



Affectionately called “Bud” by his family, Albert Rice is one of the twenty-eight African-American men who served on the final sailing crew of USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35).

Albert Rice grew up in the West Bottoms area of Kansas City, Kansas. Dating back to the late 1870’s when Rice’s great-grandparents migrated to the settlement from Tennessee at the end of the Post Civil War Reconstruction Era, the family has continued to call the area home for generations.

Born in June 1925, Albert had a twin sister, Alberta. They were the eldest children of his mother, Charlotte Lockridge. Their father, W.K. Rice, left the family when the twins were young. Three more siblings came into the family when Charlotte married John Miles Pitts and the couple welcomed Lee Roy, Madelyn, and Evelyn. The young children suffered a great loss early in life when their mother died.

Albert was only 12 years old, and his youngest sibling was two. All the children went to live with an elder aunt and uncle to be raised together in their familiar hometown. Albert relished his role as a big brother and was a guiding force in their young lives.

By the time he was 18 years old, he was working in a meat packing plant to help support the family. The year was 1943 and America was in the middle of a second world war. Food was rationed, money was tight, and the country needed young men to join in the fight. His maternal uncle had served in the Army’s Services of Supply section of the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I. Now, Albert was called upon to do his part.

The United States officially entered World War II after the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, uniting with its allies to combat the Imperial Japanese enemy. Focused on the Pacific, the Navy played a prominent role in the war effort, requiring more ships and more personnel as the war ramped up. Recruitment efforts were meant to mirror the population, but mixing blacks with whites posed some logistical challenges when it came to the close quarters and job duties on a ship at sea.

The Navy slowly made some changes to create a pathway, albeit a segregated one, for African Americans to serve on a warship - the Stewards Branch. Additional all-black companies were assembled for laborers in shore duty posts. Advertisements for Navy recruitment appealed to young men who were promised a chance to see the world and gain skills that would be useful in civilian life.

Like all other able-bodied 18-year-old young men, Albert Rice registered for the draft within days of his 18th birthday. He signed up for the U.S. Navy and was inducted four short months later. Soon he was off to the Great Lakes Naval Training facility in Illinois. Upon arrival, he and other African-American recruits reported to a segregated boot camp in an isolated section of the larger facility where he would spend the next eight weeks with other African-American men from various parts of the country.

Growing up in a multi-cultural neighborhood Albert had attended segregated schools. He was smart, educated, had artistic talents, and a curiosity about the world. Confident in his physical abilities, he was admired for his athletic skills. He was accepted into training for Steward's Mate. He completed his training as scheduled and was sent to the Naval Receiving Station in Shoemaker, California, nearly two thousand miles from his hometown. It was there

that he received his orders to report to duty on one of the most prestigious World War II ships, USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35).

Stepping onto the teak deck of the 10,000-ton heavy cruiser on the 28th of April 1944, he soon became aware his new home had already earned five Battle Stars for its performance and valor over the past two years. In addition to the ship's captain and senior officers, *Indianapolis* was now the flagship for Admiral Raymond A. Spruance. As Commander of the Fifth Fleet, Spruance had successfully directed the campaigns that captured the Gilbert Islands, Marshall Islands and the Asiatic-Pacific Raids on Palau, Yap, and Ulithi.

In a brief interlude before the next big battle, Albert Rice settled into his duties in Officer's Country. He bunked in special stewards' quarters with other black sailors. Their berths were sandwiched below the Officer's Mess and Wardroom and above the ammunition stores of the ship. Duty consisted of 8-hour work shifts and regular times when he would be scheduled to be on watch. Rice was trained on where to report for battle stations in the event of enemy action. All hands-on deck would be needed in an attack, and on *Indianapolis* African-American crewmembers were trained to be proficient on the big guns.

Over the next year, Albert would have had a chance to test those skills. *Indianapolis* participated in five more pivotal battles in the Pacific. On 31 March 1945, however, USS *Indianapolis* fell victim to a kamikaze attack during the fleet's preparation for the invasion of Okinawa. The Japanese plane was shot down. It clipped the ship and crashed harmlessly into the sea, but not before releasing a bomb that penetrated through the entire ship and detonated underneath. Rice was onboard when nine of his shipmates were killed in the attack. Spruance pulled *Indy* from the fight, and she sailed back on her own accord to the U.S. naval shipyard on the west coast of California.

Rice was among the crew members who remained attached to *Indianapolis* while she underwent repairs at Mare Island. During this time, he was able to travel home and see his family back in Kansas City. Spending time with his siblings, particularly his younger brother, Lee Roy, was heartwarming. Ever the faithful big brother, what he had witnessed in war had a cautionary effect on him. He expressed to Lee Roy that he hoped the young boy would never have to go to war.

It wasn't long afterwards that Albert Rice and the rest of *Indianapolis*'s crew were called back to Mare Island to report for duty. The ship had been chosen for a top-secret mission, due to set sail on 16 July 1945. Rice said goodbye to his loved ones. It was the last time they would see him.

By August the country was rejoicing in the news of World War II ending. That same week, a Western Union messenger rode his bicycle to the family home of Albert Rice to deliver terrible news: Albert was missing in action. A month later, a second, even more devastating notice came informing the family that he had been killed in action.

The family never knew his exact fate. Growing up on the banks of the Kaw (Kansas River), Albert was a proficient swimmer. His family always believed that had Albert made it off the ship, he would have had a good chance of survival because of his swimming skills.

Just 20 years of age, Albert Rice became one of 879 lives lost in the Navy's worst tragedy at sea: the sinking of USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35). A few days after delivering their secret cargo, the ship was sunk on 30 July 1945 minutes into the new day. For five nights and four days men struggled to survive in shark infested enemy waters. They were miraculously spotted on 2 August 1945. Of the 1,195 men onboard, only 316 shipmates survived. Their top-

secret cargo had been the fissionable components of the world's first atomic bomb which led to Japan's surrender and the end of the war. It was a horrible twist of fate with agonizing timing.

Lee Roy had to grow up without his beloved brother. As an adult, he earned a Ph.D., had a distinguished career in education, and raised a loving family. He never forgot his brother, and made sure that his family learned their Uncle Bud's story. He read and shared every book he could find about the storied ship, *Indianapolis*, hoping to learn more about his brother. None of the books, however, mentioned African Americans serving on the ship.

Fifty years after his brother Albert's death, Lee Roy Pitts made a pilgrimage to the City of Indianapolis in July 1995 to witness the dedication of a national memorial to the legendary ship and her crew. Dr. Pitts was one of thousands who attended the ceremonies. Yet, he stood out because of his eloquence and his color. An open microphone was available for family members to share about their loved ones who served on the ship. Dr. Pitts talked about his brother Albert. For most in the room, it was the first time that they realized that there were African Americans on the ship.

Albert Rice was one of 28 African American men who served on the final sailing crew of USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35). Neither he nor his 27 black shipmates lived to tell their own stories. We invite you to learn more about these men and their place in history as we lift them out of the shadows and honor their place as men of USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35).