The lion of Little Round Top ducked as another shell screamed by overhead, fired by one of the Confederate batteries nestled atop an advanced artillery position. At a distance, he saw his Corps Commander, General Warren riding up towards him. Euphemistically stating that the artillery fire was “very annoying,” Warren instructed Colonel Chamberlain to move forward and carry the position, so that the Union advance could proceed peacefully. Directing some of the men in his 1st Brigade to provide ample distraction, Chamberlain led the bulk of his force across a railroad and flanked the position, forcing the Rebels to retreat to the safety of their fortifications atop Rives Salient. No sooner had Chamberlain and his men seized the forward artillery post than a hailstorm of shells came raining down on their new position, this time from the big guns behind the enemy’s main entrenchments. Ushering his men behind the cover of the crest, Chamberlain calmly prepared his men for a possible Confederate counterattack, hoping the rest of the V. Corps would march up in support of his brigade. The Day was June 18th, 1864.¹

Out of the Virginia dust galloped a lone horse bearing a messenger with an order from General of the Army of the Potomac, George Meade, to press the attack and take Rives Salient with the 1st Brigade, alone. Chamberlain heard the orders with disbelieving ears – how could the 1st Brigade take on the strongly fortified Confederate position across the ravine by itself? Kneeling down, he scribbled frantically, “I have here a veteran brigade of six regiments, and my responsibility for the welfare of these men seem to warrant me in wishing assurance that no mistake in communicating orders compels me to sacrifice them.” Sure that an assault on the

ridge would spell disaster, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain considered it his duty to make sure his commanding officer knew what he was mandating. It was one of the rare moments that Chamberlain hesitated in obeying orders.

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was by this time, a man whose competency and leadership qualities had achieved him considerable renown in the Union Army. He had achieved his fame in the hills of Gettysburg, but his unique story encompassed so much more than one glorious battle, however great it happened to be. Just a year after Little Round Top, in June 1864, Chamberlain formed part of General Grant’s effort to take control of the city of Petersburg, a city whose proximity to Richmond made its capture by the North tantamount to the Confederate surrender of its capital. Gettysburg might have been the turning point, but it would take grueling battles like Petersburg for the Union to finally squelch the resistance of the Confederate insurrectionists. Chamberlain played a small but valiant role at Petersburg, fearlessly leading from the front of the line, heroically inspiring his men forward. From colonelcy at Gettysburg, Chamberlain rose to Brevet. Major General by war’s end, earned a medal of honor for his wartime heroics, and returned to scholarly life at the end of the war. For the sacrifices he made for the nation, for his eloquence in speaking and writing, and for his gallant service and sincere patriotism, Chamberlain is acknowledged as one of the most influential volunteer generals of the Civil War, and perhaps even of the entire Union Army.

In the end, one can only wonder what inspired the patriotism and service Chamberlain so palpably possessed. Volunteers’ achievements have so often been eclipsed by the achievements of the regular army boys, and Chamberlain is no exception; but he had a deeper element etched into his character, one formed by a combination of his love of the Union, his love of his family, his love and faith in God, his belief in Victorian honor, and ultimately, his love for the men he
would command. Together, these qualities helped shape one of the unsung heroes of the Civil War.

Born and raised in the rugged wilderness of southern Maine, Chamberlain was the eldest child of one of the oldest American families, whose ancestry stretched back to French Huguenot Protestants and English chamberlains. From his childhood, Chamberlain developed a respect for the Victorian ideals of manhood and honor, and acquired an innate sense of responsibility and care that any older sibling fosters over time. He grew up as a boy caught between a father wishing him to join the military and continue the Chamberlain legacy of service, and a mother insisting on his ordination as a minister of the church. Graduating from the Bowdoin College class of 1852, Chamberlain continued his education at Bangor Theological Seminary, marrying Frances “Fanny” Adams in 1855. With the original intention of following his mother’s desires, Chamberlain passed up on the ministry, opting instead for a professorship at his alma mater, where he taught first as a professor of religion, and then as a professor of rhetoric and the modern languages.

