Most people are familiar with the famous American aviatrix, Amelia Earhart. In 1937, she mysteriously disappeared in the South Pacific with her navigator, three-quarters of the way through their flight circumnavigating the globe. Earhart had risen to fame during the early 1930s after becoming the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic. A lesser known detail is that she served as a nurse’s aide in the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) in Toronto from 1917 to 1919, caring for wounded and infirm servicemen during the First World War and later the influenza epidemic.

Earhart was born in Atchison, Kansas on July 24, 1897. As the daughter of a railway lawyer, she had a very comfortable upbringing. After completing high school, she studied at the Ogontz School, a finishing school in Philadelphia. She travelled to Toronto during her Christmas break in 1917 to visit her younger sister Muriel, who was attending St. Margaret’s College on Bloor Street East. While sightseeing in the city, Earhart was moved by the injured veterans she encountered. “For the first time I realized what the World War meant,” she later remarked. “Instead of new uniforms and brass bands, I saw only the result of four years of despair and struggle; men without arms and legs, men who were paralyzed and men who were blind.” These wounded warriors inspired her to drop out of school and secure a position that would enable her to use her energies to help care for these veterans.

Since she didn’t have any professional training or experience, Earhart signed on as a nurse’s aide with the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Most of the women who belonged to this organization were affluent Anglo-Protestants who wanted to contribute to the war effort. Unlike nurses who had completed at least a couple years of training in their field, these volunteers typically received two to three days of instruction in first aid from the Red Cross or St. John Ambulance.

Once Earhart finished her course, she became a nurse’s aide at the Spadina Military Hospital, located on the University of Toronto campus. Amelia resided at the St. Regis Hotel, on Sherbourne Street. She likely took the Carlton streetcar to get to and from work each day.

Amelia and the other volunteers at the hospital wore
a uniform that included a three-quarter length white cotton dress with a cap in the form of a triangular white veil. The patients referred to them as “sister”. She worked at the hospital from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m., with a two-hour break. The work entailed a variety of tasks, from scrubbing the floors to playing tennis with the ambulatory patients.

Earhart also spent considerable time assisting in the kitchen and the medical dispensary. Historian Linda Quiney revealed that Earhart was likely regarded by her superiors as a reliable individual, since those working in the dispensary were entrusted with the supply of whiskey kept in stock for medicinal purposes.

Amelia and her sister soon became acquainted with some of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) officers headquartered at Wycliffe College at U of T. During the war, Toronto was one of the major training hubs for the RFC, boasting two airfields, in Leaside and Armour Heights. The sisters would frequently venture to the aerodrome to watch the young pilots practice their manoeuvres. Earhart later revealed that these airfields were where she caught the “aviation bug” that became the all-consuming passion in her later life.

At the end of September, 1918, Toronto was struck by the horrendous influenza pandemic plaguing the country. It quickly spread through the city, infecting 150,000 people and resulting in 1,750 deaths. All of the hospitals, including Amelia’s, were inundated with patients. The staff did their best to provide them with the care and the treatments that they required. Since the flu was extremely communicable, a number of caregivers – including Earhart -- caught the virus. Amelia came down with pneumonia along with a severe sinus infection that required surgery. Her illness necessitated a year-long recovery period.

Amelia convalesced during the summer of 1919 at Lake George, New York. She eventually moved to California, where she learned to fly and purchased her own small plane in 1921. She quickly translated her passion into international fame, becoming a female role model to women around the world. While some may dismiss her experience in Toronto working
at the Spadina Military Hospital as short and insignificant, Earhart had been part of a mighty army of volunteers who filled an important void in caring for wounded and infirm patients during the war and the influenza epidemic. In this brief span, she effectively caught two infectious conditions: influenza and a passion for flying. The plaque below, produced by Heritage Canada, commemorates Earhart’s experience in Toronto.

This Toronto Legacy Plaque was produced by Heritage Toronto to pay homage to Amelia Earhart and to identify the site where she lived in Toronto from 1917 to 1919. It is located where the St. Regis Hotel was situated on Sherbourne Street. It was demolished during the 1960s and replaced with an apartment building.