

Major General
JOSHUA LAWRENCE CHAMBERLAIN
His
OFFICIAL MILITARY BIOGRAPHY
Prepared by
The Adjutant General's Staff
Augusta, Maine
1865

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Civil War Series

CHAMBERLAIN, A MILITARY BIOGRAPHY
Researched by Edward Foley

During the Civil War, Maine's Adjutant General, John L. Hodsdon, always conscious that detailed records pertaining to the officers and men serving in the war would "constitute an invaluable portion of the history of Maine in the war," provided that those who rendered conspicuous service would be honored by having their military biographies included in his official reports.

Major General Joshua L. Chamberlain's military biography appears in the Maine Adjutant General's Report for 1864-65. As the biography is included in a report printed in mid-1866, it is likely that it contains an extremely high degree of accuracy as the recent "eyewitness" accounts by fellow officers weren't likely to be dulled by time. Similarly, Chamberlain too, with information furnished by himself, had the perspective of recalling his military service in fresh detail.

Chamberlain's military biography was prepared by an author or authors unknown, although he, or they, would have been members of the Adjutant General's Staff. As surviving copies of the Adjutant General's Report for the Civil War years are not easily obtainable for inclusion in personal libraries, I feel fortunate to have acquired volumes for the years 1863, 1864-65, and 1866. I suggest that in the official report no better condensed military biography of Chamberlain has ever been written and for this reason reproduce it here in its entirety for circulation to interested parties:

MAINE ADJUTANT GENERAL'S REPORT

1865-66

BIOGRAPHICAL AND OBITUARY NOTICES

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BREVET MAJ. GEN. JOSHUA L. CHAMBERLAIN,

of Brewer, after several attempts to procure his release from duty as Professor of Modern Languages in Bowdoin College, availed himself of a leave of absence granted him on the 1st of August, 1862, "for the purpose of visiting Europe," to offer his services to Gov. Washburn for any military duty to which His Excellency might assign him, and received from him the

appointment of Lieutenant Colonel of the 20th Regiment of Volunteers then about to be organized. Accepting this against the most strenuous remonstrance and opposition of his colleagues in the college, he repaired at once to the rendezvous of his regiment, and being mustered into service, ranking from August 8th, he remained the senior officer in camp until near the close of the month, when Col. Adelbert Ames took command, and the regiment embarked for the seat of war, where, after being supplied with arms, they marched to Fort Craig on the south bank of the Potomac, and were assigned to Butterfield's famous "Light Brigade" of Porter's 5th corps, Army of the Potomac. The regiment immediately entered upon the severe duties of the Maryland campaign. During the battle of Antietam they occupied reserved positions and made movements of importance under fire, but were not engaged. On the 20th of September, the heavy reconnaissance was made across Shepardstown Ford, in which they first engaged the enemy. The regiment having crossed and formed its line of battle, Col. Chamberlain was sent back by the brigade commander to lead over the broken column that was checked by the severity of the fire that swept the ford. He sat upon his horse a target for the enemy in the middle of the Potomac, keeping the men steady and urging them over, until the whole brigade was across, when he resumed his post and assisted in maintaining order in the repulse which shortly followed by reason of the overwhelming force of the enemy.

On the 12th of October, he led a reconnaissance to one of the passes of South Mountain, to intercept Stuart's cavalry.

At Fredericksburg, Dec. 13th, he participated in the whole action, during which he received a slight wound in the right cheek. On the night of the evacuation he commanded the regiment - Col. Ames commanding the right wing of the brigade - when they covered the retreat of the army, being the last troops to withdraw from the advanced line on the heights in rear of the city.

He was present in all reconnoissances, skirmishes and expeditions in which his regiment took part during the winter.

In the movements preceding the battle of Chancellorsville, the regiment was left in camp on account of the men having the small pox by inoculation through mistake of the Medical Department; and Col. Ames succeeded in being detached on the staff of Gen. Meade. On the first gun being fired in the vicinity of Fredericksburg, Col. Chamberlain rode to general headquarters, and solicited the privilege of taking his regiment anywhere on the line, promising that "if we couldn't do anything else we would give the rebels the smallpox." The force of suggestion seemed to be appreciated, for at midnight he received a dispatch from Gen. Butterfield, Chief of Staff, directing him to be at Banks' and United States Fords at daylight to take charge of the signal and telegraph lines from headquarters to the several stations on the field of battle, with instructions to put to death any who attempted to disturb our communications. While in discharge of this duty on the following day, he became implicated in a charge then being made by his division, in which he had his horse wounded under him by a piece of shell. On the night of withdrawal he worked on the pontoon bridges which were broken up and swept away by the freshet, and on the next night, after all our troops had left that vicinity, he withdrew his command - the last on the ground.

