

BARBARA KERR

SHARPSHOOTER,
SCHOOL PRINCIPAL,
GIRL GUIDE
EXTRAORDINAIRE

Barbara Kerr made contributions to the Girl Guides, sports and animal welfare. She was also a talented soprano.

By Nick Aplin

Barbara Kerr when she was District Commissioner for Singapore (1927–35). Image reproduced from Kevin Tan, *Doing Our Best: A History of the Girl Guides in Singapore 1914–2022* (Singapore: Girl Guides Singapore, 2023), 17. (From National Library Singapore, call no. RSING 369.463095957 TAN).



Barbara Kerr (second row, second from right) represented the Kinta District team from Ipoh in the Cornwell Cup competition in December 1935. She was the only female competitor. Image reproduced from *The Straits Budget*, 26 December 1935, 16. (From NewspaperSG).

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In early 20th-century Singapore, there were not many occasions when a woman was expected to stand her ground against men in a representative international sporting event. There was, however, one notable exception: when a 26-year-old school principal stunned her male rivals, not in golf or tennis, but in rifle shooting.

The school principal was none other than Barbara Kerr, principal of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS). The occasion for her amazing display of "markswomanship" was the 25th Interport Rifle Match in 1914 between the teams from Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Penang.¹

This was also the first time that women were allowed to participate in the match; prior to 1914, this had been an exclusively male preserve. What made the competition even more historic is that Kerr was the only woman on the Singapore team, and most likely the other teams as well.

A Dramatic Win

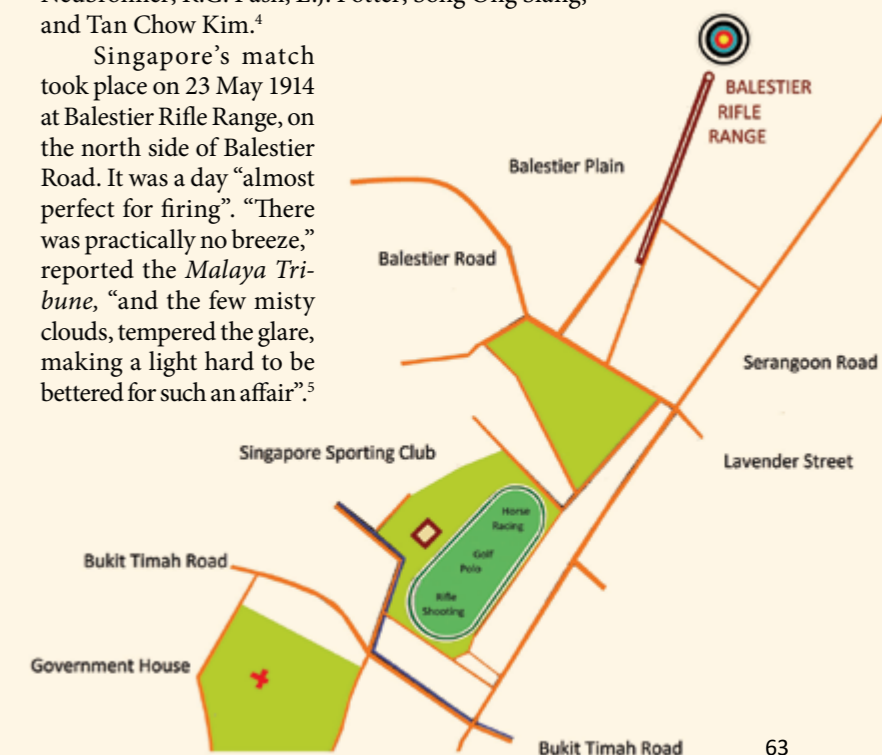
The names of the team representing Singapore – Barbara Kerr being one of them and the sole woman – were finalised only in early May 1914. There were some ground rules for the Interport Rifle Match. The match "shall be fired on any date between 15th April and 31st May (inclusive) in each year", and "[e]ach port shall shoot on its own or any recognised range in the neighbourhood".²

Singapore's competition for the 1914 Interport Rifle Match took place at Balestier Rifle Range, on the north side of Balestier Road. Illustration by Nick Aplin.

