

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 122.

Last time, just as things were looking good for Zhuge Liang on his Northern expedition, the Wei emperor wised up and recalled the one man that Zhuge Liang was wary of -- Sima Yi. Sima Yi didn't waste any time being a thorn in Zhuge Liang's side, swiftly putting down an internal uprising by the renegade general Meng Da. Then he made straight for Jieting (1,2), a small but crucial location that, if it fell into Sima Yi's hands, would mean the end of Zhuge Liang's campaign, if not the end of Zhuge Liang himself. So Zhuge Liang sent his military counselor Ma Su and the general Wang Ping to go defend Jieting, reminding them time and again to be careful and to set up camp on the road so that the enemy couldn't sneak around them. But of course, within minutes of arriving at Jieting, Ma Su allowed his ego to get the better of him and decided to set up camp on a nearby hill instead. Wang Ping objected, but to no avail, so he ended up taking a small detachment of troops and setting up an auxiliary camp near the hill.

Sima Yi, meanwhile, had gotten word of this development, and he came to check things out for himself. He and about 100 riders arrived at Jieting on a clear, moonlit night, and they took a good look at the hill where Ma Su had garrisoned his forces. As they rode off, Ma Su watched them from atop the hill and laughed, "If you want to live, then you would not dare to come attack this hill!" He then told his officers, "If the enemy comes, watch for a red flag on the hilltop. When it waves, that is your signal to lead your men and attack down the hillside."

Meanwhile, Sima Yi returned to camp and sent scouts to find out who was commanding the Shu forces defending Jieting. When they reported back that it was Ma Su, Sima Yi laughed.

"He is nothing but a reputation, a bookworm! How can Zhuge Liang use such a man and not expect to fail?"

He then asked if there were any troops around Jieting, and the scout told him about Wang Ping's camp three miles away from the hill. So Sima Yi ordered his vanguard general Zhang He to lead a

battalion to go cut off Wang Ping's path to the hill. He then ordered the officers Shen (1) Dan (1) and Shen (1) Yi (2) to lead two battalions and surround the hill where Ma Su was camped out. He told them to first cut off the water supply to the hill so that the Shu soldiers would fall into chaos, and then attack while they're in disarray, which, by the way, was exactly what Wang Ping had warned Ma Su would happen if he set up camp on the hill.

With everything in place, Zhang He set out at dawn the next day to sneak up on Wang Ping from behind. Sima Yi, meanwhile, marched his main army forward, swarming around the hill. From the top of the hill, Ma Su could see that Wei soldiers and their banners covered the hillside in an organized fashion. When the Shu soldiers saw this, they didn't exactly feel like charging down the hillside like Ma Su had envisioned. So when Ma Su waved his red flag to order a charge, all his men were just nudging each other, going, "You go first. No, you go first. No, no, after you." So much for Ma Su's theory that if he put his men in a desperate situation, they would have no choice but to fight like they had never fought before.

Enraged, Ma Su personally cut down two of his officers for their cowardice. This shocked his men, and they had no choice but to muster up some courage and charge down the hillside, hoping that maybe the Wei forces would collapse like their commander said. But alas, the Wei troops held their ground, so the Shu soldiers could only retreat to the top of the hill. Seeing things hit the fan, Ma Su ordered his men to shut the camp gates and wait for outside help.

But that outside help wasn't coming. His comrade Wang Ping, who was camped three miles away, saw the Wei army arrive, so he led his troops out to face them. They ran smack dab into the Wei vanguard general Zhang He. Wang Ping and Zhang He traded blows for few dozen bouts, by which point Wang Ping was outnumbered and exhausted, so he had no choice but to fall back, leaving the Shu troops on the hill to fend for themselves.

The Wei army now surrounded the hill for a whole day. With no water, the trapped Shu soldiers were unable to prepare food, and without food, it didn't take long for the army to lose all semblance of order. I think I mentioned this before: The soldiers of this era were not particularly well-trained, so armies were often just a couple missed meals away from a total breakdown in discipline. Around midnight, all hell broke loose as the Shu forces on the south side of the hill flung open the gates to the camp and went down the hill to surrender. Ma Su tried to stop them, but to no avail.

Now, to add to the chaos, Sima Yi ordered his men to set the hillside on fire. Ma Su figured he couldn't hold out any longer, so he pressed his tattered troops down the west side of the hill in an attempt to break out. Sima Yi left them an opening through which to escape, but no sooner had Ma Su slipped through did he find the Wei general Zhang He in hot pursuit.

