

What experiences, skills, and knowledge allowed Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to devise and successfully execute his strategy for holding Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg?

Group 3: History

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Introduction

On July 1st, 1863, Confederate and Union armies collided when a desire for shoes brought soldiers to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. After a day of desperate fighting, the North held the high ground and 160,000 men descended on the small town. The next day, Union General Gouverneur Warren was appalled to find that the small hill overlooking the entire U. S. position was unmanned. Seeing Southerners massing for a flanking movement below him, and knowing guns placed here would destroy the Federal line, he immediately dispatched orders to bring up a brigade. The message was intercepted by Colonel Strong Vincent who ordered the Third Brigade up the hill at the double quick. Moving to the end of his line on Little Round Top, Vincent stressed to the new colonel of the 20th Maine that he was the end of the Union line, he could not fail, he could not retreat. He must "Hold that ground at all hazards."¹ The confrontation had escalated into a battle that would decide the outcome of the war and the responsibility for it had fallen on the shoulders of a group of volunteers and a professor of languages from Maine. Chamberlain's actions on Little Round Top ultimately saved the Union position on the second day of the battle. **What experiences, skills, and knowledge allowed Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to devise and successfully execute his strategy for holding Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg?**

¹ Alice Rains. Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 147.

Chapter 1: Early Life Lessons

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain grew up on a farm in Brewer, Maine with a strict but loving father who expected his sons to work and be men. Chamberlain recalled that his father would not help his sons solve problems. He expected them to discover or invent solutions on their own. His answer when asked how to do difficult things was "Do it, that's how!" When young Joshua got the family wagon stuck between two large stumps as he crossed a stream, he asked his father how to free it. The answer was a predictable, "Do it, that's how!" So he did. With much effort, the boy lifted the wheel hub. The motion caused the wagon tongue to hit the ox, startling it into forward motion that pulled the wagon free. "Do it, that's how" was, wrote Chamberlain, "an order for life worth infinitely more than any book learning."² Notes historian Alice Trulock, "The same admonishment repeated over the years undoubtedly forced Chamberlain's growing mind to seek creative solutions to problems, besides stimulating his quick intellect to notice everything that could be useful to him."³ This way of facing challenges shaped Chamberlain. He learned there was always a way to solve a problem. He just needed to think hard enough to find it. It was skill that would be employed years later on a rocky hill outside of Gettysburg when success appeared to be impossible.

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain had his share of challenges as an adolescent. He struggled with a stutter that prevented him from clearly saying words that started with p, b, or t. In spite of this, Chamberlain wanted to attend college. He studied from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily for over a year to pass the Bowdoin College entrance exam. Chamberlain also overcame his speech impediment by experimenting until he found a speech pattern that worked. He discovered that if

² Ibid., 33.

³ Ibid.

he barely touched the words, as if he were singing, he could speak without stuttering. He had continued to apply his father's advice of "Do it, that's how!" After entering Bowdoin College, he earned his degree and became a professor of rhetoric and modern languages. The former stutterer was able to speak nine languages besides English. He had again overcome a seemingly insurmountable obstacle by finding his own remedy and working until the goal was reached. This determination to work until he succeeded, as well as his keen intelligence, would serve him well in the United States Army.

Chapter 2: The 20th Maine

War between the North and South broke out while Chamberlain was teaching at his alma mater. Chamberlain's students began to enlist and the young professor felt strongly the responsibility to fight for his country. However, his request for a leave of absence so that he could also volunteer was denied. Undaunted, Chamberlain found a way. He instead accepted the two year sabbatical that came with his promotion from Rhetoric to World Languages at the college. Chamberlain then wrote to Governor of Maine, Israel Washburn, offering his services to the army instead of traveling to Europe to study languages there for the next two years as was expected. The new volunteer believed strongly in the Union's cause and felt he had a personal responsibility to fight for it. "This war...will not cease until men of the North are willing to leave good positions and sacrifice...to rescue our country from desolation...I believe this to be my duty and I know I can be of service to my country in this hour of peril."⁴ Chamberlain readily left his "good position" and joined the soldiers from Maine. When Governor Washburn offered

⁴ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Thomas A. Desjardin, *Joshua L. Chamberlain: A Life in Letters: The Previously Unpublished Letters of a Great Leader of the Civil War* (Harrisburg, PA: National Civil War Museum, 2012), 166.

