

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 139.

Before we start, let me wish everyone happy holidays. This episode is being released on Christmas Day in the United States, and I would like to thank everyone for another wonderful year. The podcast has more listeners than ever, and I love reading all the comments I've been getting. We are in the home stretch. There are maybe another 20 or so episodes left, so the show is going to wrap up sometime in the coming year. When I first started this project, I wasn't sure whether it would find an audience, but you guys have answered that question loudly, and your support has been instrumental in motivating me to keep going over the past three years. So thank you again, and I hope you have a wonderful holiday season.

Last time, we bade farewell to Sima Yi and Sun Quan. Sima Yi's sons were now in charge of all the affairs of the kingdom of Wei, while Sun Quan's son Sun Liang had stepped into throne of Wu. The Sima brothers decided this would be a good time to conquer the Southlands, so they marched 300,000 men to the borders of Wu and focused their attention on taking the key district of Dongxing (1,4).

On the other side, the imperial guardian of Wu, Zhuge Ke (4), assembled the officials to discuss a response. The general Ding Feng (4) said, "Dongxing (1,4) is one of the Southland's most crucial locations. If it falls, then both the key cities of Nanjun (2,4) and Wuchang (3,1) will be threatened."

"My thoughts exactly," Zhuge Ke replied. "General, you will lead 3,000 naval troops and advance along the river. I will follow with three cavalry and infantry forces of 10,000 men each to back you up. When you hear a string of explosives, advance your troops, and I will follow with the main army."

So once again, Dongwu was going up against Wei with a dramatic difference in numbers, in this case, 30,000 vs. an invasion force of 300,000. But hey, they've been there before. Ding Feng now set out with his 3,000 naval troops on 30 warships and made for the district of Dongxing (1,4).

Meanwhile, the Wei vanguard led by the general Hu (2) Zun (1) had built and crossed a pontoon bridge. They were now on the shores of Dongxing, facing the big wall that Dongwu had built. The Wei forces laid siege to the two forts at opposite ends of the wall. The forts were well fortified and could not be taken quickly. But inversely, the Dongwu troops inside the forts also did not dare to go out and fight against the overwhelming numbers of the enemy. So Hu Zun had his men set up camp to prepare for a long stay.

It was the height of winter, and a heavy snow was falling. Hu Zun and his officers passed the time by holding a feast. Suddenly, scouts reported that 30 enemy warships were approaching. Hu Zun went outside to take a look and saw that the ships had pulled up near the shoreline, but each ship only carried about 100 men. Hu Zun scoffed, returned to camp, and told his men, "It's no more than 3,000 men; no cause for concern." So he just sent scouts to keep an eye on the enemy while he and his officers returned to their feast.

While the Wei forces were taking it easy, the Dongwu navy was gearing up for action. The general Ding Feng lined up his ships in a line across the water and said to his men, "Today is the day real men make a name for themselves and earn their riches!"

He then ordered the soldiers to take off their armor and strip to their waist, ditch their helmets, leave behind their long weapons and equip themselves only with short blades. When the Wei soldiers saw this, they just laughed at this ridiculous sight and didn't think anything of it.

But they stopped laughing soon enough. Suddenly, a string of explosives sounded, and Ding Feng pulled out his short blade, leaped onto the shore, and led his men in a mad dash into the Wei camp. The Wei soldiers were caught off guard and could not mount an organized defense. One of Hu Zun's lieutenants stepped out of his tent with halberd in hand, but Ding Feng quickly seized him and killed him with one slash of the blade. Hu Zun's other lieutenant flashed out and stabbed at Ding Feng with a

spear. But Ding Feng grabbed the spear with one hand. His foe dropped the weapon and fled, but Ding Feng threw his blade at the man, striking him in the left shoulder and sending him to the ground. Ding Feng then caught up to him and finished him off with his own spear.

Meanwhile, Ding Feng's 3,000 soldiers were doing equally berserker deeds inside the camp, and the Wei vanguard general Hu Zun was sent fleeing. His men sprinted onto their pontoon bridge, but the bridge collapsed, and most of the soldiers on the bridge fell to a freezing, watery grave. Those left on the shoreline did not fare any better, as most of them laid dead on the snow-covered ground. The Dongwu forces won the day and captured all of the enemy's horses, chariots, weapons, and equipment.

When word of this debacle reached the rest of the Wei forces, they all decided to fall back and cancel the invasion. So by the time the Dongwu imperial guardian Zhuge Ke arrived on the scene, all he had to do was reward his troops for a job well done. But Zhuge Ke was not content to just fend off an invasion. He told his officers, "Sima Zhao has been defeated and is falling back to the North; this is our chance to invade the Heartlands."

But he wasn't going to do it alone. He sent a message to the kingdom of Shu, requesting that the Shu commander Jiang Wei also mobilize his forces and invade the Heartlands, on the promise that once they have conquered the North, they would split it evenly. Meanwhile, Zhuge Ke mobilized 200,000 men and marched North.

But just as they were getting ready to move out, they saw a trail of white vapor emanating from the ground. It split the army in half and was so dense that men on the two sides of the vapor could not see each other.

One of Zhuge Ke's officers said, "This is a white rainbow. It portends ill omen for the army. Imperial guardian, you should return to court instead of waging this campaign."

But Zhuge Ke flew into a rage. "How dare you speak such unlucky words and demoralize our troops?!"

He wanted to have the guy executed, but after much pleading from the rest of the men, he settled for just stripping him of his rank before resuming the invasion. Ding Feng now suggested that they first attack the city of Xincheng (1,2), which sat on the main road into Wei. Zhuge Ke agreed and marched that way.

The city of Xincheng (1,2) was defended by a general named Zhang (1) Te (4). When he saw a huge Dongwu army on his doorstep, he had the gates shut and fortified his defenses. Word also flew into the Wei capital. One of Sima Shi's officials said, "Zhuge Ke has surrounded Xincheng, but let's hold off on engaging the enemy. The Dongwu forces have traveled a long way. They have a vast army but few provisions. Once their grain runs out, they will retreat. Then we can attack, and victory will be guaranteed. But we must guard against an encroachment by the kingdom of Shu."

Sima Shi agreed and sent his brother Sima Zhao to help the general Guo Huai keep an eye on the western border while dispatching the generals Wu (2) Qiu (1) and Hu (2) Zun (1) to deal with the Dongwu attack in the South.

Outside the city of Xincheng, Zhuge Ke spent months laying siege, with little success. He now told his men that they must throw everything they had at the city and that anyone who did not do so would lose his head. So his men gave it all they've got. The northeastern corner of the city was hit hard and looked like it was about to fall.

Facing disaster, Zhang Te (4), the city's commander, sent a messenger to see Zhuge Ke. The messenger told Zhuge Ke, "According to the laws of Wei, when a city is under siege, if the city's commander holds out for 100 days and no reinforcements arrive by then, he can surrender without his family being punished. Right now, you have surrounded our city for 90-some days. We ask that you give us a few more days, after which my master will surrender with all of the city's soldiers and civilians. Here is the city's census rolls in advance."

Well, Zhuge Ke apparently did not inherit the smart gene from his illustrious predecessors, because he believed this and called off the siege for a few days. Well, while the Dongwu army was sitting around twiddling their thumbs, the Wei forces inside were frantically tearing down houses and using the lumber to patch up the parts of the city walls that had been damaged in the siege.

A few days later, Zhang Te (4) stepped to the top of his newly reinforced wall and uncorked a string of insults at the enemy outside his gates.

“We still have enough food to last us half a year. How can we be willing to surrender to you dogs of Dongwu?! Go ahead; do your worst!”

Infuriated at having been taken in by this obscenely obvious ruse, Zhuge Ke now directed his men to resume their siege. But in the midst of battle, an arrow from the city wall struck Zhuge Ke in the forehead, sending him tumbling off his horse. His men rescued him, brought him back to camp, and patched up his wound. He was ok, but after this, his men lost all desire for battle. On top of that, the punishing summer heat was spreading disease among the troops.

When Zhuge Ke’s wound improved a bit, he wanted to resume the siege, but he was told that everybody was sick and there was no way they could fight on. Zhuge Ke was enraged and declared that anyone who mentioned illness again would be executed. Well, that went down like a lead balloon with his men, as countless soldiers deserted upon hearing that. Soon, word came that one of Zhuge Ke’s commanders had defected to the enemy. Stunned, Zhuge Ke rode around his camp and saw that oh yeah, my men really are sick. So Zhuge Ke now decided to call off the campaign and go home. But as soon as he started falling back, the Wei relief force made its move and swept in from behind, dealing him a major defeat.

Upon returning to the Wu capital in disgrace, Zhuge Ke was so embarrassed that he avoided going to court on account of illness, which prompted the Dongwu emperor Sun Liang and all the officials to go to

his residence to check on him. Now, you would think that this would put Zhuge Ke more at ease, but nope. Instead, he was super paranoid and sensitive about criticism and decided to flex his muscle to preemptively shut everyone up. Seizing on the smallest infractions, he punished various officials and officers. The lucky ones were exiled; the unlucky ones were beheaded in public. He also put a couple of his confidants in charge of the imperial guard. All these moves brought about the intended chilling effect, as everyone at court learned not to talk about Zhuge Ke in public.

But just because they weren't talking about him in public, it did not mean they weren't talking about him in private. Specifically, a member of the imperial household began talking. His name was Sun Jun (4). He was the grandson of a younger brother of Sun Jian (1), the patriarch who began the Sun family's reign in the Southlands. During the later years of Sun Quan's reign, Sun Jun (4) was a favorite of Sun Quan's and was put in charge of the imperial guard. But Zhuge Ke had just taken that away from him, incurring his wrath.

At the same time, Teng (2) Yin (4), the master of ceremony, had long been at odds with Zhuge Ke. So he now whispered in Sun Jun's (4) ear. He told Sun Jun, "Zhuge Ke is monopolizing power and acting with unrestrained cruelty. He has executed officials and no doubt plans to usurp the throne. Sir, you are a member of the imperial house. You must act soon."

"I have long harbored such intentions," Sun Jun said. "I will inform the emperor and ask for his decree to exterminate Zhuge Ke."

So the two of them went to see the emperor Sun Liang in secret to discuss this matter. Sun Liang told them, "Whenever I see Zhuge Ke, I am on edge. I have often wanted to get rid of him, but haven't had the right opportunity yet. Since you have such loyal and honorable intentions, you may proceed in secret."

Teng (2) Yin (4) now suggested, "Your majesty should hold a banquet and hide armed men behind the walls. Throw your cup to the ground as the signal, and they will kill Zhuge Ke at the banquet and rid you of future concerns."

So Zhuge Ke had been holed up at home all this time, feeling rather distracted. One day, as he walked out of the central hall in his residence, he noticed a man walking in wearing mourning clothes. He questioned the man, who appeared dumbfounded. Zhuge Ke immediately had the guy seized and interrogated. The man said, "My father just died and I was coming into the city to find a monk to perform the services for him. I thought this was a monastery, so I came in. Who knew that it would turn out to be the imperial guardian's residence? I don't know how I ended up here."

Zhugue Ke was pretty ticked off and he asked the soldiers who were supposed to be guarding his house. They told him, "There were dozens of us and we were stationed by the gate and did not leave our post. We didn't see a single person come in."

Well, that's too bad, because Zhuge Ke was in the mood to punish somebody, so he executed all the guards and the stranger who had stumbled in. That night, Zhuge Ke was restless in bed when all of a sudden, he heard a loud crash from the main hall. When he went out to take a look, he saw that the main beam of the house had fractured into two.

Stunned, Zhuge Ke returned to his bedchamber. But just then, a cold wind swept in, and he saw the man in mourning clothes and all the guards he had executed. They were all carrying their severed heads and demanding their lives back. Zhuge Ke fell to the floor and did not come up until a good while after.

The next morning, when Zhuge Ke got up to wash his face, he could smell the stench of blood emanating from the water. He scolded his maids and ordered them to bring him fresh water. But guess what? That water reeked of blood, too. So they brought him another basin of water, and it smelled the

same. They changed the water dozens of times, but every time, it still reeked of blood. I guess a fortune cookie that says “You’ll face challenges today” was just too subtle.

Just then, a messenger from the emperor arrived, inviting Zhuge Ke to a banquet. So Zhuge Ke had his chariot prepared. But as he was leaving, a dog gripped his robe with its teeth and whimpered as if it were weeping.

“How dare this mutt toy with me?!” Zhuge Ke said in anger. He ordered his men to chase the dog away and went on his way.

But he had barely gone a few steps when he suddenly saw a white rainbow emanating from the ground, rising into the sky. Ooookay, I guess maybe I WILL face some challenges today?

So Zhuge Ke was starting feel just a bit suspicious. One of the confidants he had placed in charge of the imperial guard was with him, and this guy said, “We don’t know what the deal is with this banquet in the palace. My lord, you must not go lightly.”

So Zhuge Ke decided to turn around and go home, but he had not gone far when Sun Jun and Teng Yin rode up and asked, “Imperial guardian, why are you turning back?”

“My stomach is hurting all of a sudden, so I cannot go see his majesty,” Zhuge Ke replied.

To this, Teng Yin said, “The court has not seen your face since you returned from your campaign, that is why his majesty is holding this banquet, so that he can discuss important matters with you. Even if you are not feeling well, you should still go.”

His arm sufficiently twisted, Zhuge Ke was convinced to turn around again and go to the palace with Sun Jun, Teng Yin, and his confidant. There, he paid his respects to the emperor Sun Liang and then they sat down for the banquet. Sun Liang offered Zhuge Ke some wine, but Zhuge Ke was feeling paranoid, so he said, “I am sick, so I should not drink.”

Sun Jun now chimed in and said, "Imperial guardian, I know you often take medicinal wine at home. What if we went and fetched that for you?"

Zhuge Ke consented, so he sent one of his men to go to his home to fetch his medicinal wine. Only now did Zhuge Ke dare to drink.

After a few rounds, Sun Liang got up to ... umm ... use the bathroom I guess. At the same time, Sun Jun also stepped outside the banquet hall. There, he removed his long robe, put on a short jacket over a soft suit of armor. He then took a sharp blade in hand, marched back inside, and declared, "On his majesty's command, I am here to exterminate the traitor!"

Zhuge Ke was caught off guard. He threw his cup onto the ground and reached for his sword. But before he could pull out the sword, Sun Jun's blade flashed, and Zhuge Ke's head fell to the floor.

Now, Zhuge Ke's confidant was also present, and when he saw his master get killed, he pulled out his sword and slashed at Sun Jun. Sun Jun ducked, but the blade cut a finger on his left hand. Sun Jun spun around and slashed his foe in the right arm. And now, the armed guards hidden behind the walls stormed out and cut the guy to pieces.

What followed was the customary purge after a coup such as this. Sun Jun sent his men to go round up Zhuge Ke's family. At the same time, he had the two bodies wrapped up in straw mats and disposed of in unmarked burial pits outside the city's south gate.

Meanwhile, Zhuge Ke's wife was feeling unsteady at home when suddenly, she saw a maid enter her room. She asked the maid, "Why do you reek of blood?"

Suddenly, the maid opened her eyes wide and grit her teeth. She leaped into the air and headbutted the main beam of the house, shouting, "I am Zhuge Ke. I have been assassinated by that scoundrel Sun Jun!"

Zhuge Ke's entire family now began to wail. Momentarily, soldiers arrived, arrested everyone, and took them all to the public market for execution. So, when Zhuge Ke's father Zhuge Jin was still alive, he

observed that his son allowed his brilliance to shine outwardly too much. He once sighed and said, "This son is not one to preserve the family." Also, an official in the kingdom of Wei once remarked to Sima Shi, "Zhuge Ke will die soon." When Sima Shi asked why, this official explained, "His prowess intimidates his lord, so how can he long persist?" So all those predictions came true on this day.

Now that Zhuge Ke was dead, Sun Liang promoted Sun Jun to prime minister and regent marshal, putting him in charge of all military affairs. This was in the winter of the year 253, and from that point on, Sun Jun was in charge at the court of Dongwu.

But remember that before Zhuge Ke died, he had sent that letter to Jiang Wei in the Riverlands, asking him to help with the invasion of the North. Jiang Wei was not about to let that opportunity pass, so in that same year, he mobilized 200,000 men. He appointed the generals Liao Hua and Zhang Yi (4) as the vanguards, made the general Xiahou Ba as his adviser, and put the general Zhang Yi (2) in charge of provisions.

As the army marched out of Yangping Pass, Jiang Wei asked Xiahou Ba how they should proceed, since the last campaign went poorly and the enemy would no doubt be prepared again.

Xiahou Ba answered, "Among the counties in the region of Longshang (3,4), Nan'an (2,1) has the most wealth and provisions. We should take that first; it's more than enough to serve as our base. We were unsuccessful last time because the Qiang (1) tribes did not come to our aid. We should first send an envoy to arrange for them to meet us at Longyou (3,4) and then advance on Nan'an (2,1) together."

Jiang Wei was impressed with that idea, so he sent an envoy with gifts to go make nice with the king of the Qiang tribes, and this king mobilized 50,000 men and marched toward Nan'an.

When Guo Huai, the Wei general in charge of defending the borders with Shu, found out about this, he immediately sent word to the Wei capital. Sima Shi asked who among his officers wanted to go face

the enemy. A general named Xu (2) Zhi (4) volunteered. This Xu (2) Zhi (4) had unrivaled courage, and Sima Shi knew it, so he happily named Xu Zhi the vanguard while appointing his brother Sima Zhao as supreme commander and sent them westward.

As they approached the front, they ran into Jiang Wei's army. The two sides lined up, and Xu Zhi (4), wielding a big battle axe, rode out to challenge for combat. The Shu vanguard general Liao Hua came out to face him, but after just a few bouts, Liao Hua fell back in defeat. The other Shu vanguard general, Zhang Yi, now took his turn, but he, too, was no match. Xu Zhi now directed his army to charge, and they sent the Shu forces scurrying for 10 miles before giving up the chase and setting up camp.

Jiang Wei now conferred with Xiahou Ba on what to do about Xu Zhi. Xiahou Ba suggested the old fake-a-retreat-and-lure-them-into-a-trap scheme, but Jiang Wei just rolled his eyes.

"Sima Zhao is Sima Yi's son. How can he not understand the art of war?" Jiang Wei said. "When he sees how uneven the terrain is, he will not give chase. In my opinion, the enemy has cut my supply route time and again, so let's use that as the lure, and we'll be able to rid ourselves of Xu Zhi."

So Jiang Wei dispatched the generals Liao Hua and Zhang Yi (4) with instructions and then sent his men to fortify the area around the camp to make it look like he's digging in for a long stay.

A few days passed, and Xu Zhi spent every day challenging for battle but received none. Then, scouts informed Sima Zhao that Shu soldiers were using wooden oxens and gliding horses to transport grain behind Iron Cage Mountain. It looked like they were definitely preparing for a lengthy stay and that they were just waiting for reinforcements by the Qiang tribes.

Sima Yi now summoned Xu Zhi and told him, "When we have defeated the Shu forces in the past, it was because we cut their supply route. Now, they are transporting provisions behind Iron Cage Mountain. Tonight, take 5,000 men and go cut off that route, and the enemy will have to retreat."

So that night around 7 o'clock, Xu Zhi and his 5,000 men headed toward Iron Cage Mountain. There, they saw 200-some Shu soldiers escorting about 100 wooden oxens and gliding horses, loaded with provisions. The Wei troops let out a loud yell and Xu Zhi charged out to block the Shu soldiers' path. The Shu soldiers immediately ditched their provisions and scattered.

Xu Zhi now divided his army. He sent half of his men to escort the provisions back to camp, while he himself led the other half to pursue the Shu soldiers. They chased the enemy for a couple miles before they found their way blocked by a bunch of carts. Xu Zhi ordered his men to dismount and push the carts out of the way. But just then, flames shot up from both flanks. Xu Zhi quickly turned and tried to retreat, but his way back was now also blocked by carts, and the flames were closing in.

Xu Zhi galloped through the smoke and fire and managed to break out, but just then, an explosive sounded, and two enemy forces arrived, led by the Shu generals Liao Hua and Zhang Yi (4). They took a big bite out of the Wei forces. Xu Zhi now ditched his men and rode away. He managed to escape from the battle, but by now, he and his horse were exhausted. Suddenly, another enemy army appeared in front of him, this one led by none other than Jiang Wei himself. Xu Zhi was caught off guard, and Jiang Wei stabbed him off his horse with one thrust of the spear. The Shu soldiers then rushed forward and cut Xu Zhi to pieces.

As for the other half of Xu Zhi's army, the half that was escorting the provisions. Well, they did not fare any better. Jiang Wei had sent Xiahou Ba after them, and he captured them all. Xiahou Ba now took his prisoners' uniforms and put them on his own men. They then hoisted the captured banners and headed toward the Wei camp. The guards at the camp saw the banners and figured it was their own guys coming back, so they opened the gates. The Shu army in disguise immediately crashed into the camp and started wreaking havoc.

Sima Zhao was caught unprepared and hurriedly hopped onto his horse. But from in front came the Shu general Liao Hua. So Sima Zhao turned and tried to fall back. By then Jiang Wei and his men had

arrived via the backroads, and Sima Zhao had nowhere to run to. Trapped, he and what remained of his troops scrambled up to the top of Iron Cage Mountain for the time being.

As it turned out, the mountain was aptly named. There was only one road up and down the peak. Everywhere else on the mountain was just steep cliffs. At the peak of the mountain, there was just one small spring, providing just enough water for about a hundred men. Well, Sima Zhao had 6,000 guys with him. So, he had problems. To see if he can solve those problems, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!