Comprising 12 competitors per team, each person had to shoot the target from 200 yards (183 m), 500 yards (457 m) and 600 yards (549 m), and the scores added up. Each team would independently and accurately record and report its scores, and send these by telegraph to the other teams. There were officials at each venue to record and verify the scores: "three superintending officers or umpires, two of whom shall be at the butts [an earthen bank used to support a target for shooting] and one at the firing point throughout the shooting".³

Only the 10 best scores from each team were taken into account. The Singapore team consisted of R.W. Chater; Ferguson Davie; R.E. de Silva; J. Flanagan; W.L. Kemp; Barbara Kerr; D.W. Moss; Gunner Neubronner; R.G. Pash; E.J. Potter; Song Ong Siang; and Tan Chow Kim.⁴

Singapore's match took place on 23 May 1914 at Balestier Rifle Range, on the north side of Balestier Road. It was a day "almost perfect for firing". "There was practically no breeze," reported the *Malaya Tribune*, "and the few misty clouds, tempered the glare, making a light hard to be bettered for such an affair".⁵



Kerr had a poor start but recovered in a spectacular way to score a total of 93 points for Singapore, putting her in sixth position. The *Malaya Tribune* wrote:

Miss Kerr was most heartily congratulated on her strong finish, and she well deserved it. Coming from the 200 yds. position a bad fire of 27, she did not become disheartened in the least, and secured 32 from the 500 distance. The last firing began at 4.35 from the 600 yards mound, and Miss Kerr rose a few minutes later after making the highest score of any of the competitors from that distance – 34, bringing her name up to 6th on the score sheet.⁶

Singapore Team	200 yards	500 yards	600 yards	Total
R.E. de Silva	31	34	33	98
Lt. W. L. Kemp	33	33	32	98
Sapper J. Flanagan	32	34	30	96
C. Sergeant-Major Chater	31	32	32	95
Gunner Neubronner	31	35	29	95
Miss Barbara Kerr	27	32	34	93
Sapper E.J. Potter	28	34	31	93
Sergeant Tan Chow Kim	32	31	30	93
Lt. Song Ong Siang	28	32	31	91
Sapper R. Pash	29	29	32	90
	302	326	314	942

Although the final scores of Singapore and Shanghai were tied at 942, Singapore was declared the winner of the competition because Kerr recorded the highest score in the third and final round (34 out of 35 points), which was the tie-breaker. No Shanghai shooter could match her in the final round. One of her teammates, Song Ong Siang, acknowledged her contributions to the team effort:

The novel feature in the match was the inclusion in the Singapore team of a lady, Miss Kerr (the well-known and popular vocalist, then Principal of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, and now Mrs Thomas). By her coolness and steady shooting at the longer ranges, she finished by taking sixth place with a score of 93.⁷

When asked by a *Malaya Tribune* reporter if nerves had affected her score after the 200 yards round, Kerr replied that she had been very nervous then. She added, "I did not care after that, as I was out of it."⁸ Kerr had left her stamp on the history of rifle shooting in Singapore.

Early Life and Achievements

Barbara Hume Christie Kerr was born on 19 December 1887 near Dockhead Street, Saltcoats, Ayrshire,

in Scotland. In 1898, 11-year-old Barbara moved to Singapore with her father David Kerr, a marine engineer, together with her mother, who was also known as Barbara Kerr, and her 13-year-old sister, Mary Gibson Kerr.

The two Kerr sisters began their studies at Raffles Girls' School (RGS) in 1899. Kerr was in Standard IV, while her elder sister Mary was in Standard VI. Both received a prize at the end of that school year – Kerr for Reading and her sister for English History.⁹

In 1900, David Kerr left Singapore in either October or November to take up a posting in Bangkok as engineer for the Poh Chin Soo rice mills. Tragically he died of a stroke on 21 November.¹⁰ At the time, Barbara Kerr and her two daughters resided at 8 Devonshire Road. In 1903, the family moved to "Leonie House" (14 Grange Road), on Leonie Hill, as proprietors.¹¹

Kerr continued to do well academically at RGS. In 1902, when she was in Standard VII, she won the prize for Sacred History.¹² The following year, she became head girl.¹³ In February 1905, as a senior in the Special Class, Kerr collected prizes for Composition and French.¹⁴ She was also one of three seniors at RGS who took the Cambridge Local Examinations and passed.¹⁵ At the prizegiving ceremony in May 1905, Kerr was designated "First Girl".¹⁶

Beyond her academic achievements, Kerr was a soprano of considerable repute. She made public appearances in charity concerts, notably at a concert held at the Tanglin Club for the benefit of St Mary's Home for Orphans in November 1906.¹⁷ Kerr also played tennis and was a handicap golfer. However, it was in rifle shooting that she made her mark.

