

Jeuel Bannister Esmacher '44
2019 Mary Mildred Sullivan Award

Each year, Winthrop recognizes an alumna for selfless dedication of time, energy and talent in service to others. The Mary Mildred Sullivan Award captures this high honor.

For her service to her country and to her alma mater, Esmacher will receive the Mary Mildred Sullivan Award when she returns to the Winthrop campus for her 75th college reunion during Homecoming weekend. She continues to be an ambassador for Winthrop, telling others how her Winthrop education influenced her life.

After graduation from Winthrop, Esmacher worked in King's Mountain, North Carolina, as the state's first female high school band director. While there, she was recruited by the U.S. Department of Defense to move to Washington, D.C. to work on a mysterious project.

With American men signing up to fight in different parts of the world, the U.S. Army and Navy turned for help to college-educated women who had an affinity for puzzles, math and music. The military trained the women to look for patterns within enemy messages intercepted by U.S. military intelligence.

The women were sworn to secrecy as they worked to decode in languages, such as Japanese and Russian, whose alphabets differ from English.

Many women took their code breaking experiences to their graves.

The work that Esmacher and others performed was not disclosed until the recent publication of the New York Times bestselling book, "Code Girls: The Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II" by Liza Mundy. Esmacher was one of several women interviewed for the book.

She believed that the Department of Defense contacted her because she had taken every course in cryptanalysis that the Army offered on Winthrop's campus. Those courses, in conjunction with her music major from Winthrop, made her an ideal candidate for service.

When the war ended and thousands crossed the river from Arlington to DC to celebrate, Esmacher met her future husband for the first time. He was among a group of translators, linking arms and singing to rejoice. She lovingly refers to that well-known V-J Day as "Victory for Jeu^l" Day.

Esmacher continued the work after WWII and was among a smaller group of code breakers asked to work on intercepted Russian messages.

Now retired from banking, the 95-year-old Winthrop alumna lives in Anderson, South Carolina.

Esmacher comes from a family of Winthrop women. A music major, she had the unusual circumstance of rooming with both her mother and her sister during part of her time at this institution. Her mother had attended Winthrop but never finished. When Esmacher graduated from high school, her mom (Allie Pearman Bannister '21) decided that she could live with her daughter on campus for one semester and finish some of the credits that had to be taken on campus (Allie Bannister did end up receiving her Winthrop degree in 1948).

After her mother finished the few courses she needed to take on campus, Esmacher moved in with her older sister, Julia, who graduated from Winthrop in 1943.