

A Leadership Moment

Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain¹

It is May 24, 1863, and you are 34-year-old Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, commanding officer of the 20th Maine Regiment of Infantry. You have been with the 20th Maine since it was founded less than a year ago in late summer, 1862, but you took command of the regiment only four days ago. Your unit is currently marching through Virginia as part of a large Union army that is on course to engage General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army.

Everything you know about military command you have learned in the last nine months. Prior to the war, you were a professor of modern languages at Bowdoin College in Maine, with no military experience. To the surprise and regret of your academic colleagues, your passion for the Union cause led you to sign up. Your colleagues had sent a message to the Governor of Maine saying that you were "no fighter," but the Governor had nonetheless appointed you a Lt. Colonel in Maine's newest regiment.

You have just received a message that you are to be given charge of about 120 new troops from the 2d Maine. You need them — your unit began with about a thousand men when it was formed, but a combination of illness, injuries, deaths and desertion have left you with fewer than 400.

The new troops would be good news except for the fact that they are mutineers. The 2d Maine has been decommissioned. A majority of its members had signed two-year contracts, and they have gone home. Left behind were the 120 who had signed for three years. After fighting in 11 battles and losing most of their fellow soldiers, they are tired and discouraged. They want to go home too, and they have stubbornly refused assignment to any other regiment.

In transferring these soldiers to your regiment, General George Meade has ordered you to "make them do duty or shoot them down the moment they refuse." The mutineers have just been dropped in your regiment's lap, still in uniform but disarmed. One of their number has been elected as a spokesman to relate their grievances. You meet him, and he explains that they had not been fed in several days (part of an effort by the Army to whip them into line), most of their fellow soldiers had died or gone home, they had fought and suffered in numerous battles, they were discouraged with the pace of the war and expected that the Union would probably lose, in no small part because the leadership of Union officers was so poor.

Your regiment will be moving out shortly. You need to talk to the 120 soldiers from the 2d Maine. They're yours now. What is your plan, and what will you say to them? Will you bring them along under guard? Order them to fight? Shoot them if they refuse? Persuade them to join your unit? If so, how? You don't have much time to make a decision and put it into motion.

¹This case was developed by Lee Bolman, Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, University of Missouri-Kansas City, based on secondary sources.