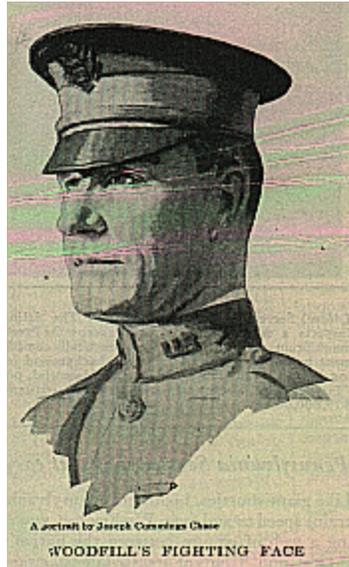


WOODFILL OF THE REGULARS : THE LITERARY DIGEST (March 15, 1930)



HOW OUR "GREATEST SOLDIER" AND HIS BUDDIES CARRIED ON

Another roar off to the east! Another screech overhead. A German .77 tore through the branches of the roadside tree and landed between the French artilleryman and the American lieutenant, who was helping him move an eight-inch gun from the ditch.

A sickening moment of expectation of death. But the shell didn't explode.

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the Frenchman.

Lieut. Samuel Woodfill of the A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Force) even after hazardous years in Alaska, the Philippines, and Mexico, was too startled to say as much as that.

He admits it, describing this day in 1918, in the Anould sector, soon after his arrival in France, in "Woodfill of the Regulars" (Doubleday, Doran), his life story as told to Lowell Thomas.

Woodfill, an old Army enlisted man, called "America's greatest soldier" by no less an authority than General Pershing, became an officer in the World War. His greatest feat was performed near Cunel. It is too well known to be told in detail here, but it involved, says General Pershing's report, "attacking single-handed a series of German machine-gun nests near Cunel, and killing the crew of each in turn until reduced to the necessity of assaulting the last detachment with a pick, dispatching them all." When the conflict was over and he was mustered out, he re-enlisted with his old rank of Sergeant.

Now, however, he has been retired and lives on an Indiana farm. His story covers many years of an adventurous career. In his chapters on the World War, he tells of many

exciting deeds, some of which have a distinctly humorous tinge. The episode of the shell came during the meal when he was on his first trip to the front with his company. German troops were just ahead. German observation balloons, or "sausages," were hovering about on the lookout for French artillery. But the newly arrived doughboys were enjoying lunch, despite the danger. The mess sergeant was in high spirits, we learn, as the scene is described in Woodfill's own words:

"Make it snappy, you guys," he bellowed at the men as they filed up with their mess kits. "This ain't no all-night barbecue, and if you birds want to get in on the buffet supper, you'd better hop to it while the goin's good. Those Germans up ahead are liable to ruin your appetite any minute."

Just then there was a roar in the distance, and something went screeching over our heads like a trolley-car taking a curve on two wheels. Then all of a sudden one corner of the field just behind us went up in the air with a noise like a clap of thunder, and then settled down all over the surroundin' scenery. The Germans in that "sausage" had caught sight of the French artillery all right, and as a result we were now having our first real tasted of the Great War.

Mess kits flew in all directions. There was a dugout at the corner of the farm-house, and a dozen brave American soldiers on their way to Berlin did a nose dive detour down that hole like scared wood-chucks. Eight bold buck privates went into a huddle under the table where the cook was ladling out the stew and coffee, and over went table, stew, and the whole works.

"Ouch, ouch," bellowed a rookie. "I'm hit! My eye's gone!" "Aw, nix on the bellyaching," was all the sympathy he got from his buddy. "use your other eye, and get off my leg!"

I guess a splash of hot coffee had gone into the lad's face. But before he let out another yelp there was a second roar, another terrifying screech overhead, followed by another cloud of dirt going skyward. At any rate, they didn't happen to have our range, and I was sure it was the French artillery they were after. So I went on eating, although the fried potatoes sort of stuck in my throat. The two lieutenants sitting near me were apparently waiting to see what I intended to do. It was up to me to appear calm, whether I was or not. So I just took another spoonful of stew.

The shells began falling a bit nearer now. They were shortening up on the range. One burst in the road right near by, and when the smoke cleared there was a Frenchman writhing with a leg bashed clean off. Another shell plumped in the road. The fragments barely missed the horses that were draggin' an eight-inch gun. The horses lunged, and both team and gun went rollin' end over end down the emankment. As the gun crew started down to the rescue, I shouted to those of my men who were still out in the open: "Who'll volunteer to help me haul that gun back up the embankment?" Every man in sight responded.

"I," "Here." "Me, too." "I'll go."

