

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is episode 148.

Before we continue where we left off, I have a quick announcement. We are rapidly approaching the end of the podcast here. I still have a few more supplemental episodes I want to put out, but we are looking at no more than five or six regular episodes remaining, if that. I do plan on doing a wrap-up episode at the end of the whole thing, and as part of that episode, I will answer any questions you may have. Now, I've gotten a number of questions about whether I'm doing another similar podcast after this one, and I will address that in the wrap-up episode, so no need to send in more questions about that. Also, please listen to the 100th episode Q&A first, so that you don't send in a question that was already answered in that episode. Alright, on with the show.

Last time, the kingdom of Wei had sent the generals Zhong Hui and Deng Ai to lead two large armies to invade the Riverlands. Zhong Hui kicked down the front door to the region of Hanzhong and was cruising along when he suddenly ran into some spooky supernatural stuff around Dingjun (4,1) Mountain. He asked around and learned that this was the final resting place of none other than Zhuge Liang.

"This must be the work of his spirit; I need to personally go offer sacrifices to him," Zhong Hui said.

So the next day, Zhong Hui prepared a first-class sacrifice and went to Zhuge Liang's grave, where he prostrated and offered up the sacrificial items. No sooner had the ceremony ended did the violent winds stop and the ominous clouds dissipate, replaced by a light breeze and drizzle, which soon gave way to sunlight.

The Wei troops were all delighted by this turn in the weather, and they offered up their gratitude before returning to camp. That night, Zhong Hui was sleeping in his tent when suddenly, a light breeze swept into the tent, followed by a man donning a headscarf and wielding a feather fan. He wore a

crane-pattern robe, white shoes, and a black sash. His face was like fine jade, and his lips were daubs of red. His eyes were bright and clear, and he moved with the light grace of divine immortal.

Zhong Hui stood up and greeted the man, asking, "Sir, who might you be?"

The guy was like, dude, have you not been listening to the last 147 episodes of the Three Kingdoms Podcast?

"I was honored by your visit this morning," the man said. "I have a short message for you: Even though the rites of the Han are at an end and heaven's mandate must be followed, the people of the Riverlands have suffered much during this long period of war and should be pitied. Once you have entered their territory, please do not slaughter the civilians."

And with that, the visitor flicked his sleeves and departed. Zhong Hui tried to keep him, but suddenly startled awake. He immediately realized who the visitor was, so he ordered his troops to erect a white banner that said, "Protect the Kingdom, Spare the People." Wherever they went, whoever kills a single innocent would pay with his life. And what do you know? That worked. Wherever they went in Hanzhong, the people of came out of the towns to welcome them. Zhong Hui put all their minds at ease with kind words, and his army did not bother the civilians. A poet later wrote:

The ghostly myriads circling Mount Dingjun
Made Zhong Hui pay due homage to its potent god,
Who in life guided the fortunes of the Liu,
And whose words from beyond will save the folk of Shu.

While Zhong Hui was steadily advancing, Jiang Wei was getting restless at his base at Dazhong (2,1), waiting for the emperor to mobilize defenses as he had recommended. But when word reached him that

the enemy was coming, he could wait no longer. He sent orders to the generals Liao Hu, Zhang Yi (4), and Dong Jue (2) to rendezvous with him, while he mobilized his troops for action.

When the enemy arrived, Jiang Wei went out to face them. The commander of this Wei army rode out and shouted, "We have an army of a million men and thousands of top generals advancing on 20 fronts. We are already at your capital. If you refuse to surrender and remain obstinate, you would be going against heaven's will!"

Jiang Wei was enraged and rode forth to take on the enemy commander. Within three bouts, his foe turned and fled. Jiang Wei and his men gave chase for about six or seven miles when they were suddenly accosted by another enemy force, led by the governor of Longxi (3,1).

"Such vermins are no match for me!" Jiang Wei scoffed as he continued his advance.

A few miles later, he ran into the army led by his longtime nemesis Deng Ai, and the two sides scrummed. Jiang Wei was invigorated as he fought Deng Ai to a standstill after a dozen bouts or so. But just then, the sound of gongs and drums rose up from behind, and Jiang Wei quickly ordered a retreat. But it was too late. Word arrived from the rear of his army that the camps at a key location nearby had all been burned by the enemy.

