



# THE SKY JOKER

by RAOUL WHITFIELD

*He brought a sense of humor to a hard-boiled squadron, this laughing lieutenant, but it took the squadron a long time to appreciate his wisecracking.*

**T**HE TROUBLE WAS that Lieutenant Bill Roberts came up to the squadron with a very large sense of humor. At least, that's one way of looking at it. But then again, one soldier's humor is another soldier's poison, and the Thirty-ninth had been alternately strafed by the Boche and Staff for a period of about three weeks. Three weeks is a long time for a squadron to be strafed by anything.

The Thirty-ninth was located pretty far up front, for a squadron field. The enemy had bombed them out of two fields, and the third one that Staff had assigned them was just a little worse than the other two had been. Worse for landings and take-offs, and considerably worse in the matter of camouflaging from the enemy. I arrived the second day after they'd got, up canvas hangars and shaky barracks. That day the Boche came over twice. They didn't do very much

damage, but they came over. And that night a bombing squadron from across No-Man's-Land droned along and raised hell in general. It did a little damage—and the morale of the outfit took a sharp drop. By this time, the Thirty-ninth had been completely replaced, and that fact wasn't any too inspiring.

After that first call in the new location, the Boche made frequent visits, and the Staff buzzed the wire almost as frequently. Everything the outfit did could have been done better—according to Staff. And the fact that the enemy had us located didn't seem to bother them at all. They'd moved the outfit twice, and they probably figured that was enough. Besides, Staff was busy. The Boche had a sharp drive on—and it extended over a wide front. The air was filled with ships—most of them Boche.

We lost a few men every day, and ships weren't easy to get. Everything was going tough, and getting

tougher. As an example of how tough things were, I hadn't flown back to Orley for ten days. Orley was a very cheerful field, about thirty minutes by truck from Paris. The C.O., ten days ago, had been a good scout. But the Boche and Staff had changed him. The combination had changed us all, for that matter. Thus, when Bill Roberts set a nice, shiny Nieuport down on the field, after circling it seven or eight times, and then cracked up, it didn't strike us as funny as it struck him. We needed ships.

This chap, Roberts, was tall and very lean. He had a sort of long nose, and he wasn't exactly dignified as he limped over toward the hangars, dabbing at an eye-cut with a handkerchief. The Nieuport remained up on her nose with a splintered prop and a warped wing tip.

I had watched the nose-over from a position beside Vic Miller, and neither of us figured it as exactly funny. But this fellow Roberts evidently did figure it that way. He stopped a few feet from us, and grinned.

"She's looking for water," he stated cheerfully. "That camel's thirsty."

Vic and I looked at this fellow, Roberts. We didn't know his name at the time. But we did know that he wasn't flying a Sopwith, commonly called a "Camel." He had a single-seater Nieuport. And Vic mentioned the fact.

"Funny-looking Camel," he stated. "Looks more like a Nieuport to me."

This lean officer actually looked surprised. He turned around and stared at the nosed-up Nieuport. Then he drew a deep breath and turned back to Vic and me.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "There they went and told me to fly up a two-seater D.H.4—and I got a Nieuport by mistake, thinking I was taking a Sopwith Camel!"

I blinked a few times and then I got wise to the fact that this bird thought he was a great little kidder. Vic got wise about five seconds ahead of me. He just grunted.

"The Boche have been giving us some great laughs in the last few weeks," he stated grimly. "But I can see right away that you're going to be a lot funnier, lieutenant—"

"Bill Roberts," this lean bird came back. "Seventh son of a seventh son! And where do I find the general, Lieutenant—"

"Vic Miller," Vic stated evenly, though his eyes were narrowed. "This is Lieutenant Burns."

I stuck out my hand. So far. I hadn't cracked a

smile. Maybe this fellow, Roberts, was funny, but not to me. He gave me a good grip.

"Fat' Burns?" he questioned, and kept dabbing at his cut eye with the handkerchief in his left hand.

I repressed a groan. The first time I heard that one I kicked four slats out of my cradle.

"It does," I agreed. "And just to set you straight, while we're on the subject, when you get a few rounds of high-explosive and tracer bullets in your system, and your ship digs into the mud—everything burns! Not that I want to spoil your little party—or anything."

