

Created for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs

It was easy to describe cardiac surgeon Michael E. DeBakey as a medical innovator, statesman and visionary; a doctor who also made key contributions to the VA's approach to research and medicine. The challenge in understanding the man and a medical career that spanned 75 years, was to find the central themes that would give his story shape and focus. I was able to trace his approach to surgery and medicine to his battlefield service during World War II. And show how that experience informed a life-long mission devoted to saving lives. I researched and wrote the script and edited the program.

Soldier, Surgeon, Statesman: a Portrait of Michael E. DeBakey

DEDICATION CEREMONY

Tucker

What a great day this is. It is my pleasure to welcome you to a state of the art health care facility that now carries with it the title of a truly great man.

Wainerdi

Today we are gathered in a very auspicious occasion to honor perhaps the most honored physician in history.

Rep. Lee

We in Hoston claim him. And so he's a great tall Texan in our eyesight.

Sen. Hutchinson

Full individuals make an impact on all of humanity. Dr. DeBakey has had a lifetime of accomplishments.

Butler

Mike is this generations most influential medical statesman. He has walked the halls of royalty, treated the famous, and been advisors to presidents. Please join me in welcoming our own, Dr. Michael E. DeBakey.

NARRATION

How are we to know Michael E. DeBakey? His vision helped chart the course of the modern VA. He created medical miracles, trained generations of physicians and set the standard for personal integrity. His dedication to research pushed the boundaries of what is possible. And his leadership created centers of excellence to heal the sick and care for the wounded.

This is the legacy of Michael E. DeBakey: Soldier. Surgeon. Statesman.

Butler

He is a multi-faceted person. His intellect is superior, his work ethic is superior, and his contributions have been superior...

Tucker

Not just being the world's most recognized surgeon, not just being a physician to heads of state and presidents and dignitaries from around the world...

Wainerdi

He creates systems, concepts, ideas and he has the stick-to-it-ness to see them through to reality...

Lindberg

He embodies the best, and the science and politics and advice and wisdom and friendship and all that, but it never steers very, very far from just being a good treater of patients...

Lynch

So many of the modern foundations of medicine were created by this man, or at least he contributed to them...

Perlin

I can think of no individual who has made a commitment to veterans and the care of veterans more passionately, or more effectively, than Dr. Michael E. DeBakey.

WWII STORY - France

NARRATION

In 1944, the tides of war are shifting. We're about to launch a great invasion, but our armies could be decimated. One man has a plan that could save countless lives.

Announcer

June 6. D Day. The great plan is put to the test.

NARRATION

On this day, 120,000 men will hit the beaches at Normandy. 50,000 German soldiers lie ready for them. Thousands of our soldiers will die. But a new strategy to care for the wounded is in place and ready to be tested.

Announcer

The first American soldiers hit the beach. The medics have moved in with them and their work begins. Aid stations are established on the spot. And an astounding record starts piling up. Eighty to ninety percent of the wounded receive medical care within ten minutes of being hit.

NARRATION

The bloody D Day invasion changes the course of World War II. Many of the men who survive their wounds that day owe their lives to the determination of one man, Michael DeBakey.

WWII STORY – Italy

NARRATION

Italy, a year earlier. Surgeon DeBakey is assigned to the Fifth Army under the leadership of General Mark Clark. There he sees “things in action,” as he will put it. And he realizes that many who were wounded in battle could be saved, if we changed how our combat surgeons operated.

Butler

I think Dr. DeBakey’s compassion for the veterans, emanated from his own experience as a soldier. He saw first hand, the pain and suffering and the sacrifices made by young men for their nation.

DeBakey

And one of the things that I noticed: we did not have the most experienced surgeons assigned to the field or evacuation hospitals. They were in the general hospitals in the rear, doing almost nothing. So it seemed obvious to me make these well-trained surgeons mobile. Create a team and move them when you needed them.

Wainerdi

The concept is that after you are hurt, there’s what is called the "golden hour". It is important that within one hour you’re stabilized and helped.

NARRATION

DeBakey’s “obvious” plan meets much resistance. It will require too much change. It is too difficult, too risky. But his scientific mind wins out, and new mobile surgical units are formed.

