

Medal of Honor Recipient Samuel Woodfill



Samuel Woodfill was born in Jefferson County, Indiana, in January 1883. He enlisted in the Army in 1901 and was sent to the Philippines. Later, Woodfill was stationed in Alaska during an American show of force when the US was involved in a border dispute with Canada and England over the Alaska-Yukon area. Woodfill apparently was stationed first in Fort Thomas in 1912 and 2 years later was among troops from Fort Thomas sent to the Mexican border in an attempt to protect Texas, New Mexico and Arizona from attacks by Mexican bandits. The troops returned to Fort Thomas. Woodfill met and on Christmas Day 1917 married Lorena Wiltshire. The Woodfills later owned a house at 1334 Alexandria Pike in Fort Thomas. The year he married, Woodfill was promoted to Lieutenant. That was the rank he held in April 1918 when he and others at Fort Thomas were dispatched to Europe as part of the American Expeditionary Force headed by General Pershing to fight in World War I.

Woodfill was a member of the Army's 60th Infantry, Fifth Division, which was sent to the Meuse-Argonne front in France in the fall of 1918. The battle there began in September and lasted 45 days, costing thousands of lives on both sides.

Woodfill earned his place in American military history on the morning of October 12, 1918, near Cunel, France. His citation reads:

While he was leading his company against the enemy, his line came under heavy machinegun fire, which threatened to hold up the advance. Followed by 2 soldiers at 25 yards, this officer went out ahead of his first line toward a machinegun nest and worked his way around its flank, leaving the 2 soldiers in front. When he got within 10 yards of the gun it ceased firing, and 4 of the enemy appeared, 3 of whom were shot by 1st Lt. Woodfill. The fourth, an officer, rushed at 1st Lt. Woodfill, who attempted to club the officer with his rifle. After a hand-to-hand struggle, 1st Lt. Woodfill killed the officer with his pistol. His company thereupon continued to advance, until shortly afterwards another machinegun nest was encountered. Calling on his men to follow, 1st Lt. Woodfill rushed ahead of his line in the face of heavy fire from the nest, and when several of the enemy appeared above the nest he shot them, capturing 3 other members of the crew and silencing the gun. A few minutes later this officer for the third time demonstrated conspicuous daring by charging another machinegun position, killing 5 men in one machinegun pit with his rifle. He then drew his revolver and started to jump into the pit, when 2 other gunners only a few yards away turned their gun on him. Failing to kill them with his revolver, he grabbed a pick lying nearby and killed both of them. Inspired by the exceptional courage displayed by this officer, his men pressed on to their objective under severe shell and machinegun fire.

Exhausted and suffering from the effects of exposure to mustard gas - a chemical explosive shot by German artillery - Woodfill safely made it back to American lines. He was hospitalized at Bordeaux and saw no further action during the war.

For his courage in that one morning of service, Woodfill received the Medal of Honor - American's greatest military honor - in ceremonies at Chaumont, France, on February 9, 1919. General Pershing presented the medal to Woodfill. The French government decorated him with the Croix de Guerre with palm and made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. The Italian government presented Woodfill with its Merito di Guerra, and the government of Montenegro honored Woodfill with its Cross of Prince Danilo, First Class. Woodfill also was promoted to the rank of Captain.

Woodfill's term in the military apparently ran out [in 1919] because a Kentucky Post account on December 16, 1919, said Woodfill had reenlisted. But he apparently lost his rank in the reenlistment. A later account said Woodfill retired in 1923 with the rank of Sergeant. There was a local movement, apparently

unsuccessful, to get the Congress to pass a special act allowing Woodfill to retire as a Sergeant, but with a Captain's pension.

He was proclaimed as America's most outstanding soldier of World War I by no one less than General John "Black Jack" Pershing. Woodfill also was selected as part of the honor guard at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C.

Locally, Woodfill was honored in July 1922 when the cornerstone was laid for a new Fort Thomas school at Alexandria Pike and Fort Thomas Avenue, which was named in Woodfill's honor.

Despite his honors, Woodfill - on a Sergeant's salary - struggled to pay his bills and to pay off the mortgage on his Fort Thomas home. Woodfill took a job in 1922 as a \$6-a-day carpenter working on the Ohio River dam project at Silver Grove. Ned Hastings, manager of the Keith Theater in Cincinnati, sent pictures of Woodfill working at the dam site to New York. There a theatrical group involved in charitable work raised money to pay off the mortgage on Woodfill's Fort Thomas home and to pay up an insurance policy.

His wife, Lorena, died March 26, 1942, at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. An account said she was buried in Falmouth. In May 1942, Woodfill and Alvin C. York - himself a highly decorated World War I veteran from Tennessee - were commissioned Army majors. Woodfill told a Kentucky Times-Star reporter at the time he was not aware the Army was going to give him the commission, which he termed a pleasant surprise. Woodfill was 59 and the Army commissions were part of a national campaign to boost national spirit and enlistments. In 1944 Woodfill again resigned from the Army, and he retired to a farm near Vevay in Jefferson County, Indiana. Because his wife had died, Woodfill decided not to return to Fort Thomas.

Woodfill was found dead at the Indiana farm on August 13, 1951, at the age of 68. He apparently had died of natural causes several days before he was found. Neighbors said they had not missed him because he had talked of going to Cincinnati to buy plumbing supplies. Despite his Indiana roots, a Kentucky Post editorial on August 15, 1951, called Woodfill "one of the greatest soldiers produced by the Bluegrass state." Woodfill was buried in the Jefferson County Cemetery near Madison, Indiana. But through the efforts of Indiana Congressman Earl Wilson, Woodfill's body was removed and buried at Arlington National Cemetery in August 1955.

(Written by Deanna Beineke. Information excerpted from Michael Robert Patterson's profile of Woodfill on the Arlington National Cemetery website.)