an agonizing decision: save himself or die.

Two powerful forces converged on Katahdin that fateful day 50 years ago: one was a killer storm; the other was a clash of cultures. In the shadow of a storm-raked mountain, the by-the-book park rangers and the rebel ice climbers would need to turn to one another for help.

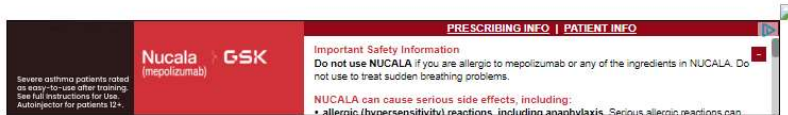
The year 1969 was one of revolution in America, from Woodstock, to the moon landing, to ice climbing.

Yvon Chouinard, the pioneering mountain climber who later founded the company Patagonia, was experimenting with ways to climb straight up vertical ice. He forged new kinds of equipment — the Chouinard ice ax and ice hammer bear his name. The rigid crampons he designed with sharp front points let climbers ascend directly up frozen waterfalls, when before they had to painstakingly chop steps into the ice and snow.

Chouinard was an evangelist, traveling around the country showing others that they could use these tools to tackle routes once deemed impossible. Classic climbs that previously took days now took hours. On trips to New England, Chouinard crashed in the University of Massachusetts Amherst dorm room shared by Bob

Proudman and Rick Wilcox. The two friends were quick converts to Chouinard's cause, vaulting into the vanguard of what became known as the Ice Revolution.

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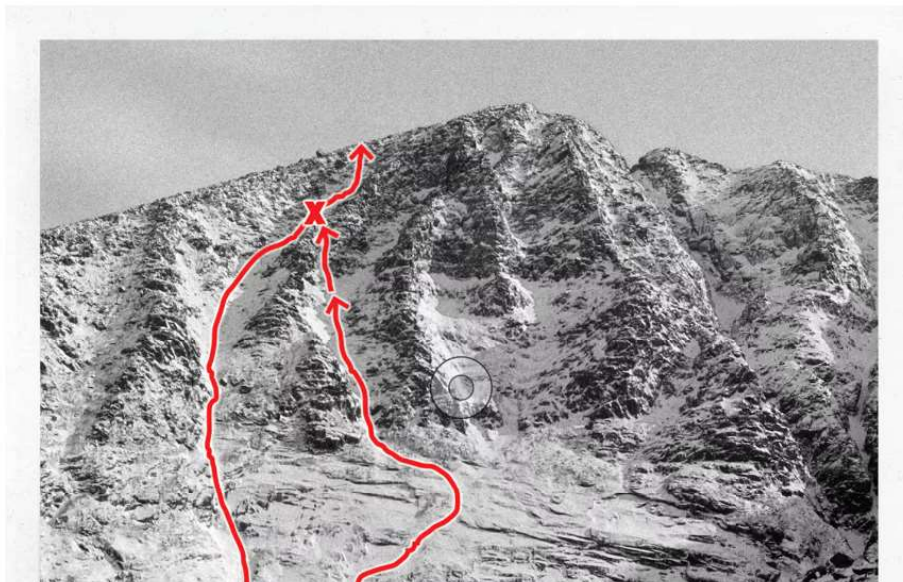
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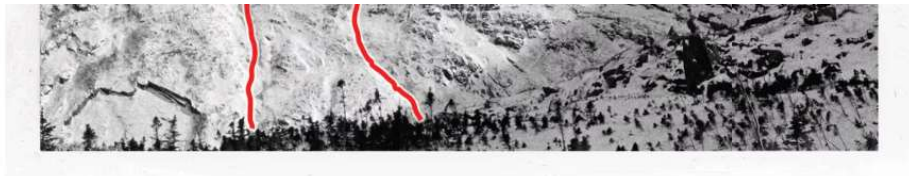
Intense, quiet, and competitive, Proudman had enrolled in ROTC at UMass to avoid the Vietnam War, which he opposed. But he and Wilcox would much rather climb than study or do military drills. By his early twenties, Proudman had already made daring first ascents throughout New England and the western United States. He had a reputation for trying anything, including rock climbing in hurricane-force winds.

