

## Fix Bayonets! Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's Courage at Gettysburg

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you discern the difference between courage and recklessness?
- **Virtue:** Courage
- **Definition** – Courage is the capacity to overcome fear to do good.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will explore the role Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain played in the Battle of Gettysburg. Students will specifically learn about his actions on July 2 on Little Round Top and its significance to the Union's overall victory in the battle.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's role in the Battle of Gettysburg
  - Students will understand how they can be courageous in their own lives
  - Students will apply their knowledge of courage in their own lives
- **Background**
  - In the summer of 1863, the Civil War was in its second full year of conflict. The previous months had been difficult for the Union Army. They had lost several major engagements, including the bloody Battle of Fredericksburg in December and the humiliating loss at Chancellorsville in May. Robert E. Lee thought the Union was on its last legs. If he could invade the north, defeat the union forces in a major battle, and threaten Washington D.C., he might just end the war. So he moved his forces north where he eventually encountered the union army at the small Pennsylvanian village of Gettysburg.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Union
  - Confederate
  - Colonel
  - Regiment
  - Flank
  - Volley
  - Saltpeter
  - Cartridge
  - Bayonet
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - What was Colonel Chamberlain's role in the Battle of Gettysburg?
  - Why was holding Little Round Top so critical to the Union's success?
  - What does Colonel Chamberlain's stand say about his identity?

- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Shaara, Michael. *Killer Angels: A Novel of the Civil War*. New York: Ballantine, 1987
  - Trulock, Alice Rains. *In the Hands of Providence: Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.
  - *Gettysburg* (1993), film

## Handout A: Fix Bayonets! Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's Courage at Gettysburg

### Background

In the summer of 1863, the Civil War was in its second full year of conflict. The previous months had been difficult for the Union Army. They had lost several major engagements, including the bloody Battle of Fredericksburg in December and the humiliating loss at Chancellorsville in May. Robert E. Lee thought the Union was on its last legs. If he could invade the north, defeat the union forces in a major battle, and threaten Washington D.C., he might just end the war. So he moved his forces north where he eventually encountered the union army at the small Pennsylvanian village of Gettysburg.

### Narrative:

It was a hot summer day in July of 1863. Thousands of men in dusty faded blue and mud-stained uniforms found themselves sweating under the tireless sun. It was 82 degrees in the sun as the men stood sweltering in their thick wool uniforms. One of the hundreds of regiments that made up the Army of the Potomac was the 20th Maine. The Maine men had come far from the cool wooded pine forests they called home to fight to preserve the Union. Leading these men was their Colonel, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.

Chamberlain was a Maine man through and through. Born in Brewer, Maine in 1828, his great-grandfather had fought in the American Revolution and his grandfather in the War of 1812. Before the war, Chamberlain had been a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College. He was fluent in nine languages, not counting English and was reputed to have taught every curriculum at the college other than science and mathematics. He had strong anti-slavery sentiments and was eager to fight on behalf of his country when he was presented with the opportunity in 1862. His regiment soon marched south to join the war effort.

Chamberlain then saw combat across the Eastern Theater. At one point during the dreadful combat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, he was forced to spend the night between friendly and enemy lines amongst the bodies of the men who had fallen in the days fighting. Just a few weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg was to commence, Chamberlain was promoted to commander of the 20th Maine regiment.

After months of campaigning, the regiment's numbers had been greatly reduced from combat and disease, the constant deadly companion of armies of the period. On the eve of the battle, the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine were assigned a group of men who had attempted to mutiny from their previous regiment, the 2nd Maine, and wanted to go home.

Battle commenced at Gettysburg on July 1 when Union General John Buford's cavalry moved to block Confederate General Robert E. Lee's advance guards just outside of town. Fighting ebbed back and forth throughout the day as both North and the South rushed up reinforcements. When the sun set, the Confederates were well installed in town with their lines stretching from north to southwest. The Union Army under General Meade had taken up positions to their east and south in a fishhook-like formation. Throughout the night, both armies moved to reconnoiter the surrounding countryside as best as they could.

As dawn broke, the Union army braced for the coming Confederate assault. Fighting escalated throughout the day. As the Confederates advanced, they steadily moved further south, seeking out the flank, or end, of the Union line. The Union commanders were following this movement closely. They realized that the defense of the Union flank, rested on holding Little Round Top, a hill at the extreme southern edge of the Union line.

It was to Little Round Top that Chamberlain and the 20th Maine were sent at a critical moment. The soldiers did not know what to expect as he led them up the steep and stony slope. As they reached the summit, the crackle of musket fire was growing steadily to their right. Chamberlain was ordered by Colonel Strong Vincent to deploy his men along the southern rim of the hill, dig in, and prepare for the imminent Confederate assault. Vincent's parting words to Chamberlain were, "hold at all costs." Chamberlain's men were all that prevented the Confederates from surrounding the Union army and routing it.

The men of the 20th did not have long to wait. Soon gray uniforms were glimpsed advancing through the dense green foliage. Chamberlain deployed his men in an arc following the curve of the hill, had his men load their weapons, and prepared for the assault. The tough men of the 15th Alabama under Colonel William Oates came toward them with shrieks and shouts. A veteran division, the Alabamians would not be repelled easily.

It's hard to imagine how Chamberlain must have felt in the moments leading up to the first exchange of fire. There he stood with his men, with what was in a very real sense, the entire fate of the Union cause resting in his hands. His 386 men were tired from the rushed march to the front the night before. Some of these men he knew well, while others, the men of the 2nd Maine, were strangers to him. Could they be trusted when called upon? What forces were arrayed against him? And what should happen if he failed to hold the position?

As the Alabamians advanced, Chamberlain's men let loose a ferocious volley of fire, which momentarily checked their advance. Their fire was returned, and the battle raged. Chamberlain remained cool, watching the confederate advance, patrolling his line, and watching for gaps. Chamberlain soon realized that he had completely lost touch with his B Company. This company had been sent out as skirmishers to slow the advancing Confederate lines. He had to assume they were all lost.

As the fighting raged on, men sweated and died under the Pennsylvania sun. Men's thirst grew quickly as they repeatedly bit off the top of their saltpeter cartridges sapping all the moisture from their mouth. Their shoulders grew sore and their arms weak as they hefted their muskets and fired round after round into the enemy.

Chamberlain remained calm. As the Confederates attacked and were repulsed, they continued to move to his right trying desperately to find the edge of his line. Chamberlain, noticing this, spread out his men to mirror the enemy's movement. When his forces extended to their effective length, he doubled them back, creating a right angle in his line. And still the men from Alabama came on.

Chamberlain knew his time was running out. After what seemed like hours, but was only thirty or forty-five minutes of fighting, his men were desperately low on ammunition and suffered from the heat and overwhelming thirst. He knew they could not hold much longer. Chamberlain had to make a decision.

If he stayed where he was and stood his ground, he knew his men would be unable to repulse another Confederate assault. But could he retreat without the flank collapsing and with it the entire Union Army? He knew he must act, but what could he do? Was he to hold and sacrifice his men, men who included his own younger brother, in a vain attempt at preserving a position that was already lost?

Chamberlain knew he had no choice. If he could not stay where he was and could not fall back, there was only one direction he could go – forward. He would charge into the advancing Confederates and attempt to push them back down the hill. It was now that Chamberlain mustered his last ounce of courage.

Chamberlain called together his officers, told them the plan, and ordered them to prepare for a charge. The cry went down the line for bayonets. As the Confederates came on, Chamberlain ordered his men to charge. Starting with the soldiers who had been bent back as a right angle, they charged forward, moving down the hill like a door swinging shut. When they came even with the main line, Chamberlain moved his men forward. As they advanced, his lost company stood up and fired into the shocked Confederates. Down the hill they went, blue chasing grey, gaining back the ground the Confederates had fought so desperately to win all afternoon. Chamberlain's charge had won the day for the Union.

Chamberlain's story did not end at Gettysburg. He continued to fight for the Union for the rest of the war. By the end, he had been wounded six times and been promoted to brigadier general. However, it was the charge on Little Round Top that would give him everlasting fame. For this courageous action, he was later bestowed with the nation's highest honor for bravery, the Medal of Honor.

Chamberlain's charge was truly courageous. In a moment of great stress, he had to make a choice between holding the line and fleeing. Chamberlain had no knowledge of the enemy army marching against him or of what was happening on the rest of the battlefield; but he led his exhausted and thirsty men in a desperate bid to save the day for the Union and, though he could not know it, a tipping point in the war. Courage was required, and Chamberlain did not back down.