

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 60.

Last time, a banner fluttering in the wind grazed Zhou Yu's face, and next thing you know, he was spitting up blood and passing out. None of his men knew what was wrong with him, but Zhuge Liang boasted that he could cure Zhou Yu. So he went to the commander's tent to pay him a visit.

"I haven't seen you in a while, but I never imagined your precious health would be failing," Zhuge Liang said.

"A man's luck can change in the course of a day. Who can foretell what will happen?" Zhou Yu lamented.

"Yes, just as the weather can change when least expected. You can never tell," Zhuge Liang said with a smile.

Hmm, funny Zhuge Liang should put it that way. When he heard those words, Zhou Yu's face lost its color and he moaned.

"Commander, do you feel vexation gathering inside you?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"Yes."

"You must take a cooling tonic for it."

"I have already taken it, but it did nothing."

"You must first regulate your vital ethers," Zhuge Liang said. "When the vital ethers are flowing smoothly and in the right direction, then your health will naturally be restored in a matter of moments."

Hmm ... flowing in the right direction, eh? Zhou Yu was beginning to get the sense that Zhuge Liang knew what was eating at him, so he tried to steer the conversation that way.

"What medicine would you recommend to get the vital ethers flowing in the proper direction?"

"I have a prescription that will take care of it," Zhuge Liang said with a smile.

“Please do tell.”

Zhuge Liang asked for brush and paper and dismissed everyone else. He then wrote 16 words for Zhou Yu’s eyes only. He then handed it to Zhou Yu and said, “This is the cause of your illness.”

Zhou Yu took a look and was astonished. The paper read:

To break Cao Cao,

With fire we attack.

All is ready, save

Southeast wind we lack!

So do you remember what Cao Cao had said in the last episode about a fire attack? This was the height of winter, and all the winds that were blowing across the river were coming from the northwest. If Zhou Yu tried to start a fire in these conditions, the flames would turn back on his own fleet instead, turning all his carefully laid plans into a disaster.

“Zhuge Liang is incredible indeed!” Zhou Yu thought to himself with amazement. “He already knew what’s on my mind. I might as well come clean.”

So he smiled and said, “Sir, since you already know the cause of my illness, what is your prescription? The situation is urgent. I pray you will enlighten me.”

“Although I am untalented,” Zhuge Liang replied, “I once met an extraordinary man who passed on to me occult texts for reading the numerology of the heavens. This method can be used to summon wind and rain. When you wish to have southeastern wind, build an altar on the Southern Screen Hills and call it the Altar of the Seven Stars. It should be nine spans tall, with three levels. Have

120 men carry flags and surround the altar. I shall ascend the altar and invoke magic to borrow a strong southeastern wind for three days and three nights to help you. How does that sound?"

"Even just one night of strong southeastern winds would be enough for victory, much less three days and three nights!" Zhou Yu said. "But we must act now; there's no time for delay."

"On 20th day of the 11th month, we will supplicate the wind, and have it blow until the 22nd day. Is that enough?" Zhuge Liang asked.

A delighted Zhou Yu sprang to his feet and immediately dispatched 500 crack troops to the Southern Screen Hills to build the altar. He sent another 120 men to hold flags, surround the altar and to do as Zhuge Liang instructed.

Zhuce Liang took his leave and headed to the Southern Screen Hills with Lu Su to oversee the operation. He was very particular about the construction. The altar had to be built with red earth from the southeast. The circumference of the altar was to be 181 feet. Each of the three tiers was to be 2.25 feet tall, making it 6.84 feet tall total.

On the bottom tier, he erected 28 flags -- 7 in each direction -- representing the 28 lunar mansions of the zodiac. On the second tier, he erected 64 yellow flags, one for each hexagram in the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*. So this book has its origins in a text of divination, and the divination is based on these 64 hexagrams, each of which is made up of six lines. So basically, Zhuge Liang's setup here is drawing on some highly spiritual and supernatural sources.

On the top tier of the altar, Zhuge Liang stationed four men, all of whom bound their hair tightly and wore caps; thin, black, silk robes; wide sashes that represented the phoenix; vermilion shoes; and squared kilts. At the front left, one man held up a long pole that was topped with chicken feathers to show which way the wind was blowing. At the front right stood one man holding a pole topped with

the banner of the Seven Stars, also to show the direction of the wind. The guy in the left rear held a fine sword, while his counterpart in the right rear held an incense burner.

