

**THE WAR AMPS  
PRESENTS**

**AN  
H. CLIFFORD CHADDERTON PRODUCTION**

**Jeff Nicklin  
Hero of the Gridiron and the Battlefield**

**Narrator:**

Welcome to the 2006 Rogers CFL Player Awards.

**Brian Williams:**

“Ladies and gentlemen, to me this is a very important part of this show - the Jeff Nicklin Memorial Trophy is for outstanding player here in the west...”

**Narrator:**

In the 1930s, Jeff Nicklin was a household name, not only in Winnipeg and the west, but across Canada. He had earned a reputation as one of the top athletes in the country.

Born in Fort William, Ontario, Jeff moved with his family to Winnipeg as a young boy. It was there that he began his career in athletics. He was a member of the champion basketball team at Kelvin High School, and goalie for the Columbus Hockey club. He was also a brilliant lacrosse player. It was, however, as a football star that he earned nation-wide fame.

Jeff Nicklin was an all-star with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and played in the 1935 Grey Cup the year the Bombers became the first western team to win the championship. In those days of two-way players, Nicklin was successful as both a defensive and offensive end. In 1939, he sparkplugged his team to win the Grey Cup again.

Ted Reeve was a well-known Toronto sports writer and a star with the Toronto football teams of that era. (super article: March 31, 1946)

**Ted Reeve:**

“Jeff Nicklin was the greatest athlete the west had developed. He had the heart, the old desire and, more important, he had the mental and physical equipment to back it up.”

**Narrator:**

This outstanding athlete, whose courage on the football field won him accolades, would go on to engage in a more dangerous occupation – leading paratroops into battle in World War II.

Jeff Nicklin cut short his football career in 1940 when he enlisted with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, a crack infantry unit in the Canadian Army.

**Reporter** (excerpt from article: September 13, 1941):

“Jeff Nicklin has put away his cleets for a pair of hobnailed army boots until after the war, but he is still giving lots of thought to football. Aboard the ship which brought a Manitoba Rifle regiment to England, Lieutenant Nicklin admitted he was just a little worried about how the Bombers will make out in their games this year. ”

**Jeff Nicklin:**

“They are pretty good this season but the opposition is going to be tough.”

**Reporter:**

“He ended the interview by explaining he had to ‘go into a huddle’ and discuss debarkation arrangements.”

**Jeff Nicklin:**

“But don’t forget. If you hear anything about the Bombers, let me know.”

**Narrator:**

Following the Blue Bomber’s Grey Cup victory later that season, Nicklin wrote to a Winnipeg newspaper:

**Jeff Nicklin:**

“Congrats to coach Reg Threlfall for another great job...from your old ‘Flanker’ Jeff.”

**Narrator:**

Once in England, Jeff Nicklin took command of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles’ Baker Company.

Cliff Chadderton served with Nicklin. Before that, as a correspondent with The Canadian Press, Chadderton covered his role in the Blue Bombers’ Grey Cup victories.

**Cliff Chadderton:**

I happen to have been his second in command of Baker Company with the Winnipeg Rifles. There's a lot of definitions about bravery and courage but Jeff Nicklin was the kind of guy who never thought in those terms. He just thought in terms of 'we have to go over this hill, we have to take these Germans and not lose any more men than I would hope to lose. If I don't come out, I don't come out.' That was the way he thought about things.

**Narrator:**

While serving with the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, Nicklin was able to continue his sports career. He was a star hockey player with the regiment. Other notable players were his friends from Winnipeg. Fraser Eadie played for the University of Manitoba and the Chicago Blackhawks prior to the war. Cliff Chadderton played with the Winnipeg Falcon-Rangers, a farm team for the New York Rangers.

Chadderton was teamed with Nicklin and Eadie as part of the defence corps of the Winnipeg Rifles hockey team. They won the Manitoba Senior championship while the battalion was in training, prior to embarkation for overseas.

**Cliff Chadderton:**

I knew Nicklin through playing hockey and that type of thing. So maybe that's what drew me to him.

