

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 96.

Last time, our heroes got word that the imperial court was going to send two commandants to attack Liangshan, so they decided to send Guan Sheng the Great Saber to go attack the two commandants first. These two guys were known for their skills in launching water and fire attacks, but so far, we have seen none of that. They used some trickery to capture Guan Sheng's two lieutenants. But then, Guan Sheng came to fight them in person. He lured the General of Sacred Water, Shan (4) Tinggui (2,4), away from the battlefield before showing his true skills and easily knocking Shan Tinggui off his saddle.

But instead of finishing off his helpless opponent, Guan Sheng dismounted, went over and helped him to his feet and apologized.

Shan Tinggui was startled and humbled, and immediately kowtowed and agreed to surrender.

"I have spoken highly of you to my brother Song Jiang," Guan Sheng told him. "That's why he sent me here to recruit the two of you."

"I am untalented but willing to do all I can to help carry out justice on heaven's behalf," said Shan Tinggui, spewing the company slogan before he even finished signing the new-hire paperwork. He now returned with Guan Sheng to the bandits' camp.

There, Lin Chong the Panther Head came out to meet them and asked what happened. Guan Sheng did not mention who won and who lost. Instead, he just said, "We talked about the past and the present in the hills, and I convinced him to join us."

Lin Chong and company were delighted. Shan Tinggui now rode back out to the battlefield, and gave a big shout to the 500 soldiers who accompanied him out that day. In a split second, they all flocked over to him, following him in joining the bandits. The rest of the forces from Lingzhou Prefecture scampered back into the city and told the prefect what happened.

When the other commandant, Wei (4) Dingguo (4,2) the General of Holy Fire, heard the news, he was irate. The next day, he rode out to fight the bandits. As soon as he saw Shan Tinggui and Guan Sheng on the other side of the field, he cursed them, calling them treasonous, ungrateful jerks.

Guan Sheng was angered by those words and rode out to fight Wei Dingguo. After less than 10 bouts, Wei Dingguo turned and galloped back toward his own lines. Guan Sheng was just about to give chase, but Shan Tinggui shouted, "General, you must not give chase!"

Guan Sheng had barely reined in his horse when he saw why. From the enemy lines, 500 soldiers dressed in red charged out, all wielding fire-starting equipment and pushing 50 carts loaded with incendiary material. Each soldier carried a gourd on their back that was filled with sulfur and gunpowder. Before you knew it, a sea of fire was sweeping across the field, scorching everything it touched. Guan Sheng's troops scattered every which way and fell back about 15 miles before they could regroup.

Satisfied with this outcome, Wei Dingguo now called off his men and prepared to return to the city. But as soon as he turned around, he went ah crap! In the distance, he could see billowing black smoke and roaring red flames inside the city.

So, if you remember from the last episode, in addition to Guan Sheng's forces, we also had Li Kui the Black Whirlwind running some sort of rogue operation out in the wilds. He recruited a couple new chieftains to help him, and they had rescued Guan Sheng's two lieutenants, Xuan (1) Zan (4) and Hao (3) Siwen (1,2), after they had been captured in battle. Well, that little group and the 700 bandit lackeys they had amassed took advantage of Wei Dingguo's attention being squarely focused on Guan Sheng. While the fight was raging on the front side of the city, Li Kui and his gang snuck around to the back side, broke through the north gate, and stormed into the city. Once inside, they did the usual looting, pillaging, and setting things ablaze. Fun times.

Seeing that his city had been sacked, Wei Dingguo did not dare to go back inside. Instead, he rushed back to join up with the rest of his army outside the city, while Guan Sheng and his regrouped forces

were hot on their tail. Wei Dingguo now had no choice but to flee the scene, taking up position in a nearby county seat. Guan Sheng's forces immediately surrounded that town and began to lay siege, while Wei Dingguo kept the gates shut and refused to come out.

Shan Tinggui, the General of Sacred Water, now said to Guan Sheng, "Wei Dingguo is all courage. If we press him too hard, he would rather die than to suffer humiliation. Go easy and we will succeed; get impatient and it will be difficult. I am willing to go into town, brave whatever danger I face there, and convince him to come surrender without a fight."

Guan Sheng was delighted by this suggestion, and he sent Shan Tinggui to the town alone. When Wei Dingguo heard that his former comrade was there alone, he came out to meet him.