Chamberlain the colonelcy of a new regiment of volunteers, Chamberlain declined and asked him to give it to a regular officer already serving in the armed forces saying, "I will take a subordinate position and learn and earn my way to the command."⁵ This decision would become important because it spurred him to become a student of the military, a subject at which he eventually excelled. He was assigned to an obscure unit that was not claimed or supported by any county. On September 2, 1862, Lieutenant Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the 20th Maine Volunteers marched away from their homes and into history.

In the beginning, the 20th Maine marched and drilled so poorly that Colonel Adelbert Ames told them that they ought to "desert and go home."⁶ But the men learned. Discovering that many of his superiors were West Point graduates, Chamberlain persuaded them to start a school where interested officers could learn military tactics. Chamberlain was anxious to be one of their students. In addition, he spent time studying with Colonel Ames with whom he shared a tent. "I study, I tell you," he wrote to his wife, Fannie, "every military work I can find. And it is no small labor to master the evolutions of a Battalion and a Brigade. I am bound to understand everything."⁷ He went on to request that she send him his copy of *Jomini Art of War* and said that Colonel Nichols had promised read it with him and use it as a text for Chamberlain's instruction. Translated into English from the French, and published in 1862, the book was the chosen treatise of war and military strategy for the United States military during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain," Gettysburg Battlefield Online, accessed February 01, 2018, <http://www.angelfire.com/pa4/gettysburg/chamberlain.html>.

⁷ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Mark Nesbitt, *Through Blood & Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Major General Joshua Chamberlain* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2011), 27.

All the training paid off when the 20th Maine was made to charge Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg. The Confederates held position at the top of the hill where they could use artillery to destroy the Union assaults. The 20th Maine held formation despite the cannon fire that tore holes in their line. Said one Union soldier already on the hill, "It was such a grand sight and a striking example of what discipline will do for *such* material in *such* a battle."⁸ Chamberlain's unit was one of the last ordered to charge the heights. The regiment passed four stalled lines before spending the night on the hill among the dead and dying. It was a vivid lesson in the importance of holding the high ground. After the battle, General Joseph Hooker tried to comfort Chamberlain saying, "You've had a hard chance, Colonel, I'm glad to see you out of it." Chamberlain replied, "It was chance, General; not much intelligent design there!"⁹ Although new to the world of war, Chamberlain could see the futility of the repeated and wasteful attacks on the advantageous Rebel position. Because of the 20th Maine's bravery, Ames was promoted and Chamberlain was made colonel. Kept out of the action at Chancellorsville because of a bad batch of smallpox vaccine, the men were ready for a fight as they moved into Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863. The new colonel, suffering from heat stroke, was also given charge of men from the 2nd Maine who, thinking they had volunteered for one year not three, had refused service. Rather than shooting them as he was invited, Chamberlain inspired them to fight.

⁸ Geoffrey C. Ward et al., *The Civil War: An illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 172.

⁹ Alice Rains. Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 104.

Chapter 3: Little Round Top

The next day, Chamberlain barely had time to position his men before the guns quieted and Southerners began to charge his position on Little Round Top. The attack began at their right, but soon officers noticed something wrong and warned the colonel who stood on a rock to see over his men. They were being flanked by Colonel William Oates and the 15th Alabama, coming up from the ravine between the Round Tops. Chamberlain ordered his men to refuse the line. Sidestepping and continuing to fire they extended the line to the left and bent it at a right angle. The Rebels instead of coming to the unguarded rear were met by “the most destructive fire” Oates said he had ever seen.¹⁰ The battle for Little Round Top raged for around 90 minutes. 40,000 round of ammunition were fired and a third of the 20th Maine was cut down. Chamberlain’s report stated “squads of the enemy broke through our line in several places and the fighting was literally hand to hand. The edge of the conflict swayed to and fro...at times I saw around me more of the enemy than my own men.”¹¹ They repulsed wave after wave of Rebels. The Southerners fell back, apparently to regroup for a final assault. The 20th was now out of ammunition, even that which was taken from the wounded and the dead. They could not withstand another attack and the other regiments could not come to their aid. Knowing they could not retreat, Chamberlain’s said his “thought was running deep...feeling only a desperate chance was left, I ordered the bayonet.”¹² “Holding fast by our right and swinging forward our

¹⁰ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Mark Nesbitt, *Through Blood & Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Major General Joshua Chamberlain* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2011), 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹² Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, "After action report [Little Round Top]. :: Combat Studies ...," Combat Studies Institute, , accessed December 29, 2017, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/car1/download/csipubs/chamberlain.pdf>.

