

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

In this episode, we are going to take a look at the real Battle of Red Cliff versus the fictional version. Considering that we spent all or part of 11 episodes of the podcast on this battle and the events immediately leading up to it, it goes without saying that this was a seminal event in the novel, and that mirrors its significance in real history, even if the players involved may not have realized it at the time. This turned out to be essentially the battle that set us on the path to having three kingdoms instead of one kingdom run by Cao Cao. However, as you may have guessed, a lot of the events described in the novel are exaggerations or just pure fiction.

So let's start with what was real. To do that, I'm going to read you what was written about this battle in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, which is generally considered the most reliable source of information on the Three Kingdoms period. This is actually a collection of three books, each one being the official history of one of the three kingdoms. I'll start off with the Book of Wei (4), which is the kingdom that Cao Cao's descendants will found. Here's roughly what it says about the Battle of Red Cliff:

"Cao Cao arrived at Red Cliff and fought against Liu Bei. The outcome was unfavorable. Also, there was pestilence and many soldiers died, so he led his army back. Liu Bei then gradually gained the counties of Jing Province and the Southlands."

So yeah, not a very substantial record of what is supposed to be such an important event. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this, since one can hardly fault Cao Cao's descendants for not wanting to spill too much ink on this less-than-glorious chapter in their ancestor's career.

But surely, Cao Cao's enemies would have much more to say about their triumph, right? Well, let's see what the book of Shu (3), the official history of the kingdom that Liu Bei would create, has to say:

"Liu Bei sent Zhuge Liang to go form an alliance with Sun Quan. Sun Quan sent Zhou Yu, Cheng Pu, and a navy of several tens of thousands to join forces with Liu Bei. They fought against Cao Cao at Red Cliff and routed him, burning his ships. Liu Bei and the Dongwu troops advanced on land and water and pursued to Nanjun. At this time, there was pestilence, causing many deaths in the Northern army, so Cao Cao retreated with his forces."

Ok, so that's a little more, but still not that much. Let's see what's in the book of Wu (2), Sun Quan's kingdom.

"Liu Bei moved to Xiakou and sent Zhuge Liang to meet with Sun Quan. Sun Quan sent Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu. At the time, Cao Cao had just added Liu Biao's forces and looked very strong. Many advisers were intimidated and advised Sun Quan to welcome him. Only Zhou Yu and Lu Su advocated resistance, which Sun Quan agreed with. Zhou Yu and Cheng Pu served as left and right commanders, each leading 10,000 men, and advanced with Liu Bei. They faced off at Red Cliff and routed Cao Cao's army. Cao Cao burned the remainder of his ships and retreated. His troops were starving and exhausted, and most of them died. Liu Bei, Zhou Yu, and company pursued him to Nanjun, and Cao Cao returned to the North."

Ok, once again, not really that much detail about the battle. So based on these passages, here's what we know happened, or at least what the most reliable historical source says happened: Cao Cao

pursued Liu Bei. Liu Bei joined up with Sun Quan. Zhou Yu and Lu Su talked Sun Quan into fighting instead of submitting to Cao Cao. Sun Quan sent several tens of thousands of men and they, together with Liu Bei's forces, defeated Cao Cao at Red Cliff. Cao Cao's ships were burned, possibly by Zhou Yu, possibly by Cao Cao himself, or possibly a combination of both. Cao Cao then retreated first to Nanjun, and from there, back to the North.

As for what did NOT happen in real life, let's get to the first major discrepancy between fact and fiction: the size of the armies involved in this battle. In the novel, Cao Cao was said to have 830,000 men, which he claimed to be a million. While there doesn't seem to be much agreement in the historical sources about how many troops he actually had, it does seem to be significantly lower than 830,000. One source I saw went as far as to estimate that Cao Cao only had about maybe 70,000 troops in the field. But the figure I've seen cited most often is about 230,000.

As for his enemies, in the novel, Dongwu was said to have sent 50,000 troops, while Liu Bei was said to have had about 10 to 20,000. From the historical sources, these numbers seem to actually be pretty close to reality. Zhou Yu was said to have led about 30,000 men, plus however many Liu Bei had. So Cao Cao still had a definite numerical edge, though it certainly wasn't the overwhelming advantage the novel portrayed. It was more like 4 or 5 to 1 instead of more than 10 to 1.

One of the sources I came across relayed an interesting story. It said that at the time, Sun Quan only had 50,000 men altogether, and he sent 30,000 of them to help Liu Bei. When Zhou Yu met Liu Bei and told him how many men he had brought, Liu Bei apparently said that's not enough, and Zhou Yu basically answered, "Well, it will have to be."