On the 20th of May, he was appointed Colonel, and soon after had 120 men of the 2d Me. Vols. transferred to his regiment. (Note: The 2nd Maine, formed just after war broke out in April of 1861 and most of its men serving on two-year enlistments, was returning to Bangor at this time. The 120 men who transferred to the 20th Maine were those who enlisted for a longer period.) They were in a state of mutiny owing to some ill treatment they had doubtless received since their regiment left for home; and as they had openly refused to obey orders, they were sent to Col. Chamberlain under guard of a Pennsylvania regiment with loaded arms and fixed bayonets, with orders from the corps commander to draw up the 20th Regiment and fire on them if they refused to do duty. Col. Chamberlain immediately rode to Gen. Meade and got permission to manage the men in his own way. He then took off all guard, supplied them with food - which had not been issued them for three days - assigned them to companies, without giving them any specific orders whatever, expecting them to be treated and to behave, like other soldiers. He found no trouble, except in the case of one or two men who were tried by court martial, and whose sentences he afterwards succeeded in having remitted. These men of the 2d Regiment were afterwards among his very best men, worthy of the proud fame of the 2d and the hard earned laurels of the 20th.

At Gettysburg, he was assigned to a post of great importance and peril - the extreme left of our general line - and withstood an attack in front, flank and rear for more than two hours from Law's brigade of Hood's division - his ammunition at length entirely exhausted, and for the last half hour using that of the rebel dead and wounded whom he had repulsed in the third assault. Holding the position with the loss of nearly half his men, a fresh line of the enemy coming upon us with heavy force, Col. Chamberlain was obliged to rush forward and "meet them half way" with a bayonet charge which completely routed them, driving them across the slope of Round Top, killing and wounding 150, and capturing prisoners twice the number of men he had. (Note: The "Round Top" used here should read, "Little Round Top.") At dusk he was ordered to advance and carry the heights of Round Top, where the fragments of Hood's division had gathered after his repulse of them, which he did with the bayonet alone. This assault Col. Chamberlain led on foot, and by the heroic remnant of his gallant regiment, that decisive point of the field was carried with the capture of many more prisoners. This position was held all night by them, though supported by other troops, who stayed so far in the rear that they thought they were in front, and afterwards claimed credit for the whole affair, which belongs to the 20th Maine, and that regiment alone. For this decisive action the 20th received the personal and official thanks of brigade, division and corps commanders, and Col. Chamberlain was warmly recommended by all his superiors for promotion to the rank of Brigadier General.

Soon after this, Col. Chamberlain was assigned by Gen. Griffin to the command of the 3d brig., 1st div., 5th A.C., where he continued for a long time, Gen. Griffin declining to receive general officers who were sent to him for assignment to this brigade. Under his command, the brigade was brought to the very highest point of excellence in drill and discipline. It had an important part in the Culpepper and Centerville campaign, including the battle of Rappahannock Station, where in reconnoitering the ground preparatory to the assault in which a portion of his troops participated, his horse was shot under him by a rifle ball.

In November, 1863, the malarial fever Col. Chamberlain had been suffering under for some time - though constantly on severe duty - came to a sudden crisis, in consequence of lying out in a severe snow storm one night, without fire or shelter, and he was sent in an unconscious state to Washington in a cattle car. When he was able to go out, he was detailed by order of the Secretary of War to serve on an important Court Martial sitting in Washington, where he was detained, though making most earnest efforts to return to his command. After much difficulty, when the army crossed the Rapidan in May, he succeeded in getting relieved, and joined his regiment before Spotsylvania Court House, and in half an hour from that time was ordered to take seven regiments and charge the enemy's works at the Court House; but the attempt seeming to corps commanders too desperate, the movement was deferred till night, when the advance was successfully made. Col. Chamberlain was in all of the fights of the campaign from that time forth, besides several independent affairs in which he fought the enemy's rear guard of cavalry or horse artillery, and drove them from their positions. In pushing one of these attacks one night, he advanced incautiously and fell into the enemy's lines, and being sharply fired upon, barely escaped with his life by throwing himself flat on the ground and drawing himself along by the grass roots in an open field.

On the first of June, 1864, a brigade was made by consolidating two veteran brigades of Pennsylvania troops from the 1st corps, to which Col. Chamberlain was assigned, by order of Gen. Warren, commanding the corps. He now bade farewell to his beloved and gallant regiment, the men who had never failed him in any extremity, and whose fortunes he had shared in every great battle except the Wilderness. With his veteran brigade he continued the campaign until the army crossed the James and moved on Petersburg, he then having the advance. Here on the 18th of June, shortly after the battle opened, he assaulted a strong advanced position of the enemy, from which they annoyed our artillery so as nearly to silence it. Forming a strong column of attack, Col. Chamberlain led it with his whole staff and escort, when the terrible fire of case and canister swept away everybody from his side, and his horse fell, shot through by a 12 lb. shell. Taking his flag which had fallen, he led his troops on foot to the charge and carried the heights. Sending for two batteries of artillery, he established them on this crest, by sinking platforms on the rear slope so that guns could be worked out of sight of the enemy, and when in position, the muzzles would lie in the grass on the crest, and was ordered to charge the main line of rebel works, which were strong field entrenchments with artillery and infantry, all in close musket range.