Wilcox, wiry with a mop of curly hair and a thick mustache, worked part time at the Eastern Mountain Sports store in Amherst. He'd been climbing since he was a teen in Middleton, Massachusetts, and honing his skills at the Blue Hills Reservation. During his junior year at UMass, he joined a climbing expedition to Alaska — he paid his way with loans intended for college — and summited Mount Bona, North America's 10th highest peak.

The era's ragtag group of talented climbers with their new gear began clawing their way up icy cliffs from the Adirondacks to Northern Maine and beyond. More climbing was always the goal, even if it took living out of their cars to do it. "We were dirtbags before the expression came along," says Jonna Bragg, previously known as John Bragg, a leading climber of the time and regular mountaineering partner of Wilcox. "There was a counterculture aspect to it."

But in [Baxter State Park](#), park supervisor Irvin "Buzz" Caverly was intent on ensuring the revolutions of the 1960s and '70s ended at his gate. A farm boy who grew into a self-assured and imposing leader with a barrel chest and booming voice, he forged an improbable bond as a young ranger with former governor Percival Baxter, who spent decades purchasing the lands around Katahdin for the people of Maine. The act of generosity came with a proviso: The land must be kept "forever wild."

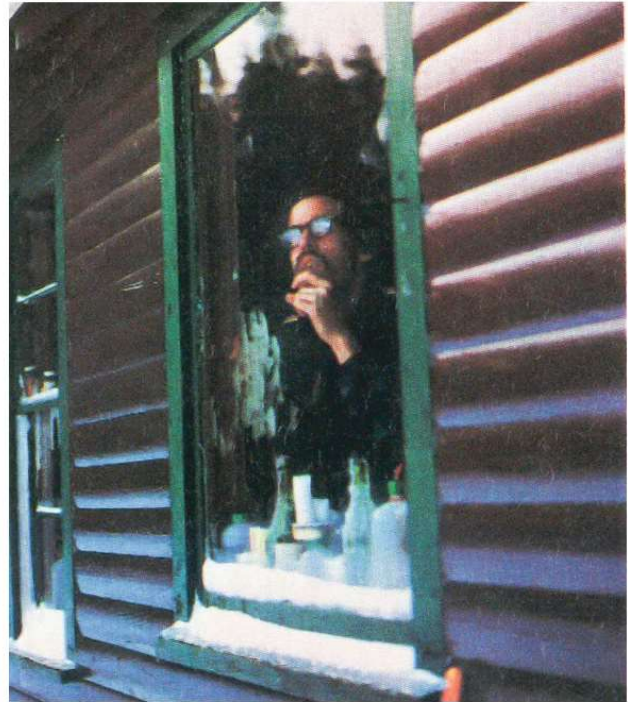




Approximate routes the two teams climbed on Pamola Peak, with Paul DiBello's team on the left and Bob Proudman's on the right. The X represents the ledge where the two climbing parties met just as the storm arrived that day. PHOTO BY PETER COLE. GLOBE STAFF ILLUSTRATION



In 1974, Bob Proudman organized a six-man group of current or recent staff of the Appalachian Mountain Club, where he worked, to climb Pamola Peak on Mount Katahdin in Maine. (APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB LIBRARY & ARCHIVES)



Tom Keddy looking at Mount Katahdin the day before the group began their climb. (THE KEDDY FAMILY FOR YANKEE MAGAZINE)

Caverly took this as a blood oath to zealously defend Baxter State Park, which now spans 209,644 acres. He tightly controlled loggers and hunters to keep them from pillaging its natural resources, to the delight of environmentalists. But to the renegade climbing community, he was the detested face of the establishment. Caverly railed against the “illegal and immoral” use of drugs and sent undercover officers “to mingle among the hippies” to bust pot-smoking hikers and climbers. He pursued the mission so passionately that Maine’s attorney general once urged him to dial back his “gung-ho” anti-drug crusade.