The new units achieve such dramatic results DeBakey will convince the generals to use them on D Day. And where ever they are deployed, the mobile surgical units show a high rate of success -- saving the lives of soldiers wounded in battle.

A few years later, when our troops fight in the frozen hills of Korea, DeBakey’s concept is standard operating procedure – with a new name: the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital – soon shortened to “M.A.S.H.”

Wainerdi

In the early days of warfare, in the Civil War and things like that, infectious diseases used to be a big problem. And today in warfare the big problem is trauma.

Lynch

Dr. DeBakey recognized that rather than sitting back and passively waiting for someone to bring the survivors to you, that you get out to them is going to change morbidity and mortality.

Wainerdi

And the result is that in Vietnam, people had a much higher survival rate than in any other war. And now in the Gulf Wars, both I and II, the survival rate is astonishing – very, very high.

NARRATION

DeBakey's experiences during World War II will shape his thinking throughout his life. Once the war ends, he turns his attention to the wounded troops coming back from overseas.

MODERNIZING THE VA

Wainerdi

After the war he recognized the great need for rehabilitating the soldiers who had returned. Because what really happened with techniques that he invented, such as the MASH hospitals, was that actually people who were wounded and in previous wars would have died, did not. And since they did not die, it was necessary that they be treated, and rehabilitated and brought back into life.

NARRATION

That job will fall to the VA. But first, things will have to change.

Tucker

He agreed to stay to work with the VA in creating an infrastructure, so that veterans who were returning from war had the resources that they were going to need to be taken care of.

Lynch

Late in the war, Roosevelt, before his death, recognized that the VA was not ready for all the returning soldiers. It was more the old soldiers home and needed to be beefed up, if you will, to deal with the crush of returning veterans.

Omar Bradley

We in the Veterans Administration are bending every effort to modernize and speed up our services to all veterans.

DeBakey

We were having as many as 3 – 5000 wounded military personnel arriving daily from overseas. But we were losing the personnel that we needed to take care of those wounded, many of whom still needed restoration surgery.

Lynch

Dr. DeBakey was still in the Army at this time, but he was working with the VA in transitioning active duty soldiers to VA hospitals.

DeBakey

It became obvious that we were going to have a crisis on our hands. The Veterans Administration was not prepared to take over. It didn't have the facilities or the personnel. Surgeon General Kirk called me in and said I need you to stay on. Would you stay on for another year? I asked the Surgeon General to let me call a hundred surgeons whom I knew well. Every single one agreed to stay on. Which really touched me.

NARRATION

General Bradley, Medical Director Paul Magnuson, and Dr. DeBakey help guide the VA through that difficult transition. Bringing in new staff is the first challenge. Instituting a high quality of care will be the next.

Perlin

When Michael DeBakey came home from World War II, a young Colonel DeBakey said that we had the obligation, we have the obligation, to follow the health of the returning troops over time to see how the experience of war affects them. He started an epidemiology program and today we still use those data, we still track the epidemiology of the health of service members who returned from combat ever since World War II.

Wainerdi

Now, what Dr. DeBakey knew, and it was just really at the beginning of this, was that medicine, coupled with science and research, could in fact help people dramatically.

NARRATION

DeBakey institutes ongoing medical research as a key component of the VA mission. Then he has another idea -- join each VA hospital with a medical school. Make the VA hospital a teaching hospital, with the medical school faculty in charge of patient care. And form a Deans committee to oversee it all.

Wanerdi

First of all he created the idea of Dean's committees at all the VA hospitals and he served on this Dean's committee at the Michael E. DeBakey Medical Center since its inception.

Tucker

And if you look at the fifty plus years of attendance, at the Dean's Committee the person with probably the best attendance record is Michael E. DeBakey.

DeBakey

The idea was to be able to bring to the Veterans Hospitals, and therefore the veterans, the best quality of medical care we had. Which was by the medical faculty. Because they were the ones doing the research and thus improving the delivery of healthcare.

Lynch

The sort of legacies that we have now in the VA today all came out of this couple of years right after the war when the foundation of the VA, as we know it today, was being built. And Dr. DeBakey was there working with them on a first-name basis. He really is part of the roots of the modern VA.

NARRATION

Today, the VA hospital that bears his name is part of a world class medical center; and stands as a model for medical institutions around the world.

