Dr. Michael E. DeBakey died July 11, 2008, less than two months before what would have been his 100th birthday. Internationally acclaimed, Dr. DeBakey was hailed as the “greatest surgeon of the 20th century.” Dr. Claude Lenfant, director emeritus of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, called him “the father of modern cardiovascular surgery.”

Dr. DeBakey operated on more than 60,000 patients during his 75-year medical career. However, as noted by Gert Brieger, professor of the history of medicine at Johns Hopkins University, “what has elevated him over many other surgeons was his creativity — that’s what made his influence on surgeons and training programs so tremendous.” A classic example was DeBakey’s 1953 use of Dacron to repair aortic aneurysms. He sewed the prototype on his wife’s sewing machine, using fabric purchased at Houston’s downtown Foley’s department store.

Dr. DeBakey is also credited with inventing the roller pump for the cardiopulmonary bypass machine, while still in medical school. Later, as a surgeon, he devised several surgical instruments that still carry his name. He performed the first successful angioplasty in 1954, the first coronary bypass in 1964, and the first heart transplant in the United States in 1968. However, realizing that the demand for human heart transplants would outstrip the supply, he pursued the development of a total artificial heart, as well as ventricular assist devices (VADs).

It was the first use of the total artificial heart that sparked an infamous 40-year feud between DeBakey and Dr. Denton Cooley, a onetime colleague and rival surgeon. However, the two reconciled during the past year, with Dr. DeBakey receiving the Denton A. Cooley Cardiovascular Surgical Society Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007, and Dr. Cooley being honored with a comparable award by DeBakey’s surgical society.

In recent years, Dr. DeBakey had collaborated with NASA to develop the MicroMed DeBakey VAD. Up until the time of his death, DeBakey was prepared to assist Dr. O.H. “Bud” Frazier, director of surgical research at the Texas Heart Institute, in his upcoming attempt to implant...
dual heart pumps in calves as a total heart replacement. “It’s amazing how he never ceased to have encouragement and interest in new things,” Frazier said of the man he described as indomitable.

Dr. DeBakey served in the U.S. Army during World War II (where he originated the idea for mobile surgical hospitals [MASH units]). He is also credited with helping to establish special medical and surgical centers for veterans returning home from war, which later evolved into the VA Hospital System. And he was a driving force in rejuvenating the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Md., which has become the world’s leading repository of medical information.

In a bizarre twist of fate, Dr. DeBakey nearly died at age 97. In early 2006, he became the oldest person to survive emergency surgery for an aortic dissection, including a period of elective circulatory arrest. The surgery, performed by his longtime partner, Dr. George P. Noon, had been pioneered by Dr. DeBakey himself 50 years earlier. The anesthetic was delivered by another longtime friend and colleague, Dr. Salwa Shenaq. Remarkably, his eventual recovery was complete. He was able to travel to Washington, D.C. earlier this year to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, our nation’s top civilian honor.

After his death, Dr. DeBakey was the only physician and the only Houstonian ever to be given the honor of “lying in repose” at City Hall in Houston. The open-casket viewing, attended by a military honor guard, was held all day on July 15, 2008. Dr. DeBakey lay in repose, dressed in his surgical scrubs, white coat and the cowboy boots that he always wore to the operating room. On July 18, he was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

Dr. DeBakey’s personal motto was to “strive for nothing less than excellence.” He was a perfectionist, intolerant of incompetence, sloppy thinking and laziness. For a man who outlived nearly all of his peers, DeBakey was never philosophical about death, appearing to view it as a personal enemy. He was quoted in the Houston Chronicle as saying “You fight (death) all the time, and you never can accept it. You know in reality that everybody is going to die, but you try to fight it, to push it away, hold it away with your hands.”