



Staff photo by Bill Green

Robert and Ann Lundahl hold a photograph of their father, Arthur C. Lundahl, and a model of a U-2 spy plane that provided the photographs Mr. Lundahl used to detect Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962.

Film recalls photo expert's alert about Cuban missiles

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BRADDOCK HEIGHTS — In great historical moments, there are often people working behind the scenes.

That's true of the late Arthur C. Lundahl, who told President John F. Kennedy in October 1962 that yes, there were Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, and that he was sure of that fact.

Mr. Lundahl's children, Robert Lundahl, of Braddock Heights and Ann Lundahl, of Thurmont, said their father was essentially the first to warn Mr. Kennedy that the

Soviets were pointing their weapons at major U.S. cities. The next 13 days, known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, were arguably the closest the country has ever come to the brink of nuclear annihilation.

"Thirteen Days" is the title of a recently-released movie, which includes Mr. Lundahl's part in history.

His 1962 work with the National Photographic Intelligence Center (NPIC) of the CIA, a division he built from a small group of photo interpreters and other technolo-

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Film

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gists, brought U.S. intelligence to the forefront during the Cold War.

Robert and Ann Lundahl said Monday there are some in the division who still call it "the house that Art built."

"He left pretty big footsteps in there, for sure," Mr. Lundahl said of his father's legacy at NPIC. Also a technology buff, Mr. Lundahl works as an engineer with ATR in Columbia and credits his father's work as an inspiration for his own career.

Ms. Lundahl was 15 when the Cuban missile crisis occurred. Mr. Lundahl was 10. The pair said they really didn't know or understand at that time how important their father's work was.

"I remember in my teen-age years that there was something very serious going on," Ms. Lundahl recalled. "There were several nights dad didn't come home."

Indeed, their father spent those 13 days working long hours in Washington, not far from their Bethesda home, but worlds away from their suburban life. They remembered their mother, Ann, took their father extra clothing for his extended stay and seemed to be worried about something.

"Of course he didn't elaborate at the time," Mr. Lundahl said of his father. "He just said there was a big flap at the office. But at that point we knew something was up. Even at my young age there was certainly a sense of concern with my mom. It wasn't until much later it sunk in just how much was going on."

Oct. 16, 1962, was the day the elder Mr. Lundahl was called before Mr. Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, other advisers and military top brass to explain the findings of a U-2's recent mission over Cuba.

The plane, developed by Lockheed especially for such intelligence missions, had taken photographs of missile deployment on the Cuban coast. The threat of nuclear warheads in the Western Hemisphere was now very real and Mr. Lundahl had to tell Mr. Kennedy just that.

"Dad always used to relate, certainly one of the defining moments (of his career), was that day in the Oval Office, presenting the briefing to Kennedy," Mr. Lundahl said. "He went through the whole litany. All the things shown in the movie. But after he had been through that and there was a long silence Kennedy said, 'Are you sure about all this?' You can imagine what it would have

been like for him to say, 'Yes. I'm as sure of this as a photo interpreter can be sure of anything.' But what a moment."

The younger Mr. Lundahl continued: "Many think of government service as a safe haven from the real world. But some (civil servants) are just the cream of the crop. They are insightful, analytical people. It's good to see such good talent work for the United States."

The elder Mr. Lundahl, also known as the "Knight of the Light Table," after he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for assisting the United Kingdom with building its own photo interpreting division, did exactly what was expected of him as a civil servant for the next 13 days. His son said he wouldn't have done it another way.

"Dad was always quite humble," he said. "He always used to say he was in the right place at the right time. But those that knew him acknowledge he was a technologist and a wonderful person with people in the (NPIC)."

The elder Mr. Lundahl died in 1992 at the age of 77, but not before being presented with numerous awards and having served under presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

Dino Brugioni, a friend of Mr. Lundahl's from his NPIC days, author and adviser for the film "Thirteen Days," wrote that "of all the awards and honors Lundahl received, one he seldom displayed reflects most appropriately his contributions to this nation — an autographed photograph of Allen Dulles and himself that reads: 'Art Lundahl has done as much to protect the security of this nation as any man I know. Allen W. Dulles.'"

Mr. Kennedy, too, personally thanked Mr. Lundahl and NPIC in a note following the Cuban ordeal: "I want you and your people to know of my very deep appreciation for the tremendous task you are performing under the most trying circumstances. The analysis and interpretation of the Cuban photography and the reporting of your finds promptly and succinctly to me and to my principal policymakers, most particularly the Secretary of State (Dean Rusk) and the Secretary of Defense (Robert McNamara), has been exemplary. You have my thanks and the thanks of your government for a very remarkable performance of duty, and my personal commendation goes to all of you."