On the ground level, 24 people surrounded the platform, each holding emblomed flags, ceremonial canopies, large halberds, long dagger-axes, ritual gold battle-axes, white yak-tail banners, vermilion pennants, or black standards.

With everything in place, on the 20th day of November, which was an auspicious day, Zhuge Liang bathed and performed the required rituals, put on a daoist robe, let his hair down, and walked barefoot to the altar. There, he told Lu Su, "You should go back to camp to help Commander Zhou deploy his troops. If my prayers do not work, please do not hold it against me."

Once Lu Su left, Zhuge Liang instructed the guards at the altar, "Do not leave your station without orders. Do not chatter amongst yourselves. Do not speak nonsense. Do not react wildly. Anyone who disobeys these orders shall be executed!"

Everyone snapped to, and Zhuge Liang slowly ascended the altar. He lit incense and poured water into a vessel. He then looked up to the heavens and uttered a silent incantation. After that, he descended the altar and went to his tent for a brief rest, while ordering the guards to take breaks and eat in shifts.

In this way, three times during the day he ascended the altar, and three times he descended. Still, there was not a trace of southeastern wind.

Meanwhile, back in the Dongwu camp, Zhou Yu had summoned his officers to his tent, and they were just waiting for a southeastern wind to deploy their troops. At the same time, he sent word to Sun Quan, asking him to prepare his army to provide backup.

The general Huang Gai, the one who was pretending to defect to Cao Cao, prepared 20 boats. At the front of the boats, they mounted large nails so that once they rammed into the enemy ships, they would be stuck there. The boats were packed with reeds and kindling soaked in fish oil and other miscellaneous stuff that would ensure a fiery display. They then covered up the top of the boats and put blue flags at the front, which was the agreed-upon signal to Cao Cao that this was the defecting fleet. Everything was ready and just waiting for Zhou Yu to give the word.

Tying up other loose ends, the general Gan (1) Ning (2) and the adviser Kan (4) Ze (2), the two other guys who were pretending to defect to Cao Cao, kept the two fake defectors FROM Cao Cao -- Cai (4) He (2) and Cai (4) Zhong (1) -- within their naval camp, drinking with them every day. Not a single one of the soldiers that those two had brought with them to the Southlands were allowed on shore. All around them were Dongwu troops, packed so tightly that not even water could leak through -- in a metaphorical sense anyway. They were also just waiting for Zhou Yu to give the word.

Zhou Yu soon got word that Sun Quan's fleet was anchored 20-some miles away, waiting for his good news. So Zhou Yu told Lu Su to send out word for all the troops to get ready to move out as soon as the order goes out. When the troops heard this, everyone was rubbing their hands in anticipation for the coming battle.

There was just one snag, though. As evening descended, the sky was still clear, and there was not even the slightest breeze. Sooooo, where's that southeastern wind I was promised, Zhou Yu was starting to wonder.

"Zhuge Liang's claims are absurd!" a restless Zhou Yu said to Lu Su. "It's the dead of winter. How can there be southeastern winds?"

"I don't think Zhuge Liang would tease us," Lu Su said.

And so they waited, and waited, and waited. As 9 o'clock approached, they suddenly heard the sounds of blowing wind and fluttering flags. Zhou Yu stepped outside and saw his banners flying toward the northwest. Moments later, a strong southeastern wind kicked up. So THERE is your wind, as promised. Or, in the words of a later poet:

Sleeping Dragon stood on Seven Star Altar,  
As all night southeastern winds roiled the river.  
Had he not devised his brilliant strategy,  
How could Zhou Yu show off his abilities?

At that moment, however, thanking Zhuge Liang was the last thing on Zhou Yu's mind.

"Zhuge Liang has the ability to bend heaven, earth, and the spirits to his will!" Zhou Yu said with much consternation. "If we allow him to live, he would surely be trouble for Dongwu. I must kill him sooner than later, so as to avoid future headaches."

So he immediately summoned two of his commanders, Ding (1) Feng (4) and Xu (2) Sheng (4).

"Each of you, take 100 men and head to the Seven Stars Altar at the Southern Screen Hills," he told the two officers. "Xu (2) Sheng (4), you go by water. Ding (1) Feng (4), you go by land. When you get there, catch Zhuge Liang and kill him at once, no questions asked. Bring his head to me for your reward."

