

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 132.

Last time, Zhuge Liang invented the wheelbarrow. Except he called his creations wooden oxens and gliding horses, and he used them to move grain. But it didn't take long for Sima Yi to catch on and he decided to do some corporate espionage. Well, actually it was more like a corporate smash and grab. He sent some troops to ambush one of Zhuge Liang's convoys and steal some of these contraptions. He then had his own craftsmen take them apart and reverse-engineer them, thus flooding the wheelbarrow market with a bunch of made-in-China knockoffs, which he began to use to transport his own grains.

While Sima Yi was busy assimilating foreign technology, the Shu general whose convoy was ambushed ran back to camp to tell Zhuge Liang what happened. But far from being angry, Zhuge Liang was delighted.

"I was hoping he would steal them," he said with a smile. "I may have lost a few wooden oxens and gliding horses, but soon our army will gain plenty of provisions."

Huh? His officers weren't quite following, but that's how Zhuge Liang preferred it. He now told the general Wang Ping to take 1,000 men disguised as the enemy and sneak over to the northern plain under the cover of darkness. Once there, they were to travel to the enemy's supply route under the guise of a convoy, and then they were supposed to attack a real convoy and take their wooden oxens and gliding horses, and then head back across the northern plain. Now, of course, when the Wei forces find out about this, they're more than likely going to give chase, especially since it's not like these wheelbarrows could just fly down the road. They only go six or seven miles day, remember. So Zhuge Liang told Wang Ping that if the enemy catches up, he was do X, Y, and Z.

Next, he handed out instructions to seven other officers, and they all snapped to.

So, the next day, over on the northern plain, a Wei convoy was minding its own business when word came from the men in the front that they had encountered another convoy. The officer commanding

the convoy sent someone to check it out, and they reported back that it was indeed their own men. So the commanding officer dropped his guard and proceeded to merge his convoy with the one up ahead. But suddenly, a loud cry rang out from the ranks, and within his own ranks, a slaughter broke out, accompanied by the loud shout, "The Shu general Wang Ping is here!" The real Wei soldiers were caught off guard and most were cut down, including the commanding officer. While the rest scattered, Wang Ping and his men seized the wooden oxens and gliding horses and turned them toward the Shu camp.

While Wang Ping and company were ambling along in the world's slowest getaway, the remnants of the Wei convoy ran to their camp on the northern plain, where they told the general Guo Huai what happened. Guo Huai immediately mobilized his troops to go take back their supplies. Wang Ping saw them approaching in the distance, and he and his men promptly abandoned their new prize. But, not before they reached into the mouths of these wooden oxens and gliding horses and gave their tongues a twist.

Moments later, Guo Huai and his men arrived on the scene. The Shu soldiers were already running, and Guo Huai gave a little perfunctory pursuit to make sure they stayed gone. He then told his men to bring the wooden oxens and gliding horses back to camp. But, umm, we have a problem. These things won't move anymore. They were just sitting on the road where they were abandoned, and no matter how much the Wei soldiers tried to coax them along, the contraptions refused to budge.

Just as a stumped Guo Huai was scratching his head, the sound of drums and horns suddenly shook the sky, and loud cries rose up as two squadrons of Shu forces arrived. They were led by the generals Wei Yan and Jiang Wei. At the same time, the army led by Wang Ping turned around to join the attack. This three-prong assault sent Guo Huai scurrying. So now the wheelbarrows belonged to Shu once again. Wang Ping told his men to now give the tongues of the contraptions another twist, and whatdoyaknow, they started moving again, and the Shu forces slowly set off again for home base. So yeah, Zhuge Liang

built a secret hand brake into these machines, and Sima Yi's craftsmen did just a bit too fine job copying the design plank for plank.

Seeing the wooden oxens and gliding horses on the move once again, Guo Huai was just about to lead his troops in another pursuit when suddenly, they spotted smoke rising up from behind a hill. Momentarily, a group of about 500 showed up, and these guys looked like soldiers from heaven above. These guys all held a flag in one hand and a sword in the other. They seemed to have the heads of demons and the bodies of wild animals, and their faces were an array of colors. This group of cosplayers now escorted the wheelbarrows and they cruised off into the distance.

"They must have help from the gods!" a stunned Guo Huai said. And of course, telling your troops that the enemy has divine assistance is not exactly a morale booster, and the Wei soldiers lost all desire to give chase. But of course, this was another of Zhuge Liang's tricks. He had the general Zhang Yi (2) and 500 men dress up like soldiers from heaven, with the expressed intent to spook any Wei forces trying to chase down this convoy.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi had heard about the attack on the convoy and Guo Huai's defeat, so he personally led a relief force to come help. But along the way, they were greeted by the sound of an explosive, and two detachments of Shu soldiers charged out from hiding, their cries making the earth tremble. These troops were led by the generals Zhang Yi (4) and Liao Hua, who had been waiting for Sima Yi on Zhuge Liang's orders.

Sima Yi's men were thrown into chaos and scattered. Sima Yi himself fled into some woods, with Liao Hua hot on his tail. Soon, Liao Hua had closed to within striking distance. At that very moment, Sima Yi made a sharp turn around a tree just as Liao Hua's saber came crashing down. The saber ended up lodged in the trunk of the tree instead of Sima Yi's neck, and by the time Liao Hua managed to dislodge it, Sima Yi had fled out of the woods.

Liao Hua now resumed his chase, but he saw no sign of his prey. But he did see a golden helmet lying on the ground to the east of the woods. He grabbed the helmet and continued eastward. But that tricky Sima Yi had pulled one over on him. Sima Yi had thrown his helmet to the east of the woods, while he rode west. The misdirection play worked, and Liao Hua came up empty. After traveling eastward for a while without any sign of Sima Yi, Liao Hua turned around and returned to camp with his comrades.

By now, the Shu forces had already escorted the captured wooden oxens and gliding horses back to camp. This haul netted them quite a bit of grain. Liao Hua then presented Sima Yi's helmet, which earned him top merit for the day. So everybody was happy, right? Well, not quite. Apparently Wei Yan was rather butthurt over Liao Hua getting top merit, and he grumbled about it. Word of this got back to Zhuge Liang, who just pretended that he didn't hear anything. Is this foreshadowing? Oh you bet.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi managed to escape back to his camp, and he was brooding over getting played so thoroughly by Zhuge Liang. Suddenly, an envoy from his emperor arrived, informing him that the kingdom of Dongwu had launched a three-prong invasion on Wei, but that the emperor was on it and that Sima Yi's orders were to stay on the defensive and not give battle. So Sima Yi fortified his defenses and refused to go out.

So now, let's jump over to the other side of the empire and check in on that invasion by Dongwu. The Wei emperor Cao Rui mobilized three forces to meet the three-pronged attack. He personally led one of the forces with the veteran official Man (2) Chong (3) to relieve the siege on the key city of Hefei (2,2).

Man Chong led the vanguard to the mouth of Lake Chao (2), where he saw countless enemy warships and banners on the eastern shore. He went to see Cao Rui and said, "The Wu forces will not be on guard because they figure we are fatigued from our long journey. We should raid their naval camp tonight. Victory is assured."

Cao Rui agreed, so that night, two detachments of Wei forces, numbering 5,000 each, set out, with one attacking from the mouth of the lake and the other attacking along the eastern shore. Around 9 o'clock that night, they converged on the Dongwu naval camp and crashed into the enemy's ranks. The Dongwu forces were indeed unprepared, and they fled without a fight. The Wei forces now set the whole place on fire, reducing countless warships, grains, and weapons to ashes. The commander of the Dongwu forces, Zhuge Jin, was forced to flee with his men.

The next day, word of this defeat reached the Dongwu supreme commander Lu (4) Xun (4). He told his officers, "I will write a letter to our lord to request that he call off the siege on another city to come cut off the enemy's path of retreat. I will then attack them from the front so that they would be under siege on both ends and can thus be defeated in one fell swoop."

Everybody thought that was a good idea, so Lu Xun wrote a memorial to Sun Quan and dispatched a soldier to deliver it. Alas, that courier got caught by the enemy's pickets, and they brought him to see the Wei emperor Cao Rui. After reading the letter that the courier was carrying, Cao Rui was impressed.

"Lu Xun is truly insightful!" he sighed.

But that insight was not going to do Lu Xun much good now. Cao Rui had the courier locked up and then told his troops to be on guard against enemy forces trying to sneak around to their rear. So, so much for that plan.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Jin, the leader of the newly defeated Dongwu army, had problems. Not only was he still licking his wounds from his defeat, many of his soldiers were also stricken by pestilence amid the summer heat. So Zhuge Jin sent a letter to Lu Xun, suggesting that maybe they should call off this invasion and go home. When Lu Xun read the letter, though, he told the messenger, "Please tell your commander that I already have a plan."

When Zhuge Jin asked the messenger what Lu Xun was up to, the messenger said, “I just saw Commander Lu ordering everyone to plant beans outside the camp, while he and the officers were passing their time with target practice.”

Alarmed by this, Zhuge Jin personally went to see Lu Xun and asked him, “Right now, Cao Rui’s army is very strong. How do you plan to proceed?”

Lu Xun replied, “I had sent a plan to our lord, but it fell into the hands of the enemy. Since our plan has leaked, the enemy will be ready. There is no benefit to continuing the fight. It’s better to retreat. I have already sent a message to our lord advising that we retreat gradually.”

Zhug Jin said, “But if your intent is to retreat, then we should do so quickly. Why drag it out?”

“We must retreat gradually,” Lu Xun said. “If we retreat in a hurry, the enemy will give chase, and we would have brought defeat upon ourselves. You should deploy your ships to look like you are preparing for battle, while I advance some troops to deceive the enemy. Then we can methodically fall back to the Southlands, and the enemy will not dare to chase us.”

So the Dongwu forces proceeded as Lu Xun described, making lots of noise about advancing on a key enemy city. When word of this reached the Wei camp, many of the Wei officers wanted to go fight them, but Cao Rui was wary of Lu Xun’s reputation for cunning.

“Lu Xun is clever; this could be a trick to lure us in,” he said. “We must not act rashly.”

So everyone just stayed put. A few days later, scouts reported that all the Dongwu forces had retreated. Cao Rui was skeptical and sent more men to check it out, but they came back and confirmed that report.

“Lu Xun is the equal of the great military strategists of old,” Cao Rui said. “It is not yet the right time to try to conquer the South.”

So instead, he left officers to oversee the defense of key locations while he himself and the main army stayed at Hefei, just in case the situation changed.

Meanwhile, back in the West, Zhuge Liang was making plans to settle in for a long-term stay at Qi Mountain. One of the things he did was to order his troops to share the farmlands with the local civilians. They divided the land into thirds. The soldiers tilled one-third of the land, while the civilians got the other two-thirds, and they did not encroach on each other's share. Now, remember that these civilians were citizens of the kingdom of Wei, so what Zhuge Liang was doing was basically getting them used to a long-term occupation and convincing them that, hey, being ruled by the kingdom of Shu wasn't so bad. I mean, aside from giving up a third of your land to their army, of course. But in any case, this was what benevolent rule looked like in this era, and this did not sit well with the Wei forces.

Sima Yi's eldest son, Sima Shi, went to see his father and said, "The enemy stole a lot of our provisions, and now they're tilling the land with our citizens. They are playing the long game. If this continues, it would be a grave concern for our kingdom. Father, why don't we challenge Zhuge Liang to one decisive battle to settle it all?"

But Sima Yi said, "My orders are to stay on the defensive, so I cannot make rash moves."

While they were discussing this, word came that the Shu general Wei Yan was outside challenging for battle, parading Sima Yi's lost golden helmet as an insult. All of Sima Yi's officers were enraged by this and wanted to go fight, but he just laughed it off.

"As the sage says, 'If you cannot tolerate small insults, you will ruin grand plans.' The best course of action is still to defend."

So everyone stayed in, and Wei Yan returned to camp unsatisfied after a long day of hurling insults.

So Zhuge Liang now devised another scheme to lure Sima Yi out. He ordered the general Ma Dai to oversee the construction of palisades and dig a deep moat within the camp inside Shangfang (4,1) Gorge, where he had been building the wheelbarrows. The moat was filled with lots of flammable

material. On the surrounding hillside, they put up straw sheds and bunkers constructed as decoys, and around them they buried lots of landmines.

Once everything was in place, Zhuge Liang told Ma Dai, “Block off the back entrance of Shangfang (4,1) Gorge and hide your troops inside the gorge. If Sima Yi comes your way, let him into the gorge, then set off the landmines and start a fire.”

Zhuge Liang then ordered his men to set up a signal at the entrance to the gorge. By day, the signal was a seven-star banner. By night, it was seven lit lanterns.

Once Ma Dai left to carry out his order, Zhuge Liang summoned Wei Yan and told him, “Take 500 men to go challenge for battle at the Wei camp. You must lure Sima Yi out to fight, but when he does come fight, you must not win. Pretend to lose and flee, and Sima Yi will give chase. Just run toward the seven-star banner by day and the seven lit lanterns by night. If you can lure Sima Yi into the gorge, I will be able to capture him.”

After Wei Yan left, Zhuge Liang told the general Gao Xiang (2), “Group our wooden oxens and gliding horses into packs of 30 or 40. Load them with grains and march them back and forth along the mountain paths. If the enemy comes and seizes them, you will have succeeded.”

After that, Zhuge Liang dispatched one detachment of troops after another, all in the guise of sending them to till the farmlands. He told them, “If other enemy forces come to attack, just pretend to lose. But if Sima Yi comes in person, then attack the south bank of the Wei River to cut off his return path.”

All this done, Zhuge Liang led an army to set up camp near Shangfang (4,1) Gorge.

Meanwhile, Sima Yi's advisers Xiahou Hui (4) and Xiahou He (2) went to see him and said, "The enemy's forces are setting up camp everywhere and starting to till the soil. They're planning for a long stay. We must eliminate them now. If they set down roots, it will be hard to dislodge them."

But Sima Yi said, "This is another one of Zhuge Liang's tricks."

But the two Xiahou brothers were nonplussed. "Commander, if you are so paranoid, when will we ever wipe out the rebels?" they said. "We two are willing to go fight it out and repay the kindness we have received from the state."

Seeing that they were dead set on doing something, Sima Yi relented and gave them each 5,000 men, while he himself remained in camp to await word of their success.

So Xiahou Hui (4) and Xiahou He (2) set out, and along the way, they spotted an enemy convoy with wooden oxens and gliding horses. They promptly attacked, and the Shu soldiers fled, leaving their precious cargo behind. This time, the Wei soldiers knew that there was a secret handbrake in these things, so they managed to get the wooden oxens and gliding horses back to camp.

The next day, the Wei forces set out again, and this time, they captured about a hundred enemy soldiers and brought them back to camp. Sima Yi questioned them, and they told him, "Zhuge Liang figured that you won't come out to fight, so he sent us out to till the soil as part of his plan for a long-term stay."

Satisfied that they were telling the truth, Sima Yi ordered his men to release the prisoners. Wait, what? That's not something you see every day. When Xiahou He asked him why he didn't just do what's usually done in these situations and execute them all, Sima Yi said, "There's nothing to be gained from executing these pawns. So instead I'll release them back to their camp so that they can spread word of the generosity and benevolence of the Wei generals and sap their own men's desire for battle. This is how the Dongwu general Lü (3) Meng (2) conquered Jing Province."

In fact, Sima Yi then sent out standing orders that from now on, whenever his forces captured Shu soldiers, they were to treat the prisoners well, and that whoever did so would be rewarded.

In the meantime, the Wei forces kept up their raids on the Shu convoys along the mountain roads. Within half a month, they had won one engagement after another, much to Sima Yi's delight. One day, the raiding party returned with another few dozen prisoners, and Sima Yi asked them where Zhuge Liang was at present.

"The prime minister is not at Qi Mountain," they told him. "He has set up camp about three miles west of Shangfang (4,1) Gorge. He is storing daily shipments of grain in the gorge."

After more questions, Sima Yi released the prisoners and summoned his officers.

"Zhuge Liang is at Shangfang Gorge, not Qi Mountain," he told them. "Tomorrow, you will lead your forces and attack the enemy's base camp at Qi Mountain, and I will bring backup."

While the officers were preparing for battle, Sima Yi's son Sima Shi asked, "Father, why are you attacking their rear?"

"Qi Mountain is their base," Sima Yi explained. "If they see us attacking their camp there, then all their forces will come to help. I will take that opportunity to go burn their grain at Shangfang Gorge. They will be under attack on two ends and will be crushed."

So Sima Yi mobilized his forces and headed out. He ordered the generals Zhang Hu (3) and Yue (4) Chen (1) to each lead 5,000 men to follow as reinforcements. He then brought the rest of his forces, along with his two sons, and made for Shangfang Gorge.

All this time, the Shu general Wei Yan had been camped out by the mouth of the gorge, pining for Sima Yi to show himself. So when Sima Yi finally did appear, he was ready to go.

“Sima Yi, stop!” Wei Yan shouted as he rode forth to give battle. And Sima Yi wielded his spear and came to take him on. Now, this was a surprise to me, because I had never seen any previous mention of Sima Yi as a warrior, but I guess you have to at least know which end of the sword to hold if you want to command armies in this era.

After three bouts, Wei Yan turned and fled, and Sima Yi gave chase. Wei Yan headed straight for the seven-star banner. Seeing that Wei Yan did not have many troops with him, Sima Yi gave chase with no reservation. Soon, Wei Yan and his 500 men had fallen back to inside the gorge.

When Sima Yi arrived at the entrance to the gorge, he was smart enough to first send some men on ahead to scout out the situation inside. They reported back that there was no sign of ambush, and that the hillsides were dotted with straw sheds.

“This must be where they’re storing their grain,” Sima Yi said. So he ordered his entire army into the gorge.

But upon closer inspection, Sima Yi discovered that the straw sheds were filled with not grain, but firewood. Also, there was no sign of Wei Yan or his troops. Something wasn’t quite adding up here.

“What would we do if the enemy seals the entrance to the gorge?” Sima Yi said to his two sons.

But before you could say “I’ve got bad feeling about this,” loud cries rang out across the gorge, and countless torches came flying down from the hillside, setting the entrance to the gorge on fire, effectively sealing it and trapping the Wei army inside.

Now, flaming arrows rained down from above, setting off the landmines underfoot. All the straw sheds and their firewood were soon in flames. The entire valley was engulfed in a roaring fire, with flames that shot toward the heavens.

Trapped like rats and with no way out, Sima Yi could do nothing. He got off his horse, pulled his sons into his arms, and cried, “We are going to die here!”

While all this was happening, Zhuge Liang was watching from a hilltop near Shangfang Gorge. He saw Sima Yi follow the bait into the gorge, and as the valley burned, his heart rejoiced. After six campaigns, he had finally cornered his old foe, the one man in the empire who had been able to stymie him.

To see what the Wei will do to try to slow down Zhuge Liang once its savior is done being burned to a crisp, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!