Shocked, Jiang Wei left a lieutenant in charge of the fight against Deng Ai while he rushed to save those camps. But he was accosted along the way by another enemy force. The commander of that force did not dare to fight Jiang Wei, so he turned and ran. Jiang Wei gave chase, but when he tried to go up a hillside, he was forced back by a hailstorm of boulders and logs. So Jiang Wei turned and headed back the way he came. But along the way, he received word that Deng Ai had won the day and was now advancing en masse. Soon, Deng Ai's forces arrived and surrounded Jiang Wei.

Jiang Wei and a number of riders managed to break through the enemy lines and sprinted back into their main camp to await reinforcements. But while he was waiting, Jiang Wei got more bad news. Urgent dispatches arrived, informing that Zhong Hui had sacked Yang'an (2,1) Pass. Of the two generals

defending the pass, Jiang (3) Shu (1) had surrendered and Fu (4) Qian (1) had fought to his death. The region of Hanzhong now belonged to Wei, and the two nearby towns of Lecheng (4,2) and Hancheng (4,2) had also surrendered. The only other general in the area could not hold his position and had fled back to the capital Chengdu for help.

Stunned by this development, Jiang Wei immediately ordered his troops to break camp and move out. That night, as they were marching, they were blocked by an enemy force. The enemy commander traded just one blow with Jiang Wei before turning to flee. Jiang Wei pulled out his bow and took aim.

Now, Jiang Wei is usually a deadeye shot, but on this occasion, he fired three straight arrows, and all three missed the mark. Infuriated, Jiang Wei snapped his own bow in half and gave chase. But suddenly, his horse lost its footing and threw him to the ground. The enemy commander now turned to attack, but Jiang Wei leaped to his feet and stabbed his foe's horse in the chest. The enemy troops now swooped in and rescued their commander, while Jiang Wei got back on his horse. He was just about to give chase again when word came that Deng Ai was approaching from the rear.

Now, Jiang Wei was facing enemies both in the front and back. He decided he would fall back and go take back Hanzhong instead. But scouts soon informed him that his path of retreat had been cut off by Zhuge Xu (4), the imperial protector of Yong (1) Province. So Jiang Wei now pitched camp by some hills, while Zhuge Xu (4) garrisoned his troops at the head of Yinping (1,2) Bridge, another critical location that had fallen.

With no way forward or back, Jiang Wei sighed, "Heaven has doomed me!"

But one of his lieutenants said, "Even though the enemy has blocked the bridge, Yong Province must be lightly defended right now. General, if you cut through Konghan (3,2) Valley and make straight for Yong Province, then Zhuge Xu will no doubt redeploy the troops from the bridge to go save his home base. Then, you can lead your troops and make a dash for the Saber Pass, and you would be able to reclaim Hanzhong."

So Jiang Wei did as his lieutenant suggested. Sure enough, as soon as word of this movement reached the Zhuge Xu, he was in a panic. "Yong Province is my responsibility. If something were to go wrong there, the court will blame me," he said.

So Zhuge Xu left only a small force to hold the bridge while he led his main army to go save Yong Province. Well, the joke was on him. Jiang Wei had only headed about 10 miles in the direction of Yong Province before he turned his army around, figuring that was enough to induce the enemy to leave the bridge. Sure enough, when they returned to Yinping Bridge, the bulk of the Wei troops there had moved out. Jiang Wei didn't even break a sweat as he scattered the remaining defenses and set the enemy camps on fire. By the time Zhuge Xu heard about this and came back this way, Jiang Wei had been gone for half a day, and Zhuge Xu did not dare to give chase.

Having slipped across the bridge, Jiang Wei marched on and soon rendezvoused with his veteran warhorses Zhang Yi (4) and Liao Hua. Zhang Yi told him, "Huang Hao listened to the words of a sorceress and refused to dispatch troops. When I heard that Hanzhong was in danger, I decided on my own to mobilize the troops. But by then, Yang'an Pass already belonged to Zhong Hui. Then, I heard you were trapped, so I was coming to help you."

Now, they combined their armies and headed for Baishui (2,3) Pass. Liao Hua suggested that since they were under attack from every direction, they should fall back to the Saber Pass, the gallery road that leads from Hanzhong to the Shu capital Chengdu. Jiang Wei wasn't sure, though. But just as he was deliberating, word came that Zhong Hui and Deng Ai were coming this way on 10 fronts.