**Narrator:**

After three years of war, Hitler's forces seemed unstoppable. The Allies were looking for ways to strike back. Airborne forces were a revolutionary new form of offensive warfare – a means of attacking the enemy deep in its own territory. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion was mobilized in July 1942.

**Newsreel Announcer:**

These men are the new, hard-hitting spearhead of the Allied army. They can leap over sea barriers and fortifications.

**Narrator:**

The volunteers who passed the rigorous selection tests were young and physically fit. Many were former athletes. It is no surprise that Jeff Nicklin volunteered to transfer to the newly formed Battalion, followed later by his friend Fraser Eadie. There was a desire to join a unit that was committed to excellence – the best of the best.

The Canadian paratroopers trained at Fort Benning, Georgia and then at Camp Shilo, Manitoba.

Training was intense and included physical fitness, hand to hand combat, tower jumping, and jumps from an aircraft. The Canadians – all volunteers – took to the parachutes five times to earn their paratrooper's wings.

Lt Col George Bradbrooke was the Commanding officer of the battalion. Nicklin was promoted to second in command and became the battalion's training officer.

For Nicklin, mistakes were not tolerated, especially in weapons training. Cross-country runs were mandatory for all personnel, as were morning fitness runs. It was not uncommon for Nicklin to lead his men, sometimes showing up in an old Blue Bombers sweatsuit.

Robert Noble, a reporter for the Toronto Star, described his observations of the training.

**Robert Noble:**

“Part-airman, part-commando and part engineer, the purpose of the paratrooper is to be a land fighter after he leaps into battle from the skies – an airborne soldier.”

**Newsreel Announcer:**

Today, the armies of the United Nations are taking to the skies, and the Allied parachute corps include Poles and Fighting French, Russians and Americans, British and Canadians.

**Narrator:**

Canada had agreed that the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion would join the British 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, as part of its 3<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade. It would be the only mixed brigade of British and Canadian troops during

World War II. The battalion arrived at Carter Barracks in Bulford, England in August of '43.

Brigadier James Hill was a British airborne veteran who was a stickler for fitness and discipline. He was impressed by the Canadian volunteers under his command.

**Brigadier James Hill:**

“I realized what a unique and interesting Battalion had joined us as brothers in our midst. Their ranks were filled with volunteers from Newfoundland through Quebec to the Rockies and Vancouver Island in the west and they had some fifty Canadian Indians on their strength. The battalion’s ‘joie de vivre’ and vitality appeared to me quite remarkable.”

**Narrator:**

In the book *Paras versus the Reich*, Fraser Eadie explains that the Canadians wanted to prove they could match or maybe surpass their British counterparts.

**Fraser Eadie:**

“We had the incentive to be better than the other Battalions. After all, we had to measure up - we were strangers in a brigade and division.”

**Narrator:**

For the next ten months, the battalion was subjected to a severe training regimen. The Canadians adopted British parachute techniques, which meant jumping without a reserve chute. They had to become sharpshooters and master a wide range of weapons. They were expected to develop speed in moving across country, often under murderous enemy fire. Jeff Nicklin tested his men with gruelling marches. Those who couldn't keep up were transferred out.

**Andy Anderson:**

"We had to do ten-mile runs in full kit with weapons. You were determined that no one in your platoon was going to fall behind. Men would carry equipment belonging to others who weren't feeling up to it to get in under the two-hour limit. Then there were fifty-mile forced marches, all timed."

**Cliff Chadderton:**

Tough, forgiving, respected by everybody who ever knew him. Kind of a guy that you'd follow anywhere. Jeff would only sort of nod his head and you'd know that you had to go, no matter what it was. Because he would never put you in the spot that he wouldn't get into himself and he never put you in a spot that he knew he couldn't get you out of.

**Narrator:**

Cliff Chadderton recalls earlier days in Winnipeg when one of the first jobs Nicklin took was shovelling coal so he could build up his muscular frame.