On the professional front, Kerr was the principal of SCGS from 1912 to 1916, and again from 1918 to 1920 after her marriage. She also made significant contributions to the Girl Guide movement, and was District Commissioner for Singapore from 1927 to 1935. Between 1934 and 1941, she was Commissioner for Malay Guides and Brownies, Girl Guides Association, Malaya.¹⁸

Kerr was also known for her work as honorary secretary of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Child Welfare Society.¹⁹

In 1916, she married Leslie Arding Thomas, who would be appointed Chief Police Officer of Singapore in 1939. After her marriage, she became known as Mrs L.A. Thomas.²⁰

Taking up Rifle Shooting

It is not possible to state categorically when Kerr began to take up sports as a meaningful pastime or even as a ruling passion. Tennis and golf were popular with ladies when Kerr was growing up, as there were no modesty concerns with these sports. Rifle shooting was a different story.

In 1956, the *Straits Times Annual* described the following, which was a common scenario in the Federated Malay States (FMS) in the early 20th century:

The ladies lowered themselves decorously to the ground, lay flat on their stomachs, arranged their full ankle-length black skirts modestly to their fullest extent, and raised their rifles tentatively to their shoulders. Their white blouses were fastened up to their necks. Their hats were strange affairs, very large and of a white straw for the most part and adorned with a wealth of ribbon and bows.²¹

The first decade of the 20th century saw the rapid growth of shooting in the Malayan states, though less so in Singapore. The *Straits Budget* reported a rifle contest between men and women in Taiping, Perak, in February 1904: "The ladies were armed with the .360 rook rifle and fired from a distance of 100 yards, while the gentlemen were provided with service rifles at double the distance." The ladies managed to beat the men by 19 points.²²

In September 1907, there were calls for a ladies' branch of the Singapore Rifle Association. By March 1909, the Singapore Ladies' Rifle Association had been formed with 28 members. The idea of regular competition was an important objective.²³

Kerr most likely joined the association upon the introduction of the older ladies. Her name as a participant in a rifle shooting competition first appeared in newspapers in May 1908 when she was 21 years old, shooting at 100 yards (91 m), 150 yards (137 m) and 200 yards (183 m), and finished in eighth place out of 11 women.²⁴ By October, she had made significant improvements to her scores, notably in the two longer distances.²⁵

Students of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School having lessons outside the school, c. 1900. Image is reproduced from a postcard published by G.R. Lambert & Co. Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Principal of Singapore Chinese Girls' School

In February 1912, Kerr became the principal of SCGS at the age of 25. It was a challenging job as the school suffered from a lack of funding between 1899 and 1919.²⁶ By 1912, the school was overcrowded with 240 students.

Amid her professional developments, Kerr retained her interest in singing. The Singapore Philharmonic Society hosted a concert at the Teutonia Club on 30 March 1912 where Kerr performed two songs.²⁷ In June 1914, she sang in the concert for St Mary's Home and School for Eurasian Girls.²⁸

Kerr left her post in 1916, the same year she married. Two years later, as Mrs L.A. Thomas, she returned as principal of SCGS. During the next three years, she focused on playing tennis and an occasional shoot at the monthly "spoon competitions" (where spoons were awarded as prizes at these shooting competitions).²⁹

By June 1920, Kerr had resigned as principal and accompanied her husband to Melaka.³⁰ In her last annual school prizegiving ceremony a few months earlier, Lim Boon Keng, on behalf of the trustees of the school, "expressed the gratitude of the committee to Mrs Thomas, and the staff, for the work they had already done for the pupils and, indirectly, for the Chinese community". The *Straits Times* wrote that "SCGS was an institution so ably conducted under the principalship of Mrs Thomas".³¹

Subsequent Shooting Competitions

As part of his police work, Kerr's husband was posted to different locations within the FMS and Singapore. After stints in Melaka, Penang, Ipoh and Selangor, he became Chief Police Officer of Singapore in 1939.³²

Kerr accompanied him on his different postings, and had the opportunity to join various shooting and other sports clubs.