During the attack, while in the act of leading a second column against a weak point in the rebel line, and at the moment of giving a command, Col. Chamberlain was shot through the body from hip to hip, the ball passing through, severing arteries and fracturing bones. Balancing himself with the point of his sabre, he did not fall until his men had passed him in their charge, when the great loss of blood brought him to the ground. Supposing the wound to be mortal, he did not think it worth while to take anybody from his duties to bear him from the field, until the day was fairly lost, and he could only fall into the enemy's hands by remaining. For the services of this day, Gen. Grant, without waiting longer for the authorities to act upon previous recommendation, promoted Col. Chamberlain, by an order on the field, to the rank of Brigadier General, the solitary instance in the history of our army. He was assured of his promotion before he was borne from the field, but the official intelligence reached him after his arrival at Annapolis. The following is a copy of the telegram from Lieut. Gen. U. S. Grant:

Hd. Qrs. Army of the U. S.
June 20, 1864

To Col. J. L. Chamberlain
20th H. Infantry

Special Order No. 39. - 1st. - Col. J. L. Chamberlain, 20th Me. Inf'ty Vols., for meritorious and efficient services on the field of battle, and especially for gallant conduct in leading his brigade against the enemy at Petersburg on the 18th inst., in which he was dangerously wounded, hereby in pursuance of authority of the Secretary of War, is appointed Brig. Gen. U. S. Vols., to rank as such from the 18th day of June, 1864, subject to the approval of the President.

U. S. Grant, Lieut. Gen.

For two months Gen. Chamberlain lay at Annapolis at the point of death, and at the end of five months, and before he could mount a horse or walk a hundred yards, he resumed command of his brigade. Their position at that time was on the extreme left of our front line before Petersburg, and the duties were unremitting and responsible.

In the subsequent operations against the Weldon Railroad, Gen. Chamberlain had an active part, being sent with his command to make proper dispositions by night to keep the enemy at bay along an extensive front, while the rest of our troops destroyed the railroad. A severe storm of snow and sleet added to the severities of this operation, and on the last of January, 1865, his wounds had become so exasperated that his corps commander insisted on his being sent North for surgical treatment. While suffering under this, and without much prospect of permanent recovery, he received many tempting offers to leave the military service and accept positions in civil life. Wishing, however, with such strength as might be given him, to stand by his men and his country to the last, he declined these offers, stole a march upon his surgeons, and leaving his room for the first time after he had taken it, started on a painful journey to the front again, where he arrived after an absence of a month. His brigade now consisted of new troops from New York and Pennsylvania, and his post was the extreme advance on Hatcher's Run, and in immediated contact with the enemy.

On the 29th of March, our great offensive movement commenced, and, as had before been confidently announced to Gen. Chamberlain, he was to have the costly honor of leading the advance and of opening the campaign. With his single brigade and a battery of regular artillery, he encountered the enemy on the Quaker Road, their force consisting of cavalry and infantry of Johnson's and Anderson's commands, and in number, as was afterwards ascertained, five times his own. After a long and severe battle, in which at different times he had both his flanks turned, and his center broken, and lost 400 men and 18 officers - every one of his mounted officers, including his personal staff, being either killed or wounded, his own horse shot under him and himself twice painfully wounded in the breast and arm, - the enemy was driven from his position, and enabled the army to occupy the long coveted Boydton Plank Road. For the action of this day Gen. Chamberlain received from President Lincoln the brevet of Major General.

While lying on a heap of straw suffering much from accumulation of wounds, he was suddenly summoned on the second day after, to take command of our extreme left on the Boydton Road, with one brigade and two batteries of artillery, in resistance to an attack which was then commencing. Two divisions of his corps on his right were soon thrown back in great confusion from an advanced position they were endeavoring to maintain against a vigorous assault of the enemy, and while Gen. Chamberlain was rallying these troops and reforming them in rear of his own, he was asked by the commanding general to throw forward his command in the extremity and attempt to stem the torrent then sweeping us away, and, if possible, regain the field lost by the other two divisions. Gen. Chamberlain assented, and while the engineers were trying to bridge the stream on our front, his men dashed through it in the very face of the enemy, and gaining a foothold on the opposite steeps, at once drove the rebels back to the field of the former struggle. While pressing them back upon their works, Gen. Chamberlain was ordered to halt and take the defensive as a matter of precaution. Seeing, however, that his men were much exposed, and that the enemy's strong position could be carried by a tactical manoeuvre, he solicited permission to make an assault, which he did with rapid and complete success, carrying the works, capturing a battle flag and many prisoners, and effecting a lodgement on the White Oak Road.