Although a natural scholar, Chamberlain nevertheless succumbed to the irresistible call to arms from the bloody fields of faraway Virginia as war erupted following the Confederate assault on Fort Sumter, South Carolina in 1861. In a letter to Maine’s Governor Israel Washburn on July 14, 1862, Chamberlain wrote, “I am expecting to have leave … to spend a year or more in Europe … I am entirely unwilling, however, to accept this offer if my country needs my service or example here.” Contrary to the opinion of older college professors, Chamberlain disagreed with the notion that the war would be short, and thought that “this war, so costly of blood and treasure, will not cease until the men of the North are willing to leave good positions, and sacrifice the dearest personal interests, to rescue our country from desolation, and defend the
National Existence against treachery at home and jeopardy abroad.” Deciding to forgo the sabbatical for a lieutenant colonelcy in the newly formed 20th Maine Volunteers, Chamberlain joined the throngs of men who enlisted to fight and defend the “flag of the nation [which] had been insulted, [and] the honor and authority of the Union [which] had been defied.”

Armed with eloquence and expressiveness, the college professor nevertheless adapted to military life quickly, seeing his first action at Fredericksburg, Virginia, where the Union suffered heavy losses in December 1862. He grew to love the army and the beauty of the countryside around him, writing articulately to his wife Fanny, “I wish you could be beside me on some gentle palfrey plunging into some rich shaded valley, craggy defile, or along some lovely stream.” Promoted to Colonel, he was handed command of first the 20th Maine, whom he led at Gettysburg, and then the entire 1st Brigade of the V Corps, whom he led at Petersburg, and whom he watched pay the cost for the ill-fated assault at Rives Salient…

Receiving the confirmation of his mission from his commanding officer, Chamberlain noted with little confidence General Meade’s promise that advancing columns of additional infantry would support his men on the flanks. “Comrades we have now before us a great duty for our country to perform. We know that some must fall; but I feel that you will all go manfully and make such a record as will make all our loyal American people grateful.” Chamberlain thundered these words out across the ranks, making sure every soldier knew that his sacrifices would make his country proud. These were stirring words from a gifted orator, words striking for the stress on patriotism and chosen to inspire Chamberlain’s idealistic manliness in an attempt to overcome

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3 Joshua Chamberlain to Fanny Chamberlain, Oct 26, 1862; in Nesbitt’s Civil War Papers, 27.
seemingly insurmountable odds. Knowing full well that his brigade would not be enough to clear the steep ravine, ascend the opposite side, and flush out the encamped rebels, Chamberlain shouldered up, comfortable at least with the notion of dying with honor and pride. At 3 o’clock, the predetermined hour of assault, the colonel whipped out his saber, and cried “Trail Arms! Double-quick, march!”, and led the blue men out of their cover and into the fray. Discarding the idea that a commander should not put himself in the line of fire, Chamberlain bore the Brigade colors aloft, rushed in front of his men and urged them to take the fight to the enemy. One man from the 1st Brigade would later write to his colonel, “when the order came at three our line … went forward with an enthusiasm hardly ever witnessed in battle”, fired up by their gallant leader.4

Deep in the incline, in front of his men, Chamberlain noticed that the ground became swampy and cluttered up with alder trees and brush ahead, and understood that his men would get bogged down and become mere fodder for rebel gunners above. Gesticulating wildly with his saber for his men to shift to the good ground on the left, he yelled as loudly as he could, trying to save the men he lovingly commanded. The lion’s roar was heard throughout the ranks, but as he took up his position, a minie ball ricocheted off the hard earth, entered one hip, drove through his pelvis and lodged in the opposite hip. Stumbling, he drove his sword into the ground to prop himself upright, afraid that should his men see him fall, they would lose morale. He continued to shout orders and encouragement to men left and right, remaining upright for a few precious minutes before the loss of blood became too much for his weakened body to bear. Chamberlain would later note what his first reaction to getting shot was: “The first pain I felt was in my back and I thought, what will my mother say – her boy shot in the back. Then I saw the blood gushing

from my side and I felt better.” Even in critical condition, he felt the need to preserve his manliness, his reputation, and his family honor. That the sight of his own gushing blood could incite pleasing feelings within him was incredible enough, but of his most dire moment, Chamberlain would note with dark humor nearly a half century later, “I am not of Virginia blood, she is of mine.”