Shan Tinggui said to him, "Right now the court is enshrouded in darkness and the land is in chaos. The emperor is muddle-headed, and wicked officials abuse power. Let's join Song Jiang and temporarily reside on Liangshan for now. Once the corrupt officials have left the scene, then it would still not be too late to eliminate the wicked and restore the righteous."

Wei Dingguo thought about it for a good while, and then replied, "If you want me to join you, then Guan Sheng must personally come to invite me. Only then will I surrender. Otherwise, I would rather die!"

Shan Tinggui immediately returned to camp and relayed this demand to Guan Sheng, who said without hesitation, "A true man should not be paranoid." He then prepared to go alone with Shan Tinggui.

Lin Chong the Panther Head cautioned him, "Brother, it's hard to read someone's true intentions. Please reconsider."

"A hero has no cause for concern," Guan Sheng said. He then headed out with Shan Tinggui to the town.

There, they were met by Wei Dingguo, who was impressed by Gaun Sheng's courage, trust, and humility, and he immediately surrendered. They then had a nice little banquet to catch up and talk about the good ol' days. After that, Wei Dingguo and his 500 fire soldiers came over to Liangshan's camp and met the other chieftains. They then struck their tents and headed back to Liangshan.

On their way, they were met by Dai Zong the Magic Traveler, who had come on Song Jiang's orders. He said to Li Kui, "Because you snuck off the mountain, a bunch of brothers had to go all over the place. Right now the others have returned to base, and I'll go on back first to tell Brother Song so he can stop worrying."

After Dai Zong went off, Guan Sheng and company continued their journey back to Liangshan. At the edge of the marsh, they prepared to board ships and sail across to Golden Sand Beach. Suddenly, they saw someone rush onto the scene in a foul mood. This was the chieftain Duan (4) Jingzhu (3,4) the Golden-Haired Hound.

"Hey, weren't you going to the North to buy horses? Why are you here in such a bad mood?" Lin Chong asked him.

Duan Jingzhu said, "I DID go to the North to buy horses with the chieftains Yang Lin and Shi (2) Yong (3). We bought 200-some stout horses. But when we were traveling through Qingzhou (1,1) Prefecture on our way back, we were accosted by a group of 200 bandits led by a guy named Yu (4) Baosi (3,4) with the moniker the God of the Dangerous Road. They seized all our horses and took them to the Zeng (1) Family Village. I don't know the whereabouts of Yang Lin and Shi Yong, so I rushed back here nonstop to report this."

So, this would be the same Zeng Family Village that previously drew the Liangshan bandits' ire by stealing a horse and then killing their leader Chao Gai. So there was already plenty of unfinished business between the bandits and the Zeng family, and this latest episode only added to the bad blood.

The Liangshan forces now crossed the marsh and returned to Liangshan. First, they went to the Hall of Loyalty and Honor to see Song Jiang. Guan Sheng introduced the two new chieftains he just recruited. Then, Li Kui introduced the two guys that he recruited and told everyone about how he axed the would-be recruit who had the temerity to demand that Li Kui pay for his food, and how he then helped sack Lingzhou Prefecture.

All this good news plus the four new recruits had Song Jiang in a jovial mood. But that evaporated as soon as he heard the news about the Zeng family stealing their horses again.

“They were the ones who stole our horse before, and now, they dare to disrespect us again!” he fumed. “We still have not avenged Brother Chao’s death. Until we do, I shall know no joy. If we do not go seek revenge now, we would be ridiculed.”

The strategist Wu Yong chimed in and said, “It’s now springtime and the weather is getting warm, so it’s the perfect time to wage battle. Last time, we lost because of their geographic advantage. This time, we must use cunning.”

“My hatred for them is so deep that it seeps into my marrow,” Song Jiang added. “I swear that I will never return here until we get revenge!”

Wu Yong now suggested that they send Shi Qian, the Flea on the Drum, to go on ahead and scout out the area first, so Shi Qian went off. A couple days later, the other two chieftains who had gone on the ill-fated horse-buying mission, Yang Lin the Multicolored Leopard and Shi Yong the Stone General, made their way back to Liangshan and brought even more news to infuriate Song Jiang: Apparently, the Zeng family’s arms instructor Shi (3) Wengong (2,1), aka the guy whose poisoned arrow killed Chao Gai, had boasted that they were determined to be Liangshan’s nemesis.

Song Jiang fumed some more upon receiving this intel and wanted to mobilize an army right away. But Wu Yong convinced him to hold off until Shi Qian reported back. So Song Jiang stewed and waited, and he sent Dai Zong the Magic Traveler to also go conduct recon around the Zeng Family Village.

A few days later, Dai Zong came back first and said, "The Zeng Family Village wants to mobilize its forces to avenge our sacking of Lingzhou Prefecture. Right now, they have set up their main camp at the entrance to the village, and their headquarters are in the nearby monastery. Their banners span 100 miles. I couldn't see any path into the village."

The next day, Shi Qian reported back and showed them what a master thief was capable of. "I got all the way into the village and gathered lots of details," he said. "Right now they have five camps. There are about 2,000 people defending the front entrance to the village. The main camp is commanded by their arms instructor Shi Wengong. The north camp is led by their assistant instructor Su (1) Ding (4). The south camp is commanded by the second son, Zeng Mi (4). The west camp is led by the third son, Zeng Suo (3). The east camp is led by the fourth son, Zeng Kui (2). The center camp is led by the fifth son Zeng Sheng (1), who is commanding the camp with his father. As for Yu (4) Baosi (3,4), that bandit who stole our horses, he is a tall and stout man and nicknamed the God of the Dangerous Road. He is keeping all the horses he seized in the monastery."

After Shi Qian's report, the strategist Wu Yong assembled the chieftains and said, "Since they have set up five camps, we should split our forces into five battalions to attack their camps."

At that, Lu Junyi the Jade Qilin rose and said, "I have yet to repay you for saving my life. I am willing to risk my life and take the lead on this campaign. Will you consent to it?"

Song Jiang was ecstatic and said, "Mr. Lu, if you are willing to go, then you can be the vanguard."

But Wu Yong quickly intervened and said, "Mr. Lu just got here. He hasn't been in battle, and the mountainous terrain is ill-suited for horse-riding. He cannot be the vanguard. Instead, he can lead an army and lie in wait on a flat plain. When he hears the signal cannons from the main army, then he can come provide backup."

So ... what's going on here? Why did Wu Yong just kneecap Lu Junyi? Well, remember that when Song Jiang decided to "recruit" Lu Junyi, it was with the intention of making him the leader of Liangshan. In fact, he had already tried to do that once as soon as Lu Junyi joined the gang, but only relented in the face of some vocal objections, including from Lu Junyi himself. Also remember that Chao Gai, on his deathbed, had decreed that whoever captures Shi Wengong, the man who killed him, shall be the next leader. So that's why Song Jiang was excited about Lu Junyi being the vanguard, because it meant Lu Junyi would be in prime position to do just that. But that's also the exact thing Wu Yong wanted to guard against, because Wu Yong, like just about everyone else on Liangshan, wanted Song Jiang to remain the leader.

Anyway, Wu Yong prevailed, and so Lu Junyi brought along his confidant Yan Qing the Prodigy and 500 infantry and went to wait along a backroad on a flat plain. Wu Yong then dispatched five armies, one to attack each Zeng family camp. In all, 31 chieftains and nearly 20,000 troops were going on this campaign. The rest of the chieftains would remain on Liangshan to defend the base.

Meanwhile, word of Liangshan's movements trickled into the Zeng Family Village. The patriarch of the family, Zeng the Elder, discussed the situation with his two arms instructors, Shi Wengong and Su Ding (4).

"We must dig lots of concealed pits," Shi Wengong said. "Only then can we capture their stout generals and soldiers. This is the best plan to deal with these bandits."

So Zeng the Elder dispatched a bunch of workhands to go dig dozens of pits and trenches around the entrance to the village. They then covered up the pits with some loose soil and left troops in ambush all around to wait for the enemy. They then went to the road on the north side of the village and did the same.

Meanwhile, as the Liangshan forces left their base, Wu Yong again dispatched Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum to conduct recon. A few days later, Shi Qian came back and said that the Zeng family had set up countless concealed pits around their north and south camps.

“That’s nothing out of the ordinary,” Wu Yong laughed aloud when he heard this.

The bandits’ forces pressed on, and it was around noon when they approached the Zeng Family Village. In the distance, they saw a rider approaching. Bronze bells tinkled around his horse’s neck, and there were pheasant plumes tied to the horse’s tail. The rider wore a black hat and white robe and carried a short spear.

The front column of the Liangshan forces wanted to pursue this rider, but Wu Yong stopped them and instead instructed the army to stop and pitch camp and set up their defenses. For the next three days, no one came out from the village to give battle. So Wu Yong again sent Shi Qian to slip into the village in disguise so as to find out why the enemy wasn’t coming out and also to make mental note of the locations of all the concealed pits.

Shi Qian returned after a day and reported in detail all the enemy’s preparations and hidden defenses. The next day, Wu Yong ordered the front-column infantry to equip themselves with hoes and divide into two squadrons. He also prepared 100-some grain carts, but loaded them with firewood and hid them within the main army. That night, he sent word to the chieftains who commanded each of the five Liangshan armies about what to do the next day.

On the other side, the Zeng family’s arms instructor Shi Wengong was sitting pretty in the main camp, behind his many concealed pits and guarding the choke point on the one road into the village, daring the bandits to test his defenses. The following morning, around 9 a.m., he heard a cannon blast from in front of his camp, followed by a large squadron of enemy troops who approached the south



entrance. Soon, word came from the east camp that a monk wielding a Buddhist staff and a pilgrim wielding twin sabers were leading an infantry attack on that camp.

“That must be Lu Zhishen and Wu Song,” Shi Wengong said. Fearing any slipup, he immediately dispatched troops to reinforce the east camp.

But then, word came from the west camp that they were under attack from enemy infantry led by Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard and Lei Heng the Winged Tiger. So Shi Wengong sent troops to help the west camp as well.

Then, he heard more cannon blasts from in front of his own camp. He ordered his troops to hold their position and just wait for the enemy to come and fall into the concealed pits. And then, he would spring the ambush that had been set up behind some hills to capture the bandits.

But there was just one problem with that plan: The enemy wasn't coming to his camp. Instead, Wu Yong had just instructed some troops to make lots of noise on the front of the camp while he dispatched an army to sweep along two backroads behind the hills. The Zeng family infantry who were defending the camp did not dare to go out to fight these forces. That left their comrades who were hiding in ambush all alone, and those guys were soon flushed out by the Liangshan troops and driven into their own concealed pits.

Seeing this, Shi Wengong decided to go out and help his men. But that was what Wu Yong was waiting for. He pointed with his whip, and a gong started clanging in his camp. The hundred-some carts that he had prepared were now rolled out and set ablaze. When Shi Wengong rode out from his camp, he found his way blocked by these fiery carts and a mass of thick smoke that blocked out the sky.

Just as Shi Wengong was forced to retreat back into his camp, on Liangshan's side, the priest Gongsun Sheng started working his magic and summoned a strong gale that blew the fire into the enemy's camp through the southern entrance. Soon, all the structures in Shi Wengong's camp were burning.

Satisfied with the outcome, the Liangshan forces called it a day and returned to camp for the day. Shi Wengong, meanwhile, was left to pick up the pieces and repair his smoldering camp. So round 1 went to Liangshan.

The next day, Zeng Tu (2), the eldest son of the Zeng family, told Shi Wengong, "If we do not eliminate the bandits' leader first, it would be hard to wipe them out." So, Zeng Tu told Shi Wengong to defend the camp while he led an army out to challenge for battle. When Song Jiang got word of this, he went out with his troops and the halberd twins Lü Fang and Guo Sheng.

As he looked on from under his command banner, Song Jiang could see Zeng Tu, and he felt the hatred rise in his heart. He pointed with his whip and said, "Who will go capture that knave to avenge Brother Chao?"

One of the halberd twins, Lü Fang, immediately galloped out, hoisting his halberd and making straight for Zeng Tu. The two traded blows for 30-some bouts. The other halberd twin, Gu Sheng, could see that his comrade was starting to falter. Lü Fang's skills could not equal those of Zeng Tu's. For the first 30 bouts or so, he managed to hold his own, but now, he was in trouble and was reduced to dodging and parrying.

Fearing for his comrade, Guo Sheng now darted out and joined the fray. The three warriors now tangled in one mass between the opposing lines. Now, both Lü Fang and Guo Sheng's halberds had strings of gold coins attached near the tip, which, as far as I can tell, served no purpose except to look cool and to get their weapons tangled up in the heat of battle. So just as they both stabbed at Zeng Tu, he raised his spear to deflect their halberds, and in that moment, the red tuff at the head of his spear got tangled up with the strings of gold coins. So now, all three warriors' weapons were stuck on one another. See kids, this is why you don't hang purely decorative anything on sharp pointy objects that you count on to keep you alive on the battlefield.

The three warriors now pulled furiously on their own weapon to try to separate them. Zeng Tu managed to free his spear first, and while the other two were still trying to split their own halberds apart, Zeng Tu now thrust his spear toward Lü Fang's neck. But all of sudden, before his spear could reach its target, an arrow thudded into Zeng Tu's left arm, sending him tumbling off his horse head first.

This was courtesy of the sharpshooter Hua Rong, who saw that the halberd twins were in trouble and so he took aim at Zeng Tu and let fly. Now, to be honest, this was really kind of a cheap shot, since Zeng Tu was deep in the heat of battle with someone else, and it hardly seems honorable to shoot a guy essentially in the back. But that was little comfort for Zeng Tu, who was presently lying on the ground.

Before Zeng Tu could recover, the halberd twins figured out that even though their halberds were still stuck, they could be just as deadly if they both stabbed at the same target at the same time, especially when said target was lying helplessly on the ground after taking a cheapshot. Two halberds went down and into Zeng Tu's chest, and out he bled.

A dozen or so of Zeng Tu's men rode back to camp to tell Shi Wengong, who quickly sent the bad news to the patriarch. Zeng the Elder wept bitterly when he heard about the demise of his eldest son. Next to him, the youngest of his five sons, Zeng Sheng (1), who was a skilled fighter with two knives, gnashed his teeth and hollered, "Prepare my horse! I will go avenge my brother!"

Zeng the Elder could not hold his youngest son back, and Zeng Sheng donned his armor, grabbed his weapons, and rode to the front camp. But there, he was met by Shi Wengong, who advised him, "Young general, you must not underestimate the enemy. Song Jiang has many cunning and ferocious warriors. In my humble opinion, we should maintain a stout defense on all five camps and secretly dispatch a messenger to Lingzhou Prefecture and ask them to send an urgent report to ask the imperial court to dispatch two armies, one to attack Liangshan and the other to come here to defend our village. That will cause the enemy to lose heart for battle and force them to rush back to their mountain base. Then, my

unworthy self will accompany you and your brothers as we pursue and attack. That will result in a huge victory for sure.”

As he was speaking, the assistant arms instructor Su Ding arrived from the north camp and also advised staying on the defensive and asking for reinforcements. But Zeng Sheng shouted, “They killed my brother! When shall we avenge his death if not right now?! If we wait until the bandits have seized the momentum, it would be hard to repel them!”

The two arms instructors could not dissuade him, and Zeng Sheng now rode out with a few dozen riders to challenge for combat. Song Jiang ordered his front column to go out to meet the enemy, and the chieftain commanding that unit, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt was just about to go out and fight when someone else beat him to the punch.

Itching for some action, Li Kui the Black Whirlwind charged out on foot with his twin axes. Across the way, one of Zeng Sheng’s men recognized him and told Zeng Sheng that this was the Black Whirlwind. Zeng Sheng now ordered his men to shower Li Kui with arrows.

Now, whenever Li Kui went into battle, he always did so stripped to the waist rather than wear any armor. His protection came from the chieftains Xiang (4) Chong (1) and Li (2) Gun (3), the two guys who were handy with shields. But this time, Li Kui was charging at the enemy alone, and it wasn’t long before an arrow from Zeng Sheng struck him on his foot.

With a loud thud, Li Kui crashed to the ground, and Zeng Sheng now charged out with his men. Seeing this, six chieftains charged out from Song Jiang’s lines and put up a dogged fight to save Li Kui. Seeing that he was outnumbered, Zeng Sheng decided to fall back into his own camp, and Song Jiang did likewise.

The next day, the Zeng family’s arms instructors again preached avoiding battle, but Zeng Sheng insisted on going out and avenging his brother. Left with no choice, the lead instructor Shi Wengong led his troops out for battle.

To see how Liangshan will fare against their most hated enemy, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, see what could possibly convince these blood enemies to parley for peace. So, join us next time. Thanks for listening!