

# Secrets of the deep

Saturday, January 28, 2006

**By MONSY ALVARADO**  
**STAFF WRITER**

Jeff Sitar had very little space to work with Friday aboard the submarine USS Ling.

Surrounded by network television news cameras, reporters and New Jersey Naval Museum officials, the Clifton resident and professional safecracker had to get five steel safes opened that had been sealed for more than 30 years aboard the World War II vessel moored in the Hackensack River in Hackensack. The safes were in tiny quarters sometimes awkward to work in.

Sitar began in the executive officer's room, leaning close to the safe. Hunched over and wearing headphones, he moved the lock combination back and forth waiting, listening for the distinct clicking that would tell him he had uncovered the code. After nearly four minutes, he opened the door.

"I got it," he said.

Sitar did it again and again, opening all five boxes in a span of two hours. At times he used an amplifier to make the clicking sounds louder, plus a magnifying glass, but he never used a drill. Each of the locks had more than a million possible combinations.

"It's always a challenge opening up something somebody has made to keep people out," Sitar said after unlocking the final safe. "Somebody designed, thought, patented and put together and manufactured it to keep a person out, and I'm the one that gets into it."

Although no great World War II secrets or code books were in any of the safes, unlike Al Capone's vault, which turned up one beer bottle, the boxes weren't empty.

Among the items in the Ling safes were several training manuals and logs, which some museum officials said were considered confidential during the war and could be opened only by commanding officers.

"At the time, during the war, I would consider this to be top secret and classified information," said Basil Kio, a World War II veteran and president of the Submarine Memorial Association, a non-profit that operates the USS Ling Museum.

Besides the training manuals, the safes contained a list of the sub's equipment, its blueprints and two flasks containing alcohol used for cleaning electrical equipment. They also contained 12 1-cent coins, a ring of keys and two .45-caliber bullets.

"It's nothing of any great monetary value, but of historical significance," said Tom Conlon, a member of the New Jersey Naval Museum's Board of Directors, after paging through the books. "It's the sort of thing that sailors and officers would have worked with every day."

Museum officials intend to display the artifacts in the museum on River Street to give visitors insight on how the crew worked and lived.

State Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, attended the opening, even making her way down to the executive officer's and captain's quarters while Sitar was opening the third safe.

"It calls attention to the proud history of the Greatest Generation," she said. "These people achieved wonderful things."

## WHAT HE FOUND

Safecracker Jeff Sitar opened five safes aboard the USS Ling on Friday. Below is a list of where four of the safes are located, how many minutes and seconds Sitar needed to open them and the contents:

- Wardroom passageway; 16:46; two aluminum flasks filled with alcohol used

The opening also attracted several veterans in the area who were eager to find out what the safes contained.

"This is something that happened so long ago and it's interesting to see what will be in there," said Jim Battifarano of Wyckoff, a World War II veteran who served on the USS Guitarro in the Pacific. "I don't think there will be anything too significant, but you never know."

In addition to unlocking the safes, the veterans, with the help of Weinberg, awarded dolphin pins to seven teenage sea cadets who have been training aboard the Ling. Among them were the first women ever to receive the pin. The pins are reserved for officers who serve on submarines, which allow only men. In all, three girls received the honor.

"Through you, we are sending a message to the United States Navy," said Weinberg as she gave the dolphin award to Allyson Acocella, 14, of Cedar Grove. "Even on submarines, women deserve equal access ... If they can put a woman in a space capsule, they can put a woman on a submarine."

The Ling is a 312-foot long Balao-class World War II submarine and is the last of the fleet boats that patrolled American shores during that war. The submarine made one Atlantic patrol before the war ended. It was decommissioned in 1946 and donated to the Submarine Memorial Association in 1971. The vessel traveled from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to Hackensack in 1973.

to clean electronic equipment.

- Captain's quarters; 7:15; a U.S. government ballpoint pen, a set of keys for torpedo tube locks and two .45-caliber bullets.

- Executive officer's quarters; 3:56; five training handbooks dating to 1949 and the early 1950s.

- Yeoman's shack; 13:32; several manuals, including instructions for electronics, submersible pump information and Naval Reserve training. Also, 12 1-cent coins dating to the 1940s and a box of used carbon paper.