The others would have come, too, but they had sought shelter, which was only human. If I'd been a buck private, I probably would've been the first man to dive into that dugout. Anyhow, we all had a hunch that the sooner we assisted the Frenchies to get on down the road and out of our neighborhood the sooner the Germans would allow us to finish our first meal near the front without seasoning our stew with any more lead and steel. So we hustled out some ropes, turned the gun right side up, and boosted it up the embankment. Meanwhile plenty of shells were coming over. And I guess the only thing that saved us was that so many of their messages of hate were duds. Out of thirty or forty that plumped down all round us, only seven exploded.

And then came that German shell that didn't burst. When everyone had recovered from the excitement, and had finished the interrupted meal, the troops moved resolutely on up to the front. There they found more excitement, tragedy, humor, deeds of valor. Let us hear, first of all, Woodfill's account of a comic interlude involving a badly rattled but eminently spunky soldier, who might have lost his life but, fortunately, did not. We are told:

One of our sentries spent a lonesome night in an outpost with nothin' to do except stalk cooties. But along about 3:00 A.M. he heard some suspicious sounds out in front. The chills went down his spinal column, and grabbin' a hand grenade he threw it out over the top of the trench. But in his hurry he forgot all about the almost solid mass of wire netting that the French had strung along the top of the trench. That darn grenade of his hit the wire, and without his knowing it the grenade bounced right back over his head to the rear of the trench and went off behind him. "Come on, you lousy Dutchmen," he yelled. "I can lick your whole blankety-blank Army."

Whereupon he grabbed a half-dozen more grenades and let 'em fly. They, of course, rebounded and began explodin' all over the place. That poor rookie thought he was in the midst of a fierce assault, and kept on throwin' hand grenades as fast as he could pick 'em up. The only thing that saved him from wasting the whole stack of ammunition was when one of the bombs went off so close to him that it knocked him out.

Later there was a similar "show," but one more in earnest. We read:

Another chap in our outfit was driven from his outpost by a party of German midnight prowlers. They chased him out with hand grenades and machine-gun fire. It was a real show this time, however. Corporal Charles Rounds was this chap's name. He was a cool bird, too. After the grenades stop explodin' he returned from around a bend in the communication trench, where he had fled, spit on his shoes for luck, and crawled right in under their machine-gun fire, which was a bit high. Then he opened up with his automatic rifle and drove off the entire raiding party.

That lad, Charley Rounds, was a fighter from away back. He took another wallop at the Germans during the Argonne fracas. He got curious concerning the location of some German machine-gun nests and battery positions he was lookin' and crawl back to the

lines to give the information to our gunners. Then our artillery blew 'em right off the map. Charley got the D.S.C. for that.

But Woodfill was just as much in the thick of things as his men. One night during a German attack some barbed-wire entanglements were damaged. The veteran decided to repair them himself. But he needed help. So, we are told:

"Volunteers for repairing the wire," I sang out. A half-dozen responded, and of these I picked three: "You, Sergeant Nelson; you Sergeant Blackmore; and you, Private Smith."

These three were old regulars. I figured for our first real rumpus it might be wiser to pick men who had been through the mill, who had made soldierin' their business. The German were sure to have their patrols and snipers keeping a sharp lookout on the gap in the wire they had made. So it was hardly a job for butter-fingered rookies. "Keep close behind me, keep low, and keep your rifles down," I whispered.

Everything seemed as quiet and peaceful as the Garden of Eden before the fall. It was one of those perfect midsummer days in one of the loveliest parts of France. And when they have 'em perfect over there, they're just about as perfect as you'll ever find 'em this side of the Pearly Gates. Over in the east were the other ranges of the Vosges, with their slopes covered from base to crest with luxuriant green woods. The only sound that came to our ears was a sound as peaceful as though we were startin' on a huntin' trek in the Alaskan forest. It was the sound of men choppin' and sawin' wood over in the German lines. The sun was on full candle-power. That was just the trouble, too. It was a bit too bright for work like ours. But there was a lot of repairing to be done in that wire, and it wouldn't do to leave it until nightfall, because the Germans might come over in force, rush through the gap in the wire, and get revenge for the way they had been messed up on the previous night. They had done a tiptop piece of work as far as they got before their flame-thrower went fut and they had to retreat. They had snipped a curvin' passage through the seventy-foot barricade of wire that was six feet wide. And every inch of that six feet, clean through the entanglement, had been redded up as neatly as your front lawn on Saturday afternoon. I couldn't find any wire or shrubbery in that six-foot barbed-wire avenue, not even a piece the size of a lead pencil. We certainly doffed our tin kellys to the Germans for their thoroughness. They had not taken any chances on a man betraying their movement toward us by crackin' twigs under his feet.

They also had cut another place away in the middle of the barbed-wire belt all the way round a big tree. They had made that island within a hundred feet of our gun booth. That's where their machine-gunner had taken up his position, and we found a lot of empty shells all around.

