



# The Last Fugitive

Thirty-five years after four young radicals bombed Sterling Hall, three have been caught and brought to justice. One was never heard from again. To this day, there is one lingering question about UW-Madison's turbulent Vietnam days: what happened to Leo Burt?

By Doug Moe '79

## The tips started coming almost immediately.

On October 31, 1970, two months after a bomb exploded outside Sterling Hall on the UW-Madison campus, a waitress in a restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio, thought one of her customers was Leo Burt, one of four men wanted in connection with the bombing. She had seen his face on an FBI Ten Most Wanted poster.

Later that night, the customer from the restaurant came out of a Cleveland movie theater, where he had just watched *Easy Rider*. As he started to open his car door, several uniformed police officers approached, guns drawn, and told him to put his hands over his head. An FBI agent approached him and said, "You're being charged as a fugitive from justice."

After an hour of questioning, authorities realized that the man was a second-year law student named Richard Routman, and not a notorious fugitive. Today, Routman is an attorney in Kansas, and every once in a while, he wonders whatever became of Leo Burt.

In 2003, thirty-three years after that Halloween night in Cleveland, FBI special agent Kent Miller got a call from Denver. Someone had tipped police that a homeless man in the area might be Burt. Miller, who had worked the Burt case for fifteen years out of the bureau's Madison office, compared a photograph of the Denver man to age-enhanced images of Burt the bureau had made. There were resemblances, although the homeless man's hair was longer.

"He was real mysterious," Miller recalls. "He wouldn't stay in the same homeless shelter more than four or five nights, wouldn't tell anybody where he was from."

The FBI enlisted an employee of the homeless shelter, who managed to retrieve a soda can the man had held.

But the prints did not match. The homeless man was not Leo Burt.

The tips keep coming, but they are always wrong.

This summer, thirty-five years will have passed since the August night when four young radicals parked a van full of explosives in the driveway outside Sterling Hall. Targeted at the Army Math Research Center as a protest against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, the bomb killed Robert Fassnacht, a thirty-three-year-old postdoctoral

# "Leo simply disappeared.

researcher in physics, and touched off an FBI manhunt for the bombers.

Three men who carried out the bombing — erstwhile UW student Karleton Armstrong, his brother Dwight Armstrong, and then-freshman David Fine — were all eventually arrested, served time in prison, and have gotten on with their lives. But their suspected accomplice, Leo Frederick Burt '70, remains at large, making him perhaps the last fugitive of the Vietnam era. Thousands of tips have been investigated, hundreds of theories advanced, and the mystery of Burt has only deepened.

After he published *Radix*, his 1992 book about the bombing, newspaper reporter Tom Bates MA'68, PhD'72 thought he might hear from Burt. When he didn't, Bates grew even more fascinated by the fugitive. In 1995, Bates wrote a long story for a newspaper in Oregon, claiming Burt was the Unabomber, the domestic terrorist who killed three people and injured dozens more with bombs, usually mailed, from 1978 to 1995. Bates based his claim largely on similarities between the Unabomber's "Manifesto," which had been recently published by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and an article written by Burt for the left-wing journal

*Liberation* after he disappeared into the underground in 1972. There were striking similarities in the prose, but the man eventually arrested as the Unabomber was Ted Kaczynski, not Leo Burt.

Through the years, there have been rumors of sightings — in Norman, Oklahoma, in the early 1970s; in Algeria in 1972; and in Costa Rica in 1990. None have panned out. If anything, it is the utter lack of credible information on what has become of Burt that most distinguishes the case.

That's what struck Allan Thompson, the Madison FBI agent who handled the

investigation prior to Miller, about the case when I talked to him in 1995. "I did fugitive work for twenty-three years. In every case I worked, someone in the woodwork knew where the person was. Family, friends — somebody," he told me. "With Burt, there was an intense investigation of his parents and relatives. Nothing came of it. Not one iota or indication in twenty-five years that he's been sighted, heard from, or spoken to."