In 1932, Kerr, then 45, was living in Kuala Lumpur. At the FMS Championships in March that year, she recorded noteworthy scores in two competitions. She was the only woman competing and took second place in the championship. “The runner-up for the Championship was Mrs L.A. Thomas, the only lady to compete. Mrs Thomas was awarded a special prize, a bronze medal for her score of 350, which was only ten behind that of the champion,” reported the *Straits Times*.³³

A lasting ambition was fulfilled in 1933 when Kerr took part in rifle competitions in Bisley, in Surrey, England. (Bisley is one of the major international shooting competitions, the equivalent of Wimbledon for tennis.) A write-up in London’s *Evening Standard* (which was reproduced in the *Straits Times* on 15 August 1933) noted:

Mrs. Barbara Thomas has travelled 9,000 miles from Kuala Lumpur in the Malay States, where her husband is a police official, to shoot at Bisley this year. She is the only woman member of the Rifle Club in Kuala Lumpur, and it is only two years ago that she took up shooting with the Service rifle, although she had shot considerably with a small-bore rifle recently. Now she is an accomplished shot and already at Bisley she has won five prizes.³⁴

In December 1935, Kerr represented the Kinta District team in Ipoh in the Cornwell Cup presented by the FMS Volunteer Force Rifle Association. At age 48, and the only woman in the competition, Kerr scored well over the longer distances, performing better than most of the men. She was placed eighth out of 20 competitors. The *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* described her as “a clever shot”.³⁵

Barbara Kerr (back row, third from right), Commissioner of Girl Guides in Malaya, with guiders at the All-Malayan guides camp held at Tanjong Bruas, Melaka, in September 1938. Source: *The Sunday Times*, 4 September 1938. © SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction.



Contributions to the Girl Guides

Kerr was also closely involved with the Girl Guide movement in Malaya and Singapore. It is not clear when she first joined the Girl Guides, though it was likely during her time as principal of SCGS between 1918 and 1920.

She rose through the ranks. In August 1921, when Kerr was living in Penang, she was presented with a Captain’s badge during an inspection of the Penang Branch of the Girl Guides by Lady Guillelard.³⁶ In January 1923, she was appointed Division Secretary for Penang and Province Wellesley.³⁷

Just four years later, in 1927, Kerr became District Commissioner for Singapore. In May 1931, she formed the first pack of Malay Brownies in Kuala Lumpur. She recalled: “After the scheme had been carefully explained to the parents and the teachers, and with some misgivings, we chose a number of the younger pupils at the Malay Girls’ School, Kampong Bahru, Kuala Lumpur, to be our first Malay Brownies. But we need have had no fears. It succeeded far beyond our expectations.”³⁸

The Brownie investiture ceremony on 15 May 1931 was held in the presence of the sultan of Selangor, who “pointed out that the boys had had an organisation for some time and now the Malay girls were being given their opportunity” and “hoped that other packs would be formed in Selangor”.³⁹

Later in the same year, there were requests to start Malay Brownie Packs in Johor and Klang. To cope with increasing demand, in February 1932, Kerr was appointed Commissioner in charge of all Malay Brownie Packs in Malaya.⁴⁰ In January 1934, she assumed the highest position in the Girl Guide movement in Malaya and Singapore – Commissioner for Malay Guides and Brownies, Girl Guides Association, Malaya.⁴¹ For her long and outstanding service, she received the Beaver Award – the second-highest award in the Girl Guides – in 1947.⁴²

It is not known when Kerr returned to the United Kingdom for good. She died in Kingston upon Thames, London, on 6 January 1973, age 86. ♦



The first all-Malay Brownie Pack at the Kampong Bahru Malay Girls’ School in Kuala Lumpur, April 1931. The Brownie uniform was adapted from the traditional *baju* and *sarong*. Image reproduced from Kevin Tan, *Doing Our Best: A History of the Girl Guides in Singapore 1914–2022* (Singapore: Girl Guides Singapore, 2023), 21. (From National Library Singapore, RSING 369.463095957 TAN).

NOTES

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