Well, this Bill Roberts takes his handkerchief away from the bad eye, and grins at me. Scared? Not so you could notice it.

"What?" he comes back, very startledlike. "Have they been fighting up here again?"

As I mentioned before, all this may have been funny. It depends a good deal on the viewpoint. Somehow, it didn't hit me that way. And I could see that Vic was getting pretty sore. He looked at me and he didn't smile at all.

"Things'll be great now," he stated without the slightest enthusiasm. "I'm certainly glad I'm in the Thirty-ninth."

Vic walked away, going toward the hangar in which his Nieuport was parked. I stood staring at the lean newcomer—and Lieutenant Bill Roberts kept staring at Vic's back. Finally, he turned to me.

"Wind up?" he asked. "Or is he one of these funeral guys?"

That did give me a smile—the first part of it, anyway.

"Vic's got six Boche to his credit," I told Roberts. "Can you think up something funny about that one?"

He grinned. "Sure!" he came back. "But it'll take time."

"It sure will!" I agreed in a pretty sharp voice. "But you'll have plenty atmosphere here. Right over there to your left, back of that green patch of camouflage paint—that's the major's office."

This bird kept right on grinning. Some of the ground-crew boys were going out to his Nieuport, and he called out to them:

"Careful with that Bristol, boys! I don't want her cracked up."

I lighted a pill. Then Roberts looked at me, and his face sobered.

"I'll report to the general," he said slowly. "He'll be glad to know I'm up here at last. The whole army corps has been waiting."

I nodded. "It's a short life," I observed. "Why not make it a merry one?"

But that didn't get him at all. He just smiled sadly.

"Too bad about that Fokker of mine!" he muttered.

"But all those Caudrons act the same when you set them down. See you later, lieutenant."

I nodded. "Hard for a fellow to dodge any one around here," I came back. "So I guess you will."

But you couldn't stop this fellow, Roberts. He started off, grinning—then jerked his head.

"Here to-day—gone to-morrow!" he stated cheerfully. "You may be lucky, lieutenant!"

Then he headed for the major's quarters and left me trying to figure him out. It wasn't easy. I had a hunch that he was no fool. And he wasn't exactly one of those Pollyanna birds who tried to grin at everything. I gave it up and went after Vic Miller, who was doing some work on his gun sights.

"How's the funny boy?" he asked. "Still going strong on the low comedy?"

"He's reporting to the major," I told Vic. "Cheer up—maybe he'll be assigned to your flight."

Vic swore. "Not while I'm conscious!" he muttered. "He's too funny for me. Ever hear of him before, Ed?"

I shook my head. "There's a colonel on Staff, by the name of Roberts," I stated. "Signs those orders—"

Vic groaned. "If he's got any relatives on Staff, it's a cinch to see where he gets the funny stuff!" he stated. "Well, maybe he'll have a forced landing and a chance to pull wise-cracks on the Germans."

I wasn't so sure of that. Not that I was crazy about Roberts or crazy about what little flying I'd seen him do all wrong. But he had pretty keen eyes. And I've seen birds who talked one way—and thought another.

"It'll all come out in the squadron wash!" I muttered, and let it go at that.

There were more important things to worry about. Control wires, for instance, and a bit of lining-up work to be done on my own Brownings. So I went to work and forgot about Lieutenant Bill Roberts—for about fifteen minutes.

At the end of that time. Major Steele came into the hangar, followed by Roberts. Vic and I both climbed down from the cockpits of our respective ships, and the major made a few statements.

"Lieutenant Roberts," he said, "will be attached to your flight, Lieutenant Miller. Replacement for Lieutenant Donaldson. You can explain his duties in detail—see that his knowledge of the sector by maps is good. He can take the air with your early patrol—"

"We have been keeping ships in the air all day, sir," Vic interrupted. "One ship at a time, one patrol

following the other. We have been making no formation flights."

"To-morrow we make formation flight," the major stated. "We'll keep the ships out of the air except at dawn and dusk. Staff has wind of a big offensive—it will be mostly combat work. How were you at combat, Lieutenant Roberts?"

The lean officer grinned, as he looked the colonel in the eye.

"Very rotten, sir!" he stated, "but the best in my class."

