

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 111.

Last time, Zhuge Liang had easily put down the three renegade governors who had allied with the Nan Man barbarians, and he was marching toward a showdown with the barbarian king, Meng Huo. But first, he had to deal with three mini-bosses sent by Meng Huo to stop him. To do this, Zhuge Liang handed out assignments to everyone except his two best generals, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan. Not only that, he repeatedly told their subordinates that he did not dare to send his best two guys because they weren't familiar with the geography. Oh, that and they were past their prime. And he said this while the two of them were standing right there.

Once the meeting broke up, Zhao Yun invited Wei Yan to his tent and said, "The two of us are the vanguards, and yet the prime minister refused to use us on some excuse about not being familiar with the terrain. Him using these youngins is a slap in the face."

Wei Yan agreed. "Let's go scout out the terrain right now. We'll catch some locals and make them tell us about the geography so that we may fight the enemy and achieve victory."

So the two rode off along the main path. They had not gone far when they saw a dust cloud up ahead. They rode to the top of a hill to get a better look, and from there, they saw a few dozen barbarian soldiers galloping this way. Not ones to beat around the bush, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan immediately charged toward the enemy. The barbarian soldiers were caught off guard and fled, but not before Zhao Yun and Wei Yan managed to each capture a few of them alive.

The two generals brought their prisoners back to camp, where, to the prisoners' surprise, they were treated to wine and food, along with myriad questions about their troops' deployment. The prisoners told their captors that one of Meng Huo's mini-bosses, a commander that I'm calling Goldie because his real name is a mouthful, was camped out up ahead at the mouth of the canyon. There were two roads

running east and west next to the camp, which lead to the camps of Goldie's fellow commanders, Dong (2) Tuna (2,4) and A (1) Huinan (4,2).

Armed with this intel, Zhao Yun and Wei Yan called up 5,000 crack troops and set off around 9 o'clock that night, with the captured enemy soldiers leading the way. The moon and the stars were out that night, providing extra light for their journey. It was around 1 a.m. when they arrived at Goldie's camp, and Goldie's soldiers were just setting up an early breakfast as they prepared for a battle come morning. Well, no need for that now, since the battle has found them.

Zhao Yun and Wei Yan charged into the camp from two sides, throwing the enemy into disarray. Zhao Yun dashed into the center of the enemy forces, where he ran smack dab into Goldie. Within one bout, Goldie was no more, and moments later Zhao Yun had cut off his head as a trophy. Seeing their commander slain, Goldie's soldiers scattered.

But Zhao Yun and Wei Yan were not done. They now split up, with Wei Yan leading an attack eastward on Commander Dong (2) Tuna's (2,4) camp, while Zhao Yun headed west toward Commander A (1) Huinan's (4,2) camp. By the time they got to their respective targets, it was already first light. In the east, Dong Tuna heard that enemy troops were crashing into the rear of his camp, so he went out to face them. But just then, a loud roar rose up from the front of the camp, and the barbarian soldiers there fell into chaos. So this was the general Wang (2) Ping (2), attacking as Zhuge Liang had ordered. Tuna boy was now under siege from two sides, and his army disintegrated, but he managed to evade capture and slipped from Wei Yan's grasp.

The same thing played out on the other end of the road, as Zhao Yun and his comrade Ma Zhong both arrived at the same time and smacked the enemy around. The barbarian commander A (1) Huinan (4,2), however, also managed to slip away.

Having done enough damage, the Shu forces called it a day and went back to see Zhuge Liang.

“Two of the enemy commanders managed to slip away,” Zhuge Liang said. “Where is the head of the third?”

Zhao Yun presented the head of Goldie, and the other officers told Zhuge Liang that the other two enemy commanders evaded capture by ditching their horses and fleeing over mountainous terrain on foot. But Zhuge Liang laughed and told them, “I have already captured them.”

Everyone was in disbelief, but soon enough, the generals Zhang Yi (2) and Zhang Yi (4) arrived with Dong Tuna and A Huinan in tow, leaving everyone stunned.

“Having consulted the map, I already knew where their camps were,” Zhuge Liang explained. “So I used some words to rile up General Zhao and General Wei, spurring them to venture deep into enemy territory, knowing that they’d first defeat Goldie, and then split up to attack the other two camps. So I sent Wang Ping and Ma Zhong to provide reinforcements. General Zhao and General Wei were the only people who could take on this mission. I knew the enemy commanders would try to flee along mountain roads, so I sent Zhang Yi (2) and Zhang Yi (4) to wait in ambush. I also sent General Guan Suo (4) to back them up. That’s how they captured those two.”

After hearing this explanation, all the officers bowed and declared, “Not even the gods could fathom your excellency’s strategies!”

Now, I’m sure some of you are sitting there wondering about all the logistical gaps in this scheme, like how did Zhuge Liang know exactly what Zhao Yun and Wei Yan were going to do and when, so that he could send reinforcements to exactly the right place at the right time. My advice is to just not worry it. The dude could change the direction of the winds, so this was probably just child’s play to him.

Anyway, after thoroughly impressing his officer corps, Zhuge Liang had the two enemy commanders, Dong Tuna and A Huinan, brought into the tent. They were probably expecting a death sentence, but

instead, Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to untie them and gave them food, wine, and fresh clothes. He then told them they were free to go back to their respective caves, with a gentle reminder to go straight from now on. The two were moved to tears as they bowed and took their leave.

After the two captives left, Zhuge Liang summoned his officers and said, "Tomorrow Meng Huo will no doubt personally come to fight us. That will be our chance to capture him."

He then handed out instructions to Zhao Yun and Wei Yan, who each set off with 5,000 men. He then dispatched another battalion, led by Wang Ping and Guan Suo (4). With everything in place, there was nothing left to do but sit in his tent and wait for Meng Huo to come to him.

Speaking of Meng Huo, he was just lounging around his tent when his scouts arrived with word that one of his mini-bosses had been killed and the other two were captured, and that their armies had all disintegrated. Irrate, Meng Huo said fine, I'll do this myself! So he mobilized his troops and advanced toward Zhuge Liang's camp.

On the way, he ran into the army led by Wang Ping and Guan Suo. The two sides lined up, and Wang Ping looked across to the opposing lines. Where the banners parted, he saw a few hundred barbarian warriors riding out in pairs and then splitting off to two sides. From the center emerged Meng Huo. He wore a dark gold cap inlaid with gems, a red robe, a lion-shaped jade belt, and falcon-beaked green boots. He sat atop a curly-maned red hare horse and wielded two swords decorated with pine bark patterns.

After sizing up his enemy, Meng Huo turned to his warriors and said, "Everyone says Zhuge Liang is adept at war, but look at that formation. Their banners are disorganized. They are lined up all wrong. And their weapons are unimpressive. Now I know everything they've said about him is a lie. If I had known that earlier, I would have revolted long ago. Who dares to go capture their general?"

One of his warriors rode out immediately and took on Wang Ping. After just a few bouts, Wang Ping turned and ran, and Meng Huo directed his army to give chase. Wang Ping's comrade, Guan Suo, put up a bit of a fight but then also turned and fled, falling back six or seven miles. Meng Huo's army was hot on their tail when suddenly, loud cries rose up from all around. From the left charged a battalion of Shu soldiers led by the general Zhang Yi (2), and from the right came a battalion led by the general Zhang Yi (4). These guys cut off Meng Huo's path of retreat, and Wang Ping and Guan Suo now turned around and attacked.

Sandwiched by the enemy forces, Meng Huo's troops were routed. Meng Huo himself, along with some of his entourage, managed to fight their way out and fled toward the Brocade Belt Hills, with the three Shu armies in hot pursuit.

As he was running, Meng Huo was greeted with another round of battle cries from in front, as another battalion of enemy troops appeared, led by Zhao Yun. Stunned, Meng Huo turned and fled toward a narrow mountain road. Zhao Yun made quick work of Meng Huo's soldiers, taking countless prisoners.

As for Meng Huo, he fled into the canyon with a few dozen riders. Behind them, the pursuers were closing in. In front of them, the road was getting so narrow that they could not pass on horseback. So Meng Huo and company ditched their horses and climbed over the hills on foot. But just then, they heard the sound of drums from within the canyon. Guess what? The general Wei Yan and 500 foot soldiers had been waiting there the whole time. Outnumbered, Meng Huo made for easy pickings as Wei Yan took him alive. Meng Huo's entourage all surrendered as well.

Well, that was pretty easy. A little dose of the old "feign a retreat and spring a trap" trick, and the king of the Nan Man was now Zhuge Liang's prisoner. By the time Wei Yan brought his prized captive back to camp, Zhuge Liang was already throwing a party to celebrate. In the main tent, Zhuge Liang lined

up seven rings of soldiers, wielding weapons that shimmered like snow. Around Zhuge Liang, his attendants hoisted golden broad axes conferred upon him by his emperor and a curve-handled canopy. They were flanked by feather screens, drums and flutes, and the Imperial Guard. Basically, Zhuge Liang was putting the might and glory of his kingdom on full display.

Seated in the middle of this impressive scene, Zhuge Liang watched as countless barbarian soldiers were brought in. He summoned them into the tent and ordered them unbound. Yeah you know the script that Zhuge Liang is following here.

“You’re all good civilians,” he told the prisoners. “You were just forced into this by Meng Huo, and I’m sorry you have been startled. I think your parents, brothers, wives, and children must all be waiting anxiously for you to return. If they heard that you were defeated, they would no doubt feel gut-wrenching pains and cry so much that their eyes would bleed. I’m going to let you go, so that you may put their minds at ease.”

And not only was he letting the prisoners go, but Zhuge Liang also gave them all food and wine as parting gifts. Touched by his kindness, the barbarian soldiers all wept as they took their leave.

So the rank-and-file got the carrot, but now it was time to deal with Meng Huo, and you just know that the guy leading the rebellion was going to get the stick. The guards dragged him into the tent and made him kneel.

“The First Emperor treated you well, why did you rebel?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“The Riverlands used to be someone else’s territory,” Meng Huo shot back. “Your master took it by force and declared himself emperor. My family has lived here for generations. You all have encroached on my territory in a most barbaric manner. How can you call me the rebel?!”

Zhug Liang was like, yeah ok whatever.

“Now that you are my prisoner, will you wholeheartedly submit?” he asked Meng Huo.

“I stumbled into your trap on a narrow mountain road; how can I be willing to submit?” Meng Huo replied.

“Well in that case, how about if I let you go?”

Wait, what?

“If you let me go, then I will regroup my army and come settle things with you,” Meng Huo said. “If you can capture me again, THEN I will wholeheartedly submit.”

Hmm, so let’s see here. On one hand, Zhuge Liang could let Meng Huo go, with the full expectation of having to fight him again. Or, he could just dispose of Meng Huo right now and be done with it. Guess which one he chose.

Zhuge Liang ordered Meng Huo be untied, gave him some fresh clothes, treated him to wine and food, and even gave him a horse and saddle and had someone escort him back to the road leading to his camp. Well this is a funny way of fighting a war. As soon as Meng Huo was gone, Zhuge Liang’s officers all asked him, uhh, what the heck just happened?

“Capturing that man is as easy for me as taking something out of a sack,” Zhuge Liang said with a smile, making an analogy along the lines of shooting fish in a barrel. “But I must pacify his heart if there is to be peace.”

Well, his officers were, unsurprisingly, skeptical of this approach, but what’s done is done, so there was nothing to do except prepare for the fight that Meng Huo had promised they would get.

As for Meng Huo, he was heading back to his territory when he ran into some remnants of his army along the River Lu (2), which, by the way, is translated as the Angry River, if you were wondering what kind of water flow this river had. Seeing their leader, the soldiers were all like, wait, we thought you were dead for sure!

“The Shu people kept me in their tent, but I killed a bunch of them and escaped in the dark of the night,” Meng Huo shamelessly boasted. “Just as I was escaping, I ran into a sentry on horseback. I killed him and took this horse. That’s how I escaped.”

Accepting these alternative facts at face value, his soldiers were delighted to have their master back, and they crossed over the river and set up camp. Meng Huo then summoned the chiefs of various tribes, who in turn summoned back the soldiers that Zhuge Liang had released. And just like that, Meng Huo had built another army of more than 100,000.

Now, among this newly reformed army were the commanders Dong (2) Tuna (2,4) and A (1) Huinan (4,2), the two guys who had been captured and then released by Zhuge Liang. They weren’t exactly psyched about joining up with Meng Huo again, but he was still the biggest, baddest kid on the block, and they did not dare to refuse his summon.

With the tribal leaders assembled, Meng Huo told them, “I am on to Zhuge Liang now. We must not fight him; if we do we would fall victim to his tricks. His army is fatigued by their long journey and the scorching heat. How can they stay here for long? We have the barrier of the River Lu (2). Let’s keep all the boats on our side of the river and build a strong dirt wall. Let’s see Zhuge Liang handle THAT.”

The tribal leaders went along with this plan, so they moved all the boats to the south shore of the river and built a dirt wall. They also built watchtowers on hills and other high vantage points and populated them with crossbowmen and bombards, ready for a prolonged stand.

As Zhuge Liang’s army approached the River Lu (2), his advance scouts reported back that the river’s flow was very fast, and there were no boats on the water. Oh and there’s a wall on the other side of the river, manned by barbarian soldiers. And not only was Zhuge Liang’s army facing a difficult, if not impossible river crossing, they also had to contend with the summer heat. It was now the fifth month,



and in the Southwest of China, the temperatures were already scorching. It was so hot, in fact, that the Shu soldiers couldn't even wear their armor.

After personally taking a look at the river, Zhuge Liang returned to camp and handed out this order, "Meng Huo's forces have garrisoned the south shore of the River Lu (2) and built strong fortifications to resist us. But we have come too far to turn back empty-handed now. All officers are to lead their troops and rest in woody areas by the hills and forests."

He then ordered the guide and adviser Lü (2) Kai (3) to construct four camps in a relatively cool area about 30 miles away from the river. The officers Wang Ping, Zhang Yi (2), Zhang Yi (4), and Guan Suo were each assigned to one camp. Inside each camp, they constructed thatched sheds to provide a little escape from the heat for both horses and men.

The adviser Jiang (2) Wan (3), however, had misgivings.

"In my opinion," Jiang Wan (3) said to Zhuge Liang, "these camps are not well constructed. They repeat the same geographical folly that led to the First Emperor's defeat against Dongwu. If the barbarians sneak across the river and attack our camps with fire, how would we save the camps?"

But to this, Zhuge Liang merely smiled and said, "Sir, no need for second-guessing. I have a plan."

Of course, Zhuge Liang wasn't about to share his wonderful plan with anybody, so his staff remained puzzled.

Soon, the officer Ma Dai, the cousin of the general Ma Chao, arrived from the Riverlands to resupply Zhuge Liang's army with provisions and medicine for heatstroke. After ordering the grains and medicine distributed among the various camps, Zhuge Liang asked Ma Dai how many men he had with him. Ma Dai said 3,000, and Zhuge Liang asked him, "My forces have been in frequent battles and are exhausted. I would like to use your troops. Are you willing to take the lead?"

“All the soldiers belong to the court, so there’s no need to distinguish between your forces or mine,” Ma Dai said. “If your excellency want to use us, we would never decline.”

So Zhuge Liang told him, “Right now, Meng Huo has garrisoned the River Lu and we have no way to cross over. I would like to cut off his supply route. Then his army will fall into chaos.”

“How do we cut off his supply route?” Ma Dai asked.

“Fifty miles from here is a spot on the river called Sandymouth. The currents are slow there and can be forded with rafts. Take your 3,000 men and cross over, then make straight for the barbarians’ redoubts and cut off their provisions. Then meet up with the barbarian commanders Dong (2) Tuna (2,4) and A (1) Huinan (4,2) and ask them to help us from within. Don’t slip up.”

So Ma Dai led his troops to Sandymouth, where, as the name suggests, it was rather sandy and thus shallow enough to cross. In fact, it was so shallow that most of the men didn’t even bother with the rafts and just stripped naked and crossed on foot. Well, they would soon regret this.

As the men were wading across the river, they suddenly started to fall over in droves. By the time others had dragged them back to shore, they were bleeding from their mouth and nose, and before long, all the guys who had tried to wade through the river were dead.

A shocked Ma Dai rushed back to inform Zhuge Liang, and Zhuge Liang sought out some local guides to ask what’s up.

“On the hottest days, poisons are concentrated in the river,” the locals told him. “In the heat of day, toxic vapors rise up and poison anyone who tries to cross. Anyone who drinks the water is dead for sure. If you want to cross, you must wait until night, when the water is cool and the toxic fumes have subsided. Cross on a full stomach, and you will be ok.”

So Zhuge Liang had the locals lead the way and ordered Ma Dai to follow with about 600 stout soldiers. They returned to Sandymouth. This time, everybody used the rafts, and they did it in the middle of the night. And just as the locals told them, they all made it across without problems.

So now, Ma Dai, with about 2,000 total men under his command and with locals leading the way, headed for Jiashan (1,1) Gorge, a bottleneck on the enemy's supply route. Now this was a heck of a gorge. Mountains rose up on both sides, and the one path that ran between them was so narrow that both men and horses had to proceed in a single file. Ma Dai's men occupied this location and set up camp, staying below the enemy's radar all the while.

Blissfully unaware of this development, the Nan Man forces went on a supply run as usual. But when they got to the gorge, Ma Dai blocked both their path forward and their path of retreat, seizing 100-some cartloads of grain.

The Nan Man quickly sent word to Meng Huo, who at this moment was having a grand ol' time, feeling mighty secure behind his wall. He was drinking all night and partying every day and paying no attention to military matters, which seems a rather irresponsible thing to do, even with a strong defense.

"If I try to fight Zhuge Liang, I would no doubt fall victim to his tricks," Meng Huo told the tribal leaders. "So instead, we use the river as the barrier and wait behind our strong fortifications. The Shu people cannot withstand the heat, and they will no doubt retreat. Then we shall give chase, and Zhuge Liang will be ours."

As he spoke, he couldn't help but break into a big, contented laugh. But one of the tribal leaders said, "The water at Sandymouth is shallow. If the Shu forces leak through there, they will be a big problem. We should send some troops to defend that location."

But Meng Huo laughed it off. "You are natives of this land, so how can you not understand? I WANT the Shu army to cross there, so that they would all perish in the river."

"But what if locals tell them about the night crossing trick? What then?" the tribal leader cautioned.

"There's no need for concern," Meng Huo said. "Why would anyone within our territory be willing to help the enemy?"

But just then, scouts reported that an unknown number of enemy troops had sneaked across the river and cut off the supply route at Jiashan (1,1) Gorge. They told Meng Huo that these troops were carrying banners that said, "Ma Dai, the General who Pacifies the North."

"[Scoff] A nobody and no cause for concern," Meng Huo scoffed. In fact, he thought so little of this threat that he sent a mere lieutenant at the head of 3,000 men to take care of this nuisance.

Alas, the problem turned out to be a lot more severe than Meng Huo expected. When the two forces met, it only took Ma Dai one bout to cut down the enemy lieutenant. The barbarian soldiers fled back to tell Meng Huo what happened, and he asked his officers who among them dared to go face Ma Dai. At that point, the general Dong (2) Tuna (2,4) volunteered, so Meng Huo sent him with 3,000 men. At the same time, Meng Huo was worried about more enemy forces crossing the river, so he sent the general A (1) Huinan (4,2) and another 3,000 men to go guard the crossing at Sandymouth.

When Dong Tuna approached Ma Dai's camp, Ma Dai came out to face him. Now, some of Ma Dai's men were from Zhuge Liang's army, and they recognized the enemy commander as one of the guys who was a part of Zhuge Liang's catch-and-release program. After they told Ma Dai the backstory, Ma Dai rode forward and shouted, "You dishonorable ingrate! Our prime minister spared your life, and yet you have rebelled again! Have you no shame?!"

As it turns out, Dong Tuna DID have some shame, quite a lot of it actually. In fact, he was so ashamed that he made no answer and just retreated without exchanging a single blow. Ma Dai gave chase for a little while before turning back.

When Dong Tuna returned to camp, he simply told Meng Huo that Ma Dai was too much to handle, but Meng Huo was not buying it.

“I know you retreated without fighting because you felt indebted to Zhuge Liang. You threw the fight!”

Meng Huo wanted to execute Dong Tuna, but the other tribal leaders all advised leniency, and Meng Huo eventually gave in, letting Dong Tuna live, but not before giving him 100 strokes. Once Dong Tuna limped back to his own camp, many a tribal leader came to see him and they told him, “Even though we live in the territory of the Nan Man, we have never dared to offend the Central Kingdom, and they have not bothered us. But now, Meng Huo has used his might to force us to rebel. Zhuge Liang’s tactics are unfathomable. Even Cao Cao and Sun Quan are afraid of him, much less the likes of us. Besides, we all have received his kindness and mercy and have no way to repay him. We should risk our lives to kill Meng Huo and surrender to Zhuge Liang, so that we may spare our people of the ravages of war.”

“Is that what you are all thinking?” Dong Tuna asked.

Now among this group were a number of people who had been previously spared by Zhuge Liang, so they were all feeling indebted, and they all answered that they were willing to go with Dong Tuna. So Dong Tuna grabbed a steel knife, rounded up about 100 men, and stomped toward the main camp.

To see if this little uprising is successful, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!