

# The Unabomber Boys

10 years ago, UM students captured first photos of reclusive  
terrorist

Vince Devlin

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Making of a UM legend: Photojournalism students (left to right) Derek Pruitt, Bruce Ely, Greg Rec and Steve Adams celebrate their scoop in this image that ran in the summer 1996 Montana Journalism Review.

It was a spring afternoon, a Wednesday. April 3, 1996. Gregory Rec a photojournalism student at The University of Montana, rolled into the journalism school, fresh off a freelance assignment for the Denver Post.

The outer office normally hummed with activity on a school day, but on this Wednesday, it was oddly empty and quiet Rec poked his head inside the office of Professor Patty Reksten. Where was everybody? he asked her.

Moments later Rec was flying out the J School door and making a mad dash for his old Subaru. Over the next few hours, Rec and three other UM photojournalism students Bruce Ely, Derek Pruitt and Steve Adams would capture some of the most sought after images in the world.

It was a spring afternoon, a Wednesday. It was the day the FBI ended an 18 year-long manhunt for Unabomber Ted Kaczynski in the forests of western Montana. Rec. Ely. Pruitt and Adams certainly weren't the only photographers on the scene the day Kaczynski was taken into custody

But the UM students were the only ones to take his picture.

**Reksten, now director** of photography at the Oregonian newspaper in Portland, Ore., remembers how wild the day was. It began with a call from Tom Cheatham, then a visiting professor at UM who was freelancing as a producer for NBC in eastern Montana, where the FBI was involved in another event making national headlines, the famed standoff with Montana's Freeman.

The buzz around the FBI camp outside the small town of Jordan was hot, Cheatham told her: The FBI was about to arrest the Unabomber outside the small town of Lincoln.

Reksten barely had time to think before her phone rang again. The New York Times was calling It needed two photographers for a highly secret mission, the editor told her. The paper had received a tip. and it was critical neither Reksten nor the photographers tell anyone about the assignment.

Reksten smiled. "You mean the Unabomber?" she asked.

There was a stunned silence on the other end of the line. "But nobody knows," the voice finally protested.

Reksten headed into the outer office. Ely, who was working as an intern for the Missoulian, plus Pruitt and Adams, were there. Cheatham's phone call lipping Reksten off meant she didn't have to keep the story a secret from one of them.

Quickly, Pruitt and Adams signed on as freelancers for the 1 times. and Ely hitched a ride to shoot for the Missoulian. They drove the 80 miles to Lincoln, located the driveway to Kaczynski's cabin where other members of the media had assembled, and began their wait.

**Rec's Subaru** was overheating as it raced to Lincoln. He pulled up to the little media circus and found his three colleagues. No one was sure what was happening. Cars had come and gone all day, the others told Rec. No one knew if Kaczynski was there, or had been taken someplace else.

As they spoke, a white Ford Bronco came out of the trees and passed by.

The windows were tinted and you couldn't see inside. Two local high school students who were hanging around shouted. "That's him!" and jumped in their car.

None of the other photographers and journalists at the site took the bait. The four UM students huddled. Ely thought he could make out the silhouette of a man 'with hair sticking up all over the place' in the back seat. They decided to break with the pack and follow. Pruitt and Adams climbed into one vehicle, and Ely joined Rec in the Subaru.

The Bronco made a stop at a motel in Incolti, where a man — — dressed more like a rancher than an FBI agent exited the vehicle and went in a room for a moment. He

returned, and the Bronco pulled onto Highway 200. The convoy the two high school students. Rec and Ely, then Putiti and Adams — followed.

“We were guessing if it was them, they’d be going to either Great Falls or Helena.” Ely said. “We had an hour to an hour-and-a-half drive in front of us, and it was going to be embarrassing if all they did was pull into a Burger King drive-through to get a hamburger or something.”

On Flesher Pass outside Helena, the Subaru began acting up again. Pruittl and Adams pulled out and passed as Rec and Ely slowed to a crawl.

“It got so bad I had to put it in first gear.” Rec says. “I’m sure Bruce was kicking himself for not staying with Steve and Derek.”

When the Subaru inched its way to the crest of the pass, the Bronco and two trailing cars were nowhere to be seen.

“Put your seat belt on.” Rec told Ely. “I’m pulling it in neutral and we’re going to Boat down.”

“We went much too fast.” he goes on. “and took corners ... well, not responsibly.”

But (hey did catch the convoy before it reached Helena. Then, in one of the many oddities of the day. the Bronco took a right and the car carrying the two high school students kept going straight.

“To this day. I don’t know who they were, or where they went.” Rec says.