The major nodded. He did not seem to think the reply at all funny. It wasn't, as a matter of fact. You can't be good at aerial combat in two hours' time, and that was about the length of air training we'd had back of the front.

But Vic scowled. "Perhaps it would be better to wait until after to-morrow's offensive, major," he suggested. "It would give me some time to instruct Lieutenant Roberts in—"

The major shook his head. Vic stopped speaking. Bill Roberts chuckled.

"The sooner I get it over with," he muttered, "the better it'll be."

The major nodded. "I'll leave Lieutenant Roberts in your hands," he told Vic. "We're putting a new prop on his ship. He nosed over—coming in." All three of us nodded. We saluted, and the major departed from the hangar. I looked at Vic, and Vic looked at Lieutenant Roberts. That officer was grinning broadly.

"She's a good Camel," he said slowly, "even if she did nose over!" And that got Vic Miller. We'd been through a loL anyway, and Vic was pretty close to the edge. He went up.

"You're an awful funny fellow, Roberts!" he stated sharply. "But remember this—there'll be five planes in this flight. And if any one of them does the wrong thing, it may cost the rest of them their lives. So, instead of being so funny, you'd better pipe down and ask a few questions."

There was a little silence after that. Vic's tone was sharp, and his face held a grim expression. But I got a bigger jolt when I looked at Roberts. He wasn't a bit sore—just grinning as broadly as ever.

"There's nothing I want to know right now," he came back quietly. "But if you don't mind, I'll go out and look over that Rumpler of mine."

Vic shrugged his shoulders. I guessed right then that he figured it was about hopeless. Roberts turned away and went from the hangar. Vic shook his head slowly.

"They'll get him in a couple of patrols," he stated. "He doesn't know what it's all about."

I didn't say a thing. But I wasn't at all sure that Vic Miller had this fellow, Roberts, sized up right, at that. On the surface, it looked as though Roberts was due for about nine and a half more jokes—and not more.

He pulled one of them about three hours later. They got the new prop on his Nieuport and fixed his left wing up, and Vic sent him up for a two-hour jaunt back of the lines. The idea was for him to take a long-distance look at the front, get acquainted with the lines and the country back of the lines and feel out his ship and guns.

He came in just before dark; I was heading for the barracks when he dropped down on the field. He cut his engine and then suddenly opened it up again. And the first thing I knew, he was roaring that Nieuport at me and less than three feet off the ground.

When that ship got about fifty feet back of me, I did the only sensible thing I could do—hit the ground and stayed flat. Then he zoomed, banked around and made another landing. I got up, brushed some of the mud off my overall suit and headed for his ship.

Sore? I was more than that. It isn't the nicest thing in the world to have a ship come at you—doing close to a hundred an hour. And when it's supposed to be a joke!

He was climbing down from the cockpit when I got up beside him, and he gave me a smile.

"Had a scrap with a Boche about five miles south of here," he stated. "Don't think I got—"

I was all set to hand him some fine advice, but that information stopped me. I just stared. Something in my eyes had made him break off, but he started in again.

"Pretty dark up above—with a light fog. This fellow dived on me, and I let him have about a quarter of a belt and—"

He stopped again. The major stepped around from the tail assembly of the Nieuport. He was frowning.

"Staff's raising hell!" he stated. "Some Frog in a captured Fokker—plainly marked with the French insignia—was shot at by an American ship. He got down all right, but he raised hell. Headquarters has just buzzed in. See anything of him, lieutenant?"

The major was looking at Roberts. I shook my head, trying to warn the long-nosed officer. Any Frog flying a Fokker just before dusk deserved to be shot at—in my opinion. The insignia didn't show up enough, and the pilot should have known that much.

For just a second, Roberts hesitated. Then he smiled that familiar smile of his. He nodded his head.

"I let go at him, major," he stated quietly. "He looked like a Boche to me.

The major stared. I groaned. The major shook his head slowly.

"Let's go into my quarters," he suggested to Roberts. "Staff's raising hell about this."

I didn't catch the rest. But I did catch a chuckle from Roberts. I forgot about the dive he'd forced me to make. I went into Vic's coop and gave him the news. Vic nodded.