Zhang He chased Ma Su for about 10 miles when suddenly, an army appeared in front with drums and horns blaring. This army let Ma Su run past and then cut off Zhang He's path. These troops were led by the Shu general Wei Yan, whom Zhuge Liang had stationed here specifically to back up Ma Su should anything go wrong, and this definitely qualified as things going wrong.

So Wei Yan now charged right at Zhang He, and Zhang He turned and fell back. Wei Yan and his men gave chase as they attempted to reclaim Jieting. But 15 miles into their pursuit, a loud cry rang out, and Wei soldiers sprang out from hiding on two sides, led by Sima Yi on the left and his second son Sima Zhao on the right. Zhang He also turned around and charged back. They now surrounded Wei Yan and his men. Wei Yan charged here and there, but could not break through, and soon his army was decimated.

Just as things were looking dire, another army charged into the fray. This was Wei Yan's comrade, Wang Ping.

"I am saved!" Wei Yan rejoiced when he saw Wang Ping. The two then combined their forces and put up a dogged struggle to fight off the Wei forces. But when the two of them scrambled back to Wei

Yan's camp, they saw that it was covered by enemy banners, and from inside the camp charged out the Wei officers Shen Dan (1) and Shen Yi (2). Oops, so much for that backup.

Wei Yan and Wang Ping now turned and fled toward the nearby city of Liucheng (3,2), which was garrisoned by their comrade Gao (1) Xiang (2) as a backup to their backup. By now, Gao Xiang had heard about the debacle at Jieting, so he had already mobilized all of his troops to come help. He ran into Wei Yan and Wang Ping along the way, and they told him what had transpired.

"Why don't we go raid the enemy camp tonight and reclaim Jieting?" Gao Xiang suggested. The other two agreed, so when darkness fell that night, they split their forces into three and advanced, with Wei Yan leading the way.

When he arrived at Jieting, however, Wei Yan did not spot a single soul, which made him deeply suspicious, so he held up and waited for Gao Xiang to arrive. Just as they were talking about how they had a bad feeling about this, they noticed that, "Hey, where's Wang Ping and the rest of our men?"

Just then an explosive went off and the night was lit up with torches while the earth shook with the sound of war drums as Wei troops poured out from hiding, trapping Gao Xiang and Wei Yan in the center. The two tried to fight their way out, but in vain. Suddenly, cries came from behind a hill, and another army appeared on the scene. This was Wang Ping, who was probably getting sick of showing up to bail out his comrades. The three of them managed to break out and they sprinted back toward Gao Xiang's base at the city of Liucheng (3,2).

But no sooner had they arrived at the foot of the city were they greeted by another enemy force, sporting a banner that said, "Wei Commander Guo (1) Huai (2)." Now remember that Guo Huai was the second-in-command under the Wei supreme commander Cao Zhen. They had gotten their butts kicked by Zhuge Liang previously and were just holding down the fort at a key defensive position. But when

they got word that Sima Yi and Zhang He were marching on Jieting, they got to thinking that hey, we can't let those guys horde all the glory. So Guo Huai took an army to come take Jieting, hoping to beat their comrades slash rivals to the punch. But en route, Guo Huai got word that Sima Yi had already captured Jieting, so he quickly changed plans and instead came after the city of Liucheng, where he now ran smack dab into the three Shu generals fleeing back in defeat.

Guo Huai and his men kicked Wei Yan and company while they were down, and the Shu forces suffered heavy casualties. Wei Yan was mindful of the big picture. With things going so badly here, he was worried about possible enemy encroachment on Yangping Pass, the critical gateway into the region of Hanzhong, the launching pad for the Shu forces. So he and Wang Ping and Gao Xiang turned and fled toward Yangping Pass.

Having chased off the enemy, Guo Huai was feeling pretty good as he told his men, "Even though I didn't capture Jieting, I did take Liucheng, which is also a big merit."

But when he went to the foot of the city to demand that they open the gates and surrender, he was greeted with the sound of an explosive as numerous banners shot up along the city wall. The biggest banner read, "Sima Yi, the Commander who Pacifies the West."

"General Guo, what took you so long?" Sima Yi shouted as he leaned against the wall.

Stunned, Guo Huai could only mutter to himself, "Sima Yi's strategies are truly divine. I am not his equal."

Guo Huai went inside the city to greet Sima Yi, who told him, "Now that he has lost Jieting, Zhuge Liang will no doubt retreat. You and Command Cao Zhen should pursue him nonstop." Guo Huai agreed and immediately took his leave.

