

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 106.

Before we pick up where we left off, I want to let you know that last week, I was interviewed about the podcast by Ink & Quill, a program on China Radio International, so go check that out. Just look for Ink & Quill in your podcast app, or go to the link that I have posted with this episode on our website, 3kingdomspodcast.com, spelled with the number 3. Now, back to the show.

Last time, after maintaining a long stalemate against Liu Bei, the Dongwu commander Lu (4) Xun (4) was preparing to go on the offensive. It was now the sixth month of the year 222, a year after Liu Bei had initiated his campaign for vengeance. Liu Bei had built 40-some interconnected camps spanning more than 200 miles, and all the camps were placed near woods for easy access to water sources. Liu Bei thought this deployment pattern was just the bee's knees, but one of his advisers, Ma Liang, took it upon himself to draw up a map of the camps and bring it to show Zhuge Liang. When Zhuge Liang saw it, he told Ma Liang that Liu Bei was headed for disaster, and that if Ma Liang did not get back quickly enough to prevent the disaster, then Liu Bei should seek refuge in the city of Baidi (2,4).

While Ma Liang raced off to warn Liu Bei, Lu Xun was busy wheeling and dealing in the Dongwu camp. He assembled all his officers and told them, "Since I took command, I have yet to engage the enemy in battle. But now, having observed the enemy and figured out their movements, I intend to first take a camp on the south side of the river. Who dares to go take it?"

Before he had finished asking the question, his top three generals -- Han Dang, Zhou Tai, and Ling Tong -- all stepped forward and volunteered. Yet, Lu Xun waved them off and turned to a second-tier officer named Chun (2) Yudan (2,1) and said, "I will give you 5,000 troops to go take the enemy's

fourth camp on the south bank of the river, which is being defended by the Shu general Fu (0) Tong (2). You must succeed tonight. I will send reinforcements to back you up.”

Once Chun (2) Yudan (2,1) accepted the order and left, Lu Xun told the officers Xu Sheng and Ding Feng, “Take 3,000 men each and garrison a mile and a half outside our camp. If Chun (2) Yudan (2,1) returns in defeat and is being pursued, go help him, but do not give chase.”

Around dusk that evening, Chun Yudan led his 5,000 men and advanced toward his target. It was after midnight by the time he arrived at the Shu camp. Beating their war drums and chanting their war cries, Chun Yudan led his men forward. From inside the Shu camp rode out the general Fu (0) Tong (2), who made straight for Chun Yudan. Chun Yudan was no match and quickly fled. But just then, with a wave of loud roars, a battalion of Shu soldiers cut off his path. They were led by the Shu general Zhao (4) Rong (2). This surprise attack took a big bite out of Chun Yudan’s forces, and he got away with less than of his men. But he had not gone far when a squad of barbarian soldiers blocked his path. These were allies of Liu Bei’s, led by their king Sha (1) Mo (2) Ke (1), and they inflicted their fair share of damage before Chun Yudan managed to fight his way through.

Chun Yudan now hightailed it out of there and ran for base camp, with the three Shu battalions giving chase. Fortunately for him, he was met by his comrades Xu Sheng and Ding Feng, who managed to fight off the pursuing enemy.

Chun Yudan, who suffered an arrow wound in the melee, went to see Lu Xun to ask to be punished for his failure, with the arrow still lodged in him for dramatic effect. Lu Xun, however, told him, “This was not your fault. I just wanted to test out the enemy. I already have a plan to defeat them.” Oh and also, next time get that arrow out of you before you come see me so you’re not bleeding all over my floor.

Xu Sheng and Ding Feng, however, did not share their commander's confidence, and they told him, "The enemy is strong and difficult to defeat. We would just be wasting the lives of our men."

Lu Xun, though, smiled and said, "The only one who can see through my scheme is Zhuge Liang, but thank heaven he is not here, so success shall be mine!"