"Fine!" he muttered. "The major'll ship him out—and we won't have to put up with a lot of low comedy again."

"Any of us might have done the same thing," I reminded him. "These Frogs will try to doll up captured Fokkers—and it don't work. It's their own fault."

"Staff don't look at it that way," Vic stated, and grinned. "We've had a lucky break. They'll send him to Reconnaissance or Bombing."

"It's tough!" I muttered. "Any of us might have done——"

"Forget it!" Vic muttered. "We'll say good-bye to him at mess."

BUT we didn't say anything like that to Lieutenant Bill Roberts at mess. He came in with the major and he kept up a lively chatter all through the meal. It was evident that he wasn't being shipped out, after all.

The major rose from the chair at the head of the table, after his coffee, and the rest of us got to our feet. After the C.O. had departed, I looked across at Roberts. He blinked at me with one good and one bad eye.

"Don't pull anything like the one you pulled coming into the field this evening, lieutenant!" I warned. "It isn't funny—and the next time you do it. I'll climb right on your neck!"

Well, that took most of the boys by surprise. I hadn't said a word to any one about it, thinking that Roberts was in enough trouble, anyway. But now that he seemed to have kidded the major into kidding the Staff, that little running-me-into-the-mud stunt didn't seem so good.

Roberts looked as surprised as the rest of the gang. "You win!" he stated. "What did I do to you, lieutenant?"

I described in detail what he'd done. There was



considerable silence. That sort of a stunt isn't figured so funny by men who know ships. Roberts just blinked.

"Never saw you, lieutenant!" he stated suddenly. "Thought I was going to overshoot the field—and gave her the gun. Got off in a zoom. Never saw you."

I stared. Gus Rogers chuckled. Vic Miller swore softly.

"You'd better begin to look around, then," I warned. "If you fail to see Heinie, it'll be tough on you."

This fellow, Roberts, just grinned. Dave Andrews nodded.

"Did the major raise hell about your shooting at the Frog?" he asked.

Roberts shook his head. "Not so bad," he stated. "He would have—if he'd known that I didn't classify that ship."

I stared. All of us were looking at the lean-faced officer.

"You see," he explained, "I was wondering if there were any Boche around—and just then this ship dove for me. So I zoomed and let loose on her. Then I turned tail and headed for the field."

Bobby Elkins spoke first.. He tapped the table with his browned fingers and looked Roberts in the eyes.

"When we go over to-morrow," he suggested, "be careful who you spray. I'm flying in your formation. Don't get too careless on that stick trigger." Roberts nodded.

"Anything I do that isn't right—that'll be accidental, of course," he stated calmly, and with a serious face. "That crate of mine is new to me and—"

He stopped. Vic leaned over and blew out the gasoline lamp. The rest of us listened. In about ten seconds, we knew that it was a Boche bombing outfit, that it was flying low—and back toward the enemy lines. Maybe they'd dropped their apples—and maybe they hadn't.

They hadn't. The first one hit about a quarter of a mile away, the next one much closer. The barracks shook. I slipped under the table. Most of the boys got down on the floor. But not Roberts.

He sat in his chair, smoking a pill and keeping up a running chatter all of the time. Finally, after things had quieted down a bit, and the Boche had droned off toward their own lines, the rest of us got up on the top deck again. Vic lighted the lamp. Roberts was leaning back in his chair, a broad grin on his face.

"You boys sure take things seriously!" he announced. "Do we play poker in this outfit?"

It was funny the way he got off with things. We did play poker, or at least we tried to play poker. Roberts played it. He cleaned us right, and he kidded us steadily.

Vic Miller came in and sat on the edge of my cot for a few minutes before we hit the hay, which was early, at that.

"I've got a hunch," he told me in a low tone, "that we're going to run into plenty of trouble on the dawn patrol. I don't often have hunches—but I've got this one. It would be hard enough without Roberts, but with him—"

Vic broke off. I had an idea, and I spilled it.

"He's got away with everything he's tried," I stated. "But he hasn't tried being funny with the Boche. How about me getting off at dawn to-morrow, Vic? I'll pile along back-of your flight. I'm not due to take mine up until late in the afternoon. Then, if this Roberts funks it—"

Vic nodded. "The major'd never O.K. that one, Ed," he stated. "But I'd like to have you along. I haven't much confidence in Roberts."