But if Leo Burt has vanished, the interest in him has not. Joe Brennan, Jr., a thirty-six-year-old student in the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins University, is currently revising a lengthy manuscript about Burt, with the working title *The Last Radical*. Brennan's interest in Burt comes from his father, who was a classmate and rowing teammate of Burt at Monsignor Bonner High School in Pennsylvania. Brennan thinks Burt's upbringing, and especially his involvement in rowing, is critical to understanding what happened in August 1970 and perhaps the years since.

Burt was born April 18, 1948, into a middle-class, Catholic Philadelphia family. He and his six siblings grew up in a brick bungalow, across the street from a cemetery. Leo was an altar boy, and Friday dinners in the Burt home were fish

In 1970, Burt joined fellow radicals (from left) Karl-leton Armstrong, Dwight Armstrong, and David Fine as part of the New Year's Gang, which vowed to wreak havoc on operations it saw as complicit in the Vietnam War. The bomb at Sterling Hall did little damage to its intended target, the U.S. Army Math Research Center, but killed a researcher who was working inside the building. Burt's co-conspirators all have been captured and sentenced for their roles in the attack.



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or meatless spaghetti. He was a decent student, but it was crew — a widely popular sport around Philadelphia in those days — that interested him most. “The central thing in his life was rowing,” says Brennan.

A number of East Coast universities wanted Burt to row for them, but he chose Wisconsin, which under coach Randy Jablonic ‘60 had established itself as one of the best crew programs in the country. “He went to Madison solely to be part of the men’s rowing team,” Brennan says. “He wanted to be with the best. It was a fateful decision.”

Fateful because while Burt enjoyed some success in his first year rowing in Madison, the hard reality was that at five feet, eleven inches tall, he was shorter than the raw, big-boned kids Jablonic favored. It was physics: a tall man can move a boat faster than a shorter one. Burt’s experience and his intensity — remarked on by all who knew him — carried him for a time. He could outwork anyone and became a weight room legend. Yet by his junior year, with the Badgers scheduled for a big race out east, Burt was dropped from the traveling squad. While he didn’t quit then, he began to clash with Jablonic, and when the coach told him to get a haircut, Burt cleaned out his locker.

“His whole life was being a varsity rower,” Brennan says. “It left a huge hole.”

Tim Mickelson ’71, a rower originally from Deerfield, Wisconsin, may have

been Burt’s best friend on the team, having spent the summer of 1968 with Burt and his family in Pennsylvania, where they trained for Olympic trials and the coming season. Mickelson remembers Burt as someone who never fought and rarely argued with anyone, even in the sometimes heated and competitive atmosphere of the locker room. “Never

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swore, never told a dirty joke, never had a date, as far as I know,” Mickelson recalls. “It was rowing and studies. Leo was a good, but not great, student, and he studied a lot.”

When Burt left the team, he and Mickelson remained friends, while seeing each other less. “He let his hair grow and

started writing a lot for the *Daily Cardinal* and SDS [Students for a Democratic Society],” Mickelson says. “At some point, he started believing what he was writing.”

Political activism was hard to avoid on campus in 1969. Two years earlier, student demonstrations against the Dow Chemical company had erupted into bloody riots. After he left the crew, Burt’s circle refocused around *Daily Cardinal* reporters and the anti-war activists he met while covering protests. He forged friendships with Fine and Karl Armstrong. “It became another culture, like rowing, for him to immerse himself in,” Brennan says.

In the spring of 1970, when news broke that the National Guard had shot four students during a protest at Kent State University, the already edgy UW-Madison campus erupted. While covering a melee between police and students on Bascom Hill, Burt was beaten by police. And with that, he was no longer an observer.

Over beers at the Nitty Gritty, Burt talked politics and revolution with the Armstrong brothers and Fine. “It was a chance to be part of something bigger than himself, yet be a big part of it himself,” says Brennan. Their discussions turned to the Army Math Research Center, which had recently received a \$1.8 million contract from the U.S. Department of Defense, and they started to plot. Something had to be done.