Baxter State Park stymied mountaineers with a dizzying array of rules. Winter climbing permits had to be obtained weeks or months in advance, and participants were required to submit résumés and medical forms, among other requirements. The rules stifled “the freedom of the hills so successfully,” observed a history of mountaineering, “that many climbers simply avoid Katahdin rather than submit.”

For the 1974 expedition, Proudman had filed the necessary paperwork and added a sweetener: He and DiBello would come a few days early to help rangers work on a ski trail. As for Wilcox, he’d still never climbed Katahdin — he didn’t have the patience to jump through the bureaucratic hoops required by Caverly and park officials.

In 1996, embarking on my own expedition through Baxter, I asked Caverly why mountaineers couldn’t use their own judgment to travel freely there, as they do in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Caverly jabbed his finger at me. “We don’t agree with the philosophy that you have the right to die in the mountains.”

On the forbidding cliffs of Katahdin, Bob Proudman was in his element. As the sun glinted off the ice, he reveled at moving higher and higher through the East Coast's most dramatic alpine landscape. "He was like a dancer on the ice," recalls Mike Cohen. "He was just magnificent."

Proudman's confidence was infectious. He, Cohen, and Doug George made excellent time up several steep sections, as they alternated powerful swings of their ice axes with hard kicks into the ice with their crampons, sending plate-size chunks flying. But progress for the second team, led by Paul DiBello, was much slower.

Proudman had worried about this. During trip planning in the fall, he'd expressed reservations about climbing in three-person rope teams, which were slower than two-man ones. But since the group wanted to climb in two groups of three, and make decisions democratically, Proudman let it go. He chalked it up to them being "hippies," he later said, with an attitude of "let's all be a big family."

At 2 p.m., Proudman's group stopped to eat a quick lunch, then continued climbing to a ledge between the two ice-filled gullies. The two teams had been out of visual contact since about noon, their sightlines obstructed by a ridge.

DiBello was getting exhausted. So was Dinsmore, as they alternated taking the lead up the mountain. They decided to skip lunch so as not to lose more time. Dinsmore worked his way up one pitch and collapsed on a ledge. "I'm just not in very good shape," he said, his chest heaving.

After another rope length, DiBello also struggled. "My legs are cramping," he said.



DANIEL HERTZBERG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Their third teammate, the ever-cheerful Tom Keddy, had fallen quiet. The climb was longer and more exposed than he'd expected. "I'm in over my head," he admitted.

As the sky grew dark in the afternoon, Cohen and George called over to DiBello's team, who were still out of sight. DiBello shouted back that they would reach them in 20 minutes. They wouldn't arrive for three hours.

In the fading light, Proudman realized they could not make it off the mountain.

in the fading light, Proudman realized they could not make it on the mountain and prepared to bivouac overnight. He used his ice ax to chip a ledge out of the ice and snow — 3 feet wide by 5 feet long — for everyone to gather. He estimated they were within a few hundred feet of the top, but he wouldn't attempt making it there. He wanted the group to remain together.

A [later AMC report](#) included an evaluation of this moment. “In all probability, Bob, Mike, and Doug could have climbed to the ridge by dark and descended back to camp had they not waited,” the report concluded. “It is also quite possible that as a result of such action, all three of the others would have perished.”

By now, DiBello's team was close. Proudman lowered a rope and helped haul his friends up to the ledge. Exhausted, each of them slipped off the ice wall repeatedly as they tried to make it up the final yards. “You're almost there!” he shouted in encouragement.

The six climbers were blindsided as a frigid blast of wind suddenly roared up the mountain, hitting them like a freight train. Keddy closed his eyes against the strafe of snow. DiBello flinched as the frigid air hit him in the face like a bucket of ice water.

It was close to midnight by the time the six climbers were finally reunited on the ledge. Keddy arrived last, falling a half-dozen times while Proudman held tightly to the rope and dragged him up. By then, the full force of the storm was upon them.

We're in for a hell of a night, Proudman thought. Then he began saying the Lord's Prayer.

The storm raged with thunder and lightning through the night. Temperatures plunged to around minus 20 degrees. Gusts of over 100 miles per hour threatened to blow them off the ledge. Powder avalanches cascaded over their heads, vanishing into the void below.

The six men huddled in a battle to survive. They beat on one another's arms and legs to get their blood flowing. They took turns yelling roll call in the wind. “Endure!” they shouted again and again. “Endure!”

At one point, DiBello passed out from exhaustion. When he came to, he couldn't feel his legs. Cohen sat on them in a determined effort to rewarm him. Keddy grew increasingly listless as the cold sapped his strength.

When dawn finally broke, Proudman was stunned by their condition. DiBello couldn't stand. Dinsmore, his face pocked by blood blisters, turned to Proudman. “I'm freezing to death,” he said. “I have to go.”

Proudman warned that he'd die if he fell. Dinsmore said he'd die if he stayed, then untied himself from the ropes and entered the whiteout.

Proudman felt this was the moment to save everyone with what strength they had left. They made a plan: He would climb to the ridge above, fix a rope, then rappel back down. The stranded men could use it to climb up to the ridge, then follow the trail to safety. But all the ropes were frozen together, and they didn't have one long enough. Proudman started to climb anyway, while Cohen pulled what rope he could from the pile, cut lengths free, then tied them to Proudman's line to extend it.





DANIEL HERTZBERG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Proudman groped his way skyward, straining to see through partly frozen eyes. The wind was howling so fiercely up the gully that it nearly lifted him up to the ridge. After he made it there, he tied his rope around a boulder, and began to rappel down to the others. Inches before the end of his rope, just before slipping off its end, he discovered the knot connecting the next rope had untied. He lunged back onto the mountainside and shouted to his partners, but the roar of the wind drowned him out.

He had to climb back up and get help. "There was no alternative," he said later.

Proudman reached the trail and started down off Pamola Peak. When he encountered Dinsmore, the two stumbled down the wrong path toward Roaring Brook Campground. Proudman told Dinsmore to continue there and radio for help. He would hike several miles back up to Chimney Pond to alert the rangers there.

High on the cliffs above, Doug George and Mike Cohen realized they had to save themselves, or die. They secured a semiconscious Keddy and DiBello on the ledge with ropes, then cut themselves free of the frozen ropes, climbing up to the ridge with all they had left. At one point George's mitten blew off — his hand froze in moments. They staggered toward Chimney Pond, groping their way through the storm.

Ranger Art York was on duty at the Chimney Pond cabin. The previous night, he'd been concerned that the climbers had not returned and tried unsuccessfully to reach someone at park headquarters by radio. He reached Caverly on Friday at 8:30 a.m., and his boss assured him that the climbers were "well equipped and very knowledgeable." Still, he said he'd dispatch additional rangers to the area just in case.

JUST IN CASE.

At approximately 1:30 p.m. — some 28 hours after Proudman's group started their ascent — George and Cohen banged on the door of the cabin. York opened it and recoiled at the sight: the cocky young climbers could barely stand. York and his wife started first aid, and York got back on the radio to headquarters.

Around the same time, Dinsmore reached the campground and radioed for help, and Proudman soon arrived at York's cabin. He had severe frostbite, and could barely open his eyes. He stammered that the others were still up on the mountain fighting for their lives.

Caverly received York's call with news of the spiraling disaster. Knowing a rescue of this technical difficulty was beyond the ability of his rangers, he contacted the Maine Army National Guard in Bangor to request a helicopter for the injured climbers. Within hours Major Eugene Richardson made two passes with his Huey, first bringing Dinsmore to the hospital, then racing back to pick up George, Cohen, and Proudman.

On the way to the Millinocket hospital, Proudman begged Richardson to fly over the ledge where his friends were. Richardson piloted combat missions in Vietnam, but had never flown in such horrendous weather conditions. "There's no way I'm flying near those cliffs," he shouted.

Caverly met the injured climbers in the hospital, their hands and faces frozen a waxy white with deep frostbite. Proudman was desperate to get help to DiBello and Keddy. "Call Rick Wilcox," he implored Caverly. "Have him bring a team of climbers from North Conway. They're the only ones who can save them."

Huddled on the tiny ledge of ice, DiBello remained with Keddy, who continued to drift in and out of consciousness. It was late afternoon and DiBello had stayed as long as he could. He knew he couldn't survive another night. As the light waned, he willed himself to his feet.

DiBello urged his partner to stand. He tried hauling him up, but Keddy just slumped down. DiBello finally lashed him tightly in place to keep him from slipping off the mountain. Around 3:30 p.m., with numb legs and eyes nearly frozen shut, he clawed his way up Pamola Peak. He turned to face the cutting wind blowing from the direction of Dudley Trail, his escape route.

On the trek down, DiBello stumbled off a cliff, falling 60 feet through trees to the ice and snow below. Nearly blind, his ice ax lost, he heard a helicopter that he thought would save him. When the sound disappeared, he crawled for hours toward what he thought was a candle. It was the light of the ranger cabin.

DiBello pounded on the door at 6:30 p.m. on the brink of death.

Only Tom Keddy remained on the mountain.

A transistor radio crackled behind the counter at [Eastern Mountain Sports](#) in North Conway. It was late afternoon on Friday, February 1, and newscasters were reporting that President Richard Nixon had vowed he would never step down. To Rick Wilcox, the 25-year-old store manager, it was just background noise. He strolled onto the floor to arrange some new parkas.

The EMS store was the hub of the New Hampshire climbing community, staffed by a group of elite climbers earning money for their next adventures. There was John Bragg, whose shoulder-length, shaggy blond hair made him look like a California surfer. The cerebral but jocular Peter Cole and the talented Dave Cilley had put up some of the hardest, steepest ice climbs in the country. Paul Ross,

director of EMS's climbing school, reined mountaineering in hideous weather — it reminded him of his native Scotland.

Just then, the phone rang. Wilcox answered.

"This is Buzz Caverly. I don't know if you know who I am."

Of course Wilcox knew of Caverly. He was the uncompromising wilderness cop who was the reason he'd never stepped foot on Katahdin.

"What can I do for you, Buzz?" he asked warily.

"We have a serious situation and we need your help," Caverly began. "Yesterday, six ice climbers went up Katahdin. Something happened and they spent the night on an ice ledge at 25 below zero in 100 mile per hour winds. I believe they're your friends."

Wilcox stiffened.

Caverly continued, "One of them says you know him and told me to call you. His name is Bob Proudman."

The smirk vanished from Wilcox's face. Wilcox pictured his old roommate, smiling impishly as they tackled a new route.

"Several climbers are still stuck on the side of the mountain," explained Caverly, who didn't yet know only Keddy remained. "Mr. Proudman says that you and your colleagues are the best ice climbers in the country. He says that you are the only ones who can save them. I hope he's right."

For the first time, the law was asking the outlaws for help.

Caverly had already sent two planes to North Conway. They'd fly to Millinocket, just outside the park. Wilcox was to bring the best climbers he could find. The clock was ticking.

Wilcox turned to the other men in EMS. "Pack your climbing packs and warm gear," he said. "We're going to Katahdin to save our buddies."



Buzz Caverly, director of Baxter State Park, photographed in 1996. PETER COLE

When Wilcox and his team arrived in Millinocket around dusk, rangers sped them to park headquarters. A grim-faced Caverly was waiting. As he began his briefing, climber Paul Ross coolly drank a beer he'd pulled from his pack. Caverly, a teetotaler, glared at him. (Ross does not recall doing this.)

Wilcox interrupted Caverly. "Get us to the mountain as fast as you can," he said. "Let us do our thing."

At the park entrance, the rescue team was greeted by a group of Millinocket snowmobilers. They had come to help however they could. Each climber hung on while the snowmobilers raced them 13 miles into the park, as far as they could go. They would need to walk the final 3 miles.

On the stormy hike up to Chimney Pond, the rescue team encountered a party of rangers carrying DiBello out on a litter. His friend's eyes were blistered shut, and he could barely talk, but he needed to impart a key piece of information. "Come down from the top," he urged Wilcox. He said Keddy was just one rope length down from Pamola's summit, around 150 feet. "He's barely hanging on. Get to

him as soon as you can.”

It was close to midnight by the time the rescue team knocked on the door of the ranger cabin. Ranger Art York opened the door and surveyed the crew before him. The Maine rangers “expected the rescue team to be somebody [wearing] a wool jacket with a badge and carrying a gun,” Wilcox recalls. They got hippie climbers instead.

Wilcox strained to be heard above the wind. “Can we come in and have some food and catch some sleep?”

“You can’t stay here,” York replied, according to Wilcox (York died in 2021), not recognizing them as rescuers. Wilcox was stunned, explaining that they’d been told to leave their sleeping bags behind. The ranger directed them to another cabin and then shut the door.

The climbers were furious. It was too late at night to attempt a rescue, so they hunkered down in the cabin, lit the wood stove, and piled mattresses on top of themselves to stay warm. Cole’s mattress promptly caught fire. He threw it out in the snow and grabbed another one. (Proudman criticized officials at a contentious public inquest held a month later. “You treated the rescuers like [expletive],” he charged.)

At first light on Saturday morning, the rescuers were ready to climb. They feared that Keddy was unlikely to have survived 36 hours in a subzero storm. But they still had to try.

Wilcox turned to his team. “We’re here for a reason,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Rangers tried to direct them amid the rush of National Guard and Maine mountain rescue members, but Wilcox and his team ignored them. “It was kind of us and them, and we weren’t on the same team,” Wilcox recalls. The rangers watched wide-eyed as the New Hampshire climbers charged up the mountain into the gale.

Wilcox, Bragg, and Ross were fastest and climbed for several hours. At the top of the gully, they found Proudman’s rope still tied above the ice climbing route. It was just before noon when Bragg used his own rope and rappelled down to the ledge and found Tom Keddy, slumped in a tangle of frozen ropes and gear. Bragg thought for a moment that Keddy was sleeping, his head resting against a glazed rock. But when he went to roust him, he discovered that Keddy was frozen. A mask of ice encased his face.

Moments later, Wilcox and Ross rappelled to the ledge. Wilcox decided there was no way they could move Keddy’s body without risking another death. The three men climbed back up to the ridge, leaned into the wind, and made their way down to report that Keddy was dead.

Ranger York changed his tone, now realizing the climbers’ skills and their crucial role. He thanked them profusely and put them on the radio with Caverly. The rescue mission had given way to a body recovery.

The storm lasted four days. The weather observatory on Mount Washington, where conditions were similar to Katahdin, recorded temperatures down to minus 19, gusts of up to 137 miles per hour, and a wind chill of minus 71 degrees.

It took five days before a helicopter could reach Keddy and lift his body off of Pamola Peak.

All of the surviving climbers were hospitalized. Proudman lost part of an ear,

Dinsmore required skin grafts on his fingers, and George was treated for his frostbitten hand. Cohen's toes were severely frostbitten — he walked on crutches for weeks. DiBello's injuries were grave: His thumb, a foot, and part of his other foot had to be amputated.

Tom Keddy's parents buried their son back home in Massachusetts. When Proudman visited them, they said the storm that ravaged Katahdin and New England had also blown in the windows to Tom's bedroom, raining glass over his bed. They eventually found a measure of consolation, [Keddy's mother later told Yankee magazine](#), knowing he died doing something he loved.