He then assembled the staff and handed out the orders. The general Zhu Ran (2) was to advance on the river the next day with ships full of straws when the southeast wind starts blowing in the afternoon. The general Han Dang was to lead a battalion to attack the north shore, while the general Zhou Tai was to lead a battalion and attack the south shore. Everyone in their units were to carry a bundle of straws laced with sulphur, along with fire-starting material. When they charge into the Shu camps, they were to light the place up. The Shu army had about 40 camps, and the Dongwu troops were ordered to only set every other one on fire. All the troops were to bring field provisions with them, and they were not allowed to fall back. Instead, they must pursue through the night until they have captured Liu Bei.

Meanwhile, in the Shu imperial camp, Liu Bei was trying to come up with his own plan of attack when suddenly the banner in front of his tent fell over without so much as a breeze. He asked the adviser Cheng (2) Ji (1) what this omen meant, and Cheng Ji speculated that it could mean Dongwu was planning a night raid.

"But we just whipped them last night; how could they dare to come back again?" Liu Bei said.

"What if last night's battle was just Lu Xun testing us out?" Cheng (2) Ji (1) cautioned.

Just then, word came that Dongwu troops had been spotted in the distance heading east. Liu Bei suspected that this was a decoy, so he ordered the main army to stay put and dispatched Guan Xing and Zhang Bao with 500 riders each to go patrol the area.

Around dusk, Guan Xing came back and said, "A fire has broken out in the camps on the north bank."

Liu Bei quickly sent Guan Xing to go check out what's going on on the north bank and sent Zhang Bao to do the same on the south bank. He told them they were to report back at once if Dongwu troops showed up, and the two of them headed off immediately.

Around 7 o'clock that night, a strong southeast wind began to blow, and suddenly, the camp to the left of Liu Bei's imperial camp burst into flames. He was just about to send help that way when the camp to his right also went up in flames. Aided by the strong wind, the fire quickly spread, and the surrounding trees were soon ablaze as well, and loud cries rang out across both camps. The troops from those two camps ran away from the fire, not only leaving their burning tents behind, but also abandoning Liu Bei's imperial camp to fend for itself. Countless men were trampled in the chaos. Oh, and in the midst of all that, a Dongwu army of unknown numbers was sweeping in from the rear.

Confused and besieged, Liu Bei quickly got on his horse and headed toward the camp of the general Feng (2) Xi (2), but that camp, too, was engulfed by flames that shot toward the heavens. Now, both the north and south banks of the river were lit up like the day. Feng Xi was running with a few dozen riders when he was met by the Dongwu general Xu Sheng, and the two of them began to spar.

Seeing this, Liu Bei turned and fled west. Xu Sheng, however, spotted him and quit the fight with Feng Xi and instead came after Liu Bei. Before Liu Bei could even panic, another army blocked his path in front. This army was led by the Dongwu general Ding Feng. Liu Bei was now sandwiched between enemy forces with no way out.

Suddenly, loud cries rose up as a squad of Shu forces broke through the enemy lines. The man at their head was Zhang Bao, and he rescued Liu Bei and they made a run for it, accompanied by the

imperial guard. Along the way, they met up with some forces led by their comrade Fu (0) Tong (2), so they traveled together.

But soon, the pursuing Dongwu troops were gaining on them. With nowhere to run, they scurried to the top of a hill that they were passing by. No sooner had they reached the top did they hear loud cries at the foot of the hill. Lu Xun had personally arrived with a huge army, and they surrounded the hill.

Zhang Bao and Fu Tong (2) mounted a dogged defense to hold the path up the hillside to keep the Dongwu troops at bay. Looking out from the hilltop, Liu Bei could see entire fields on fire while the bodies of his slain men were so numerous that they piled on top of each other as they clogged the river.

The next day, the Dongwu forces began to set the hillside on fire, and Liu Bei's men fell into disarray. Liu Bei himself was in a panic when suddenly, he saw a general leading a few riders fight his way up the hillside. This was his other nephew, Guan Xing.

Falling to his knees, Guan Xing said, "The fire is closing in from all sides; we cannot stay here. Your highness must make a run for the city of Baidi (2,4), where we can regroup!"

"Who dares to bring up the rear?" Liu Bei asked.

"I will give my life for the task!" the general Fu Tong (2) replied.

So around dusk that evening, they made a break for it. Guan Xing led the way as they dashed down the hillside, while Zhang Bao stayed in the middle to protect Liu Bei, and Fu Tong (2) brought up the rear to slow the enemy's pursuit. Seeing Liu Bei trying to get away, the Dongwu troops were all itching to claim their share of glory, so they all swooped in and stayed on his tail as he fled west.

Seeing the enemy gaining ground, Liu Bei ordered all of his soldiers to take off their armor, piled them across the width of the road and set them ablaze so as to create a literal firewall to slow the

pursuit. That worked, for a while. Not long after they resumed their flight, however, another battalion of Dongwu troops showed up from the north bank, led by the general Zhu Ran, and they cut off Liu Bei's path.

"This is where I will die!" Liu Bei exclaimed in desperation.

His two nephews, Guan Xing and Zhang Bao, charged forward to try to cut a path through the enemy lines, but they were both repelled by a torrent of arrows. Not only did they not make it through, but they both came back with serious injuries. Just then, loud cries rose up again from behind as Lu Xun and the pursuing Dongwu army was closing in again.

By now, the sky was beginning to lighten as dawn approached. Liu Bei was panicking when suddenly, amid earth-shattering cries, the Dongwu army blocking his path forward disintegrated as Zhu Ran's men all fell into creeks or tumbled off cliff sides. The cause of this soon arrived on the scene. A squad of Shu soldiers charged in, led by none other than the general Zhao Yun. The sight of this relief force brought relief and delight to Liu Bei's face.

As it turns out, Zhao Yun was stationed back inside the Riverlands, since Liu Bei had stuck him in the rear in charge of reinforcements. When he heard that the two sides had engaged in battle, he led his forces out to help. En route, he saw flames shooting toward the sky in the southeast, which greatly alarmed him, so he went to investigate. Lo and behold, he found Liu Bei in dire straits, so he valiantly charged into the fray, probably thinking, "Sigh, here I go again."

Word soon got back to Lu Xun that Zhao Yun was on the scene. Quite aware of the man's reputation, Lu Xun hurriedly ordered his army to fall back, which meant Liu Bei was no longer being pursued from behind, at least for now. As for the army blocking his way forward, their leader, the general Zhu Ran, ran into Zhao Yun in the melee, and within one bout, Zhao Yun stabbed him off his horse. Now, I don't know if Zhao Yun actually killed him, because the historical Zhu Ran actually lived

for much longer, but our fictional Zhu Ran is never heard from again in the novel. In any case, the rest of the Dongwu troops soon scattered, allowing Zhao Yun to rescue Liu Bei and sprint toward the city of Baidi.

Even though his own immediate situation had taken a turn for the better, Liu Bei did not forget about his men. As they fled, he asked, “I have escaped, but what about the officers and soldiers?”

“The enemy is behind us, we cannot delay,” Zhao Yun said. “Your highness must go to Baidi and rest. I will lead my troops to go rescue others.”

So Liu Bei went on ahead, making it safely into Baidi with only about 100 men by his side. Remember that he set out on this campaign with more than 700,000 men, so you could say that this debacle was on par with Cao Cao’s defeat at Red Cliff, when he set out with some 800,000 men and ended up with only a few dozen by his side by the time he made it to safety. And hey, just like at Red Cliff, the key to victory was fire and southeast winds.

So if this was on par with the Battle of Red Cliff, that would make Lu Xun a latter-day Zhou Yu for pulling off an impressive David-vs.-Goliath victory. For his accomplishment, he was praised by a later poet thus:

Spears in hand they torched the western camps.

A desperate Liu Bei dashed into Baidi.

By this one stroke Lu Xun frightened Wei and Shu.

Could the King of Wu not honor scholar Lu (4)?

While Liu Bei licks his wounds in Baidi, let’s check in on the men he left behind in the thick of battle. First, the general Fu (0) Tong (2), who brought up the rear when Liu Bei made his break from the hill where he was trapped. Fu Tong quickly found himself surrounded by enemy forces, and the

Dongwu general Ding Feng shouted to him, “Countless Riverlands soldiers have died, and even more have surrendered! Your master Liu Bei has already been captured, and you are outnumbered, so why not surrender now?!”

“I am an officer of the Han; how can I be willing surrender to the dogs of Dongwu?!” Fu Tong said angrily as he wielded his spear and rode forth, leading his men into the thick of battle. After a dogged fight, though, he simply could not break through.

“I am done for!” Fu Tong said with a long sigh. As he spoke, he spat up blood and died.

In another part of the battlefield, the Shu official Cheng (2) Ji (1) had hurried to the bank of the river to alert the navy that a battle had broken out. Behind him came the Dongwu troops, and rather than fight, the Shu navy scattered. One of the naval officers shouted to Cheng (2) Ji (1), “The enemy is approaching! Run now!”

But Cheng Ji replied angrily, “Ever since I began following our lord on campaign, I have yet to run from the enemy!”

But before he finished speaking, the Dongwu troops arrived and cut off all paths of escape. Seeing no way out, Cheng Ji slit his own throat.

Meanwhile, at the city of Yiling (2,2), where the Dongwu general Sun Huan (2) had been trapped all this time after losing his encounter with Liu Bei, the Shu forces had been besieging the city under the command of the officers Wu (2) Ban (1) and Zhang (1) Nan (2). Suddenly, their comrade Feng (2) Xi (2) rushed onto the scene and told them that the Shu forces had been crushed and that they needed to go save Liu Bei at once. So they headed out immediately, which, of course, meant Sun Huan was finally freed from the city.

Just as Zhang Nan and Feng Xi were rushing to save Liu Bei, they found themselves facing a Dongwu army in front while behind them Sun Huan led his men and charged out of the city of Yiling to attack. Trapped, Zhang Nan and Feng Xi put up a valiant struggle, but they could not fight their way out and both ended up being killed in the chaos.

Their comrade Wu Ban, however, did manage to fight his way through the enemy lines. He was being pursued by enemy troops when Zhao Yun showed up and saved him, bringing him back to the city of Baidi.

And just to mop up, the king of Liu Bei's barbarian allies ran into the Dongwu general Zhou Tai and was killed after they fought for 20-some bouts. As for the rest, countless Shu officers and soldiers surrendered to Dongwu, and all the provisions and equipment in the Shu camps were reduced to ashes.

So if you are thinking that this sounds like a devastating blow to Liu Bei and his kingdom's ability to make war, you would be correct. Yes, they still had something left in the tank, but it's no small matter to replace 700,000 trained troops, not to mention the countless officers, or all that provision and equipment. So yeah, Liu Bei probably should've quit while he was ahead and accepted Dongwu's peace offering.

Oh, and there's one more loose end to tie up: Lady Sun, Sun Quan's little sister and Liu Bei's wife who was tricked back to Dongwu by her brother years earlier. She heard about what transpired on the battlefield. She also heard talk that Liu Bei had been killed in the fighting. Heartbroken and not bothering to wait for the news to be fact-checked, she went to the river bank, where she faced westward and wept bitterly to mourn her supposedly dead husband. And then she threw herself into

the river, showing that she was true to Liu Bei to the last. This over-the-top death earned her a temple and praise for posterity.

While Liu Bei tries to pick up the pieces, on Dongwu's side, Lu Xun was looking to press his advantage. Having achieved total victory, he was not yet content to call it a day. Instead, he led his troops westward, hoping to dole out some more punishment. As they approached Kui (2) Pass, Lu Xun sat atop his horse and gazed ahead. In front of him, he saw mountains and the river enveloped in an aura of death that surged skyward. Don't ask me what an aura looks like. I'm just reading what's in the novel.

"There must be an ambush ahead," Lu Xun said to his men. "The army should not advance lightly."

So he had the army fall back a few miles and set up in battle formation on an open plain to wait for the enemy. At the same time, he sent some trusted men to scout out the area ahead. They reported back that there were no sign of troops on the bank of the river, only 80 or 90 clusters of rocks haphazardly piled together.

This made Lu Xun very curious and suspicious. He tracked some locals and asked them who was responsible for those rock piles and why they emitted an aura of death.

"This place is named Fishbelly Beach," the locals told him. "When Zhuge Liang passed through here on his way into the Riverlands, he created a battle formation on the beach with piles of rocks. Ever since then, there has been gases rising up from there like clouds."

Upon hearing this, Lu Xun rode forth with a few dozen men to check out this battle formation of rocks. Looking down from a hilltop, the formation appeared well arranged, but Lu Xun laughed and said, "This is just a trick; there's no need for concern." And so he led his men down the hill and rode into the formation for a closer look.

After a little while, his men told him it was getting late and they should head back. But as soon as they tried to exit the formation, a violent gale kicked up, sweeping sand and pebbles into the air and blocking out the sky and the ground. Everywhere they looked, they were surrounded by bizarre rocks cutting the air, jagged like sword blades, while the sand, whipped around by the wind, piled into mountains. The river's waves now rumbled and rolled like the beating of war drums.

"I've fallen for Zhuge Liang's trick!" Lu Xun said with alarm. Well, that's what you get for doubting Sleeping Dragon. Also, I'm picturing something akin to a scene from Star Trek the Original Series where Captain Kirk and his away party are hamming it up while stumbling around piles of exploding styrofoam rocks.

Lu Xun kept looking for a way out, but he found none. Just as he was panicking, an old man suddenly appeared, standing right in front of Lu Xun's horse.

"General, do you wish to leave this formation?" the old man said with a smile.

"Elder, I hope you can lead me out," Lu Xun replied.

So the old man began walking briskly with his cane, turning this way and that as he exited the rock formation without any hindrance. Lu Xun and company, clutching tightly to his coat tail, managed to follow him out as well and found themselves back on the hill top.

"Who are you, elder?" Lu Xun asked.

"I am Zhuge Liang's father-in-law, Huang (2) Chengyan (2,4)," the old man replied. "When my son-in-law entered the Riverlands, he laid out this formation and called it the Eightfold Maze. It has eight always-shifting doors arranged according to the 'Taboo Days' formula: Desist, Survive, Injure, Confound, Exhibit, Perish, Surprise, and Liberate."

And by the way, all this talk of the Taboo Days and such are referring to principles of Daoism, so we're getting deep into mysticism here. Anyway, back to Zhuge Liang's father-in-law, who continued:

“Each day, at the appointed hours, the openings move unpredictably, making them the equal of 100,000 crack troops. When my son-in-law left, he told me, ‘In the future, a top general from Dongwu will be trapped inside this formation. Don’t lead him out.’ Just now, I saw from the hillside that you entered through the gate of Perish, so I figured you didn’t understand this formation and would be trapped. I have always been disposed toward kindness, so I could not bear to let you die like this. That’s why I led you out through the Survive gate.”

Well, I can only imagine how awkward the next family get-together is going to be in the Zhuge Liang household. You did what??!!

“Sir, have you studied the transformations?” Lu Xun asked.

“The transformations are endless and cannot be learned,” Huang (2) Chengyan (2,4) said.

Realizing the great favor Huang Chengyan had just done him, Lu Xun now dismounted and bowed to offer his thanks. As he headed back to camp, Lu Xun sighed and said, “Zhuge Liang really is the Sleeping Dragon. I am not his equal!” And then he gave the order for the army to head home.

His officers, though, were mystified.

“Liu Bei has been crushed and is holed up in one city,” they said to Lu Xun. “This is the perfect time to attack, so why are you retreating on account of a formation of rocks?”

“I’m not retreating because I fear a rock formation,” Lu Xun explained. “Cao Pi, the ruler of Wei, is as deceitful as his father. When he hears that I am pursuing the Shu forces, he would no doubt try to launch a sneak attack against us. If I venture too deeply into the Riverlands, it would be hard to retreat in a pinch.”

So Lu Xun left a general to bring up the rear while he himself led the main army back. And sure enough, not even two days after his army headed home, reports came from three places, saying that

hundreds of thousands of Wei troops commanded by the generals Cao Ren, Cao Xiu (1), and Cao Zhen (1), were marching nonstop toward Dongwu's borders with unclear intent.

"Just as I expected," Lu Xun said with a smile. "I have already deployed troops to counter."

We'll leave Lu Xun to deal with the encroaching Wei forces for now and check in on Liu Bei in the city of Baidi, where he was finally safe under the protection of Zhao Yun. Soon, the adviser Ma Liang arrived to tell Liu Bei that hey I spoke to Zhuge Liang and he said it's a really bad ... oh I'm too late aren't I?

"[Sigh] If I had listened to the prime minister's advice earlier, I would not have stumbled into this defeat," Liu Bei lamented. "How can I bear to return to Chengdu to face my officials now?"

So instead of packing up and heading back to his own capital, Liu Bei sent out word that he was going to take up residence in the city of Baidi, renaming his quarters the Palace of Enduring Peace. Reports soon arrived of the numerous casualties among his officer corps, which grieved Liu Bei greatly. And then, his attendants told him about his official Huang Quan (2), whom Liu Bei had put in command of the troops on the north side of the river.

"Huang Quan led those troops and defected to Wei," the attendants told Liu Bei. "Your highness should punish his family for this offense."

But Liu Bei was in a lenient mood.

"Huan Quan was isolated on the north bank by the Dongwu forces and had no way to come back," he said. "He surrendered to Wei only because he had no choice. It was I who let him down, not the other way around. How can I punish his family?"

So instead of punishing Huang Quan's family, Liu Bei allowed them to continue receiving the allotment of food that was due to him as part of his salary. Now, as for Huang Quan himself, when he defected to Wei, he was brought before Cao Pi.

“Are you trying to emulate Chen (2) Ping (2) and Han (2) Xin (4) in surrendering to me?” Cao Pi asked.

So here, he was referring to two key advisers to the founder of the Han Dynasty. Both of those guys originally served the Supreme Ancestor’s arch nemesis, but then defected and helped the Supreme Ancestor defeat their former master. So Cao Pi is asking if Huang Quan is intending to do the same for him against Liu Bei.

Huang Quan, however, answered with tears in his eyes:

“The emperor of Shu was unrivaled in his kindness to me. He put me in command of the troops on the north side of the river, but we were cut off by Lu Xun and had no way to return to Shu. I could never surrender to Dongwu, so I came to you instead. I am a defeated officer. I’d be lucky to just keep my life. How can I dare to emulate the ancients?”

Cao Pi was impressed with this honest answer and wanted to make Huang Quan a general, but he steadfastly refused. Just then, an attendant reported, “Spies have come from Shu, saying that Liu Bei has executed Huang Quan’s entire family.”

Huang Quan, however, refused to believe it.

“The lord of Shu and I are perfectly honest with each other,” he said. “He knows what is in my heart, so there is no way he would execute my family.”

Cao Pi agreed with this assessment, and Huang Quan stayed in Wei. So that takes care of all the loose ends from the battle. Cao Pi now turned his attention to how to capitalize on the fallout. This seemed like a great opportunity to attack one of his rivals, but which one first? To find out, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!