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His passion for teaching soared above historic role

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Daniel Summers Sr. left Harrisburg in the 1940s to become an original member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first black aviators and crews trained and deployed by the U.S. military during World War II.

During his 22 years in the military, Summers also served in the Korean War and did two tours of duty in Vietnam.

He supervised and trained military personnel in aircraft mechanics, and retired from the Air Force in 1966 as a senior master sergeant.

Then he began his second career, one Summers believed was the greatest gift to mankind. He became an elementary teacher in Arizona and taught fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

"He thought it was the most important job there was," said his son, Daniel Summers Jr. of Tucson, Ariz.

The senior Summers, a 1937 graduate of John Harris High School, died Oct. 29 in Tucson. He was 86.

"I don't know of anything he enjoyed more than teaching," his sister, Edythe S. Johnson of Harrisburg, said. "He loved every minute of it."

The Summers family arrived in Harrisburg during the 1800s. The Presbyterian church in Harrisburg sponsored Summers' great-great grandfather, who was trained in masonry work, after he escaped slavery in South Carolina, the younger Summers said.

Daniel Summers was born in 1919, the seventh of eight children. He grew up in what is now Allison Hill. His father operated a barber shop at Fifth and Market streets, a rare black-owned downtown business.

After graduating from high school, Summers attended Hampton Institute in Virginia for two years, then returned home to work in a steel mill.

A civil service test changed his life. Summers scored high enough to land a job as an aircraft mechanic at the Olmsted Air Force Base in Middletown. Later, he answered a military advertisement and his life changed again. This time, he landed in U.S. history.

The military was starting an aviation program in Tuskegee, Ala., for black men at a time when many white Americans felt blacks lacked the intelligence, skill, courage or patriotism to fly.

For a year, he was stationed on a military base in the Deep South with the men who would become the famed Tuskegee Airmen. The Tuskegee pilots went on to Europe and fame, but Summers had learned more about aircraft mechanics and stayed stateside to train others.

After retiring from the Air Force in 1966, Summers earned bachelor's and master's degrees in education at the University of Arizona, then taught for 14 years. Several former students attended his Dec. 15 memorial service in Tucson.

"It was neat to see some of these students; some of them were in their 40s," his son said. "Some were so inspired by him, and what he taught them changed their lives. He saw elementary education as the most important part of education because that's when people form themselves."

Summers never returned to Harrisburg to live after his military life, but he visited frequently, his sister said.

"He would show me around, where his father's barber shop was and other places," his son said. "It was cool for me, because every where we went, there was a relative or someone who knew a relative related to me. He loved Harrisburg. He seemed to feel he got a good shake there."