"I'll sneak up with you," I stated. "We'll get up before it's light—and the C.O. may not spot me. But I'm not so sure Roberts will fall down. He's damned cocky."

"That's when they get it!" Vic finished up. "He's too cocky. That low comedy of his is terrible. He's a—sky joker!"

"*High* comedy!" I corrected. "He pulls a lot of it in the sky."

Vic Miller shook his head slowly. "Here's hoping he feels sad to-morrow!" he wished. "All I can say is—he picks a hell of a time and place to be funny at and in!"

And I was with Vic on that one. It was all right for Roberts to take things easier than we were taking them. He'd just come up, he hadn't seen boys drop away from mess and poker games night after night. He hadn't seen them go down in flames, crash with collapsed, twisted wing surfaces. But he was playing the game a little wild. And I had a hunch he wouldn't check up on himself in time. We had plenty of fighters in the Thirty-ninth. But they went at it grimly. Bill Roberts, I suspected, was having too much of a good time.

I shook my head, and listened to the dull beat of the guns. I tried to forget Roberts and grab off some sleep. The air would be filled with Boche ships at dawn, I guessed that. Even the guns seemed quieter now. The lull before the big offensive—and the enemy

ships would be over to see how things were going down below and to stop us from reporting how things were going.

“Maybe we’ve lost our sense of humor,” I muttered, just before I dozed off. “but if Roberts can see anything funny in the dawn patrol, he’s a queer guy!” “

I WAS pretty sure the major saw me get the baby Nieuport off. but that couldn’t be helped. The major was a good scout, and there were other things on my mind just then. The formation ahead, with Roberts flying raggedly to the right of the V-apex, was not easy to catch. It was a gray dawn, and there was a low ground mist that bothered me for a time.

Vic Miller was heading right for the front. When he got up, he’d turn one way or the other and patrol the sector. And it would be one sweet job.

It was a cinch that Bill Roberts was having one tough time keeping formation. He’d lose an eighth of a mile in a couple of seconds, and the next thing I’d see would be that Nieuport of his zooming up above Joe Ryan’s plane, trying to lose speed and keep from tangling with the ship ahead.

I smiled grimly. Vic had his flight at about three thousand, and he was within a few miles of the front lines. If the Boche were launching an offensive, things would start to happen in a hurry.

Vision was bad. There was mist on the cowl glass, a dawn haze in the sky. The clouds were fairly low; the ground fog was lifting a bit. Miller banked to the south, after signaling. Roberts almost piled his Nieuport into Ryan’s plane, for about the fifth time, in making the turn. He was forced to bank far to the side, and as I was cutting distance by edging southward, he came within a hundred yards of my ship.

I didn’t know whether he’d seen me take off, and I didn’t know if Vic had told him about me being slated to tag along. For a couple of seconds, I figured he might let go at me. But he didn’t. I waved a hand, and he waved back. He edged over close to me—too close for comfort—waved again and grinned. I could see that grin, even with his goggles and helmet on. Then he went after the formation.

He was about three hundred yards back of it and about a hundred yards ahead of me, when the Boche dropped down out of the clouds. And right then and there things started to happen.

At intervals—flashing intervals—I got glimpses of planes. There were at least a half dozen Boche, and it was one of the hottest dog fights I’ve had the doubtful

pleasure of being mixed up in. Twice I saved my neck by going into tight spins, and I was feeding tracer, explosive and ordinary bullets into both guns for about five minutes before there was a let-up.

When it came, it came suddenly. That’s the way a dog fight usually breaks up. I was down low—down to about a thousand—and the first thing I did was to bank and look things over up above. There wasn’t a Boche ship in sight. One Nieuport was circling at about three thousand.

Then I looked below. Two ships were burning, and they both looked like Fokkers. And about a half a mile to the east, where there was a break in the ground fog, a ship was gliding—very low. One glance was enough; it was a Nieuport!

I glided after it. The wind had been from the west, and I knew we had fought most of that scrap over Boche territory—probably a good half mile back of the lines. The wind had drifted us that way. And a Nieuport, under control, was making a forced landing!