CREATING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE

NARRATION

During his war service in Washington, DeBakey spends countless hours at the Army Medical Library, researching the medical texts and browsing through the books.

DeBakey

Which then was probably the best medical library in the country.

NARRATION

But the building that houses the collection is in terrible shape.

DeBakey

It was housed in a very old red brick building, so old that they had an outhouse. And when it rained, they had to put tarpaulins over the books, because the roof leaked.

I thought that this library was a great treasure. There was a great opportunity now to recommend getting funds for a new building for this wonderful collection of books and journals.

The surgeon general told me that they had been trying to do that for thirty years. But they couldn't compete with tanks. And that's when it suddenly dawned on me that it didn't belong in the military. This was a national treasure.

NARRATION

He argues his case to any who would listen. Finally, at the Hoover Commission, his words make their mark. DeBakey's concept for a National Library of Medicine is accepted by President Truman. Now Congress will have to make it happen.

DeBakey

And everything was going along smoothly, but the Speaker of the House, from Texas, Mr. Rayburn, held it up because there were some differences among Democrats about where it should be located.

NARRATION

With the legislation stalled in Congress, DeBakey steps in to set things right.

DeBakey

It occurred to me that I had operated on the husband of the Secretary of the National Democratic Party. So I called her, and asked her if she would try to persuade Mr. Rayburn to let the Bill come up for a vote. And the next day she called me and said, "Mr. Rayburn's going to let the bill come through." Mr. Hill called me shortly afterwards. He said, "I don't know what you did, but we're going to pass that Bill."

NARRATION

Today the National Library of Medicine is a trusted resource, not just for medical professionals, but for everyone. With its comprehensive website, the world has easy access to the latest medical knowledge and research.

MEDICAL STORY

Wainerdi

Up until the Second World War, the role of science in medicine was very limited. But Dr. DeBakey developed all sorts of new approaches.

Lynch

They had to do some pretty rudimentary things in World War II. There were times they'd have to ligate -- sew off -- a major artery to prevent somebody from bleeding to death, and they learned how long could that limb survive with loss of blood flow. It was observations from people like Dr. DeBakey that led to the vascular surgery and repair of those vessels after World War II, which was really where Dr. DeBakey made his greatest impact.

NARRATION

Armed with extraordinary skill and confidence, DeBakey is determined to tackle the mysteries of heart disease. He first directs his scalpels at replacing damaged portions of arteries and veins.

Wainerdi

He was interested in research and felt that new materials and new techniques could be valuable in cardiovascular and other research, and went everywhere from using Dacron in the first successful vein replacement.

NARRATION

To mimic a blood vessel, the material must be strong and flexible. DeBakey experiments with different fabrics and settles on Dacron. Then, using sewing skills learned from his mother, he fashions artificial vessels to replace damaged arteries and veins.

DeBakey

By taking two sheets of the width I wanted and by sewing the edges on my wife's sewing machine, I could make a tube. And I first used one successfully in a patient in 1954.

Butler

Every medical student has to learn to memorize aortic aneurisms and they're the DeBakey type this type that, and they have different anatomic locations, different prognoses and different treatments. And it was DeBakey who defined all those things. And you go into the O.R. and people will ask for the DeBakey this, that, or the other because he invented instruments that are used in the O.R.

NARRATION

Through cutting edge surgical innovations, DeBakey can replace damaged vessels and valves. Now an even greater challenge awaits him. Can he apply his skills to save the damaged heart, itself? He sees a way to do it, and decides to take the risk.

DeBakey

We should be able to develop a pump, a mechanical pump that will substitute for the heart. And I'm convinced this can be done.

NARRATION

DeBakey's idea is simple. As a medical student he had designed a pump that made heart surgery possible. Now he will construct an artificial heart and use it to give the diseased heart a chance to mend. Then the restored heart will be re-attached and the patient can have a second chance at life.

The artificial heart works. But one by one, the patients die. Finally, there is a victory: Esperanza Vasquez. DeBakey's genius gives her a new life. But something even more extraordinary is about to hit the news.

In a daring procedure, Dr. Christian Barnard becomes the first surgeon to successfully transplant a human heart. Soon, DeBakey and others take up the challenge. But it will take the development of new drugs to make transplantation viable.

