

Burns, 1st EP black deputy, dies at 78

By Daniel Borunda

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EL PASO — Joseph R. “Joe” Burns was a humble man but was considered a pioneer in El Paso law enforcement and a hero by those who knew him.

Burns, who died last month at the age of 78, in 1966 became the first black deputy in the El Paso County Sheriff's Office at a time



Burns in 1965

when much of the country was still segregated, Burns' son, Tyronne Burns, said recently.

“I think what he liked was the opportunity to help people,” said Tyronne “Ty” Burns, a teacher at Hanks High School. “Back then, people respected the law.”

Joseph Burns, a native of New Orleans, joined the Army shortly before turning 18 and served in the Korean War in the same all-black unit as U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., who remained a life-long friend.

In 1950, four months after arriving in Korea, Burns was captured by Chinese forces. He survived the harsh conditions as a prisoner of war for nearly three years, eventually returning home fatigued, malnourished and his teeth rotted away from eating hard maize.

“I lost my youth,” Joseph Burns once told his son.

After Korea, Burns was stationed at Fort Bliss with the 591st Military Police Company.

“Even though he was an MP, he could not arrest a white person and that was here in Fort Bliss,” Tyronne Burns said, recalling stories his father told.

In 1965, Joseph Burns became one of only three blacks working as jailers in the El Paso County Sheriff's Office. A year later, Burns became the department's first black patrol deputy and for years patrolled the farms of Clint and Socorro. He retired in the late 1980s.



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Among the memorabilia that the family of Joseph Burns have preserved are his POW flag, his medals, his funeral prayer card and old photographs of him in uniform.

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“He did have resistance. No doubt. (But) he was always calm, just a calm demeanor no matter the situation,” Tyronne Burns said.

The late J.R. Grijalva, a former El Paso police assistant chief and El Paso Community College police chief, once described Joseph Burns as one of his inspirations for going into law enforcement.

In a college essay Grijalva gave to Tyronne Burns, Grijalva described himself as a rebellious teen working at Western Playland Amusement Park. He was slowly motivated to change his life by Joseph Burns, who worked off-duty security at the park.

“He made quite a difference in my life and if it were not for him ... I do not know where I would be today,” Grijalva wrote in a 2001 letter to Ty-

ronne Burns.

On Nov. 9, Joseph Burns died. Parthena “Pat” Burns, his wife of more than 52 years, had died a year earlier.

After Joseph Burns' death, Rangel honored him in the Congressional Record. “Although Joseph R. Burns has passed, his legacy in public service will not go unnoticed. His calm demeanor and quiet spirit will never be forgotten,” Rangel stated.

Tyronne Burns, the couple's only son, remembered his father as a kindhearted man who cared about others.

“What I remember about my dad as a deputy, no matter how tired my dad was, and sometimes he would work double shifts, he would always make time for my family,” Tyronne Burns said. “He would take off his (uniform) shirt and gun belt and he would play with us kids outside.”