In the predawn hours of August 24, 1970, Kent Miller was working as a support employee for the FBI in his hometown of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. In those days, FBI offices were required to test their teletype machines every twenty-four hours, and on that night, Miller was supposed to send messages to the office in Milwaukee.

"I'm merrily talking to this guy [by teletype]," Miller recalls, "and he sends a message back that the phone was ringing. He comes back and says, 'Big explosion at the university. Got to go.'"

It was big, all right. The blast at Sterling Hall killed Fassnacht and caused more than \$6 million in damages. But it also changed the course of Miller's life. Eighteen years later, he would be in Madison, leading the FBI's ongoing investigation, which by then centered on Burt, the only suspect whom they hadn't succeeded in finding.

After planting the bomb, Burt, the Armstrongs, and Fine had packed into a small Corvair and headed north out of Madison, toward Sauk County. The others later remembered Burt weeping in the back seat when the radio delivered the news that a man had died in the bombing. But then, as they sat on a bluff near Devil's Lake, Dwight Armstrong — as he would later tell author Tom Bates — sensed a change in Burt. The twenty-two-year-old, who had absorbed the work of the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, reinvented himself as the sun came up. Armstrong looked at Burt and thought, "He's cold as steel."

The four actually drove back to Madison, lying their way out of a potential jam when they were stopped by Sauk County police, before heading for New York. They split up in Toledo; Karl and Dwight kept the car and dropped Fine and Burt at the Greyhound station, with an agreement to meet a week later in Times Square.

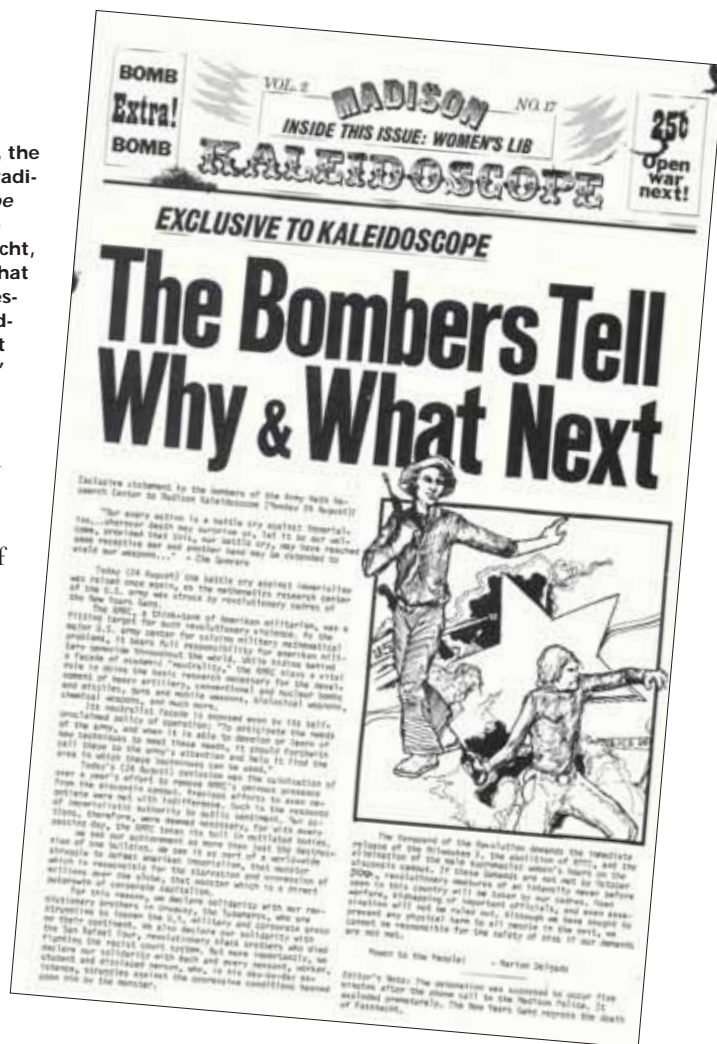
That meeting never came off. While Fine and Burt did go to New York, they were intent on getting out of the United States. From New York, Burt sent a dis-

patch to the Madison underground paper *Kaleidoscope*, which lamented the death of Fassnacht but said: "The destruction of AMRC was not an isolated act by 'lunatics.' It was a conscious action taken in solidarity with ... all other heroic fighters against U.S. imperialism."

