

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 125.

So first, a quick progress update. By my count, we only have about 25 to 30 episodes left in the podcast. That'll still take us well into next year before we finish, but the end is definitely coming up on us, fast and furiously.

Unfortunately for Zhuge Liang, his second Northern expedition was proceeding at a much slower pace. In fact, he was stalled outside the first key point on his route, the fortress at the important passage of Chencang (2,1). Hao (3) Zhao (1), the Wei general overseeing the defense of this location, had handled everything Zhuge Liang threw at him. And then, he got backup, as the vanguard of the Wei forces sent to stop Zhuge Liang arrived. Their general, a mighty warrior named Wang Shuang (1), lived up to his billing. He killed two no-name officers that Zhuge Liang sent, and then wounded an actual named general.

A concerned Zhuge Liang now summoned his pet project, the officer Jiang Wei, and asked him if he had any ideas.

"Chencang has strong fortifications," Jiang Wei said. "Hao Zhao is staging a stiff defense, and now he has help from Wang Shuang. This is indeed an impossible place to take. We should leave a top general to pitch camp here. Dispatch another top general to guard against an attack from Jieting. Then lead the main army to attack the Qi Mountain. If we proceed in such and such a manner, we can capture Cao Zhen."

Zhuce Liang took Jiang Wei's suggestion. He ordered the officers Wang Ping and Li (3) Hui (1) to lead two armies to guard the backroads leading to Jieting. He also stationed Wei Yan at the head of a force that kept watch on Chencang. Then, Zhuge Liang set off along the backroads through the Xie (2) Gorge toward the Qi Mountain, with the general Ma Dai as his vanguard and the officers Guan Xing and Zhang Bao bringing up the rear.

While Zhuge Liang was getting stymied, the Wei supreme commander Cao Zhen was feeling mighty good about himself. He had gotten his butt kicked by Zhuge Liang when they faced off in the last campaign, and then Cao Zhen had to watch Sima Yi get all the credit for turning back Zhuge Liang. So this time, when he heard that his vanguard general Wang Shuang had slayed enemy officers and won a couple battles, Cao Zhen was ecstatic, and he ordered his officers to keep up a tight watch on all the key locations.

One day, the Wei pickets captured an enemy spy in the Xie (2) Gorge and took him to see Cao Zhen. This man knelt on the ground and said, "I am not a spy. I was coming to deliver important intelligence to you, general, but I got lost and was picked up by your men. Please, let's speak in private."

So Cao Zhen ordered the man be untied and then dismissed everyone else. This guy then told him, "I am Jiang Wei's confidant, here to deliver a secret letter from him."

As he spoke, this man took out a letter from under his shirt. The letter said:

"I, Jiang Wei, a deserter, offer a hundred prostrations and this letter to Supreme Commander Cao Zhen. I have long received my living from the kingdom of Wei and was sent to defend a border town. I have received great kindness and have no way to repay it. Previously, I fell for Zhuge Liang's scheme and had to find a way to survive a desperate situation. I have never forgotten my old kingdom! Fortunately for me, the Shu army has marched from the West, and Zhuge Liang does not doubt my loyalty. Commander, you should personally lead your army forward. If you encounter the enemy, pretend to retreat. I will start a fire in the rear of the enemy's army as the signal. First, we will burn the Shu army's provisions. Then, you turn your forces around and attack, and Zhuge Liang can be captured. I am not so much rendering service to the kingdom as I am atoning for my past offense. If you like this plan, send me your command right away."

When he finished reading this message, Cao Zhen rejoiced and said, "Heaven is on my side!" He rewarded the messenger handsomely and sent him back to tell Jiang Wei that the plan is on. He then shared the details of Jiang Wei's proposal with the officer Fei (4) Yao (4).

"Zhuge Liang is wiley, and Jiang Wei crafty," Fei (4) Yao (4) cautioned. "This could be a trick."

But Cao Zhen brushed off such concerns. "Jiang Wei was a man of our kingdom. He only surrendered to Shu because he had no choice. No need for doubts."

"Commander, you must not go lightly," Fei Yao pressed. "You should stay at camp. I will lead an army to go help Jiang Wei. If we succeed, then you may claim all the credit. If it really is a trick, then I will handle it."

Wait, so I can stay here, do nothing, let you take all the risk, and still get credit for it if we win? Well, why the heck not?! It's good to be the supreme commander. Cao Zhen happily OK'ed this plan, gave Fei Yao 50,000 men, and sent him toward Xie (2) Gorge. After traveling for a while, Fei Yao garrisoned his forces and sent out scouts. They reported back that there were Shu forces approaching from within the gorge. Fei Yao hurriedly pressed his troops forward to meet these enemies, just like Jiang Wei proposed. Before the two sides even got close enough to trade blows, however, the Shu forces fell back, and Fei Yao gave chase. Then the Shu forces turned around and looked like they were coming back for a fight, but just as the two sides were about to engage, the Shu soldiers ran away again. And for good measure, they did this a third time.

This act lasted until late afternoon of the following day. By that point, the Wei troops had gone without rest for a day and a night because they were constantly on guard against the enemy coming back again. Just as they felt secure enough to start settling in to make a meal, loud cries and the sound of drums and horns rose up all around as the Shu forces swept across the hillside. Where their banners parted, a four-wheel chariot rolled out, with Zhuge Liang seated on it.

Zhuge Liang demanded to speak with the commander of the Wei forces, so Fei Yao rode out to face him. When he saw Zhuge Liang from a distance, he was secretly rejoicing. He turned and told his men, "If the enemy advances, fall back. When you see a fire behind the hills, then turn around and charge, and there will be backup."

Fei Yao then galloped forth and shouted, "You have already lost once. Why have you come back?!"

"Tell Cao Zhen to come speak with me," Zhuge Liang said.

But Fei Yao scoffed. "Commander Cao is royalty. How can he be willing to meet with rebels?!"

That response didn't please Zhuge Liang. With one wave of his feather fan, two squadrons shot out, led by Ma Dai on the left, and Zhang Yi (2) on the right. The Wei army, just as planned, immediately fell back. Within 10 miles, they saw flames shoot up behind the Shu army, along with a chorus of loud cries.

That was Fei Yao's cue, so he turned his forces around and charged back. Now it was the Shu army's turn to fall back. Fei Yao led the way and charged toward the source of the cries. As he approached the fire, however, he was greeted by earth-shattering drums, horns, and battle cries as two enemy armies darted out, led by the Shu generals Guan Xing and Zhang Bao. At the same time, boulders and arrows rained down from the hillside. The Wei forces were routed. Recognizing a trap, Fei Yao quickly fled toward the valley. His troops were exhausted, and Guan Xing was hot on their tail. Countless Wei soldiers either got trampled or fell to their deaths.

Just as Fei Yao was running, he was cut off by another battalion, this one led by none other than Jiang Wei, whose fake surrender note set all this in motion.

"Dishonorable rebel!" Fei Yao cursed. "I was unfortunate enough to fall for your wicked tricks!"

Jiang Wei laughed and said, "My intent was to catch Cao Zhen, and we ended up with you by mistake. Surrender now!"

But Fei Yao refused to give up. Instead, he tried to fight his way through the canyon. But by now, the mouth of the canyon was a sea of fire, and from behind the Shu forces were catching up. Trapped, Fei

Yao slit his own throat. His soldiers chose not to follow his lead, and they all surrendered. Seizing on the momentum, Zhuge Liang pressed his army forward all the way to the foot of the Qi Mountain before stopping to set up camp. Zhuge Liang now rewarded Jiang Wei for his idea, but truth be told, they were after much bigger fish than one of Cao Zhen's subordinates. But a win is a win.

As for Cao Zhen, when he heard that Fei Yao had perished, he was filled with remorse and began to discuss with Guo Huai about falling back. Reports of the setback soon reached the Wei emperor Cao Rui, who was quite alarmed and immediately summoned Sima Yi.

"Cao Zhen has suffered casualties and the Shu forces have marched out of the Qi Mountain once again," Cao Rui said. "Do you have any idea how we can repel them?"

"I already have an idea to deal with Zhuge Liang," Sima Yi replied. "We won't even have to trouble our mighty army to make the Shu troops fall back. I once told your highness that if Zhuge Liang came back, he would try to take Chencang. That's why I stationed Hao (3) Zhao (1) there, and now my prediction has proven correct. If he enters our territory through Chencang, then it will be easy for him to transport his provisions. But fortunately, with Hao (3) Zhao (1) and Wang Shuang (1) defending that passage, Zhuge Liang does not dare to use that route to transport his grains. Instead, he is using the backroads, which make moving the provisions very difficult. In my estimate, the enemy only has enough provisions for a month, so it is to their advantage to fight quickly. Our troops should just defend. Your highness should send a decree ordering Cao Zhen to fortify all the key locations and not give battle. Within a month, the enemy will fall back. Then, we can attack, and Zhuge Liang will be captured."

Cao Rui, though, sounded a little less than impressed with this plan. "Since you have such keen foresight, why don't you personally lead an army to attack the enemy?" he asked.

"I am not looking out for my own safety," Sima Yi said. "I am trying to save our army to guard against Dongwu's Lu Xun. It won't be long before Sun Quan declares himself emperor. When he does, he will

worry that your highness would attack him, so he will try to stage a preemptive strike. That is why I want to have our forces on standby.”

Just as they were speaking, Cao Zhen’s report arrived, and Sima Yi said to Cao Rui, “Your highness should immediately send a messenger to caution Cao Zhen that whenever he pursues the enemy, he must be sure of their strength and not rush into an area, or he will fall into one of Zhuge Liang’s traps.”

So Cao Rui immediately dispatched an envoy to tell Cao Zhen, “Do not give battle. Focus on defense and wait for the enemy to retreat before attacking.” Now, Sima Yi escorted this messenger to the outskirts of the city, where he told the guy, “I am letting Commander Cao take the credit for this victory. When you see him, do not tell him that this plan was my idea. Just say that his highness has decreed that we must adopt a defensive posture. Whomever Commander Cao sends to pursue the enemy must be a cautious man. Do not send someone who is impatient.”

So the envoy went and delivered the order to Cao Zhen in his camp. Once the envoy left, Cao Zhen discussed this matter with the officers Guo (1) Huai (2) and Sun (1) Li (3). Guo Huai laughed and told him, “This must be Sima Yi’s suggestion.”

“How do you know?” Cao Zhen asked.

“This strategy shows a deep understanding of the way Zhuge Liang deploys his army,” Guo Huai explained. “The one who will be able to resist the Shu forces in the future will surely be Sima Yi.”

“But what if the Shu forces refuse to retreat? Then what?” Cao Zhen asked.

Guo Huai said, “We can send someone to tell Wang Shuang (1) to patrol the backroads. That will discourage the enemy from trying to resupply. Once their provisions have run out and they are forced to retreat, then we can attack them on the run and achieve total victory.”

Sun Li (3) now suggested another wrinkle.

“I will go to Qi (2) Mountain and pretend to be transporting grain. I will fill the carts with twigs and firewood soaked through with sulphur and saltpeter. I will send men to put out word that we are transporting grains from the Longxi (3,1) region. If the Shu forces are running low on provisions, they will no doubt come raid our carts. Then we will set the carts on fire and attack with hidden troops.”

“That’s brilliant!” Cao Zhen said with delight. So he ordered Sun Li to go carry out his plan while sending word to Wang Shuang, instructing him to make sure no enemy convoy dares to traverse the backroads. Meanwhile, Guo Huai led some troops to Ji (1) Gorge and Jieting and fortified all the key places. Cao Zhen then tapped two officers with distinguished pedigrees to lead his vanguard. One was Zhang Hu (3), the son of Zhang Liao (2), one of those illustrious officers who helped Cao Cao conquer his empire. The other was Yue (4) Chen (1), the son of another one of those officers, Yue (4) Jin (4). Zhang Hu (3) was named the vanguard general, and Yue (4) Chen (1) was named his lieutenant, and they were told to defend the first camp and not go out to fight.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang was operating out of his base in Qi (2) Mountain. Every day, he sent troops out to challenge for battle, but the Wei forces refused to come out. Zhuge Liang understood the situation, and he said to his officers, “The Wei troops are staying on the defensive and refusing to come out. They must figure that we have no provisions. Right now, we cannot transport our provisions through Chencang, and the backroads are treacherous. We have less than a month’s grain with us. What should we do?”

Just as they were discussing this problem, scouts came to report that they spotted enemy forces on the west side of the mountain, transporting a few thousand cartloads of grain, and that they were led by the officer Sun Li (3).

Zhuge Liang asked if anybody knew anything about this Sun Li, and someone present who was from the kingdom of Wei told him, “He once followed the emperor of Wei on a hunt in the mountains.

Suddenly a tiger charged toward the emperor, but Sun Li dismounted, pulled out his sword, and killed the beast. For that, he was promoted to senior commander. He is one of Cao Zhen's confidants."

Zhuge Liang smiled and said, "He must be trying to trick me since he knows I'm short on provisions. His carts must be loaded with fire-starting material. I have made a living using fire attacks. How can this trick fool me? If he knows that our forces are going to raid his carts, he will no doubt come attack our camp. We can turn his scheme against him."

So Zhuge Liang summoned the general Ma Dai and told him, "Take 3,000 troops to where the enemy's grain is stored. Do not go into their camp. Go upwind and start a fire. Once their carts catch on fire, they will come attack our camp."

He then dispatched the generals Ma Zhong and Zhang Yi (2) to lead 5,000 men each to surround the enemy's grain depot and attack. Once those three officers left, Zhuge Liang turned to Guan Xing and Zhang Bao and told them, "The enemy camp is connected to the main road. Tonight, once the fire starts in the western hills, the enemy will come raid our camp. You two should hide outside their camp. Once they have left their camp, move in and attack."

Next, he summoned the officers Wu (2) Ban (1) and Wu (2) Yi (4) and said, "You will each lead a battalion and lie in wait outside our camp. When the enemy comes, cut off their path of retreat."

With all the pieces in place, Zhuge Liang sat atop a high perch on the mountain and waited.

On the other side, the Wei army's scouts saw the Shu forces moving out as if they were coming to attack the fake supply train, so they immediately alerted Sun Li, and Sun Li sent word to Cao Zhen. Cao Zhen then sent word to his vanguard officers Zhang Hu (3) and Yue Chen (1), telling them, "Tonight, keep an eye out for fire in the western hills. The Shu forces will come to to help their men. When that happens, move out and do this and this."

So that night, Sun Li and his battalion were hiding in the western hills, waiting for the Shu forces to come into their trap. Around 9 o'clock, the Shu general Ma Dai and his 3,000 soldiers approached in silence. They saw the carts, which were arranged in the formation of a camp and decorated with decoy banners. A southwestern wind had started to blow. Ma Dai now ordered his men to swing over to the south side of this camp and start a fire. The flames soon engulfed all the carts and shot toward the heavens.

That was exactly what Sun Li had been waiting for. Figuring that the Shu forces had taken the bait, he and his battalion now sprang out of hiding and rushed toward the camp to attack. But no sooner had they arrived at the camp did the sound of drums and horns rise up behind them as two enemy forces, led by the generals Ma Zhong and Zhang Yi (2), arrived and trapped the Wei soldiers in the center. Sun Li was caught off guard, and just then, loud cries rose up from within his own ranks as another Shu battalion appeared amid the flames. This was Ma Dai, leading his troops out to attack from inside the camp. Under siege on three fronts and with the wind whipping up the fire, the Wei forces suffered heavy casualties. Sun Li led what remained of his tattered army and made a run for it amid the smoke and fire.

While this was going on, over in the Wei vanguard's camp, the officers Zhang Hu and Yue Chen (1) saw the fire and, just as they were instructed, they mobilized all their men and made a mad dash to go attack the Shu camp, thinking that they would catch the Shu forces off guard. But when they got there, the camp was completely empty. Now a lightly defended camp would have been good news for Zhang Hu and Yue Chen, but a completely undefended camp? Not so much.

Recognizing a trap, the two quickly ordered a retreat, but it was too late. The Shu officers Wu Ban and Wu Yi (4) charged out with two battalions and cut off their path of retreat. Zhang Hu and Yue Chen managed to fight their way out and ran back toward their camp. But as they approached, they were

greeted with a shower of arrows. The Shu generals Guan Xing and Zhang Bao, who were waiting outside the Wei camp, had taken the opportunity to stage their own raid, and the camp now belonged to them.

Routed, Zhang Hu and Yue Chen now limped toward Cao Zhen's camp for refuge. Outside the camp, they were joined by the defeated forces of Sun Li. The three of them slinked into the camp to tell Cao Zhen about the debacle. Only now did Cao Zhen follow his emperor's order to stay in and not give battle.

As for the Shu forces, they returned to camp victorious. Zhuge Liang now sent a secret order to the vanguard general Wei Yan, telling him to move out and fall back. This puzzled one of his advisers, the high counselor Yang (2) Yi (2).

"We just won a big victory and have demoralized the enemy. Why are we falling back?" he asked.

"Our army is short on provisions, so we need to engage in battle quickly," Zhuge Liang explained. "Right now, the enemy refuses to show itself, and that gets at our weakness. Even though they have suffered a temporary setback, they will be replenished by the Heartlands. If their light cavalry launches a sneak attack on our grain-transport route, then we will have no way home. Since the enemy has just suffered a defeat, they will not dare to make any moves against us. So it's best to catch them off guard and fall back unexpectedly. The only thing I'm worried about is Wei Yan's army. He is keeping Wang Shuang occupied at the passage of Chencang and cannot get away quickly. I have already sent him a secret plan to kill Wang Shuang. That will discourage the enemy from giving chase. Right now, we need to move out the rear columns first."

So that night, Zhuge Liang left only a few guys in the camp to keep up the drums and gongs that signaled the time, maintaining appearances while his forces moved out. In the span of one night, his whole army had disappeared, leaving only an empty camp behind.

While all this was going on, Cao Zhen was brooding in his camp over his latest embarrassment when he received a visit from Zhang He, the General of the Left.

“By imperial edict, I have come to await your orders,” Zhang He told Cao Zhen.

“Did you see Sima Yi before you left?” Cao Zhen asked.

Zhang He replied, “General Sima instructed me that if our forces win, the enemy will not retreat. But if our forces lose, then the enemy will definitely fall back. Have you sent scouts to check on the enemy since our army’s setback?”

Cao Zhen was like, you know, that’s darn good idea. Wish I had thought of that. So he sent out some scouts, and sure enough, they reported back that the Shu camp was completely empty except for a few dozen banners that were left as decoys. It looked like the Shu army had been gone for two days already. This intel made Cao Zhen even more regretful as he realized that he had missed a golden opportunity to strike.

Now, let’s hop on over to Chencang, where the Shu general Wei Yan was rushing back toward Hanzhong in the middle of the night after receiving his secret instructions from Zhuge Liang. Wei spies quickly brought word of this to the general Wang Shuang, who was camped outside the Wei fortress at Chencang. Wang Shuang immediately mobilized his troops and gave chase. After about 10 miles, he was closing in and he could see Wei Yan’s banner ahead in the distance.

“Wei Yan, stop where you are!” Wang Shuang shouted.

Shockingly, none of the Shu soldiers stopped when they heard that. Amazing how that never seems to work, isn’t it? While the Shu soldiers kept running, Wang Shuang spurred on his horse. Suddenly, the Wei soldiers behind him shouted, “Our camp is on fire! This might be a trap!”

Wang Shuang quickly reined in his horse and turned around. He saw flames shooting toward the sky in the direction of his camp, so he hurriedly ordered a retreat. As they were passing a hill on the right, a

rider suddenly darted out from the woods, shouting, “Here is Wei Yan!” Wang Shuang was caught off guard, and before he could react, Wei Yan’s blade flashed, and Wang Shuang fell dead to the ground. Wang Shuang’s troops, who were already wary of an ambush, now scattered. As it turns out, Wei Yan only had 30 riders with him, but with the enemy on the run, they were able to casually fall back toward Hanzhong.

So what happened here was that Wei Yan, on Zhuge Liang’s instructions, had stayed hidden with those 30 riders near Wang Shuang’s camp. When Wang Shuang left the camp to chase Wei Yan’s army, the 30 guys went into his camp to start a fire. Then, they hid along the roadside and waited for Wang Shuang to come back, whereupon they surprised him, allowing Wei Yan to cut him down with ease. When Wei Yan arrived in Hanzhong, Zhuge Liang welcomed him and threw a banquet to celebrate.

Back in Wei territory, the general Zhang He tried to pursue the Shu forces, but considering the enemy had a two-day head start, that was an exercise in futility. So Zhang He had no choice but to return to camp. At the same time, word arrived from Chencang that Wang Shuang had been killed. This news grieved Cao Zhen greatly, to the point that he fell ill and had to return to the capital to recover. So he left the generals Guo Hua, Sun Li, and Zhang He to defend various points on the route to the key city of Chang’an.

So that concluded Zhuge Liang’s second incursion into Wei territory. Like the first one, he had some success, but ultimately came away empty-handed. You know he won’t just leave it at that, what with the reunification of the empire being his life’s goal and all. To see if the third time will be the charm, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!