Rick Wilcox returned home to New Hampshire with a grim new understanding: Where the climbers of the new Ice Revolution were leading, no one could follow except themselves. He helped organize the once-anarchic climbing community into the Mountain Rescue Service, an elite volunteer rescue group loosely launched two years earlier by the state. The group has led more than 600 rescues since 1974, mainly in the White Mountains — "climbers taking care of climbers," he calls it. He led the group for 40 years, stepping down in 2016.



Rick Wilcox, John Bragg, and Peter Cole after coming off the mountain. PETER COLE



Doug George in the hospital being treated for frostbite injuries from the Mount Katahdin ice climbing expedition in 1974. (APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB LIBRARY & ARCHIVES)



Paul DiBello recovering from frostbite injuries sustained in 1974 during an ice climbing expedition on Mount Katahdin in Maine. (APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB LIBRARY & ARCHIVES)

After a lifetime of rescues, Wilcox will never forget 1974 on Katahdin. "Going to the top of Pamola in those conditions, getting to Tom and getting back down, was as good as anybody could do on earth," he says. "And they were the best."

Wilcox, 76, is the longtime owner of [International Mountain Equipment in North Conway](#), in the same space as the old EMS. He's been on 64 expeditions

around the world, and in 1991 summited Mount Everest with the first all-New England group, becoming the 260th climber to stand atop earth's highest peak.

Despite his initial distrust, Wilcox became good friends with Buzz Caverly, who spent 46 years working for Baxter State Park. Upon his retirement in 2005, a park official declared, "No human being has done more to protect that magnificent resource than Buzz Caverly." Now 86, he lives in view of the mountain he loves.

Mike Cohen, 80, has worked as a mental health administrator and advocate in Maine and New Hampshire. In the mid-'70s, he joined the board of the Appalachian Mountain Club, helping lead the effort to open the formerly cliquish club to all. Today, AMC has some 90,000 members. Page Dinsmore, 69, was a veterinarian at Colorado State University and is now retired. Doug George, a builder of energy-efficient homes, died in 2009 at age 57.

"The unbelievable feat of endurance by Paul DiBello" on frostbitten legs, the author of the 1974 AMC accident report observed, "demonstrates that the will to live can overcome what may appear to be overwhelming odds." DiBello went on to become a pioneer member of the US Disabled Ski Team and was the first gold medalist in downhill skiing at the inaugural Paralympic Games in 1984, winning gold again in 1988. Founder of the competition program for the [National Sports Center for the Disabled](#), he died of COVID-19 in April 2020 at the age of 69.

Bob Proudman never returned to serious ice climbing again, citing survivor's guilt. The AMC report concluded the Katahdin tragedy was "preventable" and faulted Proudman's leadership, among many other factors, but also praised his selfless decision to keep the group together. Had he not, more would have died. "I've always tried to do the right thing, morally and spiritually," Proudman told me.

He went on to dedicate his life to protecting the Appalachian Trail, the roughly 2,200-mile route that ends on Katahdin. He spent nearly 40 years working for the [Appalachian Trail Conservancy](#), and his book on trail design remains the bible of the trade. He was the namesake and first recipient of the Proud Man/Woman Award, the ATC's highest recognition. "Bob has helped almost every hiker who's ever walked in the White Mountains, on the Appalachian Trail, or on any trail, anywhere," a US Forest Service official observed. Proudman died at 69 in 2018, four months after I interviewed him at his home in West Virginia.

Proudman eventually learned about the legend of Pamola, the protector of Katahdin. It gave him a new perspective on what happened on that night in 1974. The spirit "defended his summit with snow, ice, lightning, thunder, wind, and extreme cold," he told me, still in awe nearly a half century later. "It was almost personal."

In Rick Wilcox's guidebook to ice climbing, Proudman, Keddy, and the others are credited with the first ascent of the twin gullies. The task of finding an appropriate name for the climb fell to Proudman.

He called it Pamola's Fury.

[David Goodman](#) is a journalist and author in Vermont. He hosts the [podcast The Vermont Conversation](#). Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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