left, we made an extended right wheel before which the enemy's line broke and fell back until we had swept the valley and cleared the front of nearly our entire brigade."¹³ The maneuver so shocked the Confederates that many surrendered on the spot and the 200 men from Maine not only cleared the hill of the enemy, but took nearly 400 of them captive. The fight for Little Round Top was over. Worried that the Rebels could still position guns on Round Top, 300 feet above them, commanding officer James Rice ordered Colonel Joseph Fisher to clear the larger hill as the sun went down. Fisher refused. Rice then asked Chamberlain who told his men where he was going and added, "as of my men as feel able...can follow."¹⁴ Every man followed him onto Round Top where they captured some Rebel scouts, dislodged the last of the Southerners, and secured the line for the Union. Wrote Colonel Oates of the 15th Alabama, "There never were harder fighters than the 20th Maine men and their gallant colonel. His skill and persistency and the great bravery of his men saved Little Round Top and the Army of the Potomac from defeat."¹⁵ The next day Pickett's Charge failed to remove the Federals and the Army of Northern Virginia retreated south.

Chapter 4: A Comparison: Jomini and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain

A comparison between Baron de Jomini's tactics, strategies, battle formations, and maneuvers outlined in his *The Art of War* and those employed by Chamberlain in the defense of Little Round Top shows them to be remarkably similar. Chamberlain not only studied Jomini's book, but internalized and then utilized what he had learned. One of the first lessons to be

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alice Rains. Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 79.

¹⁵ Alice Rains. Trulock, *In the Hands of Providence Joshua L. Chamberlain and the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 155.

learned from Jomini was the importance of using the characteristics of the ground one was fighting on to one's own advantage. "The decisive point of a battle-field is certainly that which combines strategic with topographical advantages."¹⁶ Unlike previous battles, the Union troops occupied the high ground at Gettysburg. The importance of Chamberlain's position on the hill called Little Round Top could be described in Jomini's words, "Suppose an enemy's flank to rest upon high ground from which his whole line might be attained, the occupation of this height seems most important, tactically considered."¹⁷ From his studies, Chamberlain knew that holding Little Round Top and securing the Union flank was vital. He positioned his troops in a parallel order with croquet on the flank which appeared as Figure 6 in Jomini's work.¹⁸ It is also clear that when Chamberlain ordered a right wheel he used the oblique line, Figure 9 in *The Art of War*, to sweep the 15th Alabama off the hill.¹⁹ Boldly taking the offensive at this critical moment reflected Chamberlain's adherence to Jomini's admonition that "the best thing for an army standing on the defensive is to *know* how to take the offensive at a proper time, and to *take it*."²⁰

¹⁶ Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G.H. Mendenhall and W.P. Craighill (West Point, New York: U.S. Military Academy, 1862), accessed January 25, 2018, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13549/13549-h/13549-h.htm#Fig_6, 186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁰ Baron De Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G.H. Mendenhall and W.P. Craighill (West Point, New York: U.S. Military Academy, 1862), accessed January 25, 2018, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13549/13549-h/13549-h.htm#Fig_6, 183.

Fig. 6.

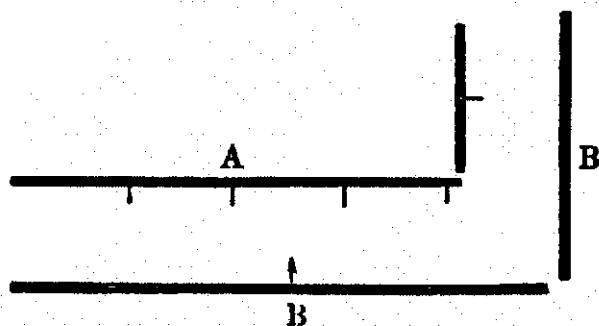


Fig. 1. Baron de Jomini's Figure 6 showing the parallel order with crochet on the flank.²¹