Jiang Wei wanted to divide his army to go fight the enemy, but Liao Hua said, "The roads around Baishui (2,3) Pass are narrow and numerous. It's not a good place to fight. We should fall back to save the Saber Pass. If that falls, we are done for."

Jiang Wei agreed, so he led the army toward the Saber Pass. As they approached, they were suddenly greeted with the sound of horns and drums and the sight of numerous banners as an army blocked the way. But fortunately, they were on the same side. This force was led by the Shu general Dong Jue (2). When Dong Jue heard that the enemy was coming on 10 fronts, he led 20,000 men here to hold the Saber Pass. He now welcomed his comrades into the pass and told them, while weeping, how Huang Hao had told the emperor to not mobilize his defenses.

“Sir, do not be concerned,” Jiang Wei said. “As long as I draw breath, I will not allow the Wei to gobble up our kingdom. Let’s hold the Saber Pass for now and devise a plan to repel the enemy.”

But Dong Jue said, “This pass is defensible, but there’s no one defending the capital Chengdu. If the enemy launches a sneak attack there, all is lost.”

“Chengdu is protected by mountains and cannot be easily taken,” Jiang Wei said. “We don’t need to worry about that.”

Just as they were talking, word came that the enemy commander Zhuge Xu had arrived. Jiang Wei was like, oh perfect, I’ve been sitting on this volcano of rage for days with no one to take it out on. So he immediately charged out of the pass with 5,000 men and crashed into the enemy lines, wreaking all sorts of havoc and putting Zhuge Xu to flight for 10 miles. Jiang Wei’s troops killed countless enemies and seized lots of weapons and horses before returning to Saber Pass.

Meanwhile, the Wei commander Zhong Hui had pitched camp a few miles away from the Saber Pass, and Zhuge Xu now came to see him. Zhong Hui was infuriated when he saw Zhuge Xu.

“I ordered you to hold Yinping Bridge to cut off Jiang Wei’s path of retreat. Why did you lose it? And now, you advanced your troops without my order and brought about this defeat!”

“Jiang Wei is crafty,” Zhuge Xu said. “He pretended to be on his way to attack Yong Province. I was afraid the province would fall, so I went to save it. Jiang Wei used that opportunity to slip away. I pursued to the Saber Pass, but was defeated by him again.”

Umm, that’s not exactly helping your cause there, buddy. Zhong Hui was fuming and ordered the guards to execute Zhuge Xu. But Wei (4) Guan (4), the army supervisor, said, “Even though Zhuge Xu is at fault, he is under the command of General Deng Ai. If you execute him, it might damage relations between the two of you.”

But Zhong Hui shot back, “I hold a clear mandate from the emperor and the Duke of Jin (4) to conquer Shu. If Deng Ai himself commits a transgression, I would execute him, too!”

That said, after much pleading from his officer corps, Zhong Hui relented and decided to throw Zhuge Xu into a prisoner’s cart and have him shipped back to the Wei capital for Sima Zhao to deal with. He then absorbed all of Zhuge Xu’s troops into his own army.

When news of this reached Deng Ai, he took it in stride and responded in a calm, reasonable manner. No, just kidding. He flew into a rage and cursed Zhong Hui, saying, “You and I are of the same rank. I have long been defending the borders and have rendered great service to the country. How dare you act so high and mighty?!”

But his son Deng Zhong advised him, “If you don’t tolerate the small things, it will ruin the grand scheme. Father, if you and Zhong Hui do not get along, it will no doubt affect the affairs of the state. I hope you can let this go for now.”

That helped Deng Ai calm down a bit, but he was still holding a grudge. He now went to see Zhong Hui with a dozen or so riders. When Zhong Hui heard that Deng Ai was coming, he asked how big a force he had with him. When told that it was just a dozen riders, Zhong Hui ordered a few hundred armed men to line up in and outside his tent to send a message to Deng Ai.

When Deng Ai arrived, Zhong Hui welcomed him into the tent, but the presence of the armed guards was not lost on Deng Ai. He now said to Zhong Hui, “General, it is the great fortune of the court that you have conquered Hanzhong. You should make plans to take the Saber Pass quickly.”

“What insights do you have?” Zhong Hui asked.

Deng Ai did the whole, “Who me? Oh I’ve got nothing valuable to contribute” schtick, but Zhong Hui insisted, so Deng Ai said, “In my foolish opinion, we can lead an army through the backroads at Yinping (1,2) and make a sneak attack on Chengdu. Jiang Wei will then have to redeploy his troops to save the capital, and then you will be able to take the Saber Pass.”

