Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 124.

Last time, while the borders between Shu and Wei were temporarily quiet, the kingdom of Wu was up to some shenanigans. One of Wu’s governors, a man named Zhou (1) Fang (1), tricked the Wei commander Cao Xiu into thinking that he was going to surrender. Convinced by Zhou Fang’s dramatic act of cutting off his own hair as an oath of loyalty, Cao Xiu decided to march deep into Wu territory. But the Wei general Jia (3) Kui (2) tried to get him to see the painfully obvious: that this smelled like a trap.

All this loyal advice, however, just made Cao Xiu angry at Jia Kui.

“I am about to march my army forward. How dare you say such things to demoralize my troops?!” he scolded Jia Kui and ordered the guards to take him outside for execution. The other officers quickly intervened, telling Cao Xiu that it would hurt the army’s morale even more if he executed a top general before marching out. Cao Xiu relented, but he stripped Jia Kui of his command and took away his troops. Cao Xiu then left Jia Kui back at camp while he personally led an army to take the city of Dongguan (1,1).

Word of this development soon reached the ears of Zhou Fang, and he was delighted.

“If Cao Xiu had listened to Jia Kui, then it would have been heaven’s will that Dongwu should fall,” he said. “But now, it is heaven’s will that I shall succeed!”

Zhou Fang then sent word of this to the top Dongwu commander, Lu (4) Xun (4). Lu Xun decided to send the general Xu (2) Sheng (4) as his vanguard to go set up an ambush along a mountain road, at a location called Shiting (2,2).

Meanwhile, Cao Xiu had ordered Zhou Fang to guide his army forward. As they were traveling, Cao Xiu asked Zhou Fang what laid ahead, and Zhou Fang told him, “Oh it’s called Shiting (2,2). It’s a lovely spot for garrisoning your troops.” Cao Xiu listened to him and ordered his troops and baggage train to head toward Shiting and set up camp there.
The next day, scouts came back and told Cao Xiu that an unknown number of enemy troops were stationed at the mouth of the canyon that lay ahead.

“But Zhou Fang said there are no enemy forces here,” a surprised Cao Xiu said. “How could they be prepared?”

So he immediately summoned Zhou Fang, but guess what? Zhou Fang and a few dozen of his men had already vanished.

“I have been deceived!” a regretful Cao Xiu said.

Despite this realization, he still wasn’t deterred. Instead, he decided to press on. He ordered the general Zhang (1) Pu (3) to lead a few thousand men to go take on the enemy troops at the mouth of the canyon. So Zhang Pu (3) went and faced off against the Dongwu vanguard general Xu (2) Sheng (4). After just a few bouts, Zhang Pu could not hold his own and ran back to see Cao Xiu to tell him that Xu Sheng was too much to handle.

“Then I will use the element of surprise,” Cao Xiu said.

To set up his little surprise, he ordered Zhang Pu to take 20,000 men and lie in wait to the south of Shiting (2,2). He then sent another 20,000 men to lie in wait to the north of Shiting.

“Tomorrow, I will lead 1,000 men to go challenge for combat,” Cao Xiu told his officers. “I will pretend to retreat and lure the enemy to the front of the hills to the north. When you hear an explosive, that is your signal. We will attack from three sides, and victory will be guaranteed.”

On the other side, Lu Xun was also counting on the element of surprise. He summoned his two deputy commanders, Zhu Huan (2) and Quan (2) Cong (2), and told them to each lead 30,000 men to swing around to the rear of Cao Xiu’s camp. Lu Xun, himself, meanwhile, would lead the main army and advance along the road in the center.
At dusk, the two Dongwu raiding parties set off. Around 9 o’clock that night, Zhu Huan arrived at the back of Cao Xiu’s camp, where he ran into one of the hidden armies that Cao Xiu had placed. This one was led by Cao Xiu’s officer Zhang Pu. But Zhang Pu didn’t realize that the men coming toward him were enemy troops, because he wasn’t expecting any enemies to approach from behind. So Zhang Pu rode up to ask who they were, but before he could open his mouth, Zhu Huan had already cut him down and scattered his men. Zhu Huan then started a fire to signal his comrades.

At the same time, the other Dongwu raiding party, led by Quan Cong, also arrived and they ran into the other ambush that Cao Xiu had set. The two sides scrunched, and Cao Xiu’s forces were routed and fled back toward their own camp. Zhu Huan and Quan Cong now swept in behind them from two sides, sending Cao Xiu’s men into disarray.

With his camp engulfed in chaos, Cao Xiu hurriedly got on his horse and fled. Meanwhile, the Dongwu vanguard Xu Sheng charged in from the main road with the bulk of the Dongwu army. Countless Wei soldiers were slaughtered, and the survivors had to ditch their armor so they could run fast enough to get away.

A panicked Cao Xiu was running for his life when suddenly, a battalion appeared from a backroad. But these were his men, led by his general Jia Kui. This set Cao Xiu’s mind at ease somewhat, but he was also embarrassed.

“I did not listen to you, and sure enough, I have walked into a defeat,” Cao Xiu said to Jia Kui.

“Commander, let’s leave this path quickly,” said Jia Kui, who was in no mood to gloat. “If the enemy blocks the road with logs and boulders, then we’re done for.”

So Cao Xiu hurried on ahead, while Jia Kui brought up the rear. And not being Cao Xiu, Jia Kui did a very smart thing. Whenever he came across areas with thick woods or precarious hills, he would set up a bunch of banners as decoys. When the pursuing Dongwu forces saw those banners poking out from behind the hills, they suspected an ambush and decided to give up the chase. That allowed Cao Xiu to
escape, but the invasion of Dongwu was a bust. Not only did Cao Xiu and Jia Kui have to retreat, but when Sima Yi, who was leading the third prong of this invasion, heard the news, he also decided to retreat.

On the Dongwu side, the victorious generals returned to camp loaded down with countless prisoners and captured equipment and pack animals. When they returned to their capital Wuchang (3,1), their lord Sun Quan was personally waiting for them outside the city, along with all the officials. Lu Xun received the tremendous honor of being allowed to ride back to the city under Sun Quan’s canopy. All the officers were rewarded and promoted.

As for Zhou Fang, whose ruse put everything in motion, Sun Quan told him, “You cut off your hair to ensure our success. What you have accomplished will go down in history!” He then bestowed a marquiship on Zhou Fang and threw a huge feast.

While they were celebrating, Lu Xun told Sun Quan, “Now that Cao Xiu has been crushed, the kingdom of Wei has been demoralized. You should send an envoy to the Riverlands and ask Zhuge Liang to attack them.” Sun Quan agreed and dispatched an envoy.

Now, as for Cao Xiu. Even though he managed to escape with his life, he lost basically everything else that he brought with him. He was so devastated by this defeat that by the time he returned to the Wei capital Luoyang, he had developed an ulcer on his back. Don’t ask me how a psychological blow can lead to a back ulcer. Anyway, his condition soon deteriorated, and Cao Xiu died before long.

Soon, Sima Yi returned with his army, and the officers asked him, “Commander Cao Xiu’s defeat was as much your responsibility as it was his. Why have you rushed back?”

“I expect that when Zhuge Liang hears of our defeat, he would try to capture the city of Chang’an,” Sima Yi told them. “Things are still tense in that region, so who would be able to relieve that siege? That’s why I returned.”
The other officers, however, were less than convinced by this explanation. Instead, they just figured Sima Yi returned because he was afraid, and they snickered as they left.

Meanwhile, the Dongwu envoy arrived in the Shu capital Chengdu, where he first bragged about how his kingdom had routed Cao Xiu and then asked that Shu launch an attack on Wei. The Shu emperor Liu Shan (4) was delighted and sent a message to Zhuge Liang, who was presently stationed in the region of Hanzhong. So we’re now in the fall of the year 228, and Zhuge Liang had built a strong, well-supplied army and was just itching to take another shot at Wei. So when he got this news, he immediately invited all his officers to a banquet to discuss another Northern expedition.

In the midst of this banquet, a strong gale suddenly swept in from the northeast, and it was so powerful that it snapped a pine tree in front of the banquet hall. If you’ve been paying attention in this podcast, then you know that this was a bad omen, and everyone was on edge. Zhuge Liang did a little divination and said, “This wind portends the loss of a top general!”

His officers weren’t too sure whether to believe this, and everyone got back to feasting. But suddenly, word came that the two sons of the general Zhao Yun had arrived to see Zhuge Liang.

Stunned, Zhuge Liang threw down his cup and cried, “General Zhao is no more!”

Momentarily, Zhao Yun’s sons entered. In between sobs, they told Zhuge Liang, “Our father died from illness around midnight last night.”

Stamping his foot, Zhuge Liang wept and said, “The kingdom has lost a pillar, and I have lost an arm!”

Everyone at the banquet wept, and yeah, I feel them. As those of you who have followed this podcast probably know, Zhao Yun was my favorite character in the novel. If the historical information on him wasn’t so scant, I would definitely do a supplemental episode on the guy. But as it is, I guess we’ll have to say farewell to him here. Whenever you see a list of the best Shu generals, he was always third
behind Guan Yu and Zhang Fei. But honestly, I would take him over the other two in a heartbeat. He was their equal in battle, and way smarter and more level-headed. If Liu Bei had a few more Zhao Yuns, I would wager he probably won’t have lost Jing Province. We could all use a few more Zhao Yuns on our team.

Anyway, Zhuge Liang now sent Zhao Yun’s sons to the capital to report the news to the emperor Liu Shan (4). Remember, Liu Shan owed a special debt to Zhao Yun, because it was Zhao Yun who saved him as an infant from the midst of Cao Cao’s giant army, and it was Zhao Yun who later saved Liu Shan again when his stepmom, aka Sun Quan’s little sister, tried to smuggle him back to Dongwu with her. So when Liu Shan heard the bad news, he immediately broke down.

“If not for him, I would have died in the chaos of battle as a child!” Liu Shan said as he wailed. He then posthumously named Zhao Yun the regent-marshal and bestowed on him a marquiship. Zhao Yun was to be honored with a fancy burial east of the Damask Screen Hills outside the capital. He would also have a temple erected in his honor, where sacrifices were to be offered year-round. Liu Shan also bestowed ranks on Zhao Yun’s two sons and charged them with keeping watch over their father’s grave.

And of course, let’s not forget the obligatory going-away poem for our great hero:

Tiger General from Changshan (2,1)
With the wit and courage to match Zhang and Guan!
His triumph at Hanshui (4,3) stands today;
His name at Dangyang (1,2) all acclaimed.
Twice he saved the baby prince
With a single mind he served his sire.
History honors those whom duty claims,
Conferring a glory that never wanes.

So another old favorite has bitten the dust, and yet history, and our story, keeps rolling along, and there was important business at hand. Liu Shan was informed that Zhuge Liang was ready to launch another invasion of Wei, so he asked the officials at court what they thought. But most of them advised against it. Just as Liu Shan was debating what to do, word came that Zhuge Liang had sent a memorial requesting permission to launch the campaign.

Now, much like the memorial that Zhuge Liang wrote before his first Northern expedition, this one was another of his masterful -- and lengthy -- writings. I’ll include a link to it in the show notes on the website. In short, it said:

“Your late father recognized that our kingdom and the kingdom of Wei cannot coexist, and that our kingdom cannot long endure if we’re holed up in this one single province. That’s why he charged me with continuing his unfinished business of reuniting the empire. Look, I’m no great talent. Even someone as brilliant as Cao Cao has suffered his share of defeats, so if you’re asking me to guarantee victory, I can’t do that. But what I do know is that we can’t just sit on our hands when the hour beckons us to take action. We can’t afford to drag this out. In just the past year that I’ve been garrisoned in Hanzhong, we have lost 70-some officers, including Zhao Yun, and more than a thousand of our elite troops. The longer we wait, the more depleted we become. So even though our kingdom is pressed for resources right now, that’s not going to get any better if we just wait around. Nobody can predict the future, but I will toil with the last ounce of my strength.”

After he read this memorial, Liu Shan was convinced, and he gave Zhuge Liang the go-ahead to launch his campaign. So Zhuge Liang mobilized 300,000 crack troops and sent Wei Yan to lead the
vanguard toward the key passage of Chencang (2,1). And remember, in the last episode, this was exactly
the route that Sima Yi expected Zhuge Liang to take if he were to launch another invasion.

Spies soon brought this intel to Sima Yi in the Wei capital. He informed the emperor Cao Rui, who
assembled his court to discuss how to respond. The supreme commander Cao Zhen said, “When your
servant was defending the region of Longxi (3,1) against the enemy, I accomplished little and failed
much, and I feel humiliated. I would like to redeem myself by leading an army to go capture Zhuge Liang.
I recently obtained a mighty warrior who wields a 60-pound saber, rides a stout horse, can pull a heavy
bow, and has three concealed throwing hammers that never miss. He is the equal of 10,000 men. His
name is Wang (2) Shuang (1). I would like to recommend him as the vanguard general.”

Intrigued by this recommendation, Cao Rui summoned this Wang (2) Shuang (1). He stood 6 foot 8,
had a dark face and yellow eyes, and possessed the waist of a bear and the back of a tiger.

“With such a warrior in my service, what need have I for concern?!” an impressed Cao Rui rejoiced.
He then gave Wang Shuang (1) a suit of golden armor, a fancy generalship, and command of the
vanguard. Cao Zhen was given 150,000 men, went to meet up with the generals Guo (1) Huai (2) and
Zhang He (2), and deployed the troops to defend key locations.

Meanwhile, the Shu army’s scouts returned from a reconnaissance mission to the passage of
Chencang (2,1) and told Zhuge Liang, “The enemy has already constructed a fortress at the mouth of
Chencang. It’s being defended by the general Hao (3) Zhao (1). The fortress is very well-fortified. It
would be easier to give up on that route and take another path through the Qi (2) Mountain.”

But Zhuge Liang was dead set on staying the course. “Directly to the north of Chencang lies Jieting
(1,2),” he said, invoking the name of the place that cost him his last campaign. “We must take this
fortress before we can advance.”
So he ordered the general Wei Yan to lead a siege on the fortress at Chencang. But after days of throwing his men at the fortress walls, Wei Yan returned to camp and told Zhuge Liang that it was impossible to sack the fort. But Zhuge Liang was in no mood for excuses, legit or otherwise. In fact, he wanted to execute Wei Yan for his failure.

Just then, a unit commander named Jin (4) Xiang (2) spoke up and said, “I am untalented, and I have yet to render any service in all the years that I have followed your excellency. But I am willing to go to Chencang and convince Hao (3) Zhao (1) to surrender without a fight.”

“How will you convince him?” Zhuge Liang asked.

“He and I are both natives of Longxi (3,1),” Jin (4) Xiang (2) replied. “We were childhood friends. I will go explain the situation to him, and he will surely surrender.”

Well it’s worth a shot, so Zhuge Liang sent Jin (4) Xiang (2) to the fort. Jin Xiang shouted from the foot of the fort and told the guards that he and their commander went way back. When Hao (3) Zhao (1) heard this, he let Jin Xiang in, met him at the top of the walls, and asked, “My old friend, what are you doing here?”

“I am serving as an adviser to Zhuge Liang,” Jin Xiang replied. “He treats me as an honored guest. He as sent me to come see you, sir, to relay a message.”

But Hao Zhao was in no mood for this. His face changed colors and he shot back, “Zhuge Liang is my kingdom’s nemesis! I serve Wei, you serve Shu. We each serve our own master. We may have been brothers once, but now we are mortal foes. Say no more. Please leave at once!”

Before Jin Xiang could get another word out, Hao Zhao had already gone back to the command tower, and the Wei soldiers kicked Jin Xiang out of the fort. Turning back, Jin Xiang saw Hao Zhao leaning against the railing of the wall.

“My brother, why do you mistreat me so?” Jin Xiang said as he pointed at Hao Zhao with his whip.
Hao Zhao replied, “Brother, you know the laws of Wei. I have received kindness from my kingdom, so I shall die in my duty. Save your breath. Go back to tell Zhuge Liang to hurry up and attack. I’m not afraid of him!”

So Jin Xiang slinked back to Zhuge Liang and told him that he didn’t even get a chance to make his pitch before Hao Zhao kicked him out. Zhuge Liang told him, “Go back and see Hao Zhao again and explain the situation to him.”

[Sigh] Okay. So Jin Xiang returned to the foot of the fort and asked to see Hao Zhao again. When Hao Zhao came back out to the command tower, Jin Xiang reined in his horse and shouted, “My brother, listen to my loyal advice. You are defending an isolated city. How can you resist a force of hundreds of thousands? If you don’t surrender now, you will regret it. Besides, you are turning your back on the Han and serving the traitors of Wei. Do you not know of the mandate of heaven? Can you not tell black from white? Please, think about it!”

But Hao Zhao became infuriated. Loading an arrow onto his bow, he pointed at his old friend and shouted back, “I stand by what I said before. Save your breath and leave at once so I don’t have to shoot you!”

When Jin Xiang reported this encounter to Zhuge Liang, Zhuge Liang was enraged.

“That scoundrel is too rude! How dare he presume that I don’t have the means to take his fort?!”

Zhuge Liang then asked a local how many men were inside the fort, and the man told him it was only about 3,000.

“How can such a tiny place resist me?” Zhuge Liang said with a smile. “Attack at once, before their reinforcements arrive!”
So the siege was back on. First, the Shu army built 100 assault towers, each one holding dozens of men, who were shielded by wooden planks. The soldiers all carried short ladders and ropes, ready to scale the fortress walls as soon as the drums rolled.

Watching from his command tower, Hao Zhao saw the assault towers and immediately ordered 3,000 men to make ready with their flaming arrows. As soon as the assault towers were within range, they were met with a torrent of flaming arrows. Now, surprisingly, Zhuge Liang had not foreseen this countermeasure. I guess he just assumed the enemy won’t know how to deal with his assault towers, so he marched them forward without a second thought. But in the blink of an eye, all the assault towers were on fire, and most of the soldiers inside burned to death. That, along with the shower of arrows and boulders, forced the Shu army to fall back.

“How dare you burn my assault towers?!” an enraged Zhuge Liang seethed. “Fine, I will use my battering rams!”

So that night, his troops made ready with the battering rams. The next day, they besieged the city again, but once again, Hao Zhao was ready for them. His men used long ropes to sling giant stones down on the Shu forces, smashing the battering rams.

Alright, we’ll try a third way then, Zhuge Liang thought. He ordered his troops to fill the fortress moat with dirt while the general Liao (4) Hua (4) and 3,000 men were tasked with digging a secret tunnel into the fort. But won’t you know it, Hao Zhao was on to them. He ordered his troops to dig a trench inside the fort that blocked the tunnel, so all that digging by Liao Hua and company was for naught.

So I gotta say, this Hao Zhao character is proving to be quite the impressive foe. I mean, when was the last time you saw Zhuge Liang so flummoxed by an opponent? Hao Zhao is treated as kind of an afterthought and just a secondary character in the novel, but here he was, giving Zhuge Liang all he could handle.
And to add to Zhuge Liang’s problems, while he was brooding in his camp, word came that the enemy’s reinforcements were approaching from the east, led by the Wei vanguard Wang Shuang (1). Zhuge Liang asked which officer wanted to go take on this enemy force. Wei Yan immediately volunteered, but was shot down.

“You’re the vanguard general; you cannot go out lightly,” Zhuge Liang said, waving off Wei Yan and asking for another volunteer. So a lieutenant commander stepped forward, and Zhuge Liang gave him 3,000 men. After that guy left, Zhuge Liang asked for another officer to go back him up. Another lieutenant commander volunteered, so Zhuge Liang gave him 3,000 men as well. He then backed his troops up a little ways from the fort, just in case the forces inside decided to come storming out while his troops were engaged with the enemy reinforcements.

So, you’ll notice that I didn’t bother to name either of the two lieutenant commanders who volunteered to go take on Wang Shuang. That’s because they were both meet a red shirt’s fate. Sure enough, neither of them lasted more than three bouts before Wang Shuang cut them down. Their men ran back to tell Zhuge Liang. Alarmed, Zhuge Liang decided he needed to send some guys with actual names, so he dispatched the veteran generals Liao Hua, Wang Ping, and Zhang Yi (2).

When those three generals faced off against Wang Shuang, Zhang Yi (2) was the first to take him on. They traded blows for a while without either one gaining the upperhand. Seeing this, Wang Shuang turned and fled, and Zhang Yi (2) gave chase.

“Don’t chase him!” Wang Ping shouted to his comrade, sensing deception afoot.

But by the time Zhang Yi turned around, a flying hammer from Wang Shuang had already struck him on his back. A wounded Zhang Yi slumped in his saddle as he rode off, with Wang Shuang hot on his tail. Wang Ping and Liao Hua hurriedly rescued their comrade, but Wang Shuang seized the momentum and routed them, inflicting heavy casualties.
When they returned to camp, Zhang Yi, who was spitting up blood after taking a hammer to the back, told Zhuge Liang, “Wang Shuang is unrivaled, and now he and his 20,000 troops have pitched camp outside Chencang and set up strong fortifications and defenses.”

So Zhuge Liang was now in a real jam. To see how he will deal with this problem, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!