

First Chairman of the Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation: A Tribute to George E. Omer Jr, MD

Thomas A. DeCoster, MD*

*UNM Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation

After a distinguished 20-year military career, Dr. George Elbert Omer Jr became the first chairman of the University of New Mexico (UNM) Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation in 1970 and served until 1990. During this time, he was president of multiple national orthopaedic societies and founded one of the first divisions of hand surgery in North America. Dr. Omer trained more than 300 residents and faculty members who went on to practice in New Mexico and the western United States. Our first chairman put New Mexico on the orthopaedic map, creating a strong foundation upon which the department continues to flourish. He passed away on November 20, 2014.

George was born on December 23, 1922, (5 years before his sister Betty) at Bethany Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, to George Elbert Sr and Edith Mae. His family moved to a variety of towns in Kansas between 1920 and 1940, a historic period encompassing both the Roaring Twenties and Great Depression. His father was a dentist, and George had two uncles who were physicians.

Particularly influenced toward a medical career thanks to his summers spent with Uncle Will, George attended Fort Hays State College (now University). His education was interrupted during World War II when he served in the United States (US) Army Medical Corps in 1943. Afterward, George resumed his studies and attended the University of Kansas for medical school, where he would meet his future wife, Wenda “Wendie” Vilven (marrying her in 1949). He completed his medical internship at the same hospital in which he was born.

In 1950, with the outbreak of the Korean War, he rejoined the US Army, although this time as a commissioned officer. George—now Dr. Omer—was first posted in the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Benning, Georgia. At one point, a patient had refused to follow rehabilitation orders, claiming that the doctor was “not one of us.” Motivated rather than discouraged, however, Dr. Omer subsequently completed his paratrooper training and proudly obtained his jump wings. While at this post, his two sons, George Eric and Mi-

chael Lee, were born.

During the Korean War, Dr. Omer developed extensive experience in treating soldier-patients with traumatic orthopaedic injuries. In 1952, he was offered an orthopaedic residency at the Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio and obtained his master’s degree from Baylor University. In the late 1950s, Dr. Omer wrote articles for the Kansas Historical Society, obtained his pilot’s license, and established five centers of subspecialty care in hand injuries (for which he received a commendation and promotion). From 1962 to 1965, he directed the orthopaedic residency program at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and taught an annual course at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

During the height of the Vietnam War, he returned to BAMC for his final posting as assistant chief of surgery, chief of orthopaedic surgery, and chief of hand surgery—a time in which he would become known as “The Peripheral Nerve Man.” Dr. Omer was clinically and academically invested in treating damage to the peripheral nerve, and he published studies on hundreds of patients with upper-extremity nerve injuries. He firmly believed that documented research between medical fields was key to understanding these injuries in BAMC and beyond.

Dr. Omer treated many high-profile patients, including President Lyndon Johnson while both were in Washington, DC. In 1969, former-president Johnson returned to Texas and continued to see Dr. Omer who was then working in San Antonio. On a particularly hot summer day, one of these visits resulted in funding for air conditioning in some of the BAMC orthopaedic clinics.

In 1970, Dr. Omer was recruited to UNM by Dean Robert Stone and previous Division Chief Jim Weaver who both wanted someone to lead the orthopaedic group. Dr. Omer incorporated various existing entities into a new orthopaedic department. These organizations included the Carrie Tingley Hospital in Truth or Consequences; Gallup Indian Medical Center; Department of Veterans Affairs of New

Mexico; and the existing but limited clinical orthopaedics enterprise affiliated with UNM School of Medicine at Bernalillo County Medical Center. Dr. Omer also initiated the Carrie Tingley Hospital Winter Conference, which continues to meet annually to this day.

As chairman, Dr. Omer organized clinical facilities into a cohesive group, established regimented training beyond clinical apprenticeship, created an academic curriculum of relevant topics and assigned readings, and emphasized balanced student and teacher responsibility in learning. He incorporated national standards into education, with formalized participation in the Orthopaedic In-Training Examination administered by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

When the residency program was better established, Dr. Omer turned his attention to faculty recruitment and subspecialty divisions, founding one of the first divisions of hand surgery in North America. In 1971, he performed one of the first toe-to-hand transplants in a child. Another watershed moment occurred in 1976 with the recruitment of Dr. Moheb S. Moneim who brought great expertise in microsurgical technique and enthusiasm to clinical work.

Dr. Omer was actively involved in many regional, national, and international orthopaedic organizations. He was an original member of the American Society of Surgery of the Hand and served as president in 1978. Dr. Omer was also a long-time member of the American Orthopaedic Association, serving as president in 1989. Furthermore, he served a 10-year term (1981-1991) on the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery, which included 1 year of presidency in 1987. While on the Board, he oversaw the process for re-certification of all orthopaedists and the introduction of the Certificate of Added Qualification for hand surgery.

After his retirement as chairman in 1990, Dr. Omer continued his practice by lecturing, writing, and caring for patients. He served on national and international advisory boards for numerous medical publications while remaining actively involved with several organizations, including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Football League, Navajo Nation, and Carrie Tingley Hospital. Dr. Omer was awarded the "Pioneers of Hand Surgery" status in 1995 by the International Federation of Societies for Surgery of the Hand—the Nobel Prize equivalent for hand surgeons. In 1996, the Society of Military Orthopaedic Surgeons honored Dr. Omer with an annual memorial lecture series at BAMC.

Dr. Omer's life and career spanned three phases of orthopaedic surgery in the US. From 1920 to 1945, when George was growing up, orthopaedics was a nonoperative specialty. During Dr. Omer's military career from 1945 to 1970, orthopaedics had shifted into an operative specialty. Finally, his academic career from 1970 to 1990 encompassed the

change of orthopaedics into an implant-intensive specialty, with advanced surgical techniques such as arthroscopy and microsurgery.

Dr. Omer left behind an international legacy in treating traumatic war-related injuries (particularly peripheral nerves of the upper extremity) and establishing the subspecialty of hand surgery, whereas his regional legacy is carried on today by the hundreds of residents and fellows he trained at the UNM orthopaedics department and division of hand surgery. The development of this department continues to prosper under the enormous, steady foundation established by Dr. Omer. For that, we all owe him a great debt of gratitude.