**Cliff Chadderton:**

He considered himself as an athlete and he used to say if you can't get up in the morning, and you can't run two miles before breakfast, you should not really be anything that requires that kind of commitment, if you like. But Nicklin never took the easy route for anything in his life, as far as I knew. He was always testing himself, testing Jeff Nicklin against whatever the world wanted to throw at him.

**Narrator:**

A few months before D-Day, Jeff Nicklin was a hero on the football field once again, thanks to a friendly match between American and Canadian servicemen. In the final play of the game, he scored a touchdown, resulting in a victory for the Canadian *Mustangs* over the American *Pirates*. Nicklin was singled out as one of the stars of the game.

Then it was back to training as the battalion prepared for its first battle action - the Allied invasion of Europe.

As D-Day approached, the paratroopers were ready for action.

**Jeff Nicklin:**

“A great feeling of mutual dependence in para work is evident and teamwork develops naturally from this. All ranks are more confident in themselves, physically and mentally, as fighting men.”

**Lt Col Bradbrooke:**

“The paratroops are the tip of the spear. They must expect to go first, to penetrate behind enemy lines and to fight in isolated positions.”

**Brigadier James Hill:**

“Gentlemen, in spite of your excellent training and good orders, do not be daunted if chaos reigns; it undoubtedly will.”

**Narrator:**

Plans for D-Day were set for the early hours of June 6, 1944. Troops from the US, the UK, France and Canada would land on five beaches along France’s northern coast. The Allied airborne divisions were involved in the prelude to this, as part of Operation Neptune. Going in ahead of the infantry, their job was to eliminate gun emplacements and capture enemy strong points.

According to the official history of the battalion, the Canadian paratroops were to be dropped east of the Orne River, on the left flank of the British assault force landing on Sword Beach.

**Excerpt from ‘*Out of the Clouds*’:**

“The battalion was to land one hour in advance of the rest of the brigade to secure the dropping zone and capture the enemy headquarters. Thereafter, they were to destroy bridges over the River Dives and its tributaries at Varaville. In addition, the Canadians were to protect the left flank of the attack on the giant coastal battery at Merville, and then seize and hold a position astride the crossroads at Le Mesnil.”

**Narrator:**

The crossroads was a strategic position on a ridge overlooking the sea. The Canadians were ordered to hold it at all costs. The success of the landings at Sword and Juno beaches depended on it.

**Frederick Griffin (*The Toronto Star*):**

“At last, with kit bags strapped to their legs – 75 pounds each of impediments, so that walking was by slow motion – they climbed with their fighting equipment and weapons into aircraft. All around them planes were wheeling out and taking off. So this was it. They were about to soar forth to a dark and unpredictable destiny.”

**Jan de Vries:**

“On the flight over, there was very little talk. I remember just thinking, ‘Well, I wonder what’s going to happen.’ I never thought about dying – I just thought about doing the job. When we crossed the coast, the anti-aircraft fire got really heavy. We could see flashes of light through the portholes. The pilot was weaving all over the place and we were rolling around inside and cursing because he wasn’t flying in a straight path. ”

**Narrator:**

Then suddenly the green light flashed inside the aircraft. One after another, without hesitation, the men flung headlong into darkness.

**Frederick Griffin (*The Toronto Star*):**

“Major Jeff Nicklin of Winnipeg, was one of the paratroopers who landed in France. He is just one of hundreds of former Canadian athletes who are starring today in the biggest game of all.”

**Narrator:**

The chaos predicted by Brigadier Hill came true. Due to high winds and enemy flak, many Canadians were dropped miles from their intended landing areas, then had to find their way in the dark to re-group with their men.

**Jan de Vries:**

“The Germans had flooded the area. Those who landed in the fields survived, those who landed in a ditch with six feet of water, with their loads – they just went straight down to the bottom and never got up again.”

**Narrator:**

Nicklin landed alone and off target in the centre of the German garrison at Varaville. His parachute caught on the roof of a house. He was shot at several times but he cut himself loose and took cover. He worked his way from building to building, dodging enemy fire until he was able to join his unit.