“But we stuck with the Bronco.”

By the time the Bronco pulled up near a nondescript office building in Helena, (he I’M students had convinced themselves they were probably farther from Kaczynski than they had been all day.

“We still didn’t know if he was in the car.” Rec says. “And by then we didn’t think he was. It just seemed like if Kaczynski was there, there would have been more cars, maybe highway patrol cars in front and back or something.”

Two men in flannel shirts and jeans exited the Bronco.

And then (hey opened a rear door, and Theodore Kaczynski — handcuffed, his unkempt hair shooting in thousands of directions — appeared.

**The four UM students** scrambled out of their cars. As the day had turned to dusk on the trip from Lincoln they had pul faster film in their cameras and attached flashes.

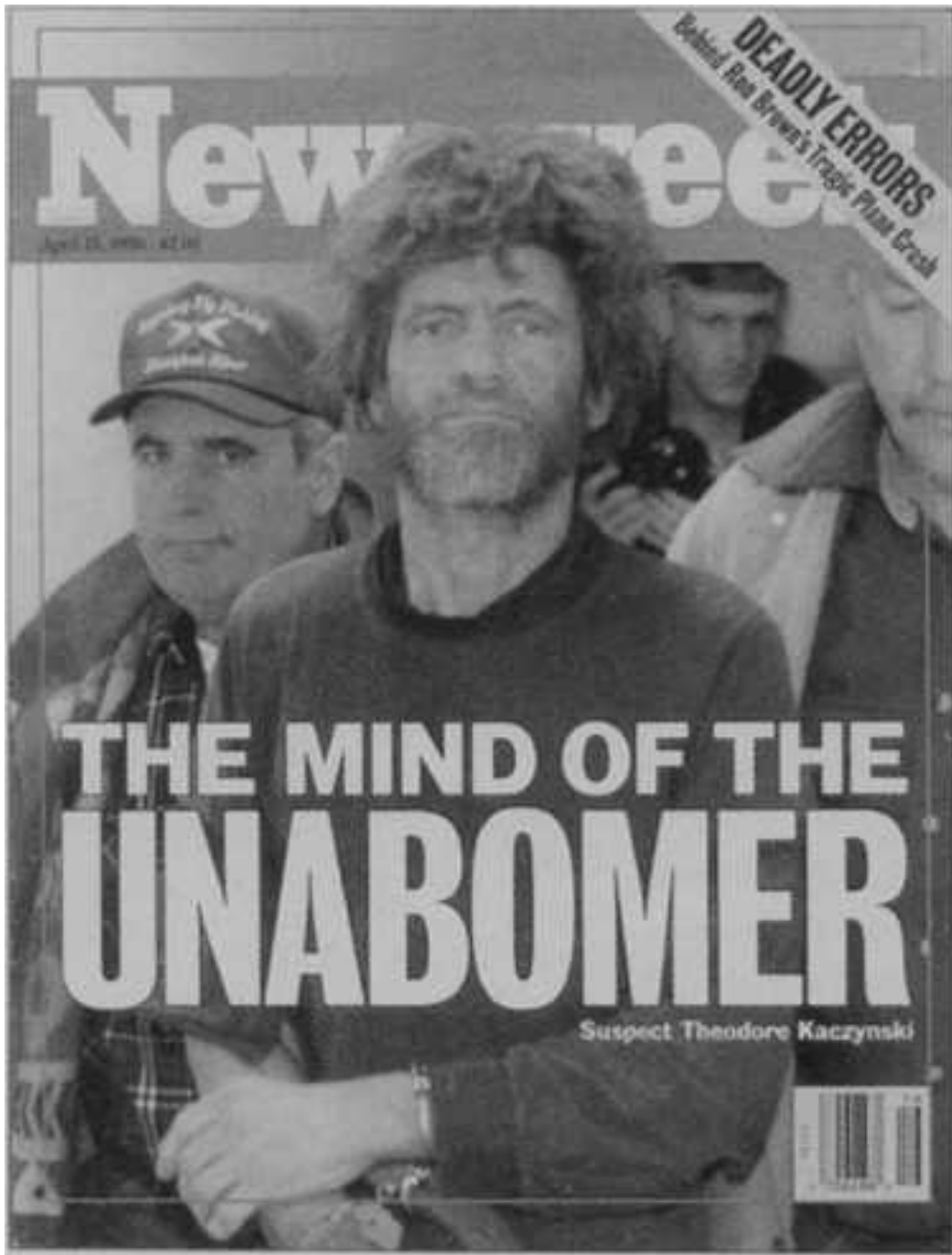
They backpedaled down the street as the two FBI agents marched Kaczynski about 100 yards to the doors of the office building. They continued shooting pictures through the building’s windows as the Unabomber and agents waited for an elevator. The elevator doors opened, the trio disappeared inside, and it was over.