"Keep your eye peeled for Boche snipers," Woodfill whispered to Nelson, before he struck out, Then:

Lying flat on my stomach, slithering back and forth like a mountain stalkin' its prey, I started to weave in new wire and close up that gap. For half an hour I worked steadily,

and during that time I succeeded in finishing up one full spool of wire and had just started a second one. Still not a sound but the wood chopping over on the other side of No Man's Land. I figured the Germans must be resting up after their night raid. By that time I had worked over a little crest, and my three men were crawling along just behind.

Ping! Right past my ear like the crack of a whip! Machine-gun bullets. I pancaked on the ground. Rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat, they went zipping over my back. No place for a fat man. If I'd measured six inches thicker around the waist that gunner would have put creases in my undershirt. The dirt and rocks began to fly. Barbed wire started snapping into pieces. Then he must have pulled down on his gun, because the bullets began hittling hardly two feet in front of me. So I didn't move a hair. And in a few minutes the gunner either lost sight of me or I had given what he considered a perfect imitation of a dead soldier. He ceased operations; I began them. You should've seen me slide away from that place. I pushed backward over the crest of the hill and down to where the rest of the boys were lying.

"Come on, let's sneak around to the other side of the knoll," I whispered. "Mebbe we can get in a bit of work there."

The way things were only one man could do any wiring at a time. I hauled it after me and started again. But I just started and that was all. Crack! Crack! Crack! Those German machine-gunners certainly were on their job. This time they were after me from a little hill across the creed, anbout three hundred yards away. I pancaked again, if anything, flatter than before. This time it was in a path of weeds. Good tall ones, too, luckily for me. The gunner guessed wrong in their height. His bullets were mowing 'em down like a farmer goin' through a hay field. A few inches lower and it would have been finis la guerre for yours truly.

Nelson and Blackmore and Smith were twenty feet or so behind me, and when the Germans had knocked off for a moment I slithered back to them.

"Those Germans don't seem to like me," I remarked.
What do you expect 'em to do?" growed Hans. "Serve you beer?"

MORE ABOUT WWI SOLDIER SAM WOODFILL

The exploits of World War I Medal of Honor recipient Samuel Woodfill are worthy of a home page in the archives of the Internet. The following accounts are a fascinating and inspiring exhibit of military memorabilia.

This is the website of a man whom General Pershing called "America's greatest soldier," a man who had more medals (1919) than any other soldier in the army and who was responsible for "the most remarkable one-man exploit of World War I." The WASHINGTON STAR commented that his deeds of valor were so quietly done that no

one knew about them except the War Department..."How did it happen that the country at large was deprived of the knowledge of him. Someone should be charged with the responsibility of searching out and making known these great shy ones." The intent of this website is to make known the long forgotten heroic life and deeds of Lieutenant Samuel Woodfill.

WOODFILL CITATION FOR THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR

"Samuel Woodfill, first lieutenant 60th Infantry. For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy at Cunel, France, October 12, 1918. While he was leading his company against the enemy his line came under heavy machine-gun fire, which threatened to hold up the advance. Followed by two soldier at 25 yards, this officer went out ahead of his first line towards a machine-gun nest and worked his way around its flank, leaving the two soldiers in front. (When he got within ten yards of the gun it ceased firing, and four of the enemy appeared, three of whom were shot by Woodfill. The fourth, an officer, rushed at Lieutenant Woodfill, who attempted to club the officer with his rifle. After a hand to hand struggle, Lieutenant Woodfill killed the officer with his pistol.) (The account in brackets is someone inaccurate.)

His company thereupon continued to advance until shortly afterwards another machine-gun nest was encountered. Calling to his men to follow, 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 three 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 machine-gun position, killing five men in one machine-gun pit with his rifle. He then drew his revolver and started to jump into the pit when two other gunners only a few yards away turned their gun on him. Failing to kill them with his revolver, he grabbed a pick lying near by and killed both of them. Inspired with exceptional courage displayed by this officer, his men pressed on to their objective under severe shell and machine-gun fire.

By Order of the Secretary of War: Peyton C. March
General, Chief of Staff

Adventurer/Author Lowell Thomas Writes of Samuel Woodfill

In the face of adversity, it is often comforting to read of those who triumphed over impossible circumstances. In the year of the great stock market collapse, 1929, Lowell Thomas authored a biography of Samuel Woodfill. **WOODFILL OF THE REGULARS** (Doubleday, Doran and Company, Garden City, New York) must have sparked inner hope in the hearts of those whose fortunes appeared lost. As a remotely related ancestor of Samuel Woodfill, (We shared a common forefather, my Great-Great-Great Grandfather and Samuel Woodfill's Grandfather was a Kentucky Methodist preacher named Daniel Woodfill, Sr.), I endeavoured to explore his past. A copy of the long out-

of-print biography, *WOODFILL OF THE REGULARS* was listed among the archives of the Houston Public Library. Several weeks after requesting the book, I was able to review the old soldier's life and career in intimate detail. Lowell Thomas authored a thorough biography and documentary of the man and his exploits. The following anecdotes are from *WOODFILL OF THE REGULARS*:

