



Portrait of an American Rifleman

Samuel Woodfill

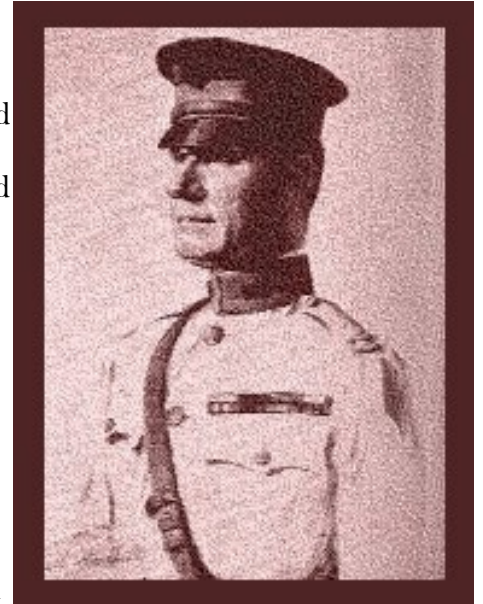
It was a humble Christian man, adopted as Kentucky's own, who was known to French Field Marshall Ferdinand Foch as "the first soldier of America" and known to General Pershing "as America's greatest doughboy" (a nickname American soldiers of that generation picked up during the dusty marches of the Spanish American War). Until Pershing selected Samuel Woodfill as one of three American soldiers to be honored at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1921, Woodfill had lived in the same obscurity his name and story would return to generations later. At the time, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner with decorations from six other nations, Woodfill held more medals than any other soldier in the army. He received standing ovations when spotted at public events; he even met with the president. Congress and the New York Stock Exchange both interrupted business to honor him. Today it is speculated that he is most well known as the namesake of Woodfill Elementary School.

During Samuel Woodfill's own elementary years, hunting with the musket his father carried in the Mexican and Civil Wars, he was already considered a good shot by age 10 and later was known in the Army for his exceptional marksmanship. In Alaska, before The Great War, he honed his skill as a rifleman and is reported to have once taken 3 caribou from 1800 yards. In comparison to many of the other troops of the American Expeditionary Force that were rushed to Europe, Woodfill had what must have seemed magical skill with a rifle from his years of practice on American soil. It's been said that in his hands a rifle was as steady as if on a tripod or locked in a vise.

On October 12, 1918, at Cunel, France, during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Lieutenant Woodfill eliminated five machine gun nests and 21 German soldiers with 21 rifle rounds, his sidearm, and a pickaxe. The 35 year old lieutenant's company came under machine gun fire while moving towards the village of Cunel under foggy conditions. Woodfill dispatched himself, followed by two soldiers at 25 yards, to stalk out the machine guns. Seeing flashes from a church bell tower, he killed five German machine gunners from 300 yards with five shots. He then eliminated another machine gun from a barn loft. Next, taking cover in a shell hole, he was overcome by mustard gas; recovered, he moved to the rear of a gravel pile. From this vantage point he took out a third machine gun nest from 40 yards. His rifle now empty, he killed an escaping soldier with his pistol and another after moving to the machine gun's position. After that, Woodfill killed a German sniper who was spotted by one of his men. After passing through the village, he destroyed another machine gun crew, taking three prisoners. Spotting the fifth machine gun crew, he killed all five, then dove into a trench occupied by two German soldiers. The first he killed with his pistol, which then jammed, leaving him only a pickaxe to finish the other. Unofficial Army accounts of the events of the day state that most of Lt. Woodfill's kills were head shots. Removal of the machine guns allowed the company to advance through the village of Cunel, a skirmish in what has been billed as one of the bloodiest single battles in U.S. History and the battle that won the war.

Samuel Woodfill survived the war with only shrapnel wounds, re-enlisting in the Army to later retire as a sergeant. During his brief national fame, the humble Woodfill squashed congressional candidacy speculation and tired of being what he called a "circus pony." He then returned home, slipping into poverty and obscurity. After the outbreak of World War II, the old soldier was commissioned as an Army Major at the age of 59 and spent most of the war as an Army instructor in Alabama.

After his second career in the Army, Samuel Woodfill retired to a farm in his native Indiana where he died at age 68. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Years earlier, a few days after Woodfill performed the Medal of Honor winning attack, he wrote a message to his wife on the back of her picture that he carried in his shirt pocket: "I will prepare a place and be waiting at the Golden Gait [sic] of Heaven for the arrival of my Darling Blossom." Later, Woodfill reportedly said, "I guessed wrong. There was no German ammunition with my name on it that day."



- *Would you like to carry on the tradition of the American Rifleman?*
- *Would you like to be able to make accurate shots out to 500 yards with an ordinary rifle?*
- *Would you like to learn more about the history on which our nation was founded and what has kept us strong for all these years?*

If so, see the backside of this article.