

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 117.

Last time, with a new emperor on the throne in the kingdom of Wei and the wiley Sima Yi having been stripped of his position, Zhuge Liang sensed an opportunity to launch his long-awaited Northern expedition to conquer Wei, reunite the empire, and resurrect the glory of the House of Han. He handed out assignments to his officers and was just about to head out when an old general barged in and demanded that he receive an assignment as well.

This was none other than Zhao Yun, now a senior statesman in the officer corps. Zhuge Liang tried to talk him out of it.

“After I returned from pacifying the South, General Ma Chao died from illness,” he said to Zhao Yun. And yeah, Ma Chao, one of the greatest warriors in this novel, got killed off just like that, off screen with barely a mention. I always felt that he was a vastly under-utilized character. The novel built him up as this awesome warrior, but aside from one losing campaign against Cao Cao and one day-long fight against Zhang Fei, he wasn’t really used much. Seems like every time we heard him mentioned after he joined Liu Bei, he was just being tasked with minding the shop at some key defensive location. Oh well.

Anyway, Zhuge Liang continued with Zhao Yun, “I regret Ma Chao’s death deeply, as though I have lost an arm. General, you are advanced in age. If something goes wrong, it would tarnish your heroic lifelong reputation and hurt our kingdom’s morale.”

But yeah, that weak sauce wasn’t going to cut it with Zhao Yun.

“Ever since I joined the First Emperor, I have never shirked from battle and have always led the way whenever we encountered the enemy. Fortunate is the man who gets to die on the battlefield. What regret would I have? I am willing to lead the vanguard!”

So Zhao Yun is basically living up to the cliché of the stubborn old warrior who refuses to bow to age, which is ironic because a while back, he was on the other end of that equation, trying to talk old guys

like Huang Zhong out of seemingly foolhardy missions to prove that they weren't old and useless. Zhuge Liang tried time and again to change his mind, but to no avail.

"If you do not make me the vanguard, then I will smash my head on these steps and die here!" Zhao Yun declared.

Well, what can you really say to that? Zhuge Liang relented, but he also said, "If you want to be the vanguard, you must have someone else accompany you."

Before he was done speaking, Deng (4) Zhi (1) stepped forward and volunteered to be that someone else. Now, the last time we heard his name mentioned, Deng Zhi was in charge of tax administration. He was instrumental as an envoy who opened the negotiations that restored peace between Shu and Wu, but THIS was no negotiation. THIS was war, and Zhuge Liang was sending an old man and basically the director of the IRS to lead the front column of his army, which just sounds crazy. But he gave them 5,000 crack troops and 10 lieutenants and sent them on their way.

On the day that Zhuge Liang's army set out from the capital, the emperor Liu Shan (4) personally led all the court officials several miles outside the city to see him off. After taking his leave, Zhuge Liang marched his troops toward Hanzhong.

Word of this soon reached Luoyang (4,2), the capital of the kingdom of Wei. When the new emperor Cao Rui (4) held court one day, his courtiers told him, "Officials from the borders have reported that Zhuge Liang has garrisoned 300,000-some troops in Hanzhong and has assigned Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi (1) to lead the vanguard to invade our territory."

Cao Rui was alarmed and asked his court who could repel this invasion. One man spoke up immediately.

"My father died in Hanzhong, and I have yet to exact revenge. Now that the forces of Shu are encroaching on our land, I am willing to lead the ferocious warriors under my command and ask your

highness to grant me the troops on the west side of the passes to defeat the enemy so that I may serve the kingdom and avenge my father. I would die without regret!"

So this guy was named Xiaohou Mao (4). He was the son of Xiahou Yuan, who, you may remember, was one of Cao Cao's kinsmen and veteran generals. Xiahou Yuan was commanding Cao Cao's forces in the region of Hanzhong at one point, but then he was killed by Liu Bei's general Huang Zhong when Liu Bei took over that territory. His son Xiahou Mao (4) was a man with a fiery temper, but also very stingy, too, which does not sound like a winning combination.

When he was little, Xiahou Mao was apparently adopted by his father's fellow kinsman Xiahou Dun; the novel doesn't explain why. After his biological father Xiahou Yuan was killed in battle, Cao Cao took pity on the young man, marrying his own daughter to him. So that meant Xiahou Mao was a prince consort, giving him a lot of respect in the Wei court. But he hadn't really done much of anything to earn that respect. Even though he had command of his own troops, he had never once set foot on the battlefield, but now he was itching to change that.

Upon Xiahou Mao's request, Cao Rui appointed him first field marshal and gave him command of several armies garrisoned on the west side of the passes. But the minister of the interior, Wang (2) Lang (3), objected.

"The prince consort is not experienced in battle. He is not suitable for such important responsibilities. Besides, Zhuge Liang is crafty and well-versed in the ways of war. We must not underestimate the enemy."

Xiahou Mao was not pleased about being dissed by an old man.

"Minister, are you in cahoots with Zhuge Liang?" he shot back at Wang Lang. "I have learned the art of war from my father since my youth, and I am well-versed in military tactics. How dare you look down on my age? I swear that if I do not capture Zhuge Liang alive, I will not come back to face his highness!"

Well, first of all, when a wet-behind-his-ear know-nothin' starts bragging about how he's going to wipe the floor with Zhuge Liang, he's probably going to eat his words soon. Second, if he can't beat Zhuge Liang, then yeah, he probably won't want to come back to face the emperor anyway, so I don't know how much that boast was worth. But Xiahou Mao's little outburst was enough to silence Wang Lang and any other objectors, so he headed out immediately. He arrived at the key city of Changan (2,1), where he assembled an army of more than 200,000 and set out to take on Zhuge Liang.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang's army had paused temporarily when they passed by the gravesite of the general Ma Chao. Zhuge Liang had his cousin Ma Dai don mourning garb, and Zhuge Liang personally went to the grave to pay his respects and to tell Ma Chao how sorry he was that Ma Chao got such an unceremonious sendoff from the novel. After the service, Zhuge Liang returned to camp to discuss the army's next move. Suddenly, scouts arrived with word that Xiahou Mao was leading an army to stop them.

The general Wei Yan now offered up an idea.

"Xiahou Mao is a pampered child and a witless weakling. I would like to take 5,000 crack troops, follow the road out of Baozhong (1,1), travel eastward along the Qinling (2,3) Mountains, and then head north at Ziwu (2,3) Gorge. Within 10 days, I would be able to reach Changan. When Xiahou Mao sees this surprise attack, he would no doubt abandon the city and flee toward the military depots at Hengmen (2,2) to the northwest. I will advance from the east, while your excellency lead the main army and advance through Xie (2) Gorge. Everything to the west of Xianyang (2,2) would be ours in one move."

But to this, Zhuge Liang merely smiled and said, "That is not a surefire plan. You think the Heartlands have no talent, but what if someone suggests that they stage an ambush in the mountains? Not only would you and your 5,000 men be lost, but our army's morale would be greatly damaged as well. I will never use that plan."

“But if your excellency only advance along the main road, the enemy would mobilize all their forces within the passes to resist us along that road,” Wei Yan countered. “That would cause considerable delay. When would we ever be able to conquer the Heartlands?”

“I shall take the flat road from Longyou (3,4) and advance from there according to military tactics. That would ensure victory,” Zhuge Liang said. And that was the end of the discussion. Zhuge Liang dismissed Wei Yan’s suggestion, which made Wei Yan kind of grumpy while Zhuge Liang ordered Zhao Yun and the vanguard to press forward.

Now, let’s jump back to Changan to check in on Xiahou Mao. He was in the process of assembling the various armies in the region, and one of those armies was a unit made up of 80,000 soldiers from the Qiang (1) tribes, led by a warrior named Han (2) De (2). This Han (2) De (2) wielded a giant battleaxe and had valor to match thousands. When he and his army came to join Xiahou Mao, the latter was delighted and appointed Han De as his vanguard. Han De also had four sons, all of whom were skilled in battle. And now Han De and his sons set off for the enemy, and when they arrived at Phoenix Call Mountain, they ran into the Shu vanguard led by Zhao Yun.

Once the two sides had lined up, Han De rode out and shouted, “You rebels! How dare you encroach on my borders?!”

That disrespectful tone did not sit well with Zhao Yun, so he rode out to teach Han De a lesson. Han De’s eldest son charged out to take on Zhao Yun, but within three bouts, Zhao Yun ended him with one thrust of the spear.

Han De’s second son now galloped out with saber in hand to avenge his brother. But old Zhao Yun fought with the vigor of the Zhao Yun of old, and Han De’s second son was no match. Seeing this, Han De’s third son hoisted his halberd and came to help, but Zhao Yun showed no fear. Now, the fourth son

joined the fray, waving a pair of swords. These three sons surrounded Zhao Yun, but Zhao Yun was like, puh-leeze.

Momentarily, Zhao Yun's spear struck Han De's fourth son and sent him off his horse. Some lieutenants from Han De's lines rushed out and rescued him. Zhao Yun now turned and rode away, dragging his spear behind him. The third son put away his halberd and fired three arrows at Zhao Yun, but he easily deflected them all. Enraged at his own impotence, the third son now chased after Zhao Yun, but hey, guess what? You aren't the only one who can handle a bow. Before he even knew what happened, this son met his maker courtesy of an arrow from Zhao Yun that struck him in the face.

The lone remaining son now chased after Zhao Yun as well. When he got close, Zhao Yun simply tossed his own spear to the ground, dodged a blow from his foe's saber, and then reached and grabbed the kid off his horse, capturing him alive. Now, in the novel, we're never explicitly told the fate of this son or the wounded son that was rescued by Han De's lieutenants. But we are told that Han De saw his four sons all meet their end at Zhao Yun's hand, so I guess we can assume that the injured son probably died from his wound while the captured son was executed later.

In any case, at this particular moment, Zhao Yun came charging toward Han De, and Han De was scared out of his mind and fled into his own lines. His troops, meanwhile, were well aware of Zhao Yun's reputation, and now, having just witnessed plenty of evidence that the reputation was still well-deserved, they all said thanks but no thanks and tucked tail and ran. So Zhao Yun just stormed around the enemy ranks like no one was there. His lieutenant Deng Zhi, meanwhile, directed their army to sweep in and put the enemy to flight. Han De himself was nearly captured by Zhao Yun, and he only escaped by ditching his armor and fleeing on foot.

Upon returning to camp in victory, Deng Zhi congratulated Zhao Yun.

"General, you're in your 70s, and yet you remain every bit the hero of yesteryear. By slaying four enemy officers on the battlefield today, you have accomplished a rare feat!"

“The prime minister refused to use me because of my age, so I had to speak up for myself,” Zhao Yun said. He then sent word of the victory, along with the captured prisoner, to Zhuge Liang.

As for Han De, after he escaped with his life, he scampered back to see Xiahou Mao and told him what happened while weeping over the death of his sons. Xiahou Mao now personally led an army to meet Zhao Yun. When Zhao Yun heard this, he promptly went out with about 1,000 men and lined up in front of Phoenix Call Mountain. Xiahou Mao, donning a golden helmet, seated atop a white horse, and wielding a large saber, stood under his own banner. When he saw Zhao Yun galloping back and forth, he wanted to go out to fight. Han De, however, beat him to the punch.

“I must avenge the death of my four sons!” he shouted as he rode out with battle axe in hand and made straight for Zhao Yun. But within three bouts, Zhao Yun stabbed him off his horse, sending him to a family reunion in the underworld. Well, I guess now we now where Han De’s sons learned how to fight. Zhao Yun now made straight for Xiahou Mao, who apparently had a sudden change of heart about wanting to fight Zhao Yun, as he ducked into his own lines. The Shu army now charged forth and again sent the Wei forces scrambling back a few miles.

After regrouping his troops, Xiahou Mao met with his officers that night.

“I had long heard of Zhao Yun, but had not yet seen him in person,” Xiahou Mao said. “Even though he is old, he is still every bit the hero. Only now do I believe the stories of his deeds at Changban (2,3) Ridge. He is invincible. What should we do?”

His military adviser Cheng (2) Wu (3), who was the son of Cheng (2) Yu (4), one of Cao Cao’s longtime strategists, now said, “I think Zhao Yun is all brawn and no brain and thus not a concern. Tomorrow, you can take another army out, but have troops lie in ambush on both flanks. Fall back and

lure Zhao Yun into the ambush. You can then go to the top of a hill to direct the troops and surround him. Then he'll be ours."

Xiahou Mao did as Cheng Wu (3) suggested and dispatched two of his officers, each with 30,000 men, to go lie in wait on the flanks. The next day, Xiahou Mao led his troops forward again, and once again Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi came out to face him.

Deng Zhi said to Zhao Yun, "The Wei forces were routed last night, and yet now they have come back. There must be deception afoot. General, you must be careful."

"[Scoff] What is there to be worried about with a little child like that?" Zhao Yun scoffed. "I will capture him for sure today!"

So Zhao Yun galloped out, and one of the Wei officers came out to fight him. After just three bouts, that Wei officer turned and fled, and Zhao Yun gave chase. Eight officers from the Wei lines now came forth to fight him, while Xiahou Mao rode away. The eight officers then also turned and fled one by one, and Zhao Yun stayed hot on their trail while Deng Zhi followed behind with the troops.

The chase led Zhao Yun deep into enemy territory, and suddenly, earth-shaking cries rose up from all around. Deng Zhi, who was trailing behind, was able to pull up short of this ambush, but Zhao Yun now found himself trapped in the center as the hidden enemy soldiers on the flanks charged out and enveloped him. Deng Zhi did not have that many men with him, so he couldn't break in from the outside to help Zhao Yun, so Zhao Yun and the men he had with him were left to fend for themselves. They tried to break out here and there, but the Wei lines only got deeper.

Gradually, Zhao Yun was left with only about a thousand men, going up against about 60,000 enemy soldiers. They fought their way to the foot of a hill, and Zhao Yun saw that Xiahou Mao was on top of that hill, signaling to his troops where Zhao Yun was headed, allowing them to follow and surround him no matter where he went. Zhao Yun said fine, I'll charge up this hill then. But he only made it halfway up the hillside before being turned back by boulders and logs.



Zhao Yun fought from early morning until dusk and still could not escape. As night fell, there was a brief respite in the fighting, and Zhao Yun dismounted, took off his armor, and sat down for a quick breather. But as soon as the moonlight lit up the sky, flames and the sound of drums rose up from all directions as arrows and stones rained down. The Wei forces attacked again, shouting, "Zhao Yun, surrender now!"

Zhao Yun hurriedly climbed back onto his horse to resume the fight. But gradually, the Wei forces closed in from all sides, and the shower of arrows got heavier and heavier. Zhao Yun and his men could not make a move anywhere.

"I refused to act my age, and now I will die here!" Zhao Yun sighed as he looked skyward.

So this was certainly shaping up to be a tragic end for a great hero. But just then, loud cries came from the northeast, where the Wei forces fell into disarray as an army crashed into the fray, led by a general who wielded a long spear and had a human head hanging from his horse's neck. This was the Shu general Zhang Bao, the son of Zhang Fei.

"His excellency was worried that something might go wrong, so he sent me with 5,000 troops to back you up!" Zhang Bao said to Zhao Yun. "I heard that you were trapped, so I fought my way through the enemy lines. I ran into one of the Wei officers and killed him."

Zhao Yun was delighted and reinvigorated, so he and Zhang Bao now fought their way out through the northwest corner of the enemy lines. As they were doing so, they saw the enemy soldiers fleeing from another army that was making a mess of things, led by a general who held a green dragon saber in one hand and a human head in another. This was Guan Xing, the son of Guan Yu. Like Zhang Bao, he too had been dispatched by Zhuge Liang to come provide reinforcement. While he was fighting his way in, he ran into the other Wei officer leading the ambush, so Guan Xing helped himself to a scalp, and he now told Zhao Yun that Zhuge Liang and the main army were on their way.

“Generals, you have already achieved an amazing feat, so why don’t we take this opportunity to capture Xiahou Mao and secure victory?” Zhao Yun said to Guan Xing and Zhang Bao.

As soon as they heard this, the two young generals darted off with their troops to do just that. Zhao Yun now turned to his own men and said, “They are from my children’s generation, and yet they show no hesitation in battle. I am a top general of the kingdom and a veteran official of the court. How can I be outshined by youngsters? I shall sacrifice my old life to repay the First Emperor’s kindness!”

So Zhao Yun also led his men to go after Xiahou Mao. These three forces converged on the Wei troops, and then Deng Zhi piled on with his army. The result was a massacre that left bodies of the enemy strewn across the field while blood flowed like rivers. Xiahou Mao, being witless and inexperienced, decided to get the heck out of dodge, so he fled with about 100 riders toward the county of Nanan (2,1). His soldiers, seeing their commander make a run for it, decided to follow his lead. Xiahou Mao fled through the night and barely made it into Nanan (2,1) with the Shu forces on his tail. He barred the gates and deployed the city’s defenses. Guan Xing, Zhang Bao, Zhao Yun, and Deng Zhi all soon arrived and began to lay siege to the city. But the city’s defenses were apparently pretty stout, because the city still held after 10 days.

Soon, Zhuge Liang arrived with the main army. Zhao Yun and company went to welcome him and told him they hadn’t been able to sack the city. Zhuge Liang got in his carriage and took a look around the outside of the city and then returned to his tent, where he assembled his officers.

“This city has a deep moat and steep walls, making it difficult to attack. But this city is not my primary aim. If you spend too much time here trying to take it, I am afraid that Wei forces would launch an attack on Hanzhong, which would put our army in danger.”

“But Xiahou Mao is the prince consort of the Wei kingdom,” Deng Zhi said. “If we capture him, it would be worth more than killing 100 generals. We have him trapped. How can we just leave?”

“I have a plan,” Zhuge Liang said. “This location borders the counties of Tianshui (1,3) in the west and Anding (1,4) in the north. Who are the governors of those two counties?”

The scouts told him that Tianshui (1,3) was being governed by Ma (3) Zun (1), while Anding (1,4) was commanded by Cui (1) Liang (4). Zhuge Liang was delighted and whispered instructions to the generals Wei Yan, Guan Xing, and Zhang Bao. He then summoned a couple trusted soldiers and gave them some instructions as well, and everyone went on their way. Zhuge Liang, meanwhile, stationed himself outside Nanan (2,1) and ordered his troops to start piling up firewood at the foot of the city walls, declaring that they were going to burn down the city. But the Wei soldiers defending the city just had a good laugh at this notion, as they felt pretty safe from a fire attack behind their tall, steep defenses.

Now, let’s jump over to the neighboring county of Anding (1,4), where the city’s governor Cui (1) Liang (4) had been on pins and needles ever since he heard that Xiahou Mao, the prince consort, was trapped inside Nanan (2,1). He wasn’t so much worried about Xiahou Mao as he was worried about his own hide, because Cui (1) Liang (4) rounded up 4,000 troops not to go save Xiahou Mao, but to reinforce his own defenses.

Then one day, an officer arrived from the south, shouting that he had secret intel. Cui (1) Liang (4) summoned him in, and the man told him, “My name is Pei (2) Xu (4), a trusted officer serving under Commander Xiahou Mao. He has ordered me to come seek help from the counties of Anding (1,4) and Tianshui (1,3). Nanan is in dire straits and has been lighting fires atop the city wall every day as a call for help from these two places, but no help has showed up. So the commander ordered me to fight through the enemy lines to come report our urgent situation. You must mobilize your troops immediately. When the commander sees the reinforcements, he will open the gates to help you.”

“Do you have a letter from the commander?” Cui (1) Liang (4) asked.

Pei (2) Xu (4) promptly pulled a letter out from under his clothes, but he had worked up a sweat fighting his way through the enemy lines, so the letter itself was soaked through and a little smeared, but still legible. After a quick glance, Cui Liang immediately ordered his men to give Pei (2) Xu (4) a fresh horse, and he set off right away for Tianshui (1,3) to ask for help there.

Less than two days after Pei (2) Xu (4) left, another messenger arrived, this time from the county of Tianshui, telling Cui Liang that the governor of Tianshui had already set out to break the siege on Nanan and was now asking him for reinforcements.

Cui Liang talked this over with his staff, and most of his officials told him that he should go, because if he didn't and Nanan falls and something happened to Xiahou Mao, it would be the two neighboring counties that bore the brunt of the blame for not lifting a finger to help. So Cui Liang mobilized his army and headed out, leaving only some civilian officials in charge of the city.

As Cui Liang and his troops advanced toward Nanan on the main road, they could see flames shooting skyward. This appeared to be the fire signal that Pei (2) Xu (4) had told him about. So he rushed toward Nanan. But when he was about 15 miles or so away, loud cries suddenly rose up from the front and back.

Uh oh. This does not look good. To see what was in store for Cui Liang, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!