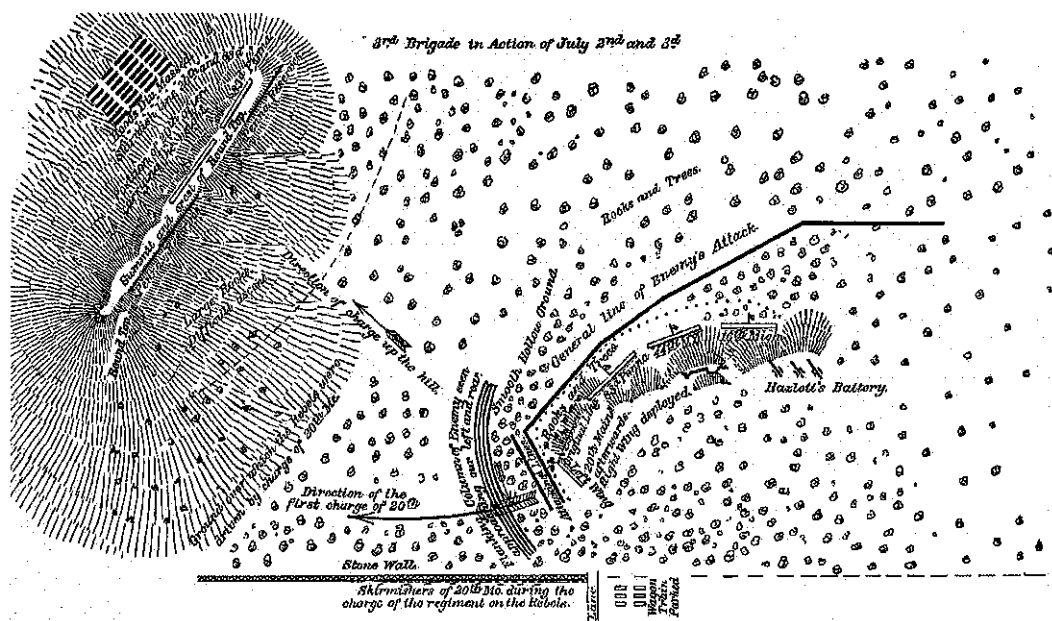


Fig. 2. Map from a facsimile of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's Report to Headquarters, 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, 5th Corps, Army of the Potomac Concerning the actions of the 20th Maine at Gettysburg, July 6, 1863.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *Through blood & fire at Gettysburg: General Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine* (Gettysburg, PA: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 50.

Fig. 9.