Today, the procedure is common, but heart disease remains the number one killer. And with the help of NASA, DeBakey has fabricated a new solution.

Lindberg

There are scores of surgical instruments that he invented, and this latest ventricular assist device is really a wonderful little contraption, this marvelous little pump. And he has a pump which is not bigger than my thumb that can pump six liters a minute.

NARRATION

DeBakey's newest pump uses space technology to do its job. With the help of NASA scientists and Dacron, his pump offers new hope to people struggling to survive with a damaged heart.

Wainerdi

He is constantly thinking about new things ...on the pattern, the thought pattern of innovation and creativity, which is really quite remarkable.

Lynch

He trained with people whose names will be forever part of the medical lexicon and he made himself forever part of the medical lexicon. To me that's amazing. These things will last forever.

Wainerdi

His work in cardiovascular surgery... That would be the crowning pinnacle of his life in medicine. He has changed cardiovascular surgery.

Butler

The liaison committee which accredits medical schools came for a visit to check things out. And they found Dr. DeBakey as president of the school, chairman of surgery, director of the cardiovascular center, world's medical statesman, and consultant to patients. And the chairman of the committee said to him, "How can you do all of this?" He said to them, "I do it between cases."

He was able to accomplish these things because he had a cadre of people that he trusted and delegated to them for the operational issues, and he could therefore set his time aside to look at the long-term strategy, to look at the vision and to set the example and set the stage for others to do their work. That's the brilliance of real leadership.

DEBAKEY HIGH SCHOOL

Tucker

I can't think of a better example of someone who had committed their life to training the next generation of healthcare providers than Michael E. DeBakey.

Wainerdi

He had a dream for a high school that would prepare young people, many of whom 85% of them are minority young people

Lindberg

He just had the idea that he ought to do something to help all of the people, particularly minorities of Houston, to have an interest and to try in medical science, to enter the profession.

NARRATION

DeBakey is actively involved with the school, bringing real world experience to the students.

Principal

And the very first thing he said to me, “bring the kids over so they can see me perform surgery. You have an open invitation, any time you’d like to bring students over.”

NARRATION

The school also mirrors DeBakey’s insistence on maintaining a standard of excellence.

Principal

The curriculum we have here at DeBakey is one that goes way beyond the average high school in what is required of most high schools for students to graduate. So we really want students who are interested in, first of all, math and science.

NARRATION

DeBakey’s ability to inspire brings results.

Principal

The students who graduate from Michael E. DeBakey High School, 98% of them are headed to college. About 60% are in the health professions in some area. In Houston there are approximately 175 physicians practicing, who started here at DeBakey.

NARRATION

DeBakey believes in education in its broadest sense, tempering a devotion to science with a love of poetry.

Principal

He will often ask students, who’s their favorite poet, what is their favorite poem and usually he catches the students off guard, but most of the times they can respond.

Butler

Well I think that he’s always had an interest in poetry. And I think that he sees poetry, and the arts in general, as a broadening experience in life, and that a physician is a better physician if they are a complete person. Not only scientifically, but understanding what people feel about life. And I think he saw poetry as a way to get to the hearts of people.

NARRATION

But beyond academic learning, Debakey knows that preparing young people for life also means instilling values, and he looks for opportunities to share his insight and wisdom.

DeBakey (speech)

So the culmination of education and a career that is satisfying provides an opportunity to be a good citizen and to contribute to the society in which that citizen lives. In the final analysis, what nobler goal is there in life?

Woman

I told her when she crossed that stage, my heart was just beating. Cause she never dreamed that she would go to college.

DeBakey

There you are.

Woman

And that just did it.

DeBakey

Sure. And many of these parents, you know, of these kids didn't go to college.

Woman

Right.

DeBakey

I admire so much what they're doing.

Student (woman)

He's a wonderful surgeon, a wonderful educator and a wonderful teacher. And that in itself is a legacy.

Student (man)

To me, he is a role model. Not only because of his contributions to medicine and his impact on medicine, but also to his contributions to science and education.

Perlin

I'd like veterans to know that Dr. DeBakey is a very human and real person. He's really an icon. But he's a warm, caring, passionate, fun-loving individual, who also at age 97 is an inspiration for all of us.

NARRATION

This is the legacy of Michael E. DeBakey: Soldier, Surgeon, Statesman.