

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 108.

Last time, Marshal Gao Qiu personally led another imperial army to lay siege on Liangshan Marsh. He first traded blows with the bandits on land, and actually scattered a force led by Song Jiang. His army chased the bandits to the edge of the marsh, and then dispatched men to go back up the imperial navy, which was advancing on the bandits' lair while Gao Qiu kept the bandits occupied on land.

The navy was commanded by the admiral Liu Menglong (4,2) and a general named Dang (3) Shixiong (4,2), who was one of Gao Qiu's top officers from the imperial guard. They were leading their fleet along the myriad channels of the swamp, trying to head toward Liangshan. They had so many ships that the fleet formed an unbroken line spanning some 30 miles as it made its way along waterways obscured by heavy fog and thick reeds.

Suddenly, a cannon blast rang out from the nearby hills, and small boats darted out from the reeds all around them and broke up the fleet so that the imperial ships could not come to each other's aid. The soldiers on the imperial ships were already nervous about the thick reeds, and now, they completely panicked, with the majority of them abandoning ship and fleeing for their lives.

Seeing their foe in disarray, the bandits' fleet now charged to the sound of drums. The two imperial commanders tried to turn their ship around, but the channels they had taken to get this far were now blocked with logs and brushwood, which snagged their oars and blocked the passage.

The imperial soldiers now abandoned ship en masse and dove into the water to swim for their lives. The admiral Liu Menglong did likewise, ditching his armor, swimming back to the bank, and fleeing down some backroads. The other commander, Dang (3) Shixiong (4,2), refused to abandon his ship and instead ordered his men to row toward deeper waters.

They had not gone a mile when they were approached by three small boats, carrying the three Ruan brothers, each wielding a spear. As their boats drew near, most of the soldiers on Dang Shixiong's ship dove into the water and fled. Dang Shixiong stood alone on the prow, grasping a lance and trading blows

with Ruan Xiaoer, the eldest of the Ruan brothers. But Ruan Xiaoer quickly dove into the water, and then his two brothers closed in. Seeing that he was in dire straits, Dang Shixiong threw away his lance and also dove into the water. But no sooner had he done that did another chieftain appear in the water. This was Zhang Heng (2) the Boat Flame. He grabbed Dang Shixiong by the hair and the waist and chucked him into a thicket of reeds. A dozen or so lackeys were waiting there with hooks and lassos, and they quickly captured Dang Shixiong alive and took him up to the base.

Meanwhile, back on land, all Marshal Gao could see was a fleet of ships heading toward Liangshan, and all the people who were bound on the ships were wearing his colors. That was a clue that things did not go well, so he quickly ordered his army to retreat back to Jizhou Prefecture and regroup. But now, it was getting dark, and cannons started firing from all around, followed by the battle cries of bandits from seemingly every direction.

As it turns out, this was all a ruse. The bandits didn't actually have any ambush set up on land. They were just firing cannon shots and making lots of noise. But Gao Qiu and his men were so scared that they ran straight back to Jizhou Prefecture.

Once the battle ended, Song Jiang first sent the chieftain Dong Ping, the General of Double Spears, back to the base to get treatment for the arrow wound on his arm that he suffered during the land battle. Meanwhile, the naval chieftains arrived with their prisoner, the general Dang Shixiong. Song Jiang ordered that he be kept under house arrest at the base, while the bandits divided up all the captured ships among the naval chieftains.

Meanwhile in Jizhou Prefecture, Gao Qiu did a headcount after he got back. The land forces didn't lose too many men, but more than half the navy was gone, and not a single ship came back. The admiral Liu Menglong, who obviously did not believe in going down with the ship, managed to get back alive, as

well as some of the soldiers who knew how to swim. The ones who couldn't swim, however, all drowned in the marsh.

After this setback, Gao Qiu decided to keep in the city for the time being and wait for one of his confidants to arrive with more procured vessels. He also sent out orders to tell said confidant to pick up the pace and to bring all the ships he found, no matter what type they were.

Gao Qiu then assembled his officers to discuss their next step. One of the commandants said, "When I was roaming the jianghu scene in my youth, I made the acquaintance of a man named Wen (2) Huanzhang (4,1). He is well-versed in military strategy and has the wits to rival the great strategists of old. Right now he is teaching in a village outside the capital. If we can get him to come advise us, we would be able to counter Wu Yong's schemes."

So Gao Qiu immediately sent an officer back to the capital with a horse to invite that village school teacher to be his strategist. A few days later, the scholar had not shown up yet, but Song Jiang and his bandit army did, as word came that they were outside the city, challenging for battle. Gao Qiu was irate over their audacity and immediately led his troops outside to face the enemy.

As soon as the bandits saw Gao Qiu's forces approach, however, they fell back five miles to a flat plain. Gao Qiu led his troops in pursuit. Song Jiang's forces now lined up in battle formation, and from the red banner unit galloped out Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs, who also wielded a spear.

Gao Qiu recognized Huyan Zhuo as the guy who turned brigand when his armored cavalry was crushed, and he now ordered one of his commandants, a general named Han (2) Cunbao (2,3), to go fight him. That Han Cunbao (2,3) was quite skilled with a halberd, and he didn't even bother trading insