

Brothers in Arms – Part 1

(John's Story)

By Paul Gibbs

This two part article is one of a family affair about two brothers that share a love of pigeon racing that has spanned some 55 years, and while they flew their birds as a partnership in the early days between 1967 and 1979 they continue today as separate competitors. These brothers are John and Lee Saliba, both very well known to many Sydney fanciers.

In the early years they were members of the Smithfield Pigeon Club that is affiliated with Sydney's and Australia's largest Federation Central Cumberland, and even though the CCF (as with many federations) has declined in membership it is still today a very strong and competitive Federation. Back in the 60's boasting 600 plus members with today's membership number being approximately half that, although I must say that this has also been affected by the forming of two other Sydney based Federations in recent times.



Anyway, back in those early days in the 60' and 70's the partnership of J & L Saliba were very competitive at both Club and Federation level, with the Smithfield club back then boasting a membership of well over 30. For those not familiar with the location of Smithfield it could be described as being a little south of the centre of the Sydney metropolitan area.

As with many fanciers in their teens there has been a break in pigeon racing due to their attention being drawn to birds of a different kind, and John was no exception.

Today John lives in the Sydney suburb of Penrith which is located in Sydney's west close to the base of the Blue Mountains having lived there now since 1981, while Lee lives at Catherine Fields near Camden in Sydney's south west. Today the distance between John and Lee's lofts is approximately 43km as the crow flies. Currently John is a flying member of the Western Sydney Club (Federation) while Lee is a flying member of the Southern Racing Pigeon Federation.

Before Lee relocated to Catherine Fields, joining the Camden Pigeon Club that is affiliated with the Southern Racing Pigeon Federation, Lee was a member of the Campbelltown City Pigeon Club. Which at the time meant both brothers flew with the Central Cumberland Federation and did so for many years. John also having been a member of the old Nepean Racing Pigeon Federation that sadly is no longer. This would be quite a unique record – with John having competed in 3 different federations over the years from the one address.

John immigrated to Australia from Malta in 1954 with his mother and father and is the fourth oldest of 10 children and is now in his 70th year, while Lee is 10 years his junior and was born in Australia, and of the 10 children John and Lee are the only ones interested in pigeons.

In years gone by (what seems like another life time) I had the pleasure of competing against both John and Lee. With John it was while I was a member of the Penrith Homing Pigeon Society, and with Lee it was while I was a member of the Campbelltown City Pigeon Club finding both very competitive in what at the time were clubs with memberships both exceeding 30.

When I asked John how he became interested in pigeons he said that when he 7 yrs. old a friend of his father's gave him 3 pigeons, a white grizzle cock, a dark grizzle hen and a blue checker hen. The white grizzle escaped one day when he was showing it to a friend, Charlie Borg, two days later the bird came back bringing with it another bird and ever since then John said he has always had pigeons.

As with all brothers there is always a little "banter" and John and Lee are no exception. John said that when he was 17 there were many times that he would become really annoyed with Lee who was 7 at the time, often finding him in the loft playing with birds when he returned home each day from work with Lee confirming to me the "dressing downs" he would cop.

I personally don't have a problem with that, as although both John and Lee are no longer in full time employment I bet their wives get annoyed with them as they both probably can be caught on a regular basis in the loft to this very day "playing" with their birds.

John is not the type of club member that takes no part in the running of the club, and while he has been a member of the Penrith Club since 1981 and has during this time has held the position of Club Secretary for the past 25 years. This combined with organising fund raising events so as to keep the club financially afloat and is one that John puts plenty of time and effort into.



Over the years many fanciers, especially those that have been in the sport for as long as John has, have had many highlights and trying to nominate one can be difficult, but when I asked John did he have a particular memory of one he had no hesitation in saying his 1997 winner in the CCF from Mt Gambier a distance of 997km that won 1st Club, 1st Section, 3rd Fed Overall with 3300 birds competing having the only bird in the club in race time with a velocity of 678 mpm would be the one.

John explained that this race was a very difficult race as the birds were liberated in very heavy overcast conditions with heavy rain commencing not long after liberation with the rain continuing for the whole of the weekend affecting all of the eastern States.

The second day (Sunday) was coming to an end and as there was a break in the weather John said he thought nothing would come through that day and was preparing to let out his

remaining birds to exercise for the following weekends event, but Charlie Sammut, his racing partner that year was adamant that they would get a bird home, and just before John let out his remaining birds to exercise Charlie yelled out “look, here comes a pigeon”, John said he couldn’t believe his eyes. Through a break in the clouds this pigeon folded and dropped into the loft being clocked in at 4:12 pm. John went on to say that out of a lifetime of achievements in pigeon racing this has been the most rewarding, one he will never forget. (Refer to attached photo).

I then asked John what he thought was his biggest disappointment in pigeon racing to date, to which he replied the “2008 Newcastle Classic One Loft Race” when a kit of 11 pigeons arrived together with one of his entrants being the first to land, but sat and watched the other 10 enter the loft, saying “you guessed it”, there was only 10 prizes and mine the first to land, was the 11th pigeon to enter the loft. No glory, no money, but that’s all part of pigeon racing.

When asked about the season just past (2020) with all the problems that surrounded the sport with Covid-19, border closures and Rota virus outbreaks I wondered as to his seasons results to which he said that he had a good year compared to many, winning 6 club races out of a possible 14 adding that the most rewarding win was the last race of the season as it was the toughest of the year.

I proceeded to ask John a series of questions regarding his breeding, racing and overall management commencing by asking how many stock pair he keeps, their background and how many young birds that he breeds each year. In total John said he keeps 30 pair of stock birds that are a blend of several blood lines with many being gift birds from several fanciers saying that he has no particular bloodline as he believes that there are good qualities in all pigeons and it comes down to how you train them and how they perform for you and that while there are a few key pigeons in the stock loft that he concentrates on they are basically his own family that has been blended together over many years, adding that every year he tries to introduce a few new pigeons as a means of trying to improve his performances and as an interest to see how they go adding that most of his birds are cross bred saying that if you are looking to source introductions always try to obtain the producers of winners, not the winner, adding that he has no special method when it comes to pairing his stock, pairing them as he sees fit, and when it comes to selecting birds from the race loft he prefers birds that have proven themselves over 3 - 4 years on the track.

When asked about the various theories that plague pigeon fanciers John said his main criteria was the study of the bird’s wing and body in helping to determine the distance that a pigeon is able to perform from, in saying that John said he pairs his stock birds in early August, breeding around 150 young birds each year.

When it comes to racing, training and feeding his birds John said he likes to keep it as simple as possible. His loft is of the old Australian design which he says has served him well over many years. The front of the loft faces east as this is the only clear view for the birds when released to exercise and when they return. There are no motivation methods employed with the birds racing to their perch being their only motivation with the hens and cocks being separated all year.



When selecting birds to race each week he looks to pick the most vibrant looking birds with clear bright eyes, those that handle well and those that have performed best from their previous race.

The clocking system is via a Benzing M1 electronic timer. The birds are only flown around the loft for 1hr each day and a basic feeding mix obtain from J&M Produce is fed to the birds all year with no variation of other seeds added and that they are only fed once each day.