Burt also wrote his parents in Pennsylvania. He told them he was looking for journalism work in New York City and added, "Did you hear about the explosion in Wisconsin? I didn't get to see it, but you could hear it far away."

From New York, Fine and Burt hitched a ride with a friend to Boston, where they spent a night with Fine's sister. According to Bates in *Radz*, from there the pair got a ride into Canada, checking into a rooming house in Peterborough, sixty miles northeast of Toronto. They had only been there a day when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police appeared at the door. Bates wrote: "David and Leo hurriedly discarded their wallets with their IDs, useless now that they had registered with them, and exited by a rear window. Then they parted company. David hitchhiked south and west, heading for the border crossing at Detroit."

Bates's next sentence echoes across thirty-five years: "Leo simply disappeared."



Meanwhile, at a rowing event in Canada a few days after the bombing, Mickelson was approached by mounted police, who wanted to know if he'd heard from Burt. They believed Burt was still in Canada and might try to contact his friend for money. Mickelson recalls feeling "total surprise" when he heard his friend might be involved. He'd not been contacted, but authorities would remain interested in their friendship, following up repeatedly over the next few years.

Before the decade was out, the Armstrongs and Fine would be apprehended. All four of the alleged bombers were immediately put on the FBI's famous Ten Most Wanted list, which brought the intense heat of a nationwide manhunt on them. Since the debut of the list in 1950, more than 90 percent of the fugitives that have wound up there have been captured.

Karl Armstrong was the first one arrested; he'd been living under an alias

in Toronto before he was caught in 1972. Another tip led to Fine, who was busted in 1976 in San Rafael, California. A year later, Dwight Armstrong was captured in Toronto. Dwight, Bates wrote, “was so tired of living underground that he had in effect given up hiding.”

**It would seem nothing could** prepare someone for a life underground. Abbie Hoffman, a longtime fugitive from that era, wrote upon surfacing: “A fugitive’s brain is filled with a mass of data — Social Security numbers, job histories, birthdates, coded contacts, even different birth signs. There are at least two dozen names I used. If I examined the problem of who I was, something everyone does in introspective periods, the problem only gets magnified. A simple “What’s your name?” can produce insane giggles.”