After Guo Huai left, Sima Yi said to his vanguard general Zhang He, "Cao Zhen and Guo Huai were worried that I would get all the credit, so they came to take this city. I wasn't trying to horde all the glory; I just got lucky. I expect that Wei Yan, Wang Ping, and Gao Xiang must have gone to defend

Yangping Pass. If I go attack that pass, Zhuge Liang would sweep in behind us, and we would be in his trap. As the rules of war say, 'You must pursue a retreating army, but do not chase broken rebels.' You will take the backroads to attack the retreating enemy forces in Ji (1) Gorge, and I will take on the enemy troops in Xie (2) Gorge. If the enemy flees, do not press too hard. Just attack them on the road and you will be able to capture their equipment and baggage train."

So Zhang He headed off with half of their men, and Sima Yi told the rest, "Head to Xie Gorge by way of Xicheng (1,2). Xicheng may be a small backwater hamlet, but it's where the enemy's grains are stored. It also commands the road to the three counties of Nan'an (2,1), Tianshui (1,3), and Anding (1,4). If we capture Xicheng, then those three counties will be ours again." He then left the officers Shen (1) Dan (1) and Shen (1) Yi (2) to oversee Liucheng (3,2) and set off with the main army toward Xie (2) Gorge.

Meanwhile, back at the Shu forces' main camp, Zhuge Liang had been on pins and needles ever since sending Ma Su and company to go defend Jieting. One day, Wang Ping's map of the area and the army's deployment arrived. Zhuge Liang opened it up, took one look, and immediately slammed his hand on his desk.

"Ignorant Ma Su! You have doomed my army!"

His staff asked why he was so alarmed, and Zhuge Liang explained, "According to this map, Ma Su has given up the key road and instead set his camp on a hill. If the enemy arrives in force, surrounds the hill, and cuts off his water supply, his army will fall into disarray within two days. If Jieting is lost, how can we make it home alive?"

A member of his staff, the high counselor Yang (2) Yi (2), now said, "I may be untalented, but I am willing to go relieve Ma Su."

So Zhuge Liang quickly told Yang Yi how he should redeploy the troops at Jieting, but just as Yang Yi was about to head out, a scout arrived with word that Jieting and the city of Liucheng had both been lost.

"[Sigh] All is lost, and it is my fault!" Zhuge Liang said with a long sigh as he stamped his foot.

But he had no time to beat up on himself, because he knew enemy troops would soon be bearing down on him. Zhuge Liang immediately summoned the generals Guan Xing and Zhang Bao and said, "Take 3,000 crack troops each and take the backroads along Mount Wugong (3,1). If you encounter enemy troops, do not engage in a full battle. Just make a lot of ruckus and act as a decoy. The enemy will fall back; do not give chase. Once the last of our army has retreated, head to Yangping Pass."

He then sent the general Zhang Yi (4) to go put Saber Pass in order for the army's retreat. This Saber Pass, by the way, was a mountain passage that connected Hanzhong with the Shu capital of Chengdu. It was a treacherous passage literally carved out of the cliffside, and it is notorious difficult to traverse. In fact, the famous Tang Dynasty poet Li (3) Bai (2) would say centuries later, "The path into Shu is hard, because it's hard to climb into the sky." I am including with this episode a [link to a webpage](#) with some pictures of various parts of this passage, so you can get an idea of how ridiculous the terrain of this passage can be, and why it needed to be properly prepared before an army could traverse it. And keep in mind that the pictures you are seeing show the passage after centuries of subsequent development. You can imagine how much more dangerous and difficult this passage was in Zhuge Liang's time.

Anyway, Zhuge Liang now sent out a secret order for the army to discretely pack up and prepare to head out. He ordered the generals Ma Dai and Jiang Wei to bring up the rear, telling them to hide their men in the gorge and wait for the rest of the army to depart before moving out. He also dispatched trusted men to go to the three counties that he had captured earlier on the campaign to tell the officials, soldiers, and civilians in those counties to relocate into Hanzhong. Now part of this was no doubt

concern for their safety, since the Wei forces might not look too kindly on the people of counties that surrendered to the enemy. But I think part of it too is to leave the Wei forces with nothing but an empty city, which they would then have to repopulate if they want it to be a useful place for garrisoning troops. And last but not least, Zhuge Liang also sent someone to go fetch Jiang Wei's mother and move her to safety in Hanzhong since, remember, he was a defector from Wei.

With everyone headed off to carry out their assignments, Zhuge Liang personally led 5,000 men to the tiny town of Xicheng (1,2) to move the army's grains, since that was definitely something he did not want to leave for the enemy. But while they were working, a dozen or so scouts arrived, one after another, with the urgent news that Sima Yi and an army of 150,000 were swarming this way.

Now, at that moment, Zhuge Liang had no generals with him, since he had dispatched all of them to coordinate various aspects of the army's retreat. All he had were a bunch of civil officials. And as for the 5,000 men he brought, half of them had already set off with the grains, so he only had 2,500 soldiers in this tiny hamlet.

Given these circumstances, it's understandable why, when they heard the news, the accompanying officials all turned pale. Zhuge Liang went to the top of the city wall to take a look, and he saw a giant dust cloud in the distance as Wei forces stormed toward Xicheng from two directions.

So ... now what?

"Conceal all the banners," Zhuge Liang ordered. "Tell the men that if anyone dares to make any noise or move rashly, they will be executed! Open all four gates wide. At each gate, have 20 soldiers dress up as civilians and sweep the streets. When the enemy arrives, do not make any rash moves. I have a plan."

Uhh, ok. What kind of plan is that? To leave the gates wide open for an enemy ready to storm the city? Well, wait and see.

Zhuge Liang now donned his crane-pattern Daoist robe and his head band, and sat down by one of the command towers atop the wall, with only two young boys around him and a stick of burning incense in front of him. There, armed with only his zither, that stringed instrument he was so fond of, Zhuge Liang waited.

Soon, Sima Yi's scouts approached the town. When they saw the unexpected welcome that Zhuge Liang had laid out for them, they dared not enter the town. Instead, they rushed back to inform Sima Yi, who simply smiled out of disbelief. He ordered his army to halt while he rode forward and took a look from a distance, just in case Zhuge Liang had a surprise waiting for him.

Glancing at the top of the city walls, Sima Yi saw that Zhuge Liang was indeed sitting up there, with a wide smile on his face, plucking his zither while incense smoke swirled around him. To his left stood one young lad holding his sword. To his right stood another young lad holding the yak's tail, the symbol of his authority. Down by the city gates were about 20 civilians, going about the everyday business of sweeping and washing the streets as if nobody was around.

What the heck is this? This sight aroused Sima Yi's suspicion, and momentarily, he turned back and gave his army this order: Turn around and fall back along the mountain path to the north.

Wait what? But ... we are right here. 150,000 men! Outside a tiny hamlet that probably couldn't even hold half this many people. There's no sign of any enemy troops! And the gates aren't even closed! Why are we falling back?!!

"Father, why are you retreating? This could just be a ruse by Zhuge Liang because he has no army," Sima Yi's second son, Sima Zhao, objected.

“Zhuge Liang has always been cautious and does not take chances,” Sima Yi said. “If he has left the gates wide open, he must have an ambush. If we advance, we would be walking into a trap. What do you know? Retreat at once!”

Meanwhile, from his perch atop the city wall, as Zhuge Liang watched the two Wei armies disappear in the distance, he clapped his hands and laughed while his officials looked on with astonishment.

“Sima Yi is a top general,” they said to Zhuge Liang. “He came here with 150,000 crack troops, so why did he leave so quickly when he saw your excellency?”

“He knows that I am always cautious and do not take chances,” Zhuge Liang explained. “So when he saw this, he suspected an ambush and left. I didn’t want to take this gamble, but I had no choice. He has headed off into the mountain roads in the north, where I have already dispatched Guan Xing and Zhang Bao to lie in wait.”

“Not even the gods can divine your excellency’s strategies,” the stunned officials said. “If it were up to us, we would have abandoned the town and fled.”

“I only have 2,500 soldiers,” Zhuge Liang told them. “If we abandon the town and run, we would have fallen into Sima Yi’s hands before we could get very far.”

He then clapped his hands and laughed again, saying, “If I were Sima Yi, I would not have retreated.” He then immediately sent out word for the civilians of the town to accompany the army back to Hanzhong, since Sima Yi will no doubt return later. So now, Zhuge Liang abandoned the town and headed toward his safehaven in Hanzhong, followed by officials and civilians from the three counties that he had captured.

And for the daring bluff that repelled Sima Yi at the gates of an empty city, Zhuge Liang got kudos from a later poet:

A zither three spans long subdued a fierce host
When Zhuge Liang dismissed his foe at Xicheng town.
A hundred fifty thousand turned themselves around --
And townsmen still point at the spot and wonder how!

As for Sima Yi, he and his troops were retreating along the backroads on Wugong (3,1) Mountain when suddenly, they heard the earth-shattering sound of war cries and drums from behind a hill. Turning to his two sons, Sima Yi said, "If I had not ordered retreat, we would have fallen into Zhuge Liang's trap for sure."

Just then, they saw an army approach along the main road, led by the Shu general Zhang Bao. Thinking that this was the ambush they were trying to evade, the Wei soldiers had no wish to stick around, as they all made a run for it. Before long, more cries and drums rang out, as another army appeared, led by the general Guan Xing. The sounds of war echoed across the valley, making it impossible to determine how big an enemy force was lying in wait. And the Wei forces were already spooked anyway, so they now abandoned their baggage train and fled. Guan Xing and Zhang Bao followed their orders and did not give chase, contenting themselves with collecting the abandoned equipment and provisions and falling back. As for Sima Yi, this sudden appearance of enemy troops inside the valley spooked him even more, so now he didn't even dare to head to the main road and instead just went back to Jieting.

Now, Sima Yi's forces weren't the only Wei army trying to take a bite out of the Shu forces on the retreat. The Wei supreme commander Cao Zhen was also leading his own troops in pursuit. But his chase was cut short when he was rudely interrupted by the sound of an explosive from behind a hill, which was followed by a swarm of Shu soldiers sweeping across the hillside, led by the generals Jiang Wei and Ma Dai. Remember, Zhuge Liang had left those two guys to bring the rear and lie in wait inside

Xie (2) Gorge for an enemy pursuit. By the time Cao Zhen could order a retreat, his vanguard officer had already been cut down by Ma Dai. Cao Zhen and his soldiers scurried away like rats, while Jiang Wei and Ma Dai rushed back to Hanzhong.

Now, Zhuge Liang had left another army in Ji (1) Gorge, led by Zhao Yun and Deng Zhi. When they received word that Zhuge Liang had ordered a retreat, Zhao Yun said to Deng Zhi, "When the enemy hears that we are retreating, they will no doubt give chase. I will lead an army and lie in wait behind them, while you lead a slow retreat under my banner. I will protect you every step of the way."

Sure enough, the Wei forces were talking about exactly that. As Guo Huai was on his way back to claim the gorge, he told his vanguard general, "The Shu general Zhao Yun is unrivaled in his valor. You must be careful. If his army falls back, there must be deception afoot."

But this guy obviously hadn't been reading his recent history, because he told Guo Huai, "Commander, if you are willing to provide backup, then I will capture Zhao Yun alive."

So the vanguard general led his 3,000 men and sprinted into the gorge. Just as they were closing in on the retreating Shu forces, they suddenly spotted a red banner flashing out from behind a hill, sporting giant characters that said "Zhao Yun." The Wei forces immediately fell back, as instructed. But they had not gone far when they were surprised with the loud cries of battle as an enemy battalion dashed out, led by a general who galloped forth with spear in hand, shouting, "Do you recognize Zhao Yun?!"

The vanguard general was stunned and still trying to figure out how Zhao Yun had gotten from there to here so quickly when Zhao Yun saved him the trouble by killing him with one thrust of the spear. Zhao Yun then scattered the rest of the enemy and calmly proceeded with his own retreat.

Soon, another Wei force approached from behind in hot pursuit. Seeing this, Zhao Yun said, "Bring it," as he held up his horse, gripped his spear, and stood in the middle of the road, waiting for the enemy

to engage. But the officer leading this army was smarter than his predecessor. He recognized Zhao Yun and did not dare to advance. Zhao Yun held his ground until dusk, by which point the Shu army had gone about 10 miles ahead. Only then did Zhao Yun turn his horse and resume his casual retreat.

Soon, Guo Huai himself arrived, and the officer who had refrained from running afoul of Zhao Yun told him what happened. Guo Huai now ordered his troops to give chase, and told this officer to lead a few hundred stout riders to lead the way. I mean, c'mon. Zhao Yun was just one guy after all.

But just as they passed some thick woods, they suddenly heard a loud cry behind them.

“Zhao Yun is here!”

That one shout was apparently enough to scare the Wei soldiers such that 100-some riders immediately ditched their horses and climbed up the hillside to flee to safety. Their leader tried to fight Zhao Yun, but Zhao Yun let fly an arrow that struck his helmet, sending him into a ditch.

Pointing at the guy with his spear, Zhao Yun said, “I will spare your life! Go tell Guo Huai to come meet me himself!”

So while the poor slash lucky schmuck ran for his life, Zhao Yun escorted his forces safely back to Hanzhong. So that completed a Zhuge Liang's near-miraculous retreat back to his own territory, but you can bet there would be significant fallout from this turn of events. To see what those fallouts are, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!