The two officers immediately set out, with Xu Sheng taking 100 armed soldiers on boats while Ding Feng led 100 archers on horse back. Ding Feng and his riders arrived at the altar first. They saw that all the guards were standing at their station. Ding Feng stormed up the altar with sword in hand, but there was no sign of Zhuge Liang.

When Ding Feng asked the guards, they told him that Zhuge Liang had just descended the altar. So he hurriedly went back down to look for Zhuge Liang. By this time, Xu Sheng had arrived by boat as well. The two officers met on the bank of the river, where a foot soldier told them, "Last night, a fast boat was docked on the beach up ahead. Just now, I saw Zhuge Liang get on the boat, and it took off."

So Ding Feng and Xu Sheng gave chase on land and water. Xu Sheng instructed his men to run full mast so as to use the winds to gain ground. They soon spotted a small boat not too far ahead.

"Master Zhuge! Please wait! Commander Zhou would like to see you!" Ding Feng shouted from the front of his boat.

But yeah, I don't think so. Laughing from the rear of his boat, Zhuge Liang replied, "Please tell Commander Zhou to deploy his troops wisely. I am returning to Xiakou (4,3) for a little while. We will meet again another day."

"Please wait!" Xu Sheng shouted. "I have something important to say!"

"I expected that Commander Zhou would not be able to tolerate me and would try to do me harm," Zhuge Liang said. "So I instructed Zhao Yun to come pick me up. Please, you can stop chasing me."

Well, Xu Sheng was not about to heed this advice, especially when he noticed Zhuge Liang's boat had no sail. He pressed his own boat forward, but as he drew closer, he saw the general Zhao Yun standing at the rear of Zhuge Liang's boat with bow and arrow in hand.

"I am Zhao Yun of Changshan (2,1)," he shouted. "I have come to pick up our military strategist as instructed. Why are you chasing us? I should kill you with one shot, but then that would hurt our alliance. Instead, I will just give you a taste of my skills!"

Zhao Yun's arrow arrived just as he finished speaking, and it cut the strings holding up Xu Sheng's sail. As the sail plopped into the water, Xu Sheng's boat veered sideways. Now, Zhao Yun instructed

his men to unfurl their own sail, and their boat sped off with the wind at its back. There was no way for the Dongwu forces to catch up.

Thus thwarted, Ding Feng met Xu Sheng on shore and said to him, “Zhuge Liang’s cunning is unparalleled, and that Zhao Yun is the equal of 10,000 men. Have you heard of his exploits against Cao Cao’s army at Dangyang (1,2) and Changban (2,3)? Let’s just report back.”

So the two went back to see Zhou Yu and told him what happened, which only made Zhou Yu even more alarmed.

“That man is so crafty, I will not be able to rest easy at night!” he said.

Lu Su, however, told Zhou Yu to focus on the more immediate issue -- attacking Cao Cao. Zhou Yu agreed and summoned his officers. First, he gave the general Gan Ning these instructions:

“Take the fake defector Cai Zhong and his soldiers and set out along the south shore under Cao Cao’s banners. Head straight to Wulin (1,2), where Cao Cao’s grains are stored. Penetrate his forces and start a fire as a signal. But leave the other fake defector, Cai He, here. I will have a use for him.”

Next, Zhou Yu summoned Taishi (4,3) Ci (2), another of his top generals, and told him,

“Take 3,000 soldiers and head toward the border of Huangzhou (2,1). If Cao Cao’s troops from Hefei (2,2) try to come reinforce him, attack them immediately and start a fire as a signal. When you see troops under red banners, that would be our lord coming to back you up.”

Those two detachments had the farthest to go, so Zhou Yu sent them off first. Next, he told the general Lü (3) Meng (2) to lead 3,000 men to back up Gan Ning on his raid of Cao Cao’s supply depot. Another 3,000 men, under the command of the general Ling (2) Tong (3), were to cut off any traffic coming from Yiling (2,2) and then, when they see fire coming from Cao Cao’s supply depot, they were to head that way to provide even more reinforcements.



Zhou Yu next told the officer Dong (3) Xi (2) to lead 3,000 men and go to Hanyang (4,2), where he was to launch an attack on Cao Cao's camp. The officer Pan (1) Zhang (1) and his own 3,000 men were ordered to provide backup.