Lying there in the midst of flying minie balls, canister shot and artillery shells, Chamberlain bled out into the Virginia soil for maybe half an hour. At last, Lt. West Funk of the 121st Pennsylvania and Lt. Ben Walters of the 143rd Pennsylvania carried the wounded Chamberlain to the rear, where he barked orders to his aides, telling them to inform senior regimental commander Lt. Colonel John Irwin of the 149th Pennsylvania that he was now in charge of the Brigade. Never neglectful of duty, Chamberlain believed then and there that his wound was mortal, but in spite of these morbid thoughts, his will to live and continue fighting for the Union he loved so much triumphed over his wounds – they would not claim his life until decades later.

The bullets employed by both sides in the Civil War were known as minie balls. Their large surface areas meant that when they did strike a man’s flesh, they burrowed deep within the skin, piercing ligaments, tendons and blood vessels, and wreaking havoc within one’s body. This deadliness, when combined with the relative lack of medical and surgical knowledge of the age, was reflected by the high mortality rates of soldiers injured internally.

Chamberlain was taken to division hospital where a private by the name of Stettler lay on the amputation table. The doctors, who decided to lay Stettler aside so that the colonel could receive attention first, endured Chamberlain’s constant pleading for Stettler to be treated first.

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6 Providence, 209.
Sergeant Patrick DeLacy, who recalls the incident, wrote Chamberlain years later: “[Stettler] well remembers [your kindness], and he has so stated to me several times what you said to the surgeon at the time: Lay me on one side; I am all right, go and take care of my dear boys.” Whether Chamberlain considered his situation a lost cause or whether he was simply displaying his manliness and belief in the brotherhood of man is debatable, but that he would pass up on medical care he so desperately needed in order for his men to receive medical attention before him, is yet another shining example of his gallantry.  

Chamberlain’s superior officers certainly noticed his valor, and they vociferously recommended to General Ulysses Grant that the colonel be promoted to a Brigadier General. This was not the first time that Chamberlain’s name was put forward for consideration, as many had previously joined in the chorus crying for his promotion after his bravery at Little Round Top, only for the colonel’s efforts to go unrewarded. This time however, Grant duly obliged the entourage. The Union commander recorded the following entry in his personal memoirs:

“Colonel J.L. Chamberlain, of the 20th Maine, was wounded on the 18th. He had several times been recommended for a brigadier-generalcy for gallant and meritorious conduct. On this occasion, however, I promoted him on the spot, and at last a gallant and meritorious officer received partial justice at the hands of his government, which he had served so faithfully and so well.”

Back on the operating table, Chamberlain lay as Doctors Abner Shaw of the 20th Maine and Morris Townsend of the 44th New York steadily worked on his wound. Doctor R.A. Everett, the surgeon who first examined the colonel, had informed Shaw and Townsend that he

considered Chamberlain’s death a foregone conclusion, but the duo had refused this prognosis, working feverishly through the night to repair the bevy of internal damage. At some point during the night, Shaw and Townsend reputedly stopped work, fearing they were prolonging their dear colonel’s pain, but rumor has it that Chamberlain roused himself from anesthesia and urged them to continue operating. As historian Alice Trulock so aptly put it in her book *In the Hands of Providence*, his “determination to live transcended his agony.” Another historian, Edward Longacre, conjectured about the medicine Chamberlain received: no nerve or orthopedic repair could have been performed, but the bullet was extracted, severed arteries were ligated to prevent excessive bleeding, dead tissue was removed, and a rudimentary, metal catheter was inserted to reconnect his urethra. Everything conducted was crude at best, performed in poor lighting and unsterile operating conditions. In spite of this, Chamberlain survived to tell the tale, returning to the battlefield in the space of just a few months. However, the consequences of his devastating injury, including incontinence, lack of sexual capability, and walking and riding disabilities, would affect him until his death 50 years later.9