“That is a brilliant idea!” Zhong Hui said with apparent delight. “You should lead your troops and go at once, and I will wait for your good news.”

The two then drank a cup of wine and said goodbye. No sooner had he returned to his tent did Zhong Hui say to his officers, “Everyone says Deng Ai is talented, but from what I can tell today, he is a mediocrity!”

When his men asked the reason for that harsh assessment, Zhong Hui said, “The backroads at Yinping traverse treacherous peaks. If the enemy stations just 100 men at a key location and cut off his path of retreat, Deng Ai and his men will all starve to death. I will just keep advancing along the main road, and there’s no way my conquest will not succeed!”

So Zhong Hui sent out word for his men to start constructing siege equipment to prepare for an attack on the Saber Pass.

Meanwhile, after Deng Ai left Zhong Hui’s camp, he asked his entourage, “What do you think about the way Zhong Hui treated me?”

His entourage all said, “Judging by his expression, he strongly disagreed with what you said, but he forced himself to agree publicly.”

Laughing, Deng Ai said, “He doesn’t think I can take Chengdu, but I’ll show him!”

Upon returning to camp, his son and other officers asked him how the meeting went. Deng Ai told them, “I shared with him my sincere thoughts, but he viewed me as a mediocrity. He thinks that he has done something amazing by conquering Hanzhong. If not for me keeping Jiang Wei occupied, how could he have succeeded? If I can take Chengdu, it would trump his conquest of Hanzhong!”

So that night, Deng Ai ordered his army to break camp and advance toward the backroads at Yinping. They pitched camp more than 200 miles away from the Saber Pass. When Zhong Hui heard that Deng Ai had indeed gone off on his proposed trek through the mountains, he just laughed and mocked the man’s foolishness.

We’ll leave Zhong Hui in front of the Saber Pass for now and follow Deng Ai on his quest. After sending a message to inform Sima Zhao of his plan, Deng Ai assembled his officers and said, “We have a chance to launch a sneak attack on Chengdu and establish eternal fame. Are you with me?”

“We will obey your command, undaunted even by death!”

So Deng Ai ordered his son Deng Zhong to lead 5,000 men to move out first. They did not wear any armor and carried tools for cutting across hills and building bridges. Deng Ai himself led 30,000 men, with every man carrying provisions and ropes. As they marched, he stopped every 30 miles or so to build a camp and leave 3,000 men.

They set out in the 10th month of the year 263 toward Yinping. After covering more than 200 miles of uninhabited terrain over the course of 20-some days, they found themselves surrounded by towering cliffs and sharp gorges. By now, after all the camps he had left along the way, Deng Ai only had about 2,000 men with him.

As they approached a peak called the Heaven-Scraping Mountains, the terrain became too treacherous for horses, so Deng Ai left his horse behind and climbed up the peak on foot. When he reached the top, though, he found his son and the vanguard sitting around weeping.

When asked why they were crying, Deng Zhong told his father, “The west side of this peak is sheer cliff that cannot be cut through. All of our labor has been for naught. That is why we weep.”

But Deng Ai said, “We have already traveled hundreds of miles to get this far. On the other side of this cliff lies our destination. We cannot retreat now.”

He now told his men, “To get the tiger’s cub, you must venture into her lair. We have come so far. If we succeed, we will share in wealth and fortune!”

“We will follow your command, general!” his men all shouted.

What followed next was beyond belief. Deng Ai first told his men to slide their weapons down the steep cliff side. Then, he wrapped himself up in a blanket and rolled down the cliff. Uhh, so, were the rest of us supposed to do that? I guess so. We did just declare that we would follow his orders. Dang it.

So the rest of his men followed suit. Those who had blankets wrapped themselves up in it and rolled down the cliffside. Those who did not tied ropes around their waists and climbed down the cliff. Now the novel doesn’t say, but I’m guessing more than a few probably didn’t make it down in one piece. But amazingly enough, most of them apparently did.

Regrouping after that suicidal move, Deng Ai and company were just about to resume their journey when they noticed a stone tablet standing on the side of the road. It said, “Written by Zhuge Liang, the Marquis of Wu (3).” The lines that followed read, “When two fires first spring forth; a man will cross. Two warriors contend; soon they will die.”

Shocked, Deng Ai prostrated in front of the tablet and said, “The Marquis of Wu (3) is truly divine! It is a shame that I could not have you as my teacher!”

