

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 115.

Last time, Meng Huo had his men pretend to betray him into Zhuge Liang's hands as part of staging a surprise attack. But Zhuge Liang saw through his plan from the get-go, and Meng Huo went from pretend prisoner to real prisoner in a heartbeat. Having captured the Nan Man king for the sixth time, in his home cave no less, Zhuge Liang was hoping the guy would finally give up and surrender voluntarily. But no such luck.

"I delivered myself into your hands; this wasn't your doing. I refuse to submit!" Meng Huo said.

"I have captured you SIX times, and you still won't submit. What are you waiting for?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"If you capture me a seventh time, I will wholehearted submit. This I swear, and will never go back on," said Meng Huo, who, if I'm remembering correctly, had made that same oath five times before.

"Your nest is already broken, so what do I have to fear?" Zhuge Liang said as he ordered the guards to untie Meng Huo. "But the next time I catch you, if you still resist, I will not let you off lightly!"

And so once again, Meng Huo and his entourage scampered away. Along the way, they ran into about 1,000 of his own soldiers, most of whom were wounded during the earlier battle. With some semblance of an army around him, Meng Huo started to perk up a bit. He now asked his brother-in-law, Chief Dailai (4,2), "My cave now belongs to the Riverlanders. Where shall I go to find sanctuary?"

"Only one nation can stop the Riverlanders," Dailai told him. "About 200-some miles to the southeast of here is the Wuge (1,1) Nation. Their king is named Wu (1) Tugu (1,3). He is a tall man who does not eat grains. Instead, he eats only live snakes and fierce beasts. His body is covered with scales, which no arrow or sword can pierce. His soldiers wear rattan armor made from vines that grow in their ravine and wind around their rocky walls. They collect these vines, soak them in oil for half a year, dry them in the sun, and then soak them again. They repeat this process more than a dozen times before

turning them into armor. When you wear this armor, you float in the river, stay dry in water, and are impervious to weapons. These warriors are dubbed the rattan-armored soldiers. You should go seek their help. If they would help you, capturing Zhuge Liang would be as easy as splitting bamboo with a sharp blade.”

Well, we’ve certainly heard this “get so-and-so’s help and victory will be assured” talk from Meng Huo’s men before, and it didn’t turn out well for him. But really what choice did Meng Huo have? So he traveled to the Wuge (1,1) Nation and sought an audience with their gluten-free king Wu (1) Tugu (1,3). Now, apparently this tribe did not build anything with roofs. Instead, they dug their dwellings in the earth. Meng Huo got his audience and recounted his setbacks.

“I will mobilize my forces to avenge you,” Wu (1) Tugu (1,3) told him. The king then then ordered two of his commanders to lead 30,000 rattan-armored men to accompany Meng Huo back.

On their way, they came across a river named Peach Blossom River, which sounds idyllic enough. But, this being the wild frontiers on the edge of empire, you knew, you just knew that there something wrong with this river. It got its name from the peach trees on both shores. Now I usually think of peach trees as good things, but these trees were bad news. When their leaves fall into the river, they apparently do something funky to the water so that if foreigners drank the water, they would die. But if the people of the Wuge (1,1) Nation drank it, it would refresh them. I guess this is like travelers getting sick off the same street food that locals wolf down without any problems.

So Wu (1) Tugu (1,3) garrisoned his forces at the crossing of this river and waited for the Shu army. By this time, Zhuge Liang had already gotten word that Meng Huo had sought out help from the Wuge (1,1) Nation and that they were camped out at the Peach Blossom River crossing. So Zhuge Liang marched his army all the way to the crossing. There, they saw the enemy, and just like all the other barbarian forces they’ve encountered on this expedition, these guys were ugly, even inhuman-like. Oh,

and the locals told Zhuge Liang, don't drink the water, although by this point on their expedition, I would hope everybody in the Shu army would have gotten that message loud and clear.

Zhuge Liang told his army to back up a mile or so and set up camp and left the general Wei Yan to defend the camp. The next day, King Wu (1) Tugu (1,3) led his rattan-armored soldiers across the river, shaking the ground with the sound of their golden drums. When Wei Yan led his troops out to face the enemy, they saw barbarian warriors sweeping toward them. The Shu soldiers fired their arrows, but they just bounced harmlessly off the barbarians' rattan armor. Ok, let's try something a little harder. The Shu soldiers started to hack and stab at the enemy with their knives and spears, but could not penetrate the armor. The barbarians, meanwhile, started hacking away with their own sharp knives and pointy tridents, and the Shu soldiers were put to flight.

Despite winning the fight, the barbarian forces did not give chase. Instead, they just turned and headed back toward their own camp. Wei Yan now turned his men around and gave chase. But when they reached the bank of the river, they saw something astonishing: The barbarians simply waded across the river, staying afloat in their armor. And the ones who were too tired to wade through the currents simply took off their armor, set it on top of the water, and rode on them like a raft.

Wei Yan rushed to the main camp to inform Zhuge Liang of what had transpired. Zhuge Liang then asked his guide Lü (2) Kai (3) and some locals.

"I have often heard that there is a Nan Man tribe called the Wuge (1,1) Nation, which is bereft of human morality," Lü Kai said. "With their rattan armor, it is difficult to wound them. They also have this river that has been fouled by the peach leaves. When the people of their own tribe drink from it, they are refreshed, but when foreigners drink from it, they die. Even if we conquer such uncivilized territory, there would be no benefit. Why don't we end the campaign and go home?"

But Zhuge Liang laughed off this notion. "It wasn't easy to get here; how can we leave just like that? I will have a way to pacify the barbarians tomorrow."

So Zhuge Liang assigned Zhao Yun to help Wei Yan defend the camp and told them to not go out to fight again lightly. The next day, Zhuge Liang had some locals serve as guide as he rode in his carriage to the hills by the north shore of the river crossing to scout out the area. The terrain was too mountainous for his carriage, so Zhuge Liang proceeded on foot.

He came upon a hill, from where he spotted a serpentine ravine lined with sheer, barren rocky cliffs and one main road running down the middle.

“What is the name of this ravine?” Zhuge Liang asked the local guides.

“This place is called Winding Serpent Valley,” the guides told him,. “Outside the valley lies the main road to Three River Town, and the region in front of it is known as the Talang (2,3) Barrens.”

“Heaven has granted me a victory here,” Zhuge Liang said with delight. He then retraced his steps and returned to camp.

After returning to camp, he summoned the general Ma Dai and said, “I will give you 10 black carts. You will need 1,000 bamboo poles. You will find such and such inside the carts. Take your unit and go guard the two ends of the ravine and proceed in such and such a way. You must get everything ready in half a month’s time. When the time comes, do this and this. If any word leaks out, you will be punished according to military law.”

Once Ma Dai left, Zhuge Liang summoned Zhao Yun and told him, “Go to the back of the ravine, to the main road that leads to Three River Town, and defend it in such and such a manner. Get everything ready by the appointed day.”

Next, he told Wei Yan, “Lead your own unit and go set up camp by the river crossing. If the barbarians cross the river to attack, abandon camp and flee toward the white flag. Within half a month,

you must lose 15 straight battles and abandon seven camps. If you only lose 14 battles, don't bother coming to see me."

Well, this order did not please Wei Yan, who, as one of the top generals in the army, was used to being told to win battles rather than losing them, but he still went off, albeit grumbling under his breath. Zhuge Liang then ordered the general Zhang Yi (4) to lead a detachment of men and go set up camp at a designated spot. Next, he sent the officers Zhang Yi (2) and Ma Zhong, along with 1,000 men who had surrendered from Meng Huo's tribe, on another secret mission.

While Zhuge Liang was busy wheeling and dealing, Meng Huo's spidey sense was tingling.

"Zhuge Liang is crafty and adept at setting traps," he told King Wu (1) Tugu (1,3). "When we meet him in battle, you must instruct your army to avoid advancing rashly if they come across woody canyons."

"You're quite right," Wu Tugu said. "I already knew that the men of the Central Kingdom are deceitful. We will do as you suggest from now on. I will lead the fighting in the front, and you provide guidance from the back."

Just then came word that some Shu forces had set up camp on the north shore of the river crossing. Wu Tugu ordered his two commanders to lead the rattan-armored warriors and attack. After trading just a few cursory blows, Wei Yan said, "Oh no, you're too much for me; let me run." And he turned and fled. The barbarian soldiers were wary of an ambush, so they did not give chase.

The next day, Wei Yan had set up another camp. The barbarians heard about this, so they crossed the river again to attack, and once again, Wei Yan fled after just a few bouts, and this time, the barbarians gave chase for a few miles. When they saw no sign of ambush anywhere, they decided to garrison the camp that Wei Yan had abandoned.

The next day, the two commanders invited King Wu Tugu to that camp and told him what happened. Wu Tugu then advanced in force, putting Wei Yan to flight once again as the Shu soldiers ran like hell. But they weren't just running; they were running toward a particular spot, marked by a white flag. When they got there, they found that a pre-constructed camp was waiting for them, so they garrisoned that camp.

Soon, Wu Tugu and his army arrived and attacked, and Wei Yan once again fled, leaving the new camp behind for the barbarians. This little act repeated itself day in and day out for the next couple weeks, and soon enough, Wei Yan had reached his quota of 15 lost battles and seven abandoned camps. The barbarian army was on the move, pressing ahead with confidence, with their king leading the way. As they marched, they avoided any woody areas they came across and only sent men to check those places out from a distance. Their scouts reported back that they indeed saw banners within the woods, which made Wu Tugu turn to Meng Huo and say, "It's just as you predicted."

Laughing heartily, Meng Huo replied, "This time, I've got a handle on Zhuge Liang! You have beaten him 15 times in a row and taken seven of his camps. His men are fleeing at the sight of our forces. Zhuge Liang has run out of ideas. Let's press on, and victory will be ours!"

Feeling good about himself and his invincible army, Wu Tugu pressed on with little concern.

On the 16th day, Wei Yan, leading some tattered troops, came to fight the barbarians. Wu Tugu led the way atop his elephant, wearing a wolf-beard cap decorated with the sun and the moon and clothes lined with gold and pearls. Through his garment, you could see his hard-scaled skin, and a faint fire darted from his eyes. Pointing at Wei Yan, he cursed his foe aloud. Wei Yan didn't even bother to fight and immediately turned and ran, with the barbarian army hot in pursuit.

Wei Yan and his troops went around into a ravine and headed toward a white flag. Behind them came the barbarian hordes. Wu Tugu checked out the sides of this ravine and saw no woods there at all, so he didn't worry about any ambushes and pressed on.

Soon, they had reached the heart of the ravine, and standing in their paths were a few dozen black carts.

"This is the enemy's supply route," Wu Tugu's men told him. "They must have abandoned their supply carts when they saw your highness approaching."

Delighted, Wu Tugu ordered his forces to press on. As they approached the exit of the ravine, they saw no sign of the Shu army that they had been pursuing. Suddenly, logs and boulders rolled down the cliff side and blocked off the exit.

Uh oh.

Wu Tugu ordered his men to remove the blockade, but suddenly, they saw carts of all sizes, loaded with burning wood, setting the place ablaze. Wu Tugu hurriedly ordered his men to fall back, but by now, the rear of his army was shouting that the other end of the ravine had also been blocked off by dry wood. Oh, and those black carts in the middle? They were all loaded with gunpowder, and now they were on fire.

But still, there were no woods anywhere around, so Wu Tugu still wasn't too worried and ordered his men to find a way out. But suddenly, torches came flying down from the cliff sides, and wherever the torches landed, they sparked the gunpowder that had been strewn across the ground, which in turn set off buried explosives. In the blink of an eye, the ravine was filled with fire, and any rattan armor that came in contact with the flames were set ablaze. Remember, these armors were made from vines soaked with oil, so they burned easily. Poor Wu Tugu and his 30,000 rattan-armored warriors were reduced to cowering in each other's arms as they were burned alive in the ravine.

Standing atop a hill and looking down into this gory scene, Zhuge Liang saw barbarian soldiers engulfed in flames twitching in their death throes, and many had their heads shattered by the explosives. The valley was strewn with their incinerated bodies, and the pungent smell was intolerable.

Looking down at the ground with tears dripping down his cheek, Zhuge Liang sighed and said, "Even though I have rendered service to the country, my life will be shortened because of this!" And his words touched everyone who heard them.

Now, as for Meng Huo, he was waiting back at camp for news of the battle. Suddenly, about 1,000 men showed up with broad smiles on their faces. They prostrated and told Meng Huo, "The Wuge army has trapped Zhuge Liang inside Winding Serpent Valley and are asking your highness to go back them up. We used to belong to your tribe. We had no choice but to surrender to the Riverlanders, but when we heard that you're here, we came to help."

Ecstatic at this news, Meng Huo immediately gathered up the men from his clan and other barbarian forces, he set out at once, with the new arrivals leading the way. But as they approached the ravine, however, he saw flames shooting skyward and detected a pungent smell in the air. Recognizing a trap, Meng Huo hurriedly fell back, but it was too late.

From the left charged out a battalion led by the Shu general Zhang Yi (2). From the right came another battalion led by Ma Zhong. Meng Huo was just about to take them on when suddenly, a shout rang out and his own forces fell into chaos. As it turns out, most of those 1,000 men who had brought him here were actually Riverland soldiers in disguise, and they now turned on Meng Huo and his clansmen. All of Meng Huo's followers were captured, but Meng Huo himself managed to fight through the chaos and fled toward the hills.

As he was running, he suddenly spotted a squad of men flanked around a small carriage. On the carriage was seated a man with a headband, a Daoist robe, and a feather fan. Guess who.



“Meng Huo, you rebel! What will you do now?!” Zhuge Liang shouted to his foe.

Meng Huo quickly turned around and tried to flee in another direction, but a Shu general had already blocked his path. This was Ma Dai, and he took Meng Huo by surprise, easily capturing him. Meanwhile, the generals Wang Ping and Zhang Yi (4) had led some troops to sack the Nan Man camp, capturing Meng Huo’s wife and family.

Upon returning to camp, Zhuge Liang gathered his officers and told them, “I had no choice but to use this scheme, and it will hurt my karma. I expected the enemy would be wary of ambushes in thickly wooded areas, so I only set up banners in those places but no troops so as to confuse them. I had Wei Yan lose 15 straight battles so as to embolden them. I saw that Winding Serpent Valley only had one road, was flanked by barren cliffs, and was covered with sandy soil. So I ordered Ma Dai to place the black wagons in the valley. The carts contained explosives that I had made, called ‘earth thunder.’ Each explosive contained nine missiles. I had one buried every 30 paces and used bamboo poles filled with gunpowder as fuses. When they are set off, they would make hills crumble and rocks shatter.

“Then, I had Zhao Yun prepare cartloads of hay in the valley and logs and boulders above. Then I had Wei Yan lure the rattan-armored soldiers into the valley. Once Wei Yan was in the clear, we cut off their path of retreat and then burned them. I have heard it said, ‘That which takes to water does not take the fire.’ Although the rattan armor is impervious to weapons, it is soaked with oil, so it would burn upon contact with fire. The Nan Man warriors are so stubborn that a fire attack was the only way we could triumph. Yet, it is my egregious offense that we have exterminated the people of the Wuge (1,1) Nation.”

When they heard this explanation, all the officers bowed and said, “Your excellency’s marvelous ingenuity is more than even the gods can fathom!”

Next, Zhuge Liang was going to deal with somebody else who could not fathom his marvelous ingenuity, be it once, twice, or seven times. Meng Huo was now dragged before Zhuge Liang, and he kneeled on the ground. Zhuge Liang ordered the guards to untie him and then set him up in another tent with wine. Zhuge Liang then summoned the guy in charge of meals and gave him some instructions.

So Meng Huo, his wife, his brother-in-law, and the rest of his clansmen were sitting in their tent drinking when an officer entered and said, "His excellency is too embarrassed to see you, and he has ordered me to release you so that you may go regroup your forces and come fight again. You may go at once."

So the previous six times this had happened, Meng Huo stomped off in a huff, vowing to avenge the latest humiliation. But now, he wept and said, "Seven times captured and seven times freed. Such a thing has never been done. Even though I am a barbarian, I still understand honor and propriety. How can I be so shameless?!"

He then led his family and clansmen, and they crawled to Zhuge Liang's tent, whereupon Meng Huo stripped off his shirt, presenting his body for punishment.

"Your excellency's prowess is divine!" he told Zhuge Liang. "The southerners will never rebel again!"

"Sir, are you submitting at last?" Zhuge Liang asked.

"My children, their children, and their children's children will gratefully acknowledge your all-protecting, all-sustaining love, high as heaven, vast as the earth," Meng Huo said as he wept with gratitude. "How can I not submit?!"

Well, since you put it that way, WELCOME TO IMPERIAL CITIZENSHIP! Zhuge Liang invited Meng Huo to sit and held a banquet to celebrate. He appointed Meng Huo as the leader of his tribe for life and returned all the territory that he had seized during the campaign. Meng Huo's clansmen and the rest of the Nan Man soldiers were so touched by his generosity that they leaped and bounded with unrestrained excitement. I mean, who DOESN'T want to be a subject of the Han Empire? Wait, what do

you mean there's no Han empire left? Well, we don't have to tell these guys. They're just uncivilized barbarians. What do they know?

Anyway, no matter your views on imperialism, you have to admit that Zhuge Liang did pull off a pretty nifty feat in capturing and releasing his foe seven times. In fact, this would become one of the defining accomplishments of his career.

One of Zhuge Liang's advisers, the senior counselor Fei (4) Yi (1), now offered up a suggestion. "Your excellency personally led the army into the wilderness to tame the Nan Man. Now that their king has submitted, why don't we assign an official to oversee this territory with Meng Huo?"

So he was basically proposing installing an imperial overseer, but Zhuge Liang shot down this idea.

"To do so would pose three problems," he said. "First, if you leave an outsider in charge, then you must leave an army with him, and that army would lack food. Second, the Nan Man people have suffered grievously, losing fathers and brothers. If you leave an outsider in charge without leaving an army, that's a recipe for disaster. Finally, the Nan Man have always been politically unstable. They're suspicious and jealous, so they will never trust an outsider. So I will leave no one and ship no grain and settle for peaceful co-existence with them."

This analysis convinced everyone. Meanwhile, the Nan Man people were apparently so moved by Zhuge Liang's kindness and virtue that they established a shrine where they made offerings to him every season. They all took to calling him "Merciful Father." They also presented him and his army with tons of valuables, medicinal herbs, water buffaloes, and war horses. Most importantly, they also swore to never rebel again. And thus was the South pacified.

With his mission accomplished and himself having attained basically godhood among the Nan Man, Zhuge Liang now turned his army back toward home. It was now the ninth month of the year 225, and

remember that this campaign started back in the spring. The general Wei Yan led the vanguard and proceeded to the River Lu (2). Remember that this river's name means the Angry River, and when Wei Yan and his men approached its banks, the river decided to live up to its name. Suddenly, dark clouds gathered and a violent gale whipped up across the surface of the water, sending sand and pebbles into the air, preventing the troops from moving forward.

When word of this reached Zhuge Liang, he asked Meng Huo, and Meng Huo told him, "An evil spirit has cursed this water. Anyone wishing to cross must offer a sacrifice."

"What sort of sacrifice?"

"In olden times, when the spirit wreaked its havoc, people would offer a sacrifice of 49 human heads, along with black oxens and white sheep. Then the winds would ease, the waters would subside, and years of plenty would follow."

"But I have attained peace; how can we kill even a single soul now?" Zhuge Liang said. He then personally went to inspect the river, where he saw a storm raging and waves surging, and his army panicking. Zhuge Liang himself was also taken aback, and he consulted some locals.

The locals told him, "Ever since your excellency passed through here, the sound of spirits wailing could be heard every night by the river. The cries would persist from dusk to dawn. Countless shades, shrouded in miasma, have haunted the waters since your crossing, and now no one dares to cross anymore."

"[Sigh] This is my fault," Zhuge Liang said. "Previously, a thousand or so soldiers under general Ma Dai's command died in this river. They were also joined by the fallen Southern warriors who were abandoned here. Now these wronged souls are unable to find their final peace and are thus causing this disturbance."

So yeah, thanks a lot for that, Merciful Father. To see what Zhuge Liang will do to appease these spirits, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!