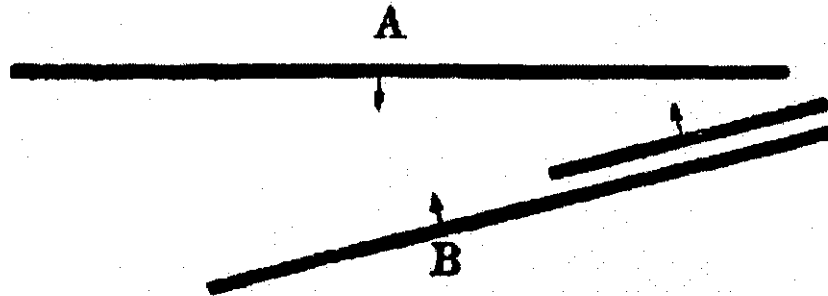


Fig. 3. Baron de Jomini's Figure 9 showing the oblique battle formation.²³

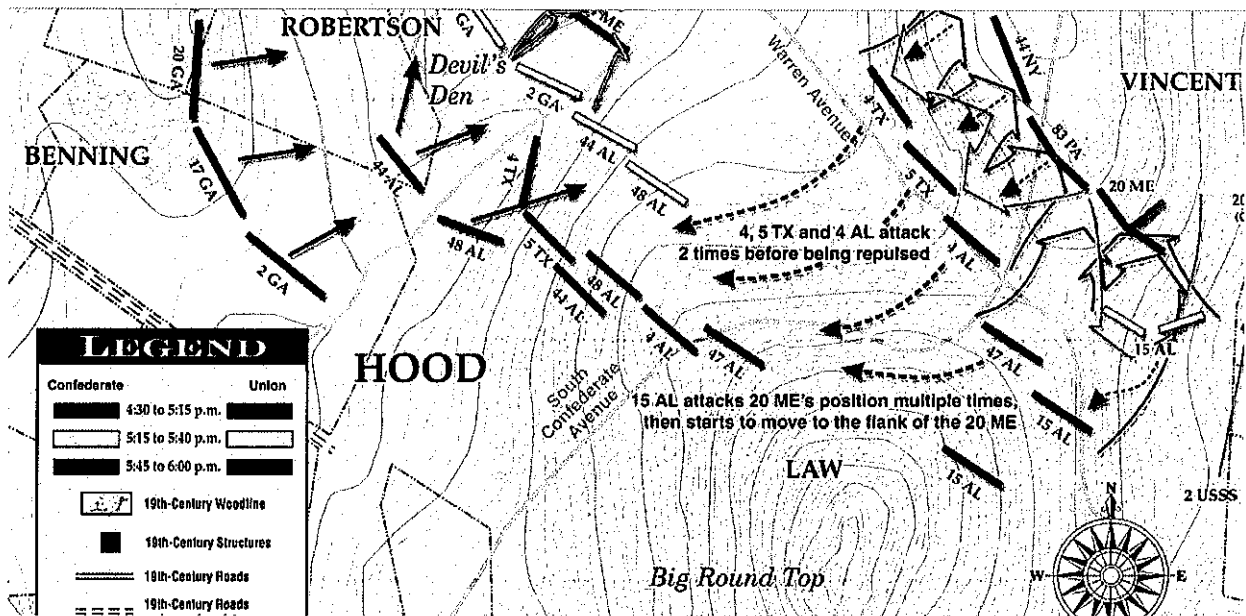


Fig. 4. Battle of Little Round Top, July 2, 1863 showing the oblique movement of the 20th Maine. Map by Stephen Stanley.²⁴

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "The Battle of Gettysburg: Little Round Top," Battle of Gettysburg : Little Round Top, , accessed February 01, 2018, <http://www.thomaslegion.net/battleofgettysburglittleroundtop.html>.

After the success at Gettysburg, Chamberlain continued to sacrifice for his country and find a way to "Do it, that's how!" Shot through the pelvis while leading a charge at Petersburg, Chamberlain leaned on his sword and continued to direct and encourage his men until he collapsed from loss of blood from what all thought was a mortal wound. In General Grant's first promotion on the field, Chamberlain was made brigadier general. Miraculously recovering, he explained his return to duty to his mother saying, "I am not scared enough or hurt enough yet to be willing to face the rear when other men are marching to the front."²⁵ Chamberlain returned to the army in time to be instrumental in the victories leading up to Lee's surrender. His valor and honorable character had so impressed General Grant that Chamberlain was asked to command the surrender ceremony of the Confederate infantry. When a downcast General Gordon approached the Union troops, Chamberlain had his men salute with the carry arms position. Chamberlain later described, "Gordon looks up, taking the meaning, and with profound salutation he drops the point of his sword to the boot toe; then gives word for his successive brigades to pass us at the same position of the manual,—honor answering honor. On our part not a sound of trumpet more nor a roll of drum; not a cheer nor a word nor a whisper of vain-glorying." "For us they were fellow soldiers," wrote Chamberlain, "We cannot look into those brave bronze faces and those battered flags we had met on so many fields...and think of personal hate and mean revenge." The time had come for peace and, as he had on Little Round Top, Chamberlain saw a way to find success in an impossible situation.

²⁵ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and Mark Nesbitt, *Through Blood & Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Major General Joshua Chamberlain* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2011), 149.

Conclusion

General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain commanded his men in 24 battles and innumerable skirmishes in which they took 2700 prisoners and eight battle flags. He was wounded six times and had six horses shot from under him. When he returned home he served four terms as Governor of Maine, kept the peace during a dangerous election dispute, and was made the President of Bowdoin College. Never willing to let other men take on his responsibility of defending the rights of his country, Chamberlain, at age 70, was disappointed when his offer of military service in the Spanish-American War was refused. At the dedication of the monuments for the 20th Maine at Gettysburg in 1886, Chamberlain said, "We know not the future and cannot plan for it much. But we can hold our spirits...so pure and high...that we can determine what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hour strikes that calls to noble action...no man becomes suddenly different from his habit and cherished thought."²⁶

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain did not suddenly become the man of the hour. What experiences, skills, and knowledge allowed Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to devise and successfully execute his strategy for holding Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg? Chamberlain became the man uniquely prepared and capable of holding Little Round Top "at all hazards" because of his upbringing, his determination to overcome challenges, and his drive to learn and earn his honors. From the beginning, he was taught that no matter the situation, there was always a possible solution whether the problem was a stuck wagon, a stutter, or learning to command a regiment. He knew no matter the challenge, the answer was to "Do it, that's how!" His desire to work and

²⁶"Chamberlain's Address for to the 20th Maine Monument at Gettysburg," Civil War Trust, , accessed February 01, 2018, <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/primary-sources/chamberlains-address-20th-maine-monument-gettysburg>.

study his way to higher ranks drove him to study the very strategies that he later used to sweep the 15th Alabama off the rocky slopes of Little Round Top.

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