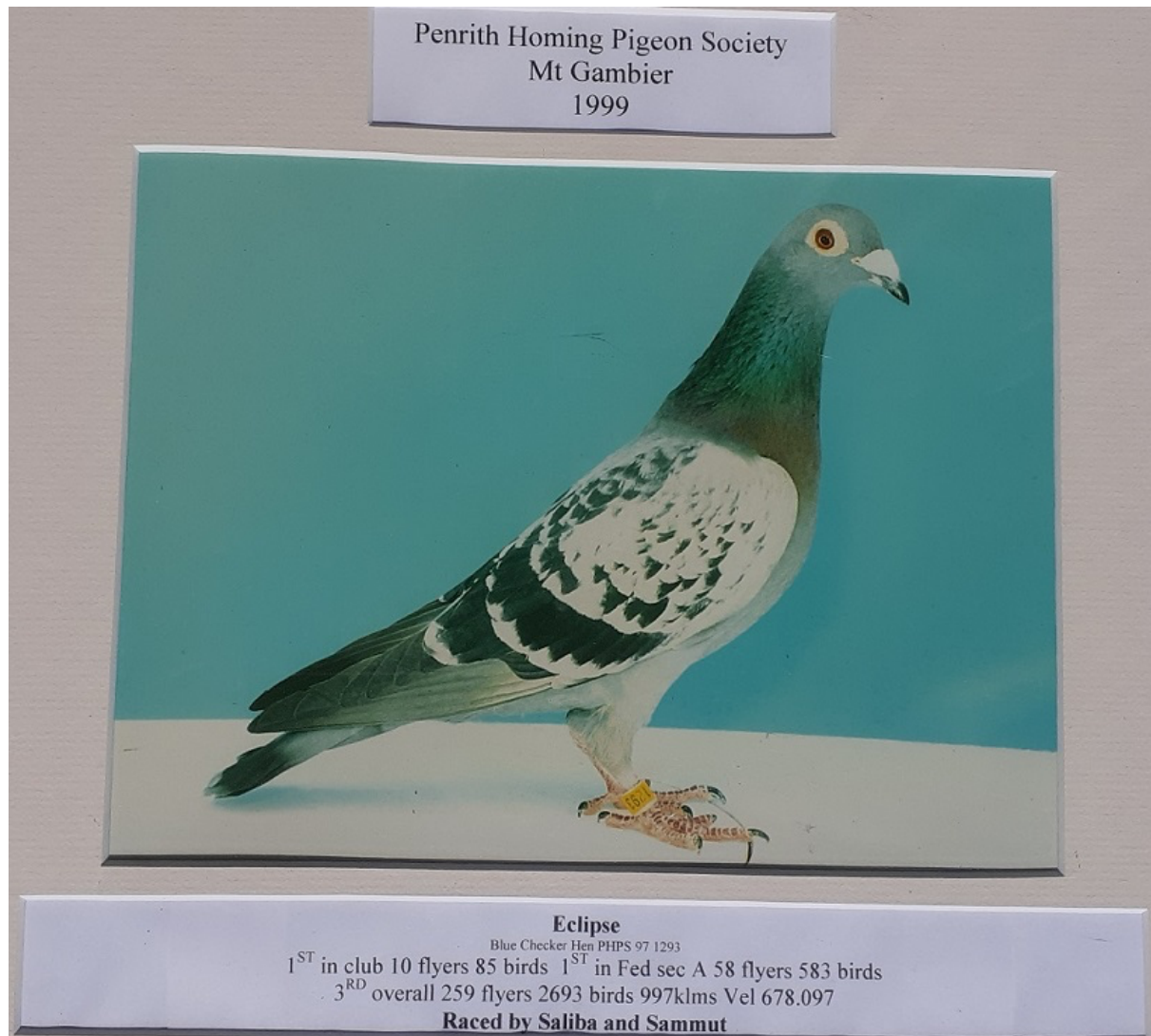
Tossing commences around 6 weeks prior to the first race, starting at 10km and building up to at least 30km where it is expected that they will have at least 15 tosses before racing commences. Once racing does commence they are tossed twice a week from 30km and always on the line of flight.

When it comes to medicating his birds John said that during the race season he treats on alternate weeks for Coxy, Canker and Respiratory issues.

A popular topic discussed each year by fanciers is bird losses that John believes comes down to three basic causes – poor weather, especially easterly winds when either tossing or racing and then our nemesis the Peregrine Falcon.

As can be seen John is a “no frills fancier” one that believes in keeping things simple, and while this method is one that John is more than happy with he sees no reason to change.

A sharp contrast to what many fanciers do these days. For those that over think things and empty their wallet regularly they may wish to adopt the “KISS” principle as well. John saying that if he had to do what many fanciers do and spend today he would give the game away. (Food for thought for some).



Part 2 will cover Lee Saliba’s story. Until then stay safe everyone.

In memory of the late Captain Sir Tom Moore I would like to use one of his quotes as he always remained positive by saying - **“Tomorrow will be a good day”**