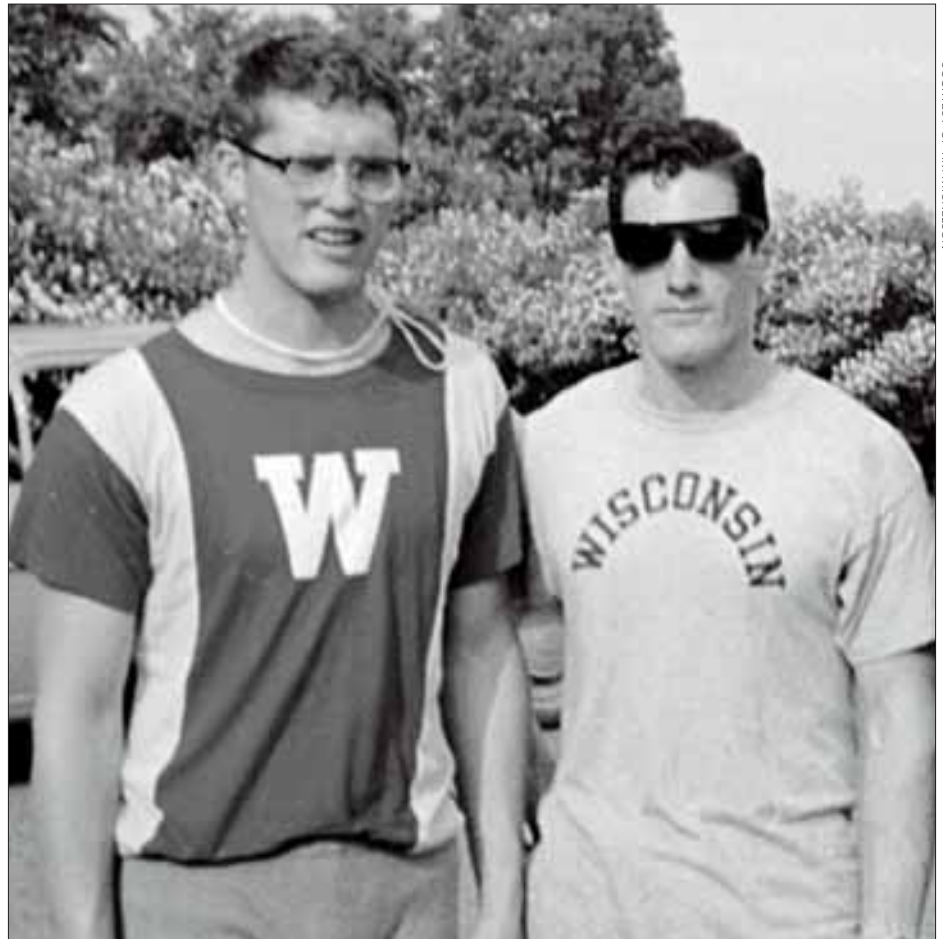
It is the difficulty of life underground — the lies, the constant sense of vulnerability, the complete cutting of ties to friends and family — that makes some people believe Leo Burt is not still on the run.

“I think he died, and nobody bothered to tell us,” Chuck Lulling, the lead Madison police detective on the case, once said.

But there’s no proof of that, either. When he took over the investigation in 1988, Miller sent copies of Burt’s fingerprints to all the medical examiners in the United States to compare with any John Doe bodies.

“That came back negative,” he says.

Like Allan Thompson before him, Miller never did feel like the bureau was close to catching Burt, who would now be fifty-seven years old. Miller had agents around the country take pictures of Burt’s living male relatives to create models of what Burt might look like today. He has also pitched the case to true-crime television programs such as *America’s Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries*. “I thought we were going to get on *Unsolved Mysteries*,” he says. “But then someone on the production team



COURTESY OF TIM MICKELSON

**On the rowing team, Burt fit in with athletes like Tim Mickelson (left), who shared his work ethic and competitive spirit. Mickelson recalls him as a serious student who never fought with anyone. But after Burt quit the crew, he drifted away from his former teammates and toward a different circle of friends.**

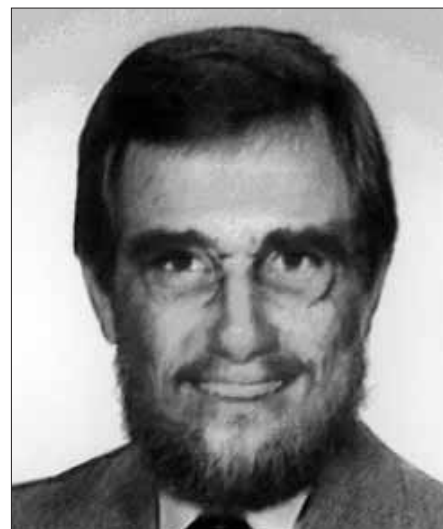
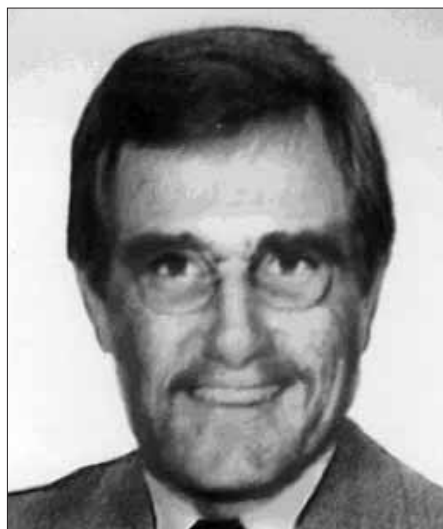
told me, ‘We really sympathize with this guy. We were against the war, too.’ ”

