

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 129.

Last time, Zhuge Liang had just showed up Sima Yi, first by besting him in a competition to see who can build the better battle formation, then with an outright butt-whooping on the battlefield. Sima Yi lost most of his army and decided to hide in his camp on the south bank of Wei River.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang returned victoriously to his base at Qi Mountain, but there was an unpleasant piece of business awaiting his attention. A new supply of grains arrived from the senior official Li (3) Yan (2). But the guy that Li Yan (2) sent to escort the supplies, an officer named Gou (3) An (1), had a little too much to drink along the way, and the convoy ended up being 10 days late. This infuriated Zhuge Liang.

“Provisions have always been crucial to our army,” he scolded Gou (3) An (1). “Even being three days late would warrant execution. You were late by 10 days! What do you have to say for yourself?!”

Zhug Liang then ordered the guards to execute Gou An, but his adviser Yang (2) Yi (2) intervened.

“Gou An is in the service of Li Yan. He is responsible for transporting money and grains out of the Riverlands. If you kill him, then no one will dare to escort grain again.”

Zhug Liang was convinced to spare Gou An’s life, but Gou An did not get off scot free. He kept his head, but he received 80 strokes. Naturally, he held a grudge, and that grudge drove him to desert that night, and he went stright to the Wei camp to surrender.

When he told Sima Yi why he had come, Sima Yi said, “That may be so, but Zhuge Liang is crafty, so I can’t trust you. Now, if you can do something really important for me, then I will ask the emperor to make you a top general.”

Gou An was all too eager to please, so Sima Yi gave him his mission. “Go back to Chengdu and spread rumors that Zhuge Liang is complaining about his lord and will declare himself emperor sooner or later, so that your lord will summon Zhuge Liang back to the capital.”

So Gou An did exactly that, passing along a lie to a eunuch at the Shu court that Zhuge Liang was getting too full of himself and will usurp the throne one of these days. The eunuch, naturally, rushed this intel to the Shu emperor Liu Shan (4), who was shocked and wondered what he should do. The eunuch suggested that he recall Zhuge Liang and strip him of command of the army to avoid trouble. Not being the brightest candle in the palace, Liu Shan decided that was the thing to do. That day at court, he handed down a decree to recall Zhuge Liang.

The senior official Jiang (2) Wan (3) asked, "His excellency has achieved one victory after another since he set out on this campaign. Why is your highness recalling him?"

"I have an important secret matter that must be discussed with the prime minister in person," Liu Shan replied.

So the envoy arrived at Zhuge Liang's base at Qi Mountain and read the decree. Zhuge Liang immediately knew what was up. He looked skyward and sighed.

"Our lord is young. There must be wicked officials around him. Why else would he recall me when I am just about to accomplish something? If I don't return, then I would be disobeying my lord. But if I obey his order and retreat, we may never get this opportunity again."

In the end, Zhuge Liang was too loyal an official to disobey his emperor, so retreat it was. But the officer Jiang Wei raised a logistical issue.

"If Sima Yi attacks us while we are on the retreat, how should we counter?" he asked.

"We will retreat in five detachments," Zhuge Liang said. "We will leave this camp today. For every thousand men we have, dig 2,000 fire pits. Tomorrow, dig 3,000 fire pits for every thousand men, and the day after that, 4,000. Increase the number of fire pits every day during our retreat."

This strategy puzzled the adviser Yang Yi (2), who asked, "I've heard of the great strategist Sun (1) Zi (3) increasing his troop numbers while decreasing the number of fire pits to deceive the enemy. But why is your excellency digging more fire pits while you are retreating?"

“Sima Yi is adept at the art of war,” Zhuge Liang explained. “When he finds out that we are retreating, he will pursue us. But he will be wary of an ambush, so he will count the number of fire pits in our old camps to see how many men we have. When he sees that we have more fire pits every day and they are not sure whether our forces are really gone, they will not dare to chase us. That way, we can retreat gradually and not have to worry about casualties.”

Meanwhile, after sending Gou An on his mission of subterfuge, Sima Yi was just waiting for the Shu army to be recalled, and then he would attack them on the retreat. One day, while he was pacing, he got word that the Shu camp was empty. Now, Sima Yi knew how crafty Zhuge Liang was, so he wasn't about to rush off on a chase. Instead, he rode to the abandoned enemy camp with 100-some men. There, he had the men count the number of fire pits and then returned to camp.

The next day, they went to the next abandoned camp and counted the fire pits there, and his men reported that the numbers had increased one fold.

“I knew Zhuge Liang was up to something,” Sima Yi told his officers. “And sure enough, he has increased the number of his troops. If I give chase, I will fall into his trap. We should fall back and draw up another plan.”

And so while Sima Yi and his troops fell back, confident that they had eluded one of Zhuge Liang's snares, Zhuge Liang and company returned to Chengdu without losing a single man. It wasn't until later that Sima Yi found out from some locals what Zhuge Liang had done.

“Zhuge Liang pulled off an old trick and pulled one over on me,” he lamented with a sigh. “I am not his equal in tactics!”

But still, despite one defeat after another, and the death of one of their commanders, the Wei army had fended off another invasion from Zhuge Liang, and they returned to Chang'an.

Now, as for Zhuge Liang, after retreating to his base in Hanzhong, he rewarded his troops and then set off for the capital Chengdu. He went straight to court to see the emperor Liu Shan.

“Your old servant had marched out from Qi Mountain and was about to take Chang’an when your highness suddenly recalled me,” Zhuge Liang said. “What was the emergency?”

Now, you figured that if you were going to recall your top official from the battlefield on the brink of a significant victory, you would have come up with some kind of reasonable explanation for why. And it’s not like the trip the front lines back to the capital was just a day trip, so Liu Shan had all the time in the world to come up with a reason, any reason. But, instead, he had no answer ready. Like I said, not the brightest candlestick in the palace.

After a long pause, Liu Shan finally said, “I had not seen you in a long time and missed you, so I summoned you back. There was no other reason.”

Sigh. Really? That was the best you can do?

“That is not your highness’s true intent,” Zhuge Liang said. “Some wicked official must have spread lies saying I’m harboring ulterior motives”

To this, Liu Shan had no answer either, so Zhuge Liang continued. “Your servant received tremendous kindness from the First Emperor and have sworn to repay him at all costs. But how can I wage war on the rebels when there is treachery within?”

Called out for his mistake, Liu Shan said, “I listened to a eunuch and recalled you. Only now do I understand, and I regret it tremendously!”

So, this was no small thing, for an emperor to apologize to a minister, in the presence of other court officials no less. It just goes to show how much sway Zhuge Liang held. He now questioned all the eunuchs and found out that it was the officer Gou An who started the rumor. But when he dispatched men to go arrest Gou An, he found out that the guy had already snuck off to the kingdom of Wei.

While Gou An was safely out of Zhuge Liang's reach, the other offenders were not. The eunuch who brought the rumor to Liu Shan was executed, and the rest of the lot were all kicked out of the palace. Zhuge Liang then gave a severe tongue-lashing to the senior officials Jiang (2) Wan (3) and Fei (4) Yi (1) for not doing a better job advising the emperor, and the two wholeheartedly admitted they had fallen down on the job.

This done, Zhuge Liang took his leave and returned to Hanzhong, where he ordered the official Li Yan to move provisions on ahead while Zhuge Liang assembled his staff to discuss another campaign.

The adviser Yang Yi now said, "On our previous expeditions, our forces were inadequate and our provisions insufficient. What if this time, we split our forces into two and set a time limit of three months. We have 200,000 men. Let's take only 100,000 of them out through Qi Mountain, camp there for three months, then rotate in the other 100,000. That way, we would always have fresh troops, and we can advance on the Heartlands gradually."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Zhuge Liang said. "The invasion of the Heartlands is not a short-term project. Your suggestion is a plan for the long haul."

And so Zhuge Liang ordered his army to be divided into two forces, and each would be in the field for 100 days before being rotated back from the front. In the year 231, Zhuge Liang set out once again for the North, his fifth expedition, if you are keeping count.

When word of this invasion reached the Wei capital, the Wei emperor Cao Rui quickly huddled with Sima Yi, who said, "No that Cao Zhen is dead, I would like to do all that I can to wipe out the rebels and repay your kindness."

Cao Rui appreciated this and held a feast to send Sima Yi off. The next day, urgent reports arrived from the front, so Sima Yi set out, with the emperor going outside the capital to see him off. Sima Yi

then headed to Chang'an and assembled various armies from the region to discuss how to repel the latest Shu invasion.

The veteran general Zhang He said, "I am willing to lead an army to go defend the cities of Yongcheng (1,2) and Meicheng (2,2) and repel the enemy."

Sima Yi, though, had something else in mind. "My front column cannot match Zhuge Liang's numbers. Splitting our forces is not a plan for victory. Instead, I will leave some troops to defend Shanggui (4,1) and move the rest toward Qi Mountain. Are you willing to serve as the vanguard?"

Zhang He was delighted with this assignment. "I have always been loyal and wanted to do all I can to repay the kingdom. I only regret not having met someone who recognized my talents. Now that you have entrusted me with this important assignment, I shall never decline."

So Sima Yi appointed Zhang He to lead the vanguard and left the general Guo Huai to oversee the defense of the various parts of the region, and everyone else set off for Qi Mountain. Scouts soon reported that Zhuge Liang was marching his main army toward Qi Mountain again, and that his vanguard generals Wang Ping and Zhang Yi (2) had gone through the passage at Chencang and were now on their way to Xie Gorge.

"Since Zhuge Liang is marching forward, he will surely harvest the wheat from the fields in the area to provision his army," Sima Yi said to Zhang He. "You go pitch camp at Qi Mountain. Guo Huai and I will patrol the counties around the area of Longxi (3,1) to prevent the enemy from harvesting the wheat."

So Zhang He headed to Qi Mountain with 40,000 men, while Sima Yi led the main army and headed to Longxi.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang had set up camp at Qi Mountain, but he also noticed Wei forces on the bank of the Wei River.

“That must be Sima Yi,” he said. “Right now we are in need of grain. I have sent one messenger after another to tell Li Yan to send us provisions, but they haven’t arrived yet. The wheat in the nearby area should be ripe. We can send troops to harvest it in secret.”

Oh, and by the way, those wheat fields in the area? Yeah, they most assuredly belonged to somebody, so let’s make no mistake about what Zhuge Liang was doing here: Taking the locals’ grain to feed his army.

So Zhuge Liang left four generals to guard base camp and headed to a town called Lucheng (3,2). The governor there was familiar with Zhuge Liang’s reputation, so he promptly flung the gates open and surrendered. Zhuge Liang made nice with him and asked him about the wheat. The governor told him that the wheat in the surrounding fields was indeed ripe. So Zhuge Liang left a couple officers to defend the town while he led his army toward the fields. But the front of the column soon reported back that Sima Yi was in the area with his army.

“He must have figured that I would be coming to harvest the wheat,” Zhuge Liang said with alarm.

But of course, Zhuge Liang being Zhuge Liang, he had a plan. He immediately went and took a bath and changed clothes. Wait, what? Well, let’s just roll with it and where he’s going with this.

Nice and refreshed, Zhuge Liang had his men roll out three identical four-wheel chariots, all equipped identically. Apparently he had these made in advance while he was still in Shu. Now why would you have three backup chariots with you? The only thing I can figure is that Zhuge Liang puts a lot of mileage on them, because I cannot imagine anyone saying, “Hey you know what, I should pack three extra chariots with me just in case I need to harvest some wheat along the but have to trick the enemy first.”

So anyway, Zhuge Liang now ordered the officer Jiang Wei to lead 1,000 men to defend his chariot, along with 500 men with drums. He stashed this squadron behind the city of Shanggui (4,1). Then, he set

up two more squadrons, also each with 1,000 soldiers, 500 drummers, and a chariot. The one on the left was led by the general Ma Dai, and the one on the right was led by Wei Yan. Then, to each chariot he assigned 24 men who were dressed in black and barefoot, with their hair hanging down, each wielding a sword in one hand and a seven-star flag in the other. All this ready, he gave Jiang Wei, Ma Dai, and Wei Yan their instructions and send them off.

Next, Zhuge Liang rounded up 30,000 men outfitted with sickles and ropes and told them to prepare to go harvest the wheat. He then selected 24 strong men and dressed them like the guys accompanying the other chariots. He also had the officer Guan Xing dress up as a divine general. Then, with Guan Xing leading the way and the 24 men flanking his chariot, Zhuge Liang set off for the Wei camp.

The Wei scouts soon caught sight of Zhuge Liang and his entourage, and they were taken aback. They weren't quite sure if they were seeing men or ghosts, so they rushed back to tell Sima Yi. Sima Yi personally came out to take a look and wondered to himself, "What is Zhuge Liang up to now?"

So he called up 2,000 men and told them, "Go bring me that chariot and everyone with it." The soldiers set off immediately and raced toward Zhuge Liang's entourage. When he saw them coming, Zhuge Liang told his men to turn around and slowly retreat toward their camp. The Wei soldiers spurred on their horses and gave chase, but as a light chilly wind blew and an icy mist closed in, something freaky happened. No matter how hard they rode, they didn't seem to be making up any ground on Zhuge Liang's entourage.

Shocked, the Wei soldiers pulled up and chattered amongst themselves about what's going on. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang noticed that his pursuers had stopped, so he told his men to hold up, turn his chariot around, and sit down facing the enemy. Seeing this, the Wei soldiers, after some hesitation, decided to give it another go. But as they rode forth, Zhuge Liang and his men once again turned and



retreated slowly. This pursuit went on for another 6 or 7 miles, with the same results. And the Wei soldiers were now dumbstruck.

And now, Zhuge Liang decided to showboat a little bit. He told his men to turn his chariot around and pull it backward, so that he could look at the dumbfounded expressions on his pursuers' faces as he retreated. The Wei soldiers were just about to start chasing again when Sima Yi arrived with an army.

"Zhuge Liang is adept at wizardry," he told his men. "He is using the technique of foreshortening the land from the divine texts. Do not give chase."

So Sima Yi and his troops turned and were just about to go back to camp when suddenly, the sound of drums rose up from their left as a squad of enemies appeared. Sima Yi quickly directed his men to prepare for battle. But they saw in the enemy ranks 24 people with hair hanging down and bare feet, clad in black and wielding swords. They were escorting a four-wheel chariot, and seated on it was none other than Zhuge Liang, dressed in his usual attire.

The sight of his foe stunned Sima Yi. "We just saw Zhuge Liang ahead of us and couldn't catch him even though we chased him for 20 miles. How could he be here now?!" he wondered aloud.

Before he finished speaking, more battle drums starting rolling on his right flank as another Shu force arrived, and just like the other one, this one also featured a four-wheel chariot with Zhuge Liang and an entourage of 24 guys, dressed just like the other two groups. By now, Sima Yi was thoroughly spooked.

"These must be supernatural troops!" he told his men.

Of course, that's not exactly the kind of thing you tell your troops if you want to keep their fighting spirit up. The Wei soldiers now had no desire to take on the enemy and just ran. While they were running, another squad of enemy forces arrived, and at their head was another four-wheeled chariot with another Zhuge Liang. Sima Yi was totally weirded out, and he and his men sprinted toward the city of Shanggui (4,1). Once inside, they barred the door behind them and caught their breath.

While all this was going on, the 30,000 soldiers that Zhuge Liang had sent out to harvest the fields were busy at work. All the wheat in the field was soon cut, bundled, and transported to the town of Lucheng (3,2) to be dried.

Three days later, Sima Yi saw that the Shu forces had retreated, and he finally got up enough courage to send his army out to scout the area. They captured a single Shu soldier and brought him to see Sima Yi. The man told Sima Yi that he was one of the Shu soldiers who was harvesting the wheat, and that he had lost his horse and was therefore captured.

“Who were those supernatural troops we saw before?” Sima Yi asked.

“None of the three hidden forces was led by Zhuge Liang,” the soldier told him. “They were led by the officers Jiang Wei, Ma Dai, and Wei Yan. Each only had 1,000 men escorting the chariot and 500 drummers. The real Zhuge Liang was the one that came to lure your army out.”

When he heard this, Sima Yi looked up and sighed. “Zhuge Liang’s schemes are truly divine!”

Just then, Sima Yi’s deputy commander Guo Huai dropped by and told him, “I have heard that the Shu forces are few in number. They are currently preparing the wheat in Lucheng (3,2). We can attack them.”

Sima Yi mentioned Zhuge Liang’s little show a few days earlier, but Guo Huai laughed and said, “He could only fool us once. Now that we’re on to him, what is there to worry about? I will lead an army to attack the rear of the town while you attack the front. Lucheng will be ours, and Zhuge Liang can be captured.”

Sima Yi agreed, and they set out with two armies. Meanwhile, in Lucheng, Zhuge Liang was overseeing the preparation of the harvested wheat. Suddenly, he summoned his officers and told them, “Tonight, the enemy will come attack the town. The wheat fields to the east and west of the town are good places for an ambush. Who dares to go?”

Four generals -- Jiang Wei, Wei Yan, Ma Zhong, and Ma Dai -- all stepped forward. Zhuge Liang sent them out with 2,000 men each to lie in wait in the four corners outside the town. Zhuge Liang then personally led 100-some men out of the town to lie in wait as well.

As darkness fell, Sima Yi's army approached the town. He told his men, "If we attack during the day, they will be prepared. We should attack the town tonight. This town's walls are low and its moat is shallow. It will be easy to sack."

So the Wei forces garrisoned outside the town and waited until around 8 o'clock that night. By then, the Wei general Guo Huai had arrived with reinforcements, so they now combined their forces. As a drum rolled, they surrounded the town. But they were immediately greeted with a barrage of arrows, keeping the Wei soldiers at bay.

Just then, a string of signal explosives went off in the middle of the Wei army. All the men were thrown into a panic as nobody knew where the enemy was coming from. When Guo Huai ordered some men to go search the nearby wheat fields, they saw flames shooting up in four directions. Amid earth-shattering cries, four detachments of Shu forces charged out. The gates to the town were also thrown wide open as the Shu soldiers inside came pouring out to attack. This onslaught killed countless Wei soldiers and sent Sima Yi scurrying. Sima Yi ran to the top of a hill, where he managed to regroup his men and hold the hill. His officer Guo Huai also joined him and held the line on the back of the hill. Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang returned to the town in victory and ordered four generals to set up camp at the four corners of the town.

Guo Huai now told Sima Yi, "We have been in a long faceoff against the enemy and haven't been able to repel them. And today's defeat cost us another 3,000 men. If we don't do something soon, it will be hard to defeat them."

Sima Yi was like, uh yeah, I know. But what should we do?

“We can summon our forces from the region to join us in an attack,” Guo Huai said. “I can lead an army to launch a sneak attack on the Saber Pass so as to cut off the enemy’s retreat and their supply route. Their forces will fall into chaos, and that will be our opportunity to destroy them.”

Sima Yi agreed and sent messengers to nearby strongholds to call up reinforcements. Within a day, the general Sun Li (3) arrived with said reinforcements, and Sima Yi sent him to go meet up with Guo Huai and attack the Saber Pass.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Liang had been garrisoned in the town of Lucheng (3,2) for a while without any movement from the Wei forces. So he summoned the officers Jiang Wei and Ma Dai and told them, “The enemy is guarding their strongholds in the hills and refusing to fight us. They must suspect that we have run out of food, and they must be staging a sneak attack on the Saber Pass to cut off our supply route. You will each lead 10,000 men to go hold down the key points. When the enemy sees that we are prepared, they will fall back.”

Once those two guys left, the adviser Yang (2) Yi (2) brought something else to Zhuge Liang’s attention.

“Your excellency had ordered that the troops would be rotated off the front lines every hundred days,” he said. “That time is up, and our reserves from Hanzhong are already on their way and the paperwork has already arrived. All that remains is for the 40,000 on the front to be swapped with the 40,000 reserves.”

Zhuce Liang ordered the army to go ahead with the swap, so his men all began packing for the journey home. But suddenly, word arrived that the Wei general Sun Li (3) was leading 200,000 men to attack the Saber Pass, their way home. What’s more, Sima Yi was personally coming to attack Lucheng (3,2). This intel sent shockwaves through the ranks of the Shu army.

To see how Zhuge Liang will handle this mess, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!