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THE SINGLE-MINDED SHOOTER

KHATIJAH SURATTEE fought parental resistance and overcame coaching challenges to become the first female shooter to represent Singapore in the international arena. She shares how shooting has honed her grit.

The first time Khatijah Surattee held a submachine gun in the shooting range, she was in awe. The year was 1968, and she was just 18. At the time, she had just joined the pioneer batch of 12 female Dental Orderlies at the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and was exploring what military life had to offer. Thanks to her open-minded superior at the time, Dental Officer Captain (Dr) Benny Chan, she was soon introduced to the world of firearms.

"As women, we didn't have to go through basic military training. But Captain Chan felt we should know how the army worked and brought us around," recalls the feisty 63-year-old in her Pasir Ris flat. The trip to the shooting range turned out to be a life-changing



experience for Khatijah. "Everything about shooting appealed to me."

In the 1960s, shooting was still a predominantly male sport. But the fact that it was a testosterone-driven game did not deter Khatijah. "As an only child, I was headstrong. What I wanted to get, I got," says Khatijah firmly. "I did not believe that being a woman meant I couldn't achieve certain things."

As she practised, Khatijah was thrilled to find out that she had a natural talent for shooting. Suddenly, she had a target to aim for, not only at the shooting range, but also in life. "I wanted to excel in shooting so much that I turned a blind eye to whatever obstacles were in my way," she shares pensively. And there were obstacles – lots of them.

A DETERMINATION TO SHOOT

Khatijah's father called the shots for most of her early life. But if he had had his way, she would never have joined the army or picked up shooting. "My father was a traditional man," she shares. "He tried to steer my life according to society's expectations of a woman – a good marriage was far more important than education or career."

She wasn't allowed to go on to junior college, even though she did well enough to do so after her O-level. Then, he objected to her joining the army and, later, her newfound passion in shooting. But although she was young, Khatijah had a mind of her own. She knew she wanted to stay in the army and shoot. And that was precisely what she did. In retrospect, Khatijah attributes this fierce determination to stay on course to her mother's early death. "When she passed away, I was only 12. But I had to grow up and learn to take care of myself. That made me not only emotionally strong but also very independent."

Shooting, as it gradually turned out, became part and parcel of Khatijah's growing years. Always headstrong, she learned to curb herself through the very act of shooting. "I have an energetic personality. But whenever I was in the range, I could be still and focus on the act of shooting. Over time, I have been able to control my emotions better."

Armed with a life goal, Khatijah was soon shooting competitively. She honed her shooting skills by representing the People's Defence Force at the competitions that SAF regularly held for its staff. "I started competing in M16

events in 1973, when I was at the Beach Road Camp. But I wasn't improving my shooting skills as I did not have proper tutoring." Still, she pushed on to perfect her shooting techniques – on her own.

AIMING HIGH

It was not until her posting to the SAFTI Military Institute in 1974 that she finally started to make breakthroughs in her shooting. "There were many sharpshooters at the Pasir Laba Camp," she says. "As it was a training institute, there were coaches, too." The first thing she did when she arrived at SAFTI MI was to head straight for the shooting range. "I took an M16 and fired away," says the naturally instinctive shooter. "If I felt I wasn't doing something right, I would ask for advice from the shooters there."

She never stopped asking. Her dedication to the sport caught the attention of Abbas Abdullah, a shooting coach at SAFTI MI. "I was also always the first to report at the range. When Abbas saw that I was so interested, he became willing to teach me what he knew," says Khatijah. "Once he corrected my stance, I started shooting very well. Under Abbas' tutelage, I became a top M16 shooter in the SAF."

Khatijah went on to win the SAF Small Arms Meet in 1977, 1978 and 1979. She cites this as one of the triumphs of her shooting life. "Although it was an internal competition, it was a major personal achievement to win the trophy. The award was only given out if you won for three consecutive years." The following year, she stopped competing in the M16 events.

THE ABILITY TO ADAPT

Eventually, Khatijah turned her attention to the air pistol as Singapore wanted to field a women's shooting team for the 1983 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. It was a move that would bring her international recognition. She says: "After I got through the trials, I was really fired up to do my best."