(For a 1930s magazine review of *WOODFILL OF THE REGULARS*, [click here.](#))

(Chapter X, Pg. 158) "At an elevation of 45 degrees, it was claimed that our rifles would carry three miles. Now was the chance to try mine out. I ran the sight up to twelve hundred yards, lay down on the snow, jammed my elbows into the crust, put my bandolier in front of me and let fly with my first shot. The caribou just turned and looked. I raised my sight several hundred yards and fired again. The caribou took up a trot for a little way, then slowed down again. I raised the sight for the third time and fired. This time I saw the bullet strike just in front of them. At last I had the range. My sight was at 1800 yards! I pulled the trigger once more and brought one of them down. They were loping now, but that didn't make so much difference so long as I had the range. I fired two more times. Both bullets missed by a few yards. The third bullet brought down another of the herd. Slipping in a new clip of bullets, I began again. After dropping a third, the others disappeared over the crest. Hardy got there about this time. He had seen the herd before I had but never thought they were close enough to hit. Then to his amazement, he had seen them drop one after another in front of his eyes. "Ye bloody blighter," he exclaimed, "ye were shootin' 'em at better'n a mile."

(Pg. 268) "The way the bullets were plowing up the ground all around me and zipping through my pack I figured the jig was up...Then to liven things up still more that machine gunner must have invited his artillery to attend the party. Suddenly, there was a whine above the rat-a-tat-tat of the machine guns. A German .77 plowed into the field ten or twelve places behind me. The second one exploded nearer still. A shower of dirt and corrugated iron rattled on my tine hat and half buried me. Mebbe the next had my name on it.

I was trapped without a chance to do a darn thing. I didn't want to hand in my checks to old St. Peter without scribbling a final message to my wife. In my blouse pocket was the picture of her in wedding dress that I always carried then. I slipped it out, fumbled and found a stub of a pencil. On the back, I put her address in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, and then amid the roar of exploding shells and the crackle of machine-gun bullets, I wrote her what I thought was sure to be a farewell message."

October 18, 1918

In case of accident or Death It is my last and fondest desire that the finder of my remains shall please do me a last, and ever lasting favor to please forward this picture to my Darling Wife. And tell her that I have fallen on the field of honor, and departed to a better land which knows no sorrow and feels no pain. I will prepare a place and be waiting at the Golden Gait of Heaven for the arrival of my Darling Blossom.

The address:
Mrs. Samuel Woodfill
167 Alexandria Pike
Fort Thomas, Kentucky

"I had guessed wrong. There was no German ammunition with my name on it that day."

Sergeant Woodfill Among Three Soldiers Honored at Commemoration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1921

(Pg. 316) "Woodfill remained very little known, even in army circles, until 1921, when the great ceremony of the Unknown Soldier was held. Among the pallbearers of the Unknown (the honor guard) were to be the three outstanding soldiers of the A.E.F. General Pershing was to select them. A committee received 3,000 citations, the records of three thousand men who had been honored during the war. From these were selected 100. General Pershing went over the 100 and picked "3." One of the three was Sergeant York. Another was Colonel Whitlesey of the "Lost Battalion." Another was Samuel Woodfill. When Pershing came to Woodfill's name on the list, he said: "Why, I've already selected that man as the outstanding soldier of the A.E.F."

Newspaper reporters got this statement. Few had heard of Woodfill. They went scurrying to look up the records. The burial of the Unknown Soldier took place with great pomp. Wilson, Taft, and Harding were in the procession. Woodfill had his wife come on to Washington for the ceremony, and they received much attention. Senator Ernst of Kentucky led him to the White House and introduced him to the President. At a performance of the Belasco Theater, Woodfill sat in the presidential box. One of the singers in the show spied him and told the audience about his valorous deeds. He got an ovation and was mobbed by admirers after the show. Congress adjourned in his honor. He was banqueted by the members of the House and Senate, and was photographed with the President and Secretary of War. In New York he was received with honors, and was the guest of Judge Philip J. McCook of the New York Supreme Court, who had been an intelligence officer with the Fifth Division overseas and had been badly wounded. Judge McCook took him to see Marshal Foch, then on a visit to America. The Marshall said he was happy to meet the first soldier of America, and Woodfill responded that he was happy to meet the first soldier of the World. He was received at the Stock Exchange, which suspended business for three minutes in his honor. A reception at the Hippodrome - Foch was there, and Woodfill had the right-hand box. Here again he was greeted with deafening applause. The Fifth Division gave a banquet in his honor, and Chase painted his portrait. "