Nicklin’s leadership earned him a Mention in Despatches, a military award for gallantry. War correspondents wrote about his fearlessness in leading troops to battle.

**J.A.M. Cook, Regina Leader Post:**

“It’s like the Winnipeg Blue Bombers’ line plunging for a touch down, only this is a Canadian all-star cast with big Jeff Nicklin on the dark Normandy field.”

**Narrator:**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion had met all its objectives by mid-day on June 6<sup>th</sup>. The battalion remained in Normandy for three months, carrying out dangerous reconnaissance patrols day and night.

During heavy fighting at Le Mesnil, Major Nicklin was wounded and evacuated to hospital in England.

**Jeff Nicklin:**

“It was a little hot spot all right. We took the offensive and sent out strong patrols to little towns outside the perimeter and gave Jerry a bloody nose a couple of times. Our men were magnificent. As a matter of fact, there was not a job the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division did not carry out.”

**Narrator:**

Following the bloody battle that was Normandy, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion had to be brought back up to strength. Upon the recommendation of Brigadier James Hill, Major Nicklin was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and given command of the Battalion. Major Eadie became his second-in-command.

**Brigadier James Hill:**

“Here we have very tough chaps, heroes. They had to be disciplined. So, I popped in Jeff Nicklin.”

**Narrator:**

Airborne troops needed further training to prepare for an offensive role. Nicklin took a personal interest in house-to-house fighting. For him, the more realistic the exercise the better. There was no shortage of bombed out buildings for commando-like practices.

Andy Anderson was the explosives expert in the battalion, having transferred from the Royal Canadian Engineers. He recalls one dangerous incident.

**Andy Anderson:**

“I gathered up booby traps, detonators and fuses. After several hours work, I reported to Colonel Nicklin that the houses were ready for attack. I saw a section attack a front door with a Corporal leading the way. Suddenly the front of the house exploded into the street. Someone said to me, “I think you’ve killed them all.” In the end, they suffered only minor cuts and bruises. Colonel Nicklin called me over and, as I shook in my boots, he smiled and said, “Now that was a real lesson. Good work!”

**Excerpt from *'Paras Versus the Reich'*:**

“Even though the training was difficult, the pride of wearing the distinctive maroon beret and the unique Canadian Parachute Badge were reasons enough for the paratroopers to dig deeper and find the energy to keep up with the unrelenting tempo.”

**Narrator:**

On Christmas Eve, 1944, the Battalion was rushed into Belgium to stop an enemy advance in the Battle of the Bulge. The paratroopers were the only Canadians to fight in the Ardennes during World War II. Next, the battalion moved to Holland where it was tasked to hold the Allied position on the Maas River. They returned to England in February to train for their next mission. They didn't have long to wait.

March 24, 1945. Operation Varsity was under way. American, British and Canadian paratroops were engaging in the largest airborne invasion the world had ever seen. They would be part of a massive assault across the Rhine River and deep into the heart of Germany. This was the last obstacle in the fight to defeat Hitler's troops...still desperate to defend the Fatherland.

Unlike Normandy, the Rhine drop would be made in broad daylight. The Canadians' initial objective was to seize and hold a wooded area which overlooked the Rhine River where the main landing assault was to take place.

**Brigadier James Hill:**

“Speed and initiative are the order of the day. Risks will be taken. The enemy will be attacked and destroyed wherever he is found. “

**Andy Anderson:**

“The navigator said three minutes to the drop zone. In the plane, there was disciplined confusion, much shuffling, dragging equipment forward, count off, then stand in the door, then follows a blast of air. I am conscious of other aircraft in the vicinity, also firecracker sounds coming from below, plus puffs of smoke. More pushing, kit bags in hand. The Green on! GO! GO! GO! GO!”

**Narrator:**

The Canadians landed on the mark and were immediately engaged by the Germans who were raking the drop zone with their rapid firing machine guns. Some paratroopers were killed coming down. Others died fighting their way to the rendezvous point across open fields.