At the battle of Five Forks on the following day, Gen. Chamberlain had command of two brigades on the extreme right - the wheeling flank. In the midst of the battle, when the rebels made a furious attempt to regain their works by a flank attack, putting in every man of his own command on a new direction to break the force of the onset, in which the 20th Maine, now in his command, was at the post of honor and peril - Gen. Chamberlain formed a mass of skulkers and fugitives from other commands and pushed them in, leaping his horse over the parapet and having him wounded by a rifle ball. His own brigade, the smallest in the division, captured 1050 men, 19 officers and five battle flags - one half the captures of their division.

On the next day he was ordered to take the advance and strike the South Side Railroad. This he did, encountering Fitz Hugh Lee's division of cavalry, which he drove across the railroad, intercepting a train of cars from Petersburg with several rebel officers and men, and routing the enemy from the position. In the subsequent pursuit, Gen. Chamberlain had the advance nearly all the time, capturing many prisoners and vast quantities of material. At Jetersville, on the Danville Railroad, he went to the assistance of our cavalry who were severely attacked on a cross road.

In the final action at Appomattox Court House, when, having marched all night, he came up with our cavalry, who were heroically holding their ground against Stonewall Jackson's old corps of infantry. He double-quickened his men to relieve the cavalry, and forming under Gen. Sheridan's eye, pushed forward against the enemy. The other troops forming on his left, the foe was driven before them to the town, when the flag of truce came in and hostilities ceased. Almost at the same moment the enemy gave a last cannon shot by which one of Gen. Chamberlain's staff officers was killed - the last man that fell in Virginia.

Gen. Chamberlain was present at the conference preliminary to the surrender, and being assigned to the 3d brig., 1st div., and temporarily commanding the division, was directed by the commanding general to receive with his troops the formal surrender of the arms and colors of Lee's army, April 12th, 1865. Afterwards assigned to the command of the division, Gen.

Chamberlain occupied a line thirty miles on the South Side Railroad for some time. This division had the advance in the triumphal entry of the army into Richmond, as also the advance of the army of the Potomac in the final review in Washington. When the army was broken up, he received an assignment to another command; but the active operations of the field now being over, he applied to be relieved from duty that he might have the surgical treatment which his wounds required, and was mustered out of service August 24th, 1865.

In the arduous and trying campaigns through which he passed, Gen. Chamberlain made a record honorable to himself and to the State. During his period of service he commanded troops in twenty-four battles, eight reconnaissances and in skirmishes without number - advance and rear guards in contact with enemy upwards of a dozen times. With his own command alone he fought five independent engagements, every one of which was successful against superior numbers. His captures in battle number 2,700 prisoners and eight battle-flags, no portion of which can be claimed by any other command. He was six times struck in action by shot and shell, three times narrowly escaping with his life.

Immediately after the surrender of the rebel army, Gen. Chamberlain was made the subject of a special communication to headquarters of the army by Maj. Gen. Griffin, his corps commander, in which this officer urged General Chamberlain's promotion to the full rank of Major General, for distinguished and gallant conduct in the battles on the left, including the White Oak Road, Five Forks and Appomattox Court House, where, says Gen. Griffin, "his bravery and efficiency were such as to entitle him to the highest commendation. In the last action, April 9th, his command had the advance, and was driving the enemy rapidly before it, when the announcement of Gen. Lee's surrender was made." This recommendation was cordially approved by Gen. Meade and Gen. Grant, and forwarded to Washington for the action of the Government, where assurances were given that the promotion should be made. (Note: Already a Brevet, or temporary Maj. Gen., this was a recommendation that Chamberlain be made a permanent Major General)

Gen. Chamberlain was rarely absent from field duty. He never had but four day's leave of absence. At all other times when not in the field, he had either been ordered away for treatment of wounds, etc., or was commanding the brigade by order of the War Department.

But on no part of his record does he look back with greater satisfaction, as he informs this department, than his relations with the men under his command. He made it a point, first of duty, then of affection, to take care of his men. He never ordered troops into positions that he had not first personally reconnoitered, and though his losses in killed and wounded have been severe, they have never been made in retreating. The noble and faithful men entrusted to his care never in a single instance failed to execute his orders, or to carry out what they deemed to be his wishes although Unexpressed. But what adds crowning lustre to his record is the fact to which he points with mournful pride, that in all the various fortunes of the field, he never left one of his wounded in the lines of the enemy, nor one of his dead without fitting burial.