Joshua Chamberlain wrote in his book *The Passing of the Armies* of a premonition regarding a life-threatening injury, saying “most likely I shall be hit somewhere at sometime, but all ‘my times are in His hands.’” He believed in the charity and compassion of the Lord, trusting that whatever he did was “divinely appointed [and] carried forward by a perfect trust in God”.10

As Chamberlain battled infection in the Navy Hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, one can only wonder what inspired the courageous man to battle on. Was it his faith? Was it his belief in Victorian ideals? Was it his intense love for his country and his family? Or was it his deep-seated

commitment to the men he had served with for two years? Eloquently highlighting his love for his family in one of his most endearing and emotional letters of the war, the battered and bruised professor spilled his soul to his dearest beloved:

My darling wife, I am lying mortally wounded, the doctors think, but my mind and heart are at peace. Jesus Christ is my all-sufficient savior. God bless and keep and comfort you, precious one. You have been a precious wife to me. To know and love you makes life and death beautiful. Cherish the darlings & give my love to all the dear ones. Do not grieve too much for me. We shall all soon meet. Live for the children. Oh how happy to feel yourself forgiven. God bless you evermore precious, precious one.11

Chamberlain evidently loved Fanny passionately as he tried hard to comfort her and commiserate with the suffering he knew she would inherently experience at his passing. Judging from the tone and content of this letter, Chamberlain wasn’t at all sure if he could win this particular battle, and laced throughout the fabric of his words is the underlying message: please don’t mourn me, be happy, get over my death, look after our beautiful children, live a full and happy life when I’m gone. I cannot speak from experience, but I think any wife would weep upon reading such an intimate and honest portrayal of her husband’s deep, abiding love for her, her children, and their collective happiness and security.

A proven family man, Chamberlain’s devotion to the flag, to the magnificent union, and to its grand Army of the Potomac was equally powerful and stirring. While recovering in the hospital, he wrote a letter to the Governor of Maine, enthusing: “I have been doing what I could here, looking up soldiers in the hospital who are true to the country’s cause in order to have them sent home to vote.” If he couldn’t fight the

enemy out on the fields, he would help the war effort by helping Lincoln secure reelection. Meanwhile, Chamberlain ached to return to combat, revealing “I long to be in the field again, doing my part to keep the old flag up, with all its stars.”

With the war already in its third bloody year, the Confederacy was on the retreat, having been defeated at the critical battles of Vicksburg in the West and Gettysburg in the East. However, though the Union had scored victories in the West and the South, the Eastern theater was far from resolved, with the Army of Northern Virginia, led by the renowned Robert “Bobby” E. Lee, stubbornly avoiding a head on clash with the larger and better equipped Army of the Potomac. With his army consisting of disciplined and loyal men willing to die for him, Lee knew that as long as it remained relatively intact, the Confederacy could still achieve its objective – cessation of hostilities with the Union and international recognition as a country – if A) a European power like France or Britain stepped in to aid the South or B) Lincoln was replaced by a president less sympathetic to the war effort. Although many in the Union army understood Lee’s philosophy, the civilians in the North could not necessarily be counted on to vote for Lincoln, and hence, more war. Thus, Chamberlain, who like many Army boys, shared Lincoln’s belief in reuniting a Union plagued by rampant insurrection, played an important role in getting the wounded “loyal” infantrymen back home to vote. Lincoln defeated George McClellan, a former leader of the Army of the Potomac, in the election of 1864, winning the Electoral College 212-21 and the soldier vote 119,754 to

