

Ralph N. Greene, M.D.: Second President of the Aero Medical Association

Douglas S. Files

Much has been written on Dr. Louis Bauer, the organizer and first president of the Aero Medical Association. Less is known of other early figures in American aviation medicine. While doing research in the Aerospace Medical Association's archives at Wright State University in Fairborn, OH, the author found material regarding some of the early leaders of our specialty. This month we will consider Dr. Ralph N. Greene, who took over the presidency of our society from Dr. Bauer in 1931.

Dr. Ralph N. Greene was born in Indianapolis, IN, in 1883 to a family steeped in Americana. His father was a distant cousin of General Nathaniel Greene, who fought with valor in the American Revolution. Dr. Greene's mother was a relative of pioneer Daniel Boone. Dr. Greene's father, Arthur Greene, worked in the paper industry in Atlanta, GA, and invented a press that could print in four colors. The young Ralph Greene grew up mostly in Atlanta, but graduated from high school in Memphis, TN.

After training at the Hospital Medical College in Memphis, he earned his medical degree in 1904. The following year he married Lillian Allen and they soon had a girl and a boy. Dr. Greene practiced general medicine at Greenville, FL, for several years, traveling to the homes of his patients with a horse and buggy. He moved to Chattahoochee in 1909 to serve at the Florida State Hospital for the Insane and was promoted to Chief Physician there the next year.

In 1916 Dr. Greene joined the National Guard to accompany the First Florida Field Hospital to Texas. Upon his return he was elected president of the Florida Medical Society. During World War I he served as Chief of the Army's Neuro-Psychiatric Service at Fort Sam Houston, TX. Upon his discharge from the Army, Dr. Greene worked as a state health officer for Florida for 2 years before devoting his practice full time to psychiatry.⁵ Contemporary medical journals refer to him as an "alienist," an archaic term for a mental health professional.²

An avid aviation aficionado, Dr. Greene devoted much of his free time to advancing flying safety. While in the Army, he spent 8 mo at Camp Wilson, TX. During that time, his boss assigned him to conduct physiology experiments in flight. Accordingly, he is credited as being the first U.S. Army physician to receive orders regarding flying duty. Around this time Dr. Greene took flying lessons with early expert Eddie Stinson and was awarded transport pilot license #40. He claimed to be the first person to fly upside-down in a military airplane. He published his physiological findings in *Military Surgeon* magazine in November 1917.⁴ In addition to his medical observations, he described his first experience of flight: "The view was so inspiring that I had forgotten that I was 3,000 feet up in a contrivance of wood and wire and rags." His first flight was disconcerting since that morning he had read of the death of a student pilot the night before.



Fig. 1. This photo was taken shortly after touchdown of the endurance flight of the Packard Diesel-powered Bellanca on May 28, 1931. It shows, left to right, the pilot, Walter E. Lees, the N.A.A. Official Observer, Dr. Ralph N. Greene, the copilot, Fred Brossy, an unidentified person, and the Texaco agent who had furnished the diesel fuel for the flight. Photo from Early Aviators website: <http://www.earlyaviators.com/egreener.htm> (reprinted with permission).

Greene became fast friends with Eddie Stinson and several other pioneer aviators. He joined the "Quiet Birdmen" and frequently piloted his own airplane to medical conferences. When Walter Lees and Frederick Brossy earned a world record for flying endurance in 1931 (84.5 h), Dr. Greene served as the official representative of the National Aeronautic Association.³ He is prominently displayed in the postflight photo (**Fig. 1**).

Many years later Dr. Greene attended the School of Aviation Medicine at Brooks Field in San Antonio, TX, and was awarded Flight Surgeon wings in the U.S. Army Reserves. In 1927 he was one of the first medical examiners appointed by the Department of Commerce.

As an aviation medical examiner, Dr. Greene was active in the Aero Medical Association since its inception, but was unable to attend the initial meeting in Detroit. He presented a paper the following year entitled "The Viewpoint of the Pilot-Flight Surgeon."

From Fairborn, OH.

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Fig. 2. Ralph N. Greene, M.D. Photo from "Doctors in the Sky" by Robert J. Benford, p. 38.

He presented on the role of neurology in determining fitness to fly 2 years later. Louis Bauer described him as an outstanding speaker who "enthralled" his audiences. Dr. Greene was a strong proponent of flight surgeons flying regularly to understand what their patients are going through. He was also instrumental in establishing an Aero Medical Association committee in 1940 to explore whether aviation medicine could become a separate specialty.

In 1931 he was elected to succeed Louis Bauer as president of the Aero Medical Association (**Fig. 2**).¹ While in private practice he began to treat Eastern Air Line aircrew and passengers. After 5 years of this, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker invited Dr. Greene to set up a medical department at Eastern Airlines in Coral Gables, FL. He agreed after a heart attack led him to retire from private practice. In his role as medical director of Eastern Air

Lines he lobbied strongly for a federal law limiting airline transport pilots to 85 flying hours each month. The Airline Pilots Association honored his commitment to their welfare by electing him an honorary member.

A second heart attack occurred in 1939 and further limited his professional activities. When Dr. Greene died on the 1st of August 1941 he was celebrated as a psychiatrist, a prominent Floridian, and as an aviator. He will also be remembered by aerospace medicine professionals as a pioneer in our specialty.

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