

THE STORY OF

The Greatest Doughboy

SAM WOODFILL

On November 11, 1921, the third anniversary of the armistice that marked the end of World War I, the remains of the Unknown Soldier, brought home from Chalons-sur-Marne, France, were entombed at Arlington National Cemetery.

Among the pallbearers for the ceremony was the man whom General John J. Pershing named as “the outstanding soldier of the American Expeditionary Force” in the war. That soldier was Samuel Woodfill, a burly, ramrod-straight Indiana native who had earned the Medal of Honor for his exploits in the Meuse-Argonne campaign in October 1918.

Like his comrade-in-arms Alvin C.

vice in Alaska and at the Mexican border added to his record, Woodfill was promoted to sergeant. With the U.S. entry into World War I, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the 16th Infantry Regiment at Camp Greene, North Carolina. During the Christmas holidays of 1917, he took enough leave to return home to marry his childhood sweetheart, Lorena Blossom Birchfield.

In the months of waiting to be shipped to Europe he took command of a machine-gun company of the 60th Infantry, a unit of the 5th Division, known to German troops as die Roten Teufel—the Red Devils—from the red diamond design of their shoulder patch.

In April 1918, a full year after the

ment with five shots from his Springfield rifle before crawling forward to a patch of woods and killing seven more enemies before his company caught up with him. Seven others fell minutes later—five with his Springfield, one with his Colt revolver and another with an entrenching pick.

In the process of advancing and occupying enemy trenches, Woodfill’s company had penetrated the southern boundary of the Hindenburg Line.

By now, Woodfill was exhausted mentally and physically, limping from a festering shrapnel wound in his leg, coughing up fluid from the corrosive mustard gas he had breathed. He was evacuated to Bordeaux and in February 1919, General Pershing conferred the Medal of Honor

In the months of waiting to be shipped to Europe Woodfill took command of a machine-gun company of the 60th Infantry, a unit of the 5th Division, known to German troops as die Roten Teufel—the Red Devils—from the red diamond design of their shoulder sleeve patch.

York, also a Medal of Honor recipient and pallbearer in the 1921 ceremony, Woodfill had little formal education and a rough-and-tumble childhood. He grew up on a farm at Bryantsburg, a hamlet in southeastern Indiana, and there hunted game with a muzzleloader inherited from his father, who had served in the U.S.-Mexican War and with Indiana volunteers in the Union Army.

In the spring of 1898, instilled with ideas of military glory, Woodfill sought to enlist for service in the Spanish-American War. However, the Army was not signing up 15-year-olds and the boy had to wait until 1901 to join. He was promptly shipped to the Philippines where he saw action at Leyte, Samar and Luzon and earned the admiration of his commanding officer for his “honest and faithful service.”

After 16 years in the Army, with ser-

American declaration of war, Woodfill and his regiment reached France, but not until October 11, exactly one month before the end of the war, did the 5th move to the front. Woodfill, now a captain, led his company in the advance to the outskirts of Cunel, a village in the northeast of France, a short march from the Meuse River.

German machine-gun and artillery emplacements around the heights of Cunel were punishing the division as it moved to the village outskirts, and with his company soon pinned down, Woodfill dropped his pack and threw himself into a shell hole with a nasty layer of mustard gas over the mud at the bottom. His binoculars revealed well-camouflaged machine-gun nests in the shrubbery to his left and in a barn and shattered church in the village. He silenced one emplace-

ment on the hero. His other medals included the Distinguished Service Cross, Croix de Guerre with palms, the Legion of Honor, and the medals of six other nations.

He returned home a national hero and in 1923 retired from the Army as a master sergeant with 23 years of service, 10 years added for foreign duty and retirement pay of \$138 a month.

He served again, in World War II as a lecturer and training instructor at Fort Benning, Georgia, retired again in 1943 and, now a widower, bought a small home in Vevay, Indiana. He died there on August 10, 1951, alone but not forgotten, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. ★

—Dale L. Walker of El Paso, Texas, is a past-president of Western Writers of America, Inc., and author of many historical books and biographies.