Now that we've addressed the numbers, let's turn our attention to another major discrepancy between fact and fiction, which is the role that Dongwu played in the outcome of the battle. In the

novel, while Dongwu was certainly important because it had the bodies, the picture we get is pretty much that Zhou Yu, Lu Su, and the rest of the Dongwu forces were more or less just along for the ride while Zhuge Liang dazzled everyone with his strategies and godlike talents. In reality, though, Dongwu's forces really were the ones that did the heavy lifting.

For example, it was the Dongwu general Huang Gai who suggested to Zhou Yu that he should use fire, and Huang Gai actually did lead a fleet of fire boats under the pretense of defecting to Cao Cao. Of course, there isn't anything in the historical records quite so dramatic as Huang Gai willingly enduring a beating in order to convince Cao Cao that he was really defecting, or Kan (4) Ze (2) risking his life to deliver the fake defection letter, or Zhou Yu tricking Cao Cao into executing his best naval commanders, or Pang Tong, aka Young Phoenix, convincing Cao Cao to tie his ships together.

As for Zhuge Liang's actual involvement, he did indeed go to Dongwu as an envoy to convince Sun Quan to join forces with Liu Bei, and in that effort, he was successful. However, once the Southlands mobilized its army, Zhuge Liang seems to have faded into the background. In the chapter about his career in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, there is basically no mention of him being involved in any of the military operations at the Battle of Red Cliff. And, I'm sure this comes as a total shock to you, it's a safe bet that he did not convince heaven to change the direction of the winds for a couple days.

Speaking of the winds, was there really a sudden shift in the direction of the winds that affected the outcome of the battle? I've seen different things from different sources on this. Some speculated that there was a temporary shift in the winds and that it was probably a local weather phenomenon, while others suggested that wind or no wind, the fire attack would have worked just fine.

Oh, and that episode where Zhuge Liang tied a bunch of strawmen to boats and sailed them out onto a foggy river to "borrow" 100,000 arrows from Cao Cao? Believe it or not, something like that actually DID happen, but it wasn't Zhuge Liang who did it, and it did not happen at Red Cliff. Instead, it

was Sun Quan who pulled off this trick, and he did it in a later battle against Cao Cao. But, like so many of the Dongwu characters, Sun Quan gets the shaft in the novel in the name of deifying Zhuge Liang.

In the real battle, there was a much more significant player than the winds or Zhuge Liang' god-like abilities, but this player's role was severely downplayed in the novel. I'm talking about disease. In the novel, this was only mentioned in passing as one of the reasons Cao Cao decided to tie his ships together. In reality, though, disease appears to have taken a significant toll on Cao Cao's troops and was as much a reason for his decision to fall back as the defeat in the battle itself. We can see evidence of this in that the histories of all three kingdoms in the Records of the Three Kingdoms make it a point to mention pestilence among Cao Cao's troops. But I suppose it's not great storytelling to say Cao Cao decided to go home because his guys were getting sick.

Finally, let's talk about Cao Cao's desperate escape after the battle and his encounter with Guan Yu at the narrow path of Huarong (2,2) Trail. In the novel, Zhuge Liang, in his infinite wisdom, had foreseen that Cao Cao would run in that direction, but he also foresaw that it was not yet time for Cao Cao to die, so he sent Guan Yu to defend that position, knowing full well that Guan Yu, out of a sense of honor and obligation, would let Cao Cao go.

In reality, though, everything I've read pretty much says this did not happen. Much of what we know about what actually happened comes from a later edition of the Records of the Three Kingdoms. This edition was produced more than a century after the original was compiled. Apparently, the emperor at the time felt that the original was too barebones, so he told one of his courtiers to beef it up. The resulting edition incorporated more than 200 other sources, though there are questions about how reliable these sources are.

In any case, much of the Huarong Trail episode is derived from one of these sources. According to this source, after he was defeated at Red Cliff, Cao Cao was beaten, but hardly in as dire straits as the novel depicted. As his army retreated, there were some enemy troops in pursuit, but there was no mention of any ambushes along the way. What was true, though, was the treacherous condition of Huarong Trail. It was apparently as muddy as the novel said, and many of Cao Cao's troops did die on this stretch of their retreat.

Interestingly, Cao Cao apparently did laugh at his enemy's inadequate strategy at one point, but unlike in the novel, he was not laughing at Zhuge Liang or Zhou Yu, but rather at Liu Bei. And he did not laugh three times, nor did his laughs bring enemy ambushes upon his troops. Instead, he laughed only once, AFTER his army had retreated out of Huarong Trail. After he laughed, some of Liu Bei's troops did show up in pursuit and they set a fire to try to burn Cao Cao's troops. But by that point, Cao Cao and his men were already safely out of range. There was certainly no mention of any groveling for mercy on Cao Cao's part, and I doubt it would have done him much good if he really had been in that position.

So there you have it: A look at some of the main differences between fact and fiction where the Battle of Red Cliff is concerned. I hope you enjoyed it, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!