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12 Joshua Chamberlain to Governor Coney of Maine, Aug 31st, 1864, in Blood and Fire, 140.
McClellan’s 34,291 in a landslide, ensuring that the Union would fight on until the bitter end.\(^{13}\)

Ecstatic about the election results, Chamberlain, who had gone home to Maine to recuperate from his injuries, itched to get back to action. His family did not particularly want him to return to war, and he was offered a position as collector of customs in the city of Bath if he decided not to rejoin the army. However, shunning the offer, Chamberlain wrote in a letter to his father on February 20, 1865, “I owe the country three years service. It is a time when every man should stand by his guns. And I am not scared or hurt enough yet to be willing to take the rear, when other men are marching to the front.” The bespectacled professor had found a new calling in the military, and he was reluctant to return to civilian life before the war ended. Chamberlain acknowledged his “position and prospects in the Army were never better”, and ended by saying quite tellingly, “after all I have gone through, I am not willing to back out just at the decisive moment, and leave the rewards and honors of my toil and sufferings to others.” Chamberlain was proud of his contributions to the Army, and he could feel the momentum surging through the Union ranks now that Lincoln had been reelected; thus he decided to return.\(^{14}\)

Though it seemed like an apparently easy decision for him to make, Chamberlain understood the toll his position as a volunteer officer in the army had on his little family. Once back on the frontlines, he wrote a rousing letter to his sister Sarah


“Sae” Chamberlain in which he divulged the deep internal conflict that raged within his heart: “No man’s [family] was dearer or more blest. And to no man could it be a greater sacrifice to leave them far away and face the dangers which in threatening me threaten them tenfold.” In writing these words, Chamberlain clearly understood the multiple roles he played in his family’s life – brother, husband, son, father – but he also comprehended his role as a soldier, protector and servant of his country, thus noting “let me say the course I take [to rejoin the army] is not only that which honor and manliness prompt, but the one which will prove best for all who belong to me or to whom I belong.” Yet again the twin Victorian virtues of manliness and honor dictated the path he took, taking precedence in his eyes above all else.15

With what biographer Alice Trulock deemed a “triumph of the human spirit,” Chamberlain took to the field once more on November 18, 1864, just five months after his injury.16 He would serve in the conclusion of the Petersburg campaign, earn a promotion to Major General after the Battles of the Quaker and White Oak Roads in the Spring of 1865, and receive the honor of overseeing the surrender of arms by the infantry of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox on April 12.

Perhaps one of Chamberlain’s most distinctive traits, one that set him apart from a great many officers in the Union army, was the vast reserve of respect he had for the men of the Confederacy. In the surrender ceremony at Appomattox, Chamberlain ordered his men to salute the surrendering Confederates by “carrying” arms. Reflecting on the ceremony years later, Chamberlain said in a speech, “We could not look into those brave, bronzed faces we had met on so many fields where glorious valor made the

15 Letter to Sarah Chamberlain. 9 Mar. 1865, Chamberlain Digital Archive.
16 Providence, 219.
very earth glorious under their feet, and think of such a thing as hatred and mean
revenge.”

Equally expressive in writing as he was in speaking, Chamberlain wrote in
his *Passing of the Armies* the following poignant description of Appomattox:

> The momentous meaning of this occasion impressed me deeply. I resolved to
> mark it by some token of recognition, which could be no other than a salute of
> arms. Before us in proud humiliation stood the embodiment of manhood: men
> whom neither toils and sufferings, nor the fact of death, nor disaster, nor
> hopelessness could bend from their resolve; standing before us now, thin, worn,
> and famished, but erect, and with eyes looking level into ours, waking memories
> that bound us together as no other bond;—was not such manhood to be welcomed
> back into a Union so tested and assured?

His salute of the Confederate Army drew criticism from some quarters, but he
stood staunchly by his decision, classifying the salute as “not to the cause for which the
flag of the Confederacy stood, but to its going down to the flag of the Union.” His
vision for a united America, an America that valued the bravery, productivity and
humility of the common man, and an America that rewarded men and women based on
their merit rather than their political alignment, transcended his time. While some tried
to slander his patriotism by asserting his supposed Confederate sympathies,
Chamberlain made it clear from the start, and in many post-war speeches, lectures and
writings, that he believed absolutely and unwaveringly in the Union. In a speech
delivered at Gettysburg at the dedication of the Maine monuments on October 3, 1888,
Chamberlain decried secession: “there was a boastful pretence that each state held in its
hands the death-warrant of the nation; that any state had a right, without show of
justification, to violate the covenants of the constitution, to break away from the Union

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17 Pat Finnegan, "To the Limits of the Soul's Ideal: Two Speeches by Joshua Lawrence
Chamberlain." To the Limits of the Soul's Ideal- My Tribute to Major General Joshua Lawrence

18 *Passing of the Armies*, 260-261.
and to destroy the body and dissolve the soul of the Great People of the United States of America.” His opinion echoed Lincoln’s views, and his very tone in these words reveals his disagreement with the principle of secession, and the perceived unconstitutionality of such an act.\(^19\)

More than anything, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain believed that the Northern cause was greater than the Southern counterpart, that “we [northerners] too were fighting for birth right and native soil, for home and all the sanctities of life … for this belongs to us, and we to it.”\(^20\) He did not begrudge Southern soldiers but rather praised their valor, while he reserved stinging words for Southern leaders, lambasting them for failing to “understand the rich, composite nature of the great people born of the eternal energies of freedom; incorporate under the guarantees of highest law; dedicated to immortal life in the great covenants of mutual human faith.”\(^21\)

Chamberlain’s expressiveness and mastery of language might strike one as out of place for an officer in the military, but it is important to remember his beginnings as a college professor at Bowdoin. The soldiers who fought during the Civil War hailed primarily from non-military backgrounds, and formed perhaps the most literate and eloquent group of fighting men the country had ever seen. Certainly, the existing war papers from men on both sides during the conflict offer colorful insight into what the soldiers actually thought and believed in. While his generation might be considered the most literate, Chamberlain himself stands as an epitome of refined eloquence that has shed so much light on the war, and on the political climate at the time. His papers,

\(^{19}\) Passing of the Armies, 260-261. Finnegan’s Limits of the Soul’s Ideal Website.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
letters and speeches reflect his deep feelings for democracy, republicanism, the Union and of course, the Victorian ideals that drove him on during the war.

Not all men subscribed to the ideals of Victorian manhood that Chamberlain held high, and certainly, his idea of romanticized heroism and manliness may sound primordial in our current age and culture. However, one must note the underlying climate of the 1860’s to better appreciate the Civil War for what it really stood for. Gender roles have come a long way in the past 150 years, and the notion of men fighting for honor and manliness has faded over the years, just as the thought of manhood and valor does not occupy a prominent role in our words and actions today. Chamberlain has often been described as a knight, and there is little doubt that his actions, words, chivalry, bravery and sacrifice make him truly worthy of the title.

From Bowdoin College to Fredericksburg, from Gettysburg to Appomattox, Chamberlain demonstrated an unyielding belief in brotherhood, manliness, honor and patriotism. These ideals lay at the core of his decision to answer the call to service that came from the fields of faraway Virginia, and these ideals prompted him to give everything he had to his country’s noble cause. In his own words, Chamberlain embodied the patriotism that so many of us nowadays attribute to the great war heroes of the past – “Our hearts beat to that one high thought; our eyes saw but the old flag, and our souls saw it, glorious with the symbols of power and peace and blessing in the forward march of man.” The professor had come a long way in fulfilling his dream of becoming a man proud of his actions and secure in his absolute belief in a higher cause, a nobler ideal.22

22 Ibid.
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