With those six detachments deployed, Zhou Yu asked the general Huang (2) Gai (4) to get his fire boats ready and send a soldier to Cao Cao with a note saying that he was defecting that very night. Zhou Yu then put four warships behind Huang Gai's fleet. These four ships were each commanded by a general -- Han (2) Dang (1), Zhou (1) Tai (4), Jiang (3) Qin (1), and Chen (2) Wu (3). And behind each of the four warships followed 300 smaller boats.

With everything set, Zhou Yu stationed himself on a large warship to oversee the operation with his second-in-command Cheng (2) Pu (3), who was thoroughly impressed by all these deployments. Xu Sheng and Ding Feng provided protection for them on the ship. Lu Su, Kan Ze, and the rest of the advisers remained behind to guard the camp. And at this time, word arrived that Sun Quan had dispatched his vanguard under the command of an officer named Lu (4) Xun (4), with Sun Quan himself leading more troops as backup. Zhou Yu also dispatched people to the western hills to set off explosives and to erect banners on the Southern Screen Hills as signals.

All these deployments took the better part of the day, and now, everything was set, and Zhou Yu was just waiting for dusk to make his move.

Zhou Yu was not the only one moving troops around that day. At another part of the river, at the city of Xiakou (4,3), Liu Bei was eagerly awaiting Zhuge Liang's return. He was soon joined by his nephew Liu Qi, who came from Jiangxia (1,4) to see what's going on. Liu Bei welcomed him and told him, "The southeastern wind has been blowing for quite a while. Zhao Yun went to pick up Zhuge Liang, but they are still not back yet. I am getting worried."

Just then, one of the soldiers pointed toward the water and directed their attention to a boat that was sailing into view.

Liu Bei and Liu Qi hurriedly went to greet the oncoming boat. Once it docked, Zhuge Liang and Zhao Yun disembarked, and Liu Bei was delighted. But there was no time for catching up.

“Let us put everything else aside for now,” Zhuge Liang said. “I had previously asked you to prepare your troops and warships. Are they ready?”

“They were ready long ago,” Liu Bei said. “They are at your disposal.”

So Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei, and Liu Qi went to their tent and summoned their staff. First, Zhuge Liang told Zhao Yun, “You may take 3,000 men, cross the river, and go to the backroad near Wulin (1,2). Pick a densely wooded area to lie in wait. Tonight, after 1 a.m., Cao Cao will definitely be coming down that path. When half of his army has passed, start a fire and attack. Even if you don’t kill them all, you would take out half.”

“There are two roads around Wulin (1,2),” Zhao Yun said. “One connects to the city of Nanjun (2,4), while the other goes to Jing (1) Province. Which path should I ambush?”

“Nanjun will be in danger, so Cao Cao will not dare to go that way,” Zhuge Liang said, “He will therefore head toward Jing Province, and from there, move his army back to his capital Xuchang.”

So Zhao Yun accepted his order and went off. Zhuge Liang then summoned Zhang Fei.

“General Zhang, you may also take 3,000 troops and cross the river. Go cut off the path leading to Yiling (1,2). Lay down an ambush at the mouth of the Hulu (2,2) Canyon. Cao Cao will not dare to head toward the southern part of Yiling (1,2), so he will no doubt head north. Tomorrow, after it rains, his troops will start making a meal. When you see smoke, start a fire on the side of the hill and attack. Even if you do not capture Cao Cao, you would render great service.”

Zhang Fei accepted his orders and left. Zhuge Liang then told Mi (2) Zhu (2), Mi (2) Fang (1), and Liu (2) Feng (1) to patrol the bank of the river on boats to capture Cao Cao's defeated soldiers and seize weapons.

Zhuce Liang then said to Liu Qi, "The area in sight of Wuchang (3,1) is of the utmost importance. You should return to your post, lead your troops, and guard the banks of the river. When Cao Cao is defeated, some of his men will no doubt flee there. When they come to you, capture them. But do not venture from your city lightly."

After Liu Qi took his leave, Zhuge Liang said to Liu Bei, "My lord, you may garrison your troops at Fankou (2,3). Let's find a high vantage point to sit down and watch Zhou Yu win a great victory tonight."

So, that takes care of everybody, right? Well, not quite. So Zhuge Liang had handed out orders to every one of Liu Bei's officers except perhaps the most obvious one. Guan Yu -- who had helped his brothers outslug the mighty Lü Bu on the battlefield, who had slayed the noted warriors Yan Liang and Wen Chou, who had stormed five check points and killed six officers on his way to find Liu Bei, -- he had been standing there this whole time, waiting for his name to be called. Yet, Zhuge Liang paid him no attention at all. Finally, Guan Yu could not take it anymore, and he spoke up loudly.