Later, a poet wrote:

Yinping's steep-pitched peaks reach heaven-high;
Even the sky crane reels before such height.
Yet Deng Ai wrapped in felt went hurtling down,
But even he could not escape Zhuge Liang's foresight.

So Deng Ai now continued on his trek. After a bit, they came upon a large, empty camp. His men told him, "When Zhuge Liang was alive, he stationed 1,000 men here to defend this location. But Liu Shan has abandoned it."

See, this is why you do what Zhuge Liang says. Deng Ai could not help but sigh at his good fortune, and he told his men, "We have crossed the point of no return! Ahead of us lies the city of Jiangyou (1,2). It has ample provisions. If we march forward, we live. If we turn back, we die. So let's throw all we've got at the city."

"We will fight to the last!" his men responded.

So this force of 2,000 advanced on foot and traveled through the night to attack the city of Jiangyou. This city was being defended by an officer named Ma (2) Miao (3). He had gotten word that the eastern half of the Riverlands had fallen, so he prepared his defenses. But he only paid attention to the main road, and with Jiang Wei holding down the Saber Pass, he figured that he was pretty safe and did not worry much.

One day, after drilling his troops, he returned home to drink with his wife. His wife, Lady Li (3) asked him, "I have heard that the situation is dire on the border, and yet you show no sign of worry. Why?"

Ma (2) Miao (3) replied, "Jiang Wei will take care of everything. There's nothing for me to worry about."

“Even so, you are defending a city and must not take that lightly.”

“The emperor listens to Huang Hao (4) and is drowning in wine and women,” Ma (2) Miao (3) told his wife. “Disaster is not far off. If the enemy arrives here, I’ll just surrender. No need to worry.”

He had barely finish saying those words before his wife’s spit hit his face. “You are a man!” she reproached him angrily. “And yet you have no loyalty and no honor. The state has squandered its benevolence on you! I am ashamed to see you!”

Those words left Ma Miao humiliated. Just then, a servant burst into the room. Oh good, something to break up this awkward situation. What’ve you got?

“The Wei general Deng Ai has appeared out of nowhere with 2,000 men and has stormed into the city!” the servant reported in a panic.

Stunned, Ma Miao promptly went out and did what he said he was going to do -- surrender. He prostrated in front of Deng Ai in the main hall and said while weeping, “I have long wanted to surrender. I am willing to lead all the city’s civilians and troops and surrender to you, general.”

Deng Ai accepted this surrender and absorbed the troops in the city into his own ranks and appointed Ma Miao as his guide. Just then, word came that Ma Miao’s wife had hung herself. Deng Ai asked Ma Miao why she did that, and Ma Miao sheepishly told the truth. Deng Ai was moved by Ma Miao’s wife, who showed far more backbone than her husband, so he personally attended her funeral. When the people of Wei heard about this, they all sighed deeply. A poet later wrote:

The Han’s rites overthrown, Liu Shan gone astray,

Heaven sent Deng Ai to seize the west.

More than all its captains of renown,

Jiangyou’s Lady Li (3) proved worthiest.

Having seized Jiangyou (1,2), Deng Ai now sent word for all the troops he had left along the way to rendezvous there and prepare to move on Fucheng (2,2), the next target. One of his officers, a man named Tian (2) Xu (4), said, “We have traversed treacherous terrain to get here and are exhausted. We should rest for a few days before advancing.”

That did not please Deng Ai at all. “Speed is of the essence in war,” he said angrily. “How dare you damage our troops’ morale?!”

Deng Ai wanted to execute Tian (2) Xu (4), but relented after much pleading from the rest of the officer corps. Deng Ai rushed his army to Fucheng (2,2), where the officials and civilians were all caught off guard and promptly surrendered without a fight.

News of this development flew into the Shu capital Chengdu. Liu Shan hurriedly summoned Huang Hao, but Huang Hao told him, “This is a lie. The gods will not let your highness down.”

Oh that’s right, the gods. Let’s ask them what to do. Liu Shan now wanted to summon the sorceress again, but lo and behold, she was nowhere to be found. I guess the gods told somebody to get out of dodge. Meanwhile, one urgent report after another flew into the capital, bearing worse and worse news. Liu Shan now held court to ask his officials what to do, and all they did was look at each other in silence.

To see how Liu Shan will try to get out of this pickle, tune in to the next episode of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!