Well, not quite.

“We just assumed the doors had locked behind them,” Rec says. But a couple minutes later a janitor walked through the door, and the students were back in business. They located the FBI office on the third floor and knocked, but no one answered.

“Steve said he needed to use the bathroom.” Rec says, “so we found the men’s room, but it was locked.”

Adams pressed his ear to the door. He could hear voices.



This April 15, 1996, cover photo was taken by UM's Derek Pruitt. Another UM student, Bruce Ely, can be seen in the background. Also note the different spelling of "Unabomber."

“That’s when we realized we weren’t the only ones who needed to go to the bathroom after the drive,” Rec says. He, Ely and Adams took up strategic positions outside the door so that, no matter which direction the people inside exited, one of them would have a head-on view, and Pruitt positioned himself further down the hall.

Which is how Bruce Ely made the cover of Newsweek — not with a photo, but in one. “I chose the wrong spot,” he says, and ended up in the background of the magazine’s cover photo, taken by Pruitt.

This was in the days before digital cameras, and the four still had to develop their film and transmit their images

Pruitt and Adams to the New York Times, Ely to the Missoulian and Rec to the Denver Post, the paper he had been freelancing for earlier in the day and that had quickly hired him again for the Unabomber assignment.

They decided to head to the Helena Independent-Record, which they would offer a picture to in exchange for the use of its facilities.

There, the strange night would keep getting stranger.

**First, the I-R’s photo** editor wanted nothing to do with them.

“At one point, he told us he didn’t have enough chemicals,” Rec says, and the four were headed out the door to locate a one-hour photo place when the managing editor, who had overheard the conversation, stopped them.

“Do you really have photos of the Unabomber?” the man asked. “I’m telling you, we do,” Rec replied.

The M.E. turned to his photo editor. “Strip the film,” he told him.

Their first responsibility was to the newspapers that had hired them for the day. but after that, the four knew they might be able to sell the photos to other places.

They turned to Reksten. plus Missoulian photographers Kurt Wilson and Michael Gallacher, for advice. Wilson and Gallacher gave them the number of a picture agency in New York City, and also told them that they should offer photos to the Associated Press. Just make sure AP only allowed newspapers to use the pictures, and banned magazines, they said.

But the fellow they talked to at AP told them he would not keep magazines — which otherwise might pay good money for the photos out of the loop. AP would do it for newspaper staff photographers, he said, but not freelancers.

“The first decision we made was that, whatever we did, we’d do it together Rec says. They would sell their images as a package deal and split any money four ways.

They called the New York agency, and agreed that, after the three newspapers they were working for and the I-R had run their shots, the agency would have exclusive rights to sell the pictures. > he four would receive 60 percent of any selling price.

When AP called back and said it had reconsidered, it was too late.

“The guy threatened my career,” Ely says. “Said we’d never work in this business again.”

Before the night was over the president of AP was on the phone to the four. They were sorry', they told him. They had tried to oiler pictures, but without the standard magazine ban. their images would have been useless to them later.

"We still really didn't know what we had. because we knew by the time Kaczynski was arraigned the next day. everybody would have pictures" Rec says.

Ah, but by the next day. Ted Kaczynski didn't look like a disturbed hermit anymore. He'd been cleaned up. his hair was combed, and he was in an orange prison jumpsuit.

Newsweek bought exclusive rights to the UM students' photos for a week for \$26,000. and over the years Ely estimates they've split more than \$40,000.

"It's funny." Ely says. "I just got a check the other day for something that happened 10 years ago. Now. textbooks are buying them."

All four are full-time newspaper photographers: Adams with the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. Pruitt for the Glens Falls (N.Y.) Post-Star. Rec at the Portland. Maine. Press Herald and Ely at the Oregonian, where he works for Reksten.

At photojournalism conferences, other photographers still recognize their names because of all that transpired on April 3. 1996.

"The four Unabomber boys." Rec says. "It's frustrating sometimes, because we've all been involved in big stories since then. In 2004 I was in Iraq twice, and the second time I was there was when that mess tent was blown up and 22 people were killed. It's odd to do something that intense, and still be known as the Unabomber photographer."

But everybody loves the story. It was a spring afternoon, a Wednesday. A day four UM students got the shots the world wanted — and nobody else had.

By Vince *Devlin*

The Ted K Archive

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