If he did survive, Burt’s life underground got easier in 1976, when he was removed from the FBI’s most-wanted list. Fine had been arrested and returned to Madison to face charges, and a federal magistrate had granted him bail — unusual leniency for a man who had spent six years running from justice. The FBI took that as a sign that the bombers were no longer regarded as serious threats and removed Burt from its vaunted list.

The practical effect for a fugitive would have been huge. To be on that list is to have your picture everywhere. More than that, it means even distant relatives have their phone records

checked and their mail perused. When an agent is responsible for a suspect on that list, Miller says, “every thirty days you have to submit a report to headquarters telling them about all the fine work you’re doing [and] all the hard investigating you’ve done and are planning to do in the next thirty days. It’s a lot of work.”

Burt wasn’t on the list when Miller got the case, which meant that the FBI checked in with Burt’s brothers and father (who is now deceased) from time to time, but it didn’t maintain round-the-clock surveillance. “Every once in a while, you might get a subpoena and pull some phone records to see if they had gotten a phone call from Ontario or some place,” Miller says. “Of course, if



Three pictures capture how Burt might look now, when he would be fifty-seven years old. The FBI used pictures of Burt's relatives and computer technology to create the images, although agents admit the chances they will find Burt grow more remote every day.

he'd been on the Ten Most Wanted list, we'd have been camped outside their door."

But if the reduced attention makes it easier to stay in the shadows, it also reduces the risk of stepping out of them. After pleading guilty to a charge of second-degree murder and receiving a twenty-three-year jail sentence, Karl Armstrong was paroled in 1980 and lives in Madison. Fine and Dwight Armstrong each did short terms in prison and have returned to lives above ground. Miller wonders why Burt wouldn't have turned himself in, accepted a relatively light sentence, and been done with it.

"That's why, late on some nights," Miller says, "I say, 'Well, maybe he's dead.' It's either that, or he's so comfortable as a fugitive that he's somewhere where he's convinced he'll never be caught."

The truth is that we don't know, and we may never find out. Firsthand knowledge of the case is fading. Bates died of pancreatic cancer in 1999; Lulling passed away in 2000. Both Miller and Thompson have retired from the FBI.

Tim Mickelson no longer gets calls from the FBI, which is just as well. In thirty-five years, he has heard nothing from Leo Burt.

But the theories live on. On the Internet, you can read countless far-fetched notions of what happened to Burt. One theory, largely discounted, is that Burt was actually working undercover for the authorities against the anti-war movement.

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Brennan, who admits to having something of an obsession with Burt, said recently that "everybody who knew him has a theory of what has happened to him." Most everyone agrees that the strength of will — the kind of mind-over-body strength that earned an average-bodied rower the attention of the nation's elite crew programs — would have served Burt well as he abandoned

his old life. "He's cold as steel," Dwight Armstrong said, and that's the kind of resolve one would need.

"I think he's still alive," Brennan says, "and I think he's only caught if he wants to be caught."

In June 1999, police and FBI agents acting on a tip surrounded a white minivan in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota. The driver, a woman named Sara Jane Olson, was a mother of three, married to a doctor — except that she turned out to be Kathleen Soliah, a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army, a radical group perhaps best known for kidnapping Patty Hearst in 1974. Soliah had been on the run for twenty-five years.

That leaves Burt, who vanished a decade ago longer than that, as the last piece of a puzzle that we can't seem to put away. And we may never know the full picture — because if he isn't dead, he might as well be.

"He won't come forward," Brennan says. "Remember this: whoever he has become, he has been that person a lot longer than he was Leo Burt." ■

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Doug Moe '79, former editor of *Madison Magazine* and now a columnist for the *Capital Times*, has heard from dozens of people during his career who claim to know where Leo Burt