Though she was representing the country, Khatijah was still left to her own devices to train. She says: "In those days, there was no real emphasis on sports." But there were many challenges, such as learning how to shoot in a confined space after years with an M16. She also did not know how to draw

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up a training programme. "Nor did I know how to peak. I would just go into the shooting range, pick up the air pistol and shoot. If I didn't shoot well on a certain day, I felt discouraged."

But shooting not only brought out Khatijah's stubborn streak to succeed, it also revealed an ability to adapt. "I just had to continue shooting," she says. "In fact, I told myself that I had to achieve, no matter what." So, she devised ways to improve. "I learned through trial and error. After observing how others shot, and asking them for advice, I had to adjust accordingly." Still, that presented problems. "Ultimately, the techniques that worked for them did not always work for me. I still had to improvise on my own."

Sheer determination won the day, as Khatijah picked up her first medal – a bronze in the 10-metre air pistol event at the 1983 SEA Games in Singapore. "Winning was exhilarating, of course," she says, clearly remembering the highs of her shooting days. That win soon set her on a steady trail of shooting achievements. In 1987, Khatijah won a silver medal in the SEA Games in Jakarta. By 1988, she was the only female representative from Singapore to compete in Seoul, Korea, for the 24th Olympics.

HARD WORK REWARDS

Even then, Khatijah did not get a proper coach. "There was a visiting coach from Australia but he arrived only a month before the competition. By then, it was too late. There was simply not enough time for us to work together. He merely corrected my stance before returning to his home country."

The day she left for Seoul, she broke down in tears because she felt so unprepared. Even though she continued to train every day, her scores were dipping. Still, she relied on sheer hard work. She trained every day, even though she knew that she could have skipped the training – and no one would have realised.

Her rationale? There is no shortcut to success. She adds: "Every night, I would focus my gaze on a target on the wall and imagine myself shooting at it. I would do so at least 10 times before I allowed myself to fall asleep. This reminded me of the values of persistence and hard work that were crucial for success – in sports or life."

In the 10 days leading up to the competition, she suffered from insomnia. "My state of mind was bad, and I lost five kilograms due to stress during that time." She eventually shot a 361/400, finishing in the bottom two. For Khatijah, it was still an experience to remember. "The standard was obviously very high, but it was an honour to be able to compete."



Back home, Khatijah became the 1987 Sportswoman of the Year. She even shot a score of 380/400 at the Mount Vernon range in June 1986 during the SAF 125th Anniversary Meet, a record that remains unbroken to this day. Gold came her way too in the SEA Games Championships. "1988 was a good year for me," Khatijah laughs. "If only such years came around more often!" She went on to compete in the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing and the 1991 SEA Games in Manila where she won a silver.

GETTING OFF THE TRIGGER

For her contributions to the shooting scene, the Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association (SAFSA) awarded Khatijah with a 30th Anniversary Special Commendation in 1998. But not everyone took pride in her achievements.

Over the years, her colleagues at the dental clinic grew unhappy with the time she took off for competitions. Finally, in 2002, her boss issued an ultimatum to Khatijah to stop shooting. "I had to comply," she says. That decision took a lot out of Khatijah, who describes competitive shooting as "being in my blood". She adds: "When I stopped shooting competitively, there was a big void in my life."

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In the end, the routine work at the dental clinic got to her, and she started taking up courses to improve herself. She eventually left the army in 2009, and is now a tour guide with the Singapore Tourism Board.

Now a grandmother of two, Khatijah understands that all good things come to an end. Looking back at her glory days, she says: "Competitive shooting helped me to keep fit, stay focused and achieve my goals through the years. It would be an understatement to say that the sport shaped my life."

VALUES

Perseverance • Discipline • Passion • Tenacity

REFLECTION

1. Khatijah wanted to excel in shooting so much that she "turned a blind eye" to the obstacles. Do you have such a passion – one that you're prepared to sacrifice for and stay true to, despite all challenges?
2. There is no shortcut to success, as Khatijah's story has shown. What do you do when your efforts do not produce the outcomes you desired? Does your resilience motivate you to try again? Do you reconsider your priorities and shift your direction? How do you evaluate your options?