"In all the years that I have followed my brother into battle, I have never lagged behind. Today, we are facing a great foe, and yet you, Master Zhuge, have not given me an assignment. What is the meaning of this?!"

"General Guan, please do not take it the wrong way," Zhuge Liang said with a smile. "I was going to task you with watching a most important location, but ... I have some reservations, so I dare not ask you to go."

Well, this was just too mysterious and tantalizing for Guan Yu to just leave it.

“What reservations? Please tell me!”

“In the past, Cao Cao treated you kindly, so you must be obliged to repay him,” Zhuge Liang said.

“Today, after he is defeated, Cao Cao will no doubt flee toward Huarong (2,2) Trail. But if I send you there, you would surely let him go, so I dare not task you with that mission.”

“Master Zhuge, you are worrying over nothing!” Guan Yu said. “Yes, Cao Cao did indeed treat me very well, but I already repaid him by slaying Yan (2) Liang (2) and Wen (2) Chou (3) and relieving Yuan Shao’s siege on the city of Baima (2,3). If I see him today, how can I be willing to let him go?”

“But what if you did?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“Then I am willing to be punished according to military law.”

“In that case, please write a pledge.”

So Guan Yu wrote a pledge on the spot, declaring that he would not allow Cao Cao to escape. But he also had some questions for Zhuge Liang.

“What if Cao Cao does not come my way?”

“Well, I will also write a pledge, guaranteeing that he will,” Zhuge Liang said.

This made Guan Yu pretty happy, since this means he might get a chance to gloat over Zhuge Liang. Zhuge Liang, meanwhile, had further instructions for him.

“At Huarong Trail, you should find a spot along the backroads in the high hills and set up a fire and use the smoke to lure Cao Cao to you.”

Wait, what? Make some smoke to ... lure Cao Cao ... toward the smoke?

“If Cao Cao sees the smoke, he would know there’s an ambush. Why would he come?” Guan Yu asked.

“[Laugh] Have you not heard of the military principle of ‘letting weak points look weak and strong points look strong?’ ” Zhuge Liang said with a smile. “Cao Cao is adept at war, so only this trick will

make him bite. When he sees smoke, he will think we are putting on appearances, so he will pick that path. When that time comes, do not show any mercy.”

So Guan Yu led his son Guan Ping (2) and his ever loyal follower Zhou (1) Cang, as well as his 500 skilled swordsmen, and set off. After he left, Liu Bei expressed some concerns about the assignment.

“My brother is a man of great honor,” he said to Zhuge Liang. “If Cao Cao really does go to Huarong Trail, I worry my brother would let him go.”

“I have been studying the stars,” Zhuge Liang said. “It is not yet time for Cao Cao to die. So we might as well let him live at the hands of General Guan. It would be rather a nice touch, after all.”

“Sir, your foresight is unrivaled!” Liu Bei said with admiration. He then accompanied Zhuge Liang to Fankou (2,3) to watch Zhou Yu do his thing.

We have covered what the forces of Dongwu and Liu Bei were up to. So let’s check in with Cao Cao. That day, he was meeting with his officers and waiting on word from Huang Gai on when he was defecting. Suddenly, southeastern winds kicked up, and one of his advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), went to see him to advise caution. But Cao Cao did not seem to be too concerned.

“The yin (1) phase of winter is ending, and the yang (2) cycle is beginning,” he said with a smile. “At this time of the year, it is only natural for there to be some southeastern winds. It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

Just then, his men reported that someone had come from the south shore with a secret message from Huang Gai. Cao Cao summoned the messenger immediately. The letter said,

“Zhou Yu keeps me under tight surveillance, so I have not been able to find a way to escape. But today we have a new shipment of provisions from Poyang (2,2) Lake, and Zhou Yu has put me on

patrol. This is my opportunity. No matter what, I will kill some high-ranking Dongwu officers and bring their heads to you. Tonight at 9 o'clock, when you see boats with blue flags at the front, those will be my boats with the provisions."

Cao Cao was delighted when he read this message. So he and his officer corps boarded his flagship in the naval camp to watch for Huang Gai's boats.

Alright, so all the pieces are in place for the most pivotal clash in the novel and one of the most famous battles in Chinese history and lore. To see how this showdown will unfold, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.