During the initial battle, Corporal Frederick Topham, a medical orderly, earned the Victoria Cross -- the only member of the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division to win the Commonwealth's highest gallantry decoration.

**Narrator:**

The area was brought under control of the Canadians within two hours of the landing. It was at this time that Commanding Officer Jeff Nicklin was reported missing.

**Excerpt from ‘*Paras Versus the Reich*’:**

“Normally, Nicklin jumped in the middle of the stick so that he could have half of his headquarters on either side of him upon landing. However, for this operation, he wanted to be the number one jumper so that he could lead his troops into battle.

“Thirty-six hours after the attack, Nicklin was discovered hanging from a tree still in his parachute, his body riddled with bullets. He had dropped into the trees directly above German entrenchments and never had a fighting chance.”

**Dick Sanburn (*The Winnipeg Tribune*):**

“Husky Jeff Nicklin, outstanding Canadian football star, has plunged into the line for the last time. Nicklin was one of the first Canadians to jump into Germany and was one of the first to die. He was buried on a hilltop which had been the objective of his Canadian paratroops. Captain Douglas Candy, the “jumping padre” of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, conducted the simple service. Nicklin’s parachute served as his shroud.”

**Narrator:**

Jeff left behind a young wife – the former Eileen Hollingsworth of Winnipeg - and an infant son named Jeff Junior - whom he had never seen.

Joe Ryan, the legendary manager of the Blue Bombers, expressed the shock felt by so many upon hearing of Nicklin's death.

**Joe Ryan:**

"We rated him almost immortal. We were sure no Hitlerite could ever get him down – anymore than we were always sure that the hardest tackler could ever drop Jeff low. Nevertheless, good old Jeff went out the way he would always have wanted to go out – leading the parade, fighting to the last, and on enemy soil."

**Cliff Chadderton:**

I got the word through the grapevine in the army that Nicklin was dead. It was the toughest day that life was ever going to throw at me because that's how much I thought of that man.

**Pte. J. Boyetchko:**

"He really stuck up for his boys. He was always fair and a good fellow. That's why the boys thought so much of him. We all felt pretty tough when he got it."

**Narrator:**

Despite the loss of their commanding officer, the paratroopers carried on. Fraser Eadie took command from Nicklin and the battalion moved quickly eastward to Wismar on the Baltic coast, the final objective. The 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion had advanced deeper into Germany than any other Canadian unit.

**Cliff Chadderton:**

Jeff was built to be a football player. All heart, all guts, and knew no fear on the football field. Don't forget, you're at a time when good Canadian football players practically didn't exist. They all came from the states. Finally, here comes this great, big, rough, tough guy applying for a team coached by Reg Threlfall, who was an American. All of these things would be part of his legacy, part of his record.

Canadians should realize what kind of football we played as kids in Western Canada in those days. I mean come on, the Grey Cup was in the East. Everybody thought 'Oh, the East, they got the best football players, the Winged Wheelers, the Hamilton Tiger Cats, Toronto Argonauts, but, the one guy who carried the cudgels on his back, the one guy who said it ain't true was Jeff Nicklin.

**Narrator:**

After the war, the Parachute Battalion created the Jeff Nicklin Memorial Trophy to be awarded by the Canadian Football League to the most valuable player in the Western Conference.

Sixty years later, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion Association, The War Amps and the CFL worked together to have the trophy re-dedicated in a special tribute to Nicklin. The Jeff Nicklin Memorial Trophy will, for all time, stand for courage and honour on the gridiron and on the battlefield.

**Brian Williams:**

“Ladies and gentlemen, to honour the Jeff Nicklin Memorial Trophy, representing the late Jeff Nicklin, from The War Amps of Canada, Mr. Cliff Chadderton.”

**Cliff Chadderton:**

Those players who played against him, for years after he was dead, they would stop me on the street, and they'd say, “You're the guy that knew Jeff Nicklin.” And I said yes. “What a tough SOB.”

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