At a hundred feet above the ground, I saw that the Nieuport was the one flown by Vic Miller. The flight commander had special markings. He was almost down, headed for some soggy ground to the south of a rutted, narrow road. The country had been fought over. It was shell-marked and desolate—but was it desolate?

A rocket popped out from the front cockpit of the gliding Nieuport. Vic was sending out the go-home signal!

I swore hoarsely and looked the sky over. One Nieuport was still up above, circling. He wasn’t paying any attention to that signal rocket. And neither was I—not with Vic Miller down in Boche territory.

When I looked down again, the Nieuport was up on her nose, and Vic was limping around a wing. Then he went back toward the cockpit, and even as I banked more sharply, the Nieuport went up in flame. Vic was burning the ship and the maps calmly.

I groaned. There was no chance of getting down. Or, more accurately, there was only about one chance in a thousand of getting down and getting off again. But there were no Boche in sight—not yet.

A hundred yards above the burning Nieuport I held my ship and tried to figure out what I could do. And then, staring down, I saw another Nieuport—not the one I had seen up in the sky. It was coming down in a stall landing!

I groaned. Vic Miller was trying to wave that pilot off, but it wasn’t working. I only needed one guess. Bill

Roberts! Bill Roberts—trying to get down and pick the flight commander up—and then get off again! One chance in a thousand!

The Nieuport—the one he had called everything but a Nieuport—made a good stall landing. It didn't nose up. I saw Vic limping toward it, automatic in his right hand. It seemed almost incredible to me that Roberts had got away with it. And the next second, I saw that he hadn't; both he and Vic were down underneath a wing, getting at the landing gear. Something had snapped under the strain of that pancake landing!

Then, for the first time, I saw Boche. There were four or five of them, and they were crawling up toward the damaged ship, ten or fifteen feet apart. They were about a hundred yards distant when I dived. Even as I went, down at them, above shrilling of wind through flying wires and rigging. I heard the staccato clatter of machine-gun fire from above!

I got two of the Boche; the others broke and ran. I zoomed the Nieuport. The other ship, high in the sky, was staging a fight with a Boche single-seater!

I headed back for the Nieuport on the ground. As I neared her, she started to roll forward! One wing was drooping, and Vic Miller was lying flat on a wing surface, close to the fuselage!

Vic's short, and that helped. But even so, there isn't much wing surface to a Nieuport. His legs trailed off the wing fabric as the ship bumped over the soggy earth. I didn't think she'd get off—but she did.

There were two shell bursts back of her as she cleared the earth. The Boche had located the spot, but too late.

The Boche single-seater that had been fighting with the Nieuport at three thousand feet was coming down in a slow spin. And the Nieuport was diving toward my plane.

I led the way. It was a cinch that Roberts couldn't

get altitude, with the added weight and a drooping wing. But he did get six hundred feet of it. The three of us winged straight across the Boche lines and back to the squadron field. The ground fog helped us, and the A.A. fire wasn't working good. Joe Ryan was piloting the other Nieuport, and we both gave Roberts plenty of room when we got to the field.

She cracked up on the landing, but she might have cracked up a lot worse. I got down next, and Joe Ryan followed. Vic Miller, out on that wing, had got some bad bumps on the field landing. And Roberts had cut open the bad eye again.

They, were both smoking pills when I got over near the ship. Vic Miller was giving an interrupted but straight report of the flight to the major. We'd lost three ships and two pilots. The Boche had fared a bit worse.

"Doc" was working with the bandages, when Vic Miller grinned over at Bill Roberts. Roberts used his one eye in grinning back.

"Pretty white of you, Roberts!" Vic stated. "Coming down for me that way—and picking me up."

Bill Roberts winked at me with his good eye.

"Not much fun in a prison camp," he said slowly. "And I figured that Jenny of mine could do it."

The major stared at Lieutenant Roberts. It was probably the first time he'd heard a Nieuport called a Jenny. But the rest of us just grinned. We'd heard it before.

"Anyway," Roberts added cheerfully, "you owe me ten francs—from last night's poker game. It was business."

Funny business, I'd have called it. But it's a matter of record that the Thirty-ninth developed a sense of humor before the war finished up. We got so we could mention Staff without swearing. And that was going some!