

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 61.

Last time, we set the board for the coming Battle of Chibi (4,4), or Red Cliff. Zhou Yu had planned a fire attack. Pang (2) Tong (3), aka Master Young Phoenix, had talked Cao Cao into tying his ships together in the name of stability, but that also ensured they won't be able to just sail away from the fire. The general Huang Gai was to head to Cao Cao's camp under the pretension of defection and start the fire. Zhuge Liang had summoned the southeastern winds to make sure the fire moves in the right direction, and both the forces of Dongwu and Liu Bei were set up to cut off any reinforcements for Cao Cao on land while taking bites out of his troops once he's on the run.

So everything looked good on paper. And now, it was time to actually execute the plan. Let's start in Zhou Yu's camp on the south bank of the river. As evening descended, Zhou Yu summoned Cai (4) He (2), one of the fake defectors that Cao Cao had sent to serve as spies. Zhou Yu ordered the guards to tie him up. Cai He protested and claimed innocence, but Zhou Yu scoffed.

"Who do you think you are? How dare you pretend to defect to me? I am missing an appropriate sacrifice for my banner, so I am borrowing your head."

Knowing that the jig is up, Cai He decided that if he was going down, he was going to take everyone down with him.

"Two of your own people, Kan (4) Ze (2) and Gan (1) Ning (2), were my accomplices!" he shouted.

Well, the joke was on him, as Zhou Yu revealed that those two guys were just leading him on. Cai He had nothing but regret at this point, and Zhou Yu ordered the executioners to drag him to the foot of the banner on the bank of the river. There, Zhou Yu poured wine and burned paper money as a sacrifice, and then his executioners lopped off Cai He's head and they offered his blood to the banner to ensure good fortune in the coming battle.

This gory business done, Zhou Yu sent out the word, and his ships moved out according to plan.

At the front of the fleet were Huang Gai's 20 boats filled with fire-starting material. Huang Gai himself stood on the third boat, wearing a chestplate and carrying a sharp knife. His banner was adorned with the giant words "Vanguard General Huang Gai".

With the wind at his back, Huang Gai set sail toward Red Cliff. The wind was raging, and the waves surged. On the other side of the river, Cao Cao peered out over the river from the center of his navy. The reflection of the rising moon flickered across the water, turning the river into myriad golden serpents rolling and sporting amidst the waves. As the wind blew in his face, Cao Cao laughed loudly in anticipation of his coming victory.

Suddenly, one of the soldiers pointed and said, "I see a fleet coming into view from the south, with the wind at its back."

Cao Cao sent scouts to take a look from a high vantage point, and they reported back that they boats carried blue flags, including a big one that bore Huang Gai's name. At this, Cao Cao laughed again.

"General Huang's defection is a sign that heaven is on my side!" he said.

As the oncoming boats drew closer, one of Cao Cao's advisers, Cheng (2) Yu (4), the guy who had been advising caution all along and getting ignored, kept a close watch. Suddenly, he said to Cao Cao, "Something is not right about these boats. Do not let them get any closer to our camp!"

"Why do you say that?" Cao Cao asked.

"If the boats are indeed carrying grains as Huang Gai said, then they would be weighed down. But these boats are floating lightly over the water. Also, the southeastern winds have been strong tonight. If there's deception afoot, what shall we do?"

At that moment, Cao Cao went “Oh crap!” and asked his officers who would go stop the oncoming boats. Wen (2) Pin (4), one of the former Jing (1) Province generals who recently surrendered to Cao Cao, volunteered. He jumped into a small boat and, with a wave of his hand, ordered a dozen or so patrol boats to accompany him. They rowed out of the naval camp to meet the oncoming fleet. Wen Pin, standing at the front of his boat, yelled, “The prime minister orders the boats from the south to stop where you are! Do not come any closer to our camp!” His men then shouted for Huang Gai’s boats to drop their sails.

But yeah, that ... umm .. ship has sailed. Before Wen Pin had finished speaking, a bowstring twanged, and an arrow pierced his left arm, knocking him back into his boat. That threw his men into a panic, and they turned around and fled back toward their camp.

Meanwhile, Huang Gai’s boats were now less than a mile from Cao Cao’s camp. Huang Gai pointed with his knife, and the boats in front were set on fire. With lots of help from the roaring winds, the flames quickly raged toward the heavens as the boats flew like arrows toward Cao Cao’s camp, sending smoke streaming toward the heavens.

The 20 fire boats crashed into Cao Cao’s naval camp. Remember that these boats were equipped with giant nails at the front, so once they rammed into Cao Cao’s ships, they weren’t going anywhere. And Cao Cao’s ships, of course, weren’t going anywhere either, since he had tied them all together.

And now, you could hear the sound of explosives going off from across the river. At that signal, more fire boats arrived, and the surface of the river was turned red by the flames that seemed to rise to the heaven and pass through the earth.

Standing on his flagship, Cao Cao turned and looked back toward his camp on land and saw that, uh oh, there were fire starting up there, too. And now, Huang Gai hopped onto a small boat rowed by

a few soldiers and came looking for Cao Cao amid the smoke and fire. Seeing that he was in dire straits, Cao Cao was ready to jump onto land, but that would have been a miraculous leap because he was quite a ways from shore.

Just then, though, one of his generals, Zhang Liao, arrived on the scene aboard a small boat. No sooner had he helped Cao Cao onto the boat did Cao Cao's flagship catch on fire. Protected by Zhang Liao and about a dozen soldiers, Cao Cao fled toward the bank of the river.

From a distance, though, Huang Gai spotted someone wearing a red cloak getting into a boat and figured that this had to be Cao Cao. So he ordered his boat to catch up. Wielding his blade, Huang Gai shouted, "Cao Cao, you traitor! Do not try to escape! Huang Gai is here!"

When he heard this, Cao Cao was going, "Oh crap, oh crap!" But Zhang Liao wasn't about to just throw up his hands. Instead, when Huang Gai got near, Zhang Liao fired an arrow toward him. With the wind howling and surrounded by utter chaos, there was no way Huang Gai could hear the twang of the bow. The arrow struck him in the armpit, and he tumbled into the water.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Cao Cao and Zhang Liao managed to reach the bank of the river, where they found some horses and rode away while their army fell into complete disarray.

While this was happening, one of the commanders of the four large warships in the Dongwu fleet, Han (2) Dang (1), got word that somebody was calling out his name from behind his ship. He listened closely, and it turned out to be Huang Gai, calling out to him for help. As it turned out, Huang Gai was an adept swimmer, so even though he took an arrow in the armpit and fell into the river with his armor on, he was still able to stay afloat.

Han Dang quickly had his men pull Huang Gai out of the water. He bit off the stem of the arrow, but the arrowhead remained lodged in Huang Gai's flesh. So Han Dang helped him take off his wet clothes and use the tip of his knife to pry out the arrowhead and then bound his wound with a piece

of a flag. Han Dang then gave Huang Gai his own cloak to keep him warm and then sent him back to headquarters on a boat for real medical care.

This done, Han Dang rejoined the attack, which was now in full swing. The river was covered in fire and the earth trembled with the roar of soldiers. On the left wing, Han Dang and Jiang (3) Qin (1) attacked from the west side of the Red Cliffs. On the right wing, the generals Zhou (1) Tai (4) and Chen (2) Wu (3) charged in from the eastern side of the Red Cliffs. In the center, Zhou Yu, accompanied by the officers Cheng Pu, Xu Sheng, and Ding Feng, led the main fleet. Whatever was not consumed by the fire, the soldiers took care of. Countless of Cao Cao's troops were pierced by spears, felled by arrows, burned by fires or drowned in the river.

A poet later commemorated this battle thus:

The Wei (4) and Wu (2) waged war to rule the roost;
The North's ships at Red Cliff to smoke were reduced.
Spreading flames illuminated cloud and sea:
Cao Cao went down; t'was Zhou Yu's victory.

A battle this epic should get an extra poem, so here's one more:

High hills, a tiny moon, waters vague and vast --
Look back and grieve at the haste to carve the land!
The Southland had no wish for Cao Cao's imperium;
And the wind had a mind to aid Zhou Yu's command.

While chaos was breaking out all over the water, chaos was also breaking out on land. Dongwu's general Gan Ning was sent to raid Cao Cao's supply depot at Wulin (1,2). For this mission, he took with him Cai Zhong, the other fake defector that Cao Cao had sent, and they marched under Cao Cao's banner. Once his troops were deep into Cao Cao's camp, Gan Ning quickly cut down Cai Zhong and set the enemy's provisions on fire.

That was the signal for reinforcements led by the general Lü (3) Meng (2) to swoop in, and these guys started more than a dozen fires themselves. Two other detachments, led by Pan (1) Zhang (1) and Dong (3) Xi (2), set more fires and made lots and lots of ruckus.

While this was going on, Cao Cao, Zhang Liao, and about 100 riders were stumbling around inside the woods, surrounded by fire in every direction. As they were looking for a way out, they were joined by a dozen or so men led by one of his naval commanders, Mao (2) Jie (4), who had rescued Wen (2) Pin (4), the guy who went out to tell the fire boats to stop and was answered with an arrow in the arm.

Cao Cao ordered his men to find a way out of this mess. Zhang Liao pointed and said, "Only the path toward Wulin is clear." So Cao Cao and company headed toward Wulin. But soon enough, a squad of Dongwu's troops caught up to them from behind, shouting for Cao Cao to stop. Amid the flames, Cao Cao could see the banner of the Dongwu general Lü Meng. Cao Cao kept on running and told Zhang Liao to bring up the rear and fend off Lü Meng.

Just then, torches lit up in front of them, and another squad of soldiers stormed out from a canyon. The general at their head was the Dongwu officer Ling (2) Tong (3). With enemies in front and behind him, Cao Cao was scared out of his wits.

Much to his relief, a squad of his own troops arrived on the scene just then, and someone shouted, "Your excellency, have no fear! Xu Huang is here!" Xu Huang, one of Cao Cao's top generals,

scrummed with the enemy long enough to help Cao Cao fight his way past the enemy and keep fleeing north.

They soon came upon a squad of soldiers stationed in front of a hill. Xu Huang went to ask who they were, and it turned that these soldiers were on their side. They were a detachment of 3,000 men led by two officers who used to serve Yuan Shao but later surrendered to Cao Cao. They had been stationed here, and that night, they had noticed flames shooting toward the heavens and did not dare to move out.

This was a blessing for Cao Cao since he now had something resembling an army with him. He ordered the two officers and 2,000 men to lead the way, while the rest stayed with Cao Cao to provide protection and a little bit of peace of mind.

That peace of mind, however, did not last long. Within three miles, the vanguard was greeted by an squad of Dongwu troops led by the general Gan Ning. The two officers leading the vanguard went up to fight him, but you can probably guess their fates from the fact that I haven't bothered to tell you their names. Within a couple bouts, both were dead by Gan Ning's blade.

When word of this reached Cao Cao in the rear of the column, he was pinning his hopes on reinforcements from his forces at Hefei (2,2). But of course, Zhou Yu had taken care of that, too. Troops led by Sun Quan himself were cutting off that path. When they saw fire on the river, they knew that their navy had triumphed, so they joined forces with a detachment of troops that Zhou Yu had sent, and they charged toward Cao Cao and his men.

Cao Cao now had no choice but to flee toward Yiling (1,2). Along the way, he ran into one of his better officers, Zhang He (2). Cao Cao told him to bring up the rear so as to slow down the enemy pursuit. Cao Cao himself spurred on his horse and continued to flee.

Around 3 a.m., the light of fires had gradually fallen into the distance, and Cao Cao began to feel easier. As they traveled, he asked his men where they were. Someone told him that they were west of Wulin (1,2) and north of Yidu (2,1).

As he surveyed the surroundings, Cao Cao noticed how thick the woods were and how treacherous the surrounding hills looked. Suddenly, from atop his horse, he looked up and started laughing out loud uncontrollably. His officers were like, dude, what are you doing?

“Why are you laughing, your excellency?” they asked.

“I am laughing at none other than the witless Zhou Yu and the shallowness of Zhuge Liang,” Cao Cao said. “If it was me, I would lay down an ambush right here. What do you think would happen then?”

Well, the answer arrived right then and there. The last word had barely left Cao Cao’s lips when the sound of drums rose from all around and the night sky was lit up by fire. Cao Cao was so startled that he almost fell off his horse. From the thickets a squad of troops darted out, and the general at their head shouted, “I am Zhao Yun! On Master Zhuge’s instructions, I have been waiting for you here!”

Well, this is not good. Fortunately for Cao Cao, he had some useful guys with him. He sent Xu Huang and Zhang He to doubleteam Zhao Yun while he fled through the smoke and fire. After a while, Xu Huang and Zhang He also tucked tail and ran. As Zhuge Liang instructed, Zhao Yun did not give chase. Instead, he ordered his men to pick off enemy soldiers and capture their banners. So Cao Cao managed to slip away.

Cao Cao and what was left of his entourage journeyed on. The darkness was starting to lift just a bit, but the sky was still covered with black clouds, and the southeastern winds kept blowing nonstop.

Suddenly, a torrential downpour began, soaking everyone's clothes. Cao Cao and his men pressed on amidst the rain. His men were showing signs of hunger, so Cao Cao ordered them to raid a nearby village for food. They were just about to set up a fire and start cooking when a squad of men caught up to them from behind. Cao Cao was momentarily alarmed, but this turned out to be his own guys. The generals Li Dian and Xu Chu were escorting his phalanx of advisers. Cao Cao was very glad to see the brainpower behind his operation safe, and he ordered his army to stop for a while.

"What lies ahead of us?" he asked.

One of his men told him that there was a fork in the road, with one path being the main road that led to south Yiling (1,2), while the other road was a mountain path going to north Yiling.

"Which destination is closer?" Cao Cao asked.

His men said that the most convenient path was the road leading to north Yiling, passing through the mouth of the Hulu Canyon. So Cao Cao told them to head that way. By the time they arrived at the mouth of the canyon, his men were starving and could not keep going. Even their horses were exhausted. A lot of guys were just collapsing on the side of the road.

Seeing his men's sorry state, Cao Cao ordered them to pause for a breather. Amazingly, even as they were fleeing for their lives, somebody remembered to bring a pot along, and of course they had the grain that they looted from a village a while back. So they set up the pot on the side of a hill to cook rice. They also slaughtered a horse and roasted its flesh. Everyone took off their rain-soaked clothes and set them out to dry in the wind, while the horses were relieved of their saddles and allowed to graze on what little grass there was to be found.

This was pretty sorry sight, and yet, as Cao Cao sat under a tree, he looked up and laughed out loud, which once again prompted questions from his staff.

"Your excellency, the last time you laughed at Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang, it brought Zhao Yun down on us and we lost a lot of men. Why are you laughing now?"

“I am still laughing at Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang,” Cao Cao said. “They are, in the end, not smart enough. If it were me, I would set an ambush here, too, to wait for the exhausted enemy. If they had done that, even if we escaped with our lives, we would take heavy losses. Yet, they failed to see this. That’s why I’m laughing.”

Well, he was asking for it. Just as he was speaking, cries rose up from the front and rear of his column. Cao Cao panicked. He did not even bother putting his armor back on and just hopped on his horse. His men, meanwhile, had no time to retrieve most of their horses. By now, fire and smoke were rising up everywhere, and at the mouth of the canyon, a squad of troops spread out. At their head was none other than Zhang Fei. With spear in hand, he shouted, “Cao Cao, you scoundrel! Where will you go now?!”

Remember that Zhang Fei was the guy who singlehandedly turned back Cao Cao’s army with the sound of his voice a few episodes back. So when Cao Cao’s men saw him now, they were all scared out of their wits. The general Xu Chu, riding a horse that he did not even have time to saddle, came forward to engage Zhang Fei. Zhang Liao and Xu Huang also came to help. As the two sides scrummed, Cao Cao whipped his horse and fled, and his officers all followed suit. Zhang Fei gave chase for a while before calling it a day. Cao Cao and his officers managed to escape, but they lost more troops, and many of his generals were now wounded.

As this ragtag group pressed on, the soldiers in front reported that they were coming up on another fork in the road and asked which way they should go.

“Which way is closer?” Cao Cao asked.

“The main road is smoother, but about 15 to 20 miles longer,” his soldiers replied. “The backroad heads through Huarong Pass. It’s shorter, but the terrain is treacherous.”

Cao Cao then sent someone up to the top of a hill to scout out both paths. They reported back that they saw smoke at various spots along the backroad, while the main road showed no sign of activity. Cao Cao then ordered his men to take the backroad toward Huarong Pass.

“But where there’s smoke, there must be troops,” his general Xu Chu asked. “Why are we taking that path?”

“Have you not heard of the military principle that ‘What looks fake is real, and what looks real is fake?’ Zhuge Liang is crafty. He must have set up the smoke on the backroad to deter us from taking that path, while he sets an ambush on the main road. But I have seen through his scheme!”

At that, everyone told Cao Cao how smart he was, and then they set off toward Huarong Pass. So yeah, this ought to be good.

But just getting to Huarong Pass was a challenge. Cao Cao’s men and horses were by now running on fumes, not to mention the fact that many of them were bearing burns and wounds from the previous night’s battle. On top of that, they had been drenched by rain. Everyone looked like a total mess, and their weapons and banners were equally pitiful. And thanks to their run-in with Zhang Fei while they were taking a break, most of the officers were riding horses without saddles. Oh, and to top it all off, it was still the dead of winter, so the air was frigid. This was a pitiful caravan indeed.

After a while, the front of the column stopped, and Cao Cao demanded to know why. Word came from the front that the path up ahead was impassable because the morning rain and left pools of water that turned the path into mud, and the horses’ hooves were sinking into this sludge. Cao Cao, however, was unsympathetic.

“When an army encounters a mountain, it cuts a path; when it comes across a body of water, it builds a bridge! How can we just stop moving forward?!” he said angrily. He then sent out word that all the old, weak, and wounded soldiers were to travel in the back of the column, while the stronger

ones were to collect wood and grass to build a makeshift road over the mud. Anyone who did not snap to right away would be executed immediately.

So everybody had no choice but to dismount and go foraging for branches and such. To make things even worse, Cao Cao, fearing that enemy troops might be in pursuit, ordered Zhang Liao, Xu Chu, and Xu Huang to lead 100 riders armed with swords. Their job was to kill any and all stragglers.

And of course, there were plenty of stragglers because his soldiers were tired and starving. Many just fell over on the path. Did Cao Cao have them dragged out of the way? Of course not. Instead, he ordered his men and horses to just trample their fallen comrades as they pressed ahead. Countless soldiers died this way, and the cries of the dying and living alike were nonstop.

This, of course, also ticked off Cao Cao.

“Life and death are determined by fate; what’s the use of crying about it?!” he said angrily. “If anyone dares to cry anymore, kill them!”

Ok, so crying is out, too. This trek along the backroad took a heavy toll on Cao Cao’s men. A third of them fell behind, while a third died on the way. The remaining, and I guess you can more fortunate, third managed to accompany him through the treacherous mountains, after which the path became a little smoother.

When Cao Cao looked back, he only had 300-some riders with him, and no one had a full set of clothes or armor. Cao Cao could not be concerned with that at this moment, though, and instead told his men to keep moving. They tried talk him into giving them a brief rest, but he told them that there would be plenty of time for that AFTER they reach their base back in Jing Province.

So they pressed on for a few more miles, and then suddenly, and much to EVERYBODY’s chagrin, Cao Cao started laughing out loud again.

“Ok, why are you laughing now, your excellency?” his men asked, probably cringing inside.

“Everyone says Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang are geniuses, but from what I’ve seen, they are useless after all,” Cao Cao said. “If they had stationed an army HERE, then we would be easily captured.”

SIGH. You just had to go there, didn’t you? Well, guess what? Just then, an explosive sounded, and 500 swordsmen dashed out and spread out in a line in front of Cao Cao. At their head was, who else, Guan Yu, riding his Red Hare horse and wielding his Green Dragon Saber.

The sight of the basically invincible Guan Yu struck fear into the hearts of Cao Cao’s men, and they all looked at each other like, ok, now what do we do?

To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening.