

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 146.

Last time, Jiang Wei had launched another incursion into Wei territory. Oh and by the way, I counted, and this is the fifth time in the last seven episodes where I began an episode with some variation of “Last time, Jiang Wei had launched another invasion of the North.” So yeah, the guys defending the Wei border were probably getting as tired of this as you are.

So anyway, to repel Jiang Wei this time, one of Deng Ai’s strategists, a man named Wang (2) Guan (4), pretended to defect to Jiang Wei. But Jiang Wei wasn’t fooled at all, and he took Wang Guan in with the intention of turning Wang Guan’s scheme against him. He sent Wang Guan to escort his provisions to Qi Mountain. Meanwhile, Jiang Wei scrapped his original plan of marching through Xie (2) Gorge. Instead, he sent some men to hide along the road to watch for spies from Wang Guan.

Sure enough, within a few days, they captured a messenger that Wang Guan had sent to Deng Ai. Jiang Wei interrogated the guy and got the letter. It said that Wang Guan was going to be transporting provisions to the main Shu camp on August 20, and that Deng Ai should meet him in the Tan (2) Valley. Intel in hand, Jiang Wei executed the messenger and then wrote a separate letter that said basically the same thing, except instead of a rendezvous on August 20, he told Deng Ai to lead his army to Tan (2) Valley on August 15.

While that fake message was on its way to Deng Ai, Jiang Wei went about setting the trap. He had his men empty a few hundred of his provisions carts and fill them with fire-starters and covered them with blue cloth. He then ordered the general Fu Qian to lead the other 2,000 Wei soldiers who defected with Wang Guan and escort the carts as if they WERE provisions. Jiang Wei and Xiahou Ba then each led an army and lay in wait inside Xie Gorge. He also ordered three other generals, Jiang (3) Shu (1), Liao Hua, and Zhang Yi, to advance toward Qi Mountain.

When Deng Ai received the fake message about the rendezvous, he was delighted and immediately wrote back to say the plan was a go. On August 15, he led 50,000 crack troops toward Tan (2) Valley. While he was still a good ways off, he sent scouts to go take a look from a high vantage point, and they saw countless provision carts moving in the valley in an unbroken line. When Deng Ai took a look for himself, he saw that these carts were indeed being escorted by Wei soldiers.

Now, Deng Ai's men said, "It's starting to get dark, we should go meet up with Wang Guan right away and escort him out of the canyon."

But Deng Ai replied, "The hills ahead fold in on each other. If there is an ambush, it would be hard to fall back. We should just wait here."

But just then, two riders rushed onto the scene and said, "General Wang is being pursued because he has transported the provisions across the border. He is asking for immediate backup."

Deng Ai immediately ordered his troops to advance. Around seven o'clock that night, the moon was shining bright, and Deng Ai heard loud cries coming from behind the hills. He figured it was Wang Guan engaged in a fight, so he rushed toward the sounds. Suddenly, an army dashed out from behind some woods. They were led by the Shu general Fu Qian, who shouted, "Deng Ai, you scoundrel! You have fallen for my commander's trick! Dismount at once and meet your doom!"

Deng Ai was shocked and quickly turned to flee. But by then, all the provision carts in the valley had been set ablaze. That fire was the signal for the ambush, as Shu forces charged out and slaughtered the enemy. Everywhere in the hills, one could hear the cry, "Whoever captures Deng Ai will be handsomely rewarded!"

Panicked, Deng Ai abandoned his armor, helmet, and even his horse. He mixed in with his infantry and fled by climbing over the hills on foot. That actually turned out to be a good move, because Jiang Wei and Xiahou Ba, who were leading the attack on Deng Ai, figured that Deng Ai must have been on a horse, so they were just looking at the riders. This allowed Deng Ai to get away. Nonetheless, the battle

belonged to Jiang Wei, and he now led his victorious army to go intercept Wang Guan, who was presently transporting grain, thinking that the rendezvous with Deng Ai was still five days away.

Word of what had transpired soon reached Wang Guan, and he was stunned. Before long, his scouts reported that three armies were sweeping in. And sure enough, he could see behind his scouts a giant dust cloud. Trapped with no way out, Wang Guan ordered his men to set their provision carts on fire. In the blink of an eye, all the provisions were going up in flames. Wang Guan then shouted to his men, "The situation is dire! Let's fight to the last!"

He then led his army and charged westward, with the three Shu armies in pursuit. Now, even though Jiang Wei had pretty much beaten the Wei army, he was not counting on this move by Wang Guan. He figured that Wang Guan would try to break out toward the east and flee back toward the kingdom of Wei. So Jiang Wei was giving chase from the east to cut him off. But Jiang Wei did not count on Wang Guan going deeper into enemy territory on a kamikaze mission, and that was exactly what Wang Guan was doing. He was heading toward Jiang Wei's home base in the region of Hanzhong. And along the way, to slow down his pursuers, he had his men burn all the gallery roads behind them.

Fearing that Hanzhong might actually fall to this desperation move, Jiang Wei now stopped chasing Deng Ai and instead rushed along some backroads to go after Wang Guan. Eventually, Wang Guan was surrounded, and he ended up throwing himself into a river and drowned. All his men were captured and buried alive by Jiang Wei.

So this ended up being a pyrrhic victory for Jiang Wei. Yeah he won a battle against Deng Ai, but all his provisions got burned, not to mention the gallery roads. So he called off the campaign and returned to Hanzhong to regroup.

Meanwhile, Deng Ai and his defeated troops fled back to their camp at Qi Mountain. Deng Ai sent a memorial asking to be reduced in rank as punishment for his failure. But Sima Zhao could not bring

himself to punish Deng Ai, not after all that he had done to protect the western borders. In fact, instead of punishing Deng Ai, Sima Zhao rewarded him handsomely. To his credit, Deng Ai turned around and distributed the gifts among the families of the soldiers who had been killed in battle.

Sima Zhao was wary of another Shu invasion, so he gave Deng Ai an additional 50,000 men to help defend Qi Mountain. And sure enough, Jiang Wei was busy plotting the next campaign. He had his men work nonstop to repair the gallery roads, and by the 10th month of the year 263, the roads had been repaired, the weapons and provisions were stockpiled, the ships were ready to set sail from Hanzhong, and Jiang Wei was ready to go.

But before he could head out, he had to get his emperor's permission. So Jiang Wei wrote a memorial to Liu Shan, saying, "Your servant has launched one campaign after another. Even though I have not yet attained a great accomplishment, I have nonetheless shaken the enemy and made them lose heart. The army has been groomed for a while now. If they don't fight, they will lose their mettle. The men dream of sacrificing themselves for our cause, and our commanders dream of carrying out your mandate. If I do not win this time, I deserve to die."

After Liu Shan read this message, he was not sure if he wanted to let Jiang Wei go on yet another campaign. The court official Qiao (2) Zhou (1), who had been an opponent of Jiang Wei's campaigns in the past, now spoke up.

"Your servant has been observing the night sky. In the constellation that guards over our kingdom, the general star is dim. This does not bode well for the general's campaign. Your majesty should issue a decree to stop him."

But Liu Shan said, "Let's see how he does this time. If he indeed falters, then I will deny his request in the future."

Qiao Zhou tried time and again to convince Liu Shan to stop Jiang Wei now, not later, but to no avail. After that, he went home and decided to stay away from court on account of illness.

While Qiao Zhou stayed in, Jiang Wei was getting ready to head out. He asked the general Liao Hua, "I swear that I will reclaim the Heartlands on this expedition. Where should I strike first?"

Liao Hua's answer was basically, uhh, nowhere.

"We have waged war year after year," Liao Hua told Jiang Wei. "Neither the army nor the people have known peace. Besides, the enemy has Deng Ai, who is crafty and no ordinary foe. General, you are trying too hard to force things, and I do not dare to advice you."

Jiang Wei was not amused at that remark. He said, "The late prime minister launched six campaigns from Qi Mountain, all for the sake of the state. Do you think I have invaded the Wei eight times for my own sake?! I will take Taoyang (2,2) first. Anyone who dares to speak against me will be executed!"

So Jiang Wei decided he would leave Liao Hua behind to hold down the camp in Hanzhong for daring to speak up against his invasion plans. Then, he and the other officers led 300,000 men and marched on the town of Taoyang (2,2).

Word of this movement soon reached the Wei camp at Qi Mountain. Deng Ai and his fellow commander Sima Wang huddled. Sima Wang said, "Jiang Wei is crafty. Could he be feigning an attack on Taoyang (2,2) to disguise a real attack Qi Mountain?"

"No, Jiang Wei is definitely going for Taoyang this time," Deng Ai said.

"How do you know that?" Sima Wang asked.

"In the past, Jiang Wei has always attacked locations where we store grain," Deng Ai replied. "But right now, there is no grain stored at Taoyang, so Jiang Wei is expecting us to stay here and defend Qi Mountain rather than Taoyang, so he's going after Taoyang. If he takes the town, he can use it to store grain while he joins up with the Qiang tribes and make long-term plans."

Ok, so what are we gonna do about it, Sima Wang asked. Deng Ai told him, "We can take all the troops here, split them into two battalions, and go defend Taoyang. About 8 miles away from Taoyang, there is a small town called Houhe (2,2). It is the key to Taoyang. We can do this, this, and this, and victory will be ours."

While Deng Ai and Sima Wang made their plans, Jiang Wei's front column was marching toward Taoyang under the command of the general Xiahou Ba. As they approached the town, they saw that there was not a single banner atop the town's walls, and the four gates were wide open. Xiahou Ba thought this looked suspicious, so he did not dare to storm into the town right away.

"Could this be a trap?" he asked his officers.

But they told him, "We can see that it's empty except for a few civilians. The city's guards must have fled when they heard we were coming."

Xiahou Ba was still skeptical, so he rode around to the south side of the town. There, he saw countless civilians fleeing toward the northwest. That was the proof he was looking for.

"They really have abandoned the town!" Xiahou Ba rejoiced.

He immediately ordered his troops to storm into the town, with himself riding at their head. But just as they approached the city wall, an explosive sounded, followed by drums and horns from atop the walls. Numerous banners suddenly appeared, and the drawbridge was pulled up.

"It's a trap!" Xiahou Ba exclaimed. He immediately tried to retreat, but it was too late. A torrent of arrows came flying down from the wall, and in the blink of an eye, Xiahou Ba and 500 of his men lay dead at the foot of the town.

And now, Sima Wang, who had been hiding his army inside the town all this time, charged out and put the remaining Shu soldiers to flight. Just as he was giving chase, he ran into the main Shu army led

by Jiang Wei. Jiang Wei managed to fight off Sima Wang and then pitched camp next to the town. But soon Jiang Wei got the bad news that Xiahou Ba was dead, and he could not help but lament this loss.

But Jiang Wei's problems were just getting started. That night, around 9 o'clock, he got another surprise. Deng Ai had been lying in wait in the nearby town of Houhe (2,2), and now, he and his men snuck into the Shu camp and attacked. The Shu forces were thrown into disarray, and Jiang Wei could not maintain order. Meanwhile, the drums and horns blared from the town of Taoyang, and Sima Wang now charged out, and Jiang Wei found himself under attack on two sides. His forces were crushed, and Jiang Wei barely made it out alive. He picked up the pieces and set up camp seven or eight miles away.

So the campaign had barely begun, and the Shu army had already suffered two defeats and lost a top general. That did not do wonders for the troops' morale, but Jiang Wei told his officers, "Victory and defeat are common in war. Even though we have suffered casualties, it is of no concern. The outcome can be determined in an instant, so do not lose heart. Anyone who suggests retreat will be executed."

The general Zhang Yi (4) now said, "The enemy forces are all here, so their camps at Qi Mountain must be vulnerable. General, while you reorganize the troops to fight Deng Ai here, I can lead an army to take Qi Mountain. Once we have captured the enemy camps there, we will make straight for Chang'an. That is the best course of action."

So Jiang Wei now led his troops to go take on Deng Ai at the hamlet of Houhe (2,2). Deng Ai came out to answer the challenge. The two commanders traded blows for a dozen or so bouts without a winner before both armies returned to camp. The next day, Jiang Wei again came to challenge for battle, but this time, Deng Ai refused to come out, so Jiang Wei resorted to the time-honored tradition of hurling insults.

Now these insults did not spur Deng Ai to go out and fight, but they did get him thinking, "I just routed the enemy a couple days ago, but instead of retreating, they have come to challenge for battle

day after day. They must be sending a force to attack our camp at Qi Mountain. The officer I left in charge there has few troops and even less wit. He would lose for sure. I must go relieve him personally.”

So Deng Ai told his son Deng Zhong, “You stay here and oversee the defense carefully. If the enemy challenges for battle, do not go out lightly. I will lead some men to reinforce Qi Mountain tonight.”

That night, around 9 o’clock, Jiang Wei was sitting in his tent, planning his next move, when suddenly he heard earth-shattering sounds of drums, horns, and battle cries. His scouts soon reported that Deng Ai was pitching a night battle with 3,000 crack troops. The Shu officers were just about to go out and meet him, but Jiang Wei stopped them and told them to sit tight.

As it turned out, there was no battle. Deng Ai just led his men past the Shu camp under the pretext of a reconnaissance mission and then took the opportunity to head toward Qi Mountain, while his son returned to their base inside the town.

Jiang Wei figured that was what Deng Ai was doing, so he left the general Fu (4) Qian (1) in charge of the camp while he personally led 3,000 men to go help Zhang Yi (4), who was overseeing the assault on the Qi Mountain camps.

Over at Qi Mountain, Zhang Yi and his Shu forces were making good progress. The Wei camp looked like it was about to fall, but suddenly, Deng Ai arrived with backup. They swept in and routed the Shu forces, and Zhang Yi was pinned down at the back of the mountain, with no way out.

Just as Zhang Yi was panicking, more earth-shattering cries and drums and horns rose up, and the Wei troops fell back. This was thanks to Jiang Wei’s arrival. So Zhang Yi took the opportunity to help Jiang Wei sandwich the Wei forces, and now, it was Deng Ai’s turn to get beaten up. He lost the fight and retreated up into his camps on the mountain. Jiang Wei then continued the siege.



So things were looking rather promising for Jiang Wei, which of course means it was about time for something to go wrong. This time, that something was Jiang Wei's lord, the Shu emperor Liu Shan. So let's digress a little bit here and catch up on what's been going on with Liu Shan. We had heard from a Dongwu envoy a couple episodes back that things were not well in the Shu court. Let's see exactly how bad they were.

At this point, Liu Shan was already 56 years old. He had long stopped being that young kid that Zhuge Liang was entrusted with. But alas, he didn't seem to have grown into his responsibilities. Quite the opposite, really. These days, he placed his trust in a corrupt eunuch named Huang (2) Hao (4), and he spent his days drowning in women and wine, neglecting all affairs of the court.

Well, I shouldn't say that. There was one affair that Liu Shan was very much knee-deep in. One of his court officials had a pretty wife. One day, she went to court to pay a call on the empress, and she ended up staying in the palace for a month before leaving. Yeah, that did not look suspicious at all.

Well, this court official certainly thought something was up. He suspected that his wife had been shacking up with Liu Shan for a month, so he ordered the 500 soldiers under his command to line up. He then had his wife bound and ordered his soldiers to slap her face dozens of times with a shoe, until the poor woman passed out several times.

When word of this got back to Liu Shan, he was enraged, because ... umm ... as emperor he was very concerned with the rights and status of women in his kingdom. Yeah that's it. He ended up having this official executed, on the reason that soldiers should not be used to discipline one's own wife, and that women's faces should not be abused. After beheading said official, Liu Shan also decreed that no ladies were allowed in the court anymore.

But the damage had been done. The officials at court all suspected that Liu Shan had engaged in shenanigans with the dead official's wife, and seeing the way he was behaving, the loyal and honorable officials gradually left the court, while the wicked advanced up the ranks.

A member of the latter group was Yan (2) Yu (3), the General of the Right. Despite his lofty title, he had rendered zero service to the court. The only reason he rose so high was that he had sucked up to the eunuch Huang Hao. So now, Yan (2) Yu (3) decided that an empty title wasn't good enough. When he heard that Jiang Wei was commanding troops at Qi Mountain, he convinced Huang Hao to go tell Liu Shan, "Jiang Wei has nothing to show for his numerous battles. You should replace him with Yan Yu."

And of course, Liu Shan agreed. So he sent out a decree to recall Jiang Wei. Jiang Wei was in the midst of trying to take the Wei camp at Qi Mountain, but then within the span of one day, three decrees arrived, telling him to return home with his troops. Ever the loyal servant of the throne, Jiang Wei had no choice but to retreat. He had the troops stationed outside the town of Taoyao fall back first, and then he and Zhang Yi slowly retreated behind them.

On the other side, Deng Ai heard horns and drums blaring one night from the enemy camp. He didn't know what Jiang Wei was up to. Came morning, word arrived from the scouts that Jiang Wei and his army had already fallen back, leaving behind just an empty camp. Deng Ai was worried about a trap, so he just let Jiang Wei go.

Upon returning to his base in Hanzhong, Jiang Wei left his army and went with the envoy to the capital to see Liu Shan. But after he arrived, Liu Shan did not hold court for 10 straight days. Hmm, if I didn't know better, I would say somebody was trying to avoid Jiang Wei.

Jiang Wei was getting suspicious as well. One day, he ran into a court official named Xi (4) Zheng (4), so Jiang Wei asked him if he knew why the emperor had canceled the Northern campaign.

Xi (4) Zheng (4) laughed and said, "General, you're still in the dark? That Huang Hao wanted to give Yan (2) Yu (3) a chance to earn some glory, so he convinced his highness to recall you. But then he heard that Deng Ai was adept at war, so he just quietly dropped the whole thing about sending Yan Yu to take your place."

Ohhhh boy. There was gonna be hell to pay for this. Jiang Wei was enraged and declared that he was going to kill that meddlesome eunuch. But Xi (4) Zheng (4) quickly checked him.

“General, you have inherited the late prime minister’s mission and you shoulder tremendous responsibilities. You must not act rashly. If you get on his majesty’s bad side, then there will be trouble.”

“You’re quite right,” Jiang Wei said.

The next day, though, Liu Shan was drinking in his garden with Huang Hao, and Jiang Wei suddenly barged in with a few guards. Word of this intrusion reached Huang Hao before Jiang Wei showed up, so Huang Hao quickly took cover.

Jiang Wei approached Liu Shan, prostrated, and said with tears in his eyes, “Your servant had trapped Deng Ai at Qi Mountain when your highness sent three decrees to recall me. Yet I still do not know why.”

To this, Liu Shan had no answer. So Jiang Wei continued, “That wicked Huang Hao is hoarding power, just like the 10 Attendants during the time of Emperor Ling (2). If you want a recent comparison, he is like Zhang Rang. If you want a more distant comparison, he is like Zhao (4) Gao (1). You should execute him at once. Only then will the court be cleansed; only then can the Heartlands be reclaimed.”

But to this, Liu Shan simply laughed and said, “Huang Hao is just an attendant at my beck and call. Even if he had power, he would not be able to do anything. I always thought it was strange that the official Dong (2) Yun (3) hated him so much. Why must you get so worked up about him?”

Kowtowing on the ground, Jiang Wei pressed, “If your highness do not kill Huang Hao today, calamity will not be far off.”

“We desire those that we love to live and those we hate to die,” Liu Shan said. “Why can you not tolerate a mere eunuch?”

And with that, Liu Shan summoned Huang Hao to come out of hiding and come apologize to Jiang Wei. Turning on the waterworks, Huang Hao wept and kneeled in front of Jiang Wei, saying, "I just serve his majesty day and night. I don't get involved in politics. General, please do not listen to words of outsiders and harbor ill intent toward me. My life is in your hands. I hope you will take pity on me!"

When he finished speaking, Huang Hao kowtowed nonstop and cried so much that snot was coming out of his nose. Faced with this pathetic display and knowing his emperor's position, Jiang Wei had no choice but to stomp off in anger. He then went to see the official Xi (4) Zheng (4) to tell him what happened. And Xi Zheng was like, wait, you did WHAT?!!

"General, disaster is not far off for you!" Xi Zheng told Jiang Wei. "If something happens to you, then the kingdom will perish with you!"

"Sir, please teach me how I can save myself and the kingdom," Jiang Wei said.

To see what plan Xi Zheng will come up with for Jiang Wei to save himself, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!