



SGT. SAMUEL WOODFILL | 1883 — 1951

*‘The greatest  
American Soldier  
of the World War.’*

## **This Month in NCO History: The Meuse-Argonne Offensive — Oct. 12, 1918**

*Pablo Villa*

**S**gt. Samuel Woodfill was once referred to as “the greatest American Soldier of the World War” by the celebrated Gen. John J. Pershing.

Woodfill earned the high praise for actions during an Allied offensive in Cunel, France, which also resulted in him being awarded the Medal of Honor. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was fought from Sept. 26, 1918, until the armistice on Nov. 11, 1918. It stretched along the Western Front during World War I and was the largest frontline commitment of Soldiers by the U.S. Army during the war. Its objective was to push through enemy lines and capture a railroad station in Sedan, France, to cut off a vital German supply route.

On Oct. 12, according to his Medal of Honor citation, Woodfill was leading his company through a dense fog towards the village of Cunel when it came under heavy fire. Then a lieutenant, Woodfill set out ahead of his line with two Soldiers trailing and located a German machine gun nest. Woodfill successfully flanked the nest and eliminated three of its four occupants with his rifle. The fourth occupant charged Woodfill. After a hand-to-hand struggle, Woodfill killed the enemy with his pistol.

The company continued its advance when it came under fire again. Woodfill once again rushed ahead. Despite being hindered by the effects of mustard gas, Woodfill shot several of the enemy while taking three others prisoner. Minutes later, Woodfill rushed a third machine gun pit and killed five men with his rifle before jumping into the pit with his pistol, where he encountered two German soldiers. With his ammunition exhausted, Woodfill grabbed a nearby pickax and killed both.

With the machine guns silenced, Woodfill’s company continued its advance through Cunel under severe fire.

At the end of the war, Woodfill was the most decorated American Soldier to have participated. Along with the Medal of Honor, Woodfill was the recipient of the French Croix de Guerre, the Italian Merito di Guerra, the Montenegrin Cross of Prince Danilo and various other awards. He resigned from the Army upon his return to Fort Thomas in November 1919 but re-enlisted three weeks later. With the Army trimming its force to pre-war levels, Woodfill rejoined the ranks as a sergeant.

Pershing selected Woodfill to join Sgt. Alvin York and Lt. Col. Charles Whittlesey as pallbearers at the burial

of the Unknown Soldier at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery on Nov. 11, 1921. He retired as a sergeant in 1922.

Woodfill joined the Army in 1901 and spent time in the Philippines, Alaska, Kentucky and along the U.S.-Mexico border before ending up in Fort Thomas, Ky., in 1917. On Christmas Day of that year, Woodfill married Lorena Wiltshire and the couple purchased a home in Fort Thomas.

After World War I, Woodfill was encouraged to run for U.S. Congress, an effort he rebuffed. Instead, he worked as a carpenter, a watchman and even tried

starting an orchard before the nation — and the Medal of Honor recipient — was thrust into global conflict once again. In May 1942, two months after his wife died, Woodfill was commissioned an Army major and spent two years as an instructor in Birmingham, Ala.

In 1944, Woodfill resigned from the Army and moved to a farm in Switzerland County, Indiana. He was found dead there Aug. 13, 1951. Woodfill was originally buried in the Jefferson County Cemetery near Madison, Ind. His remains were moved to Arlington National Cemetery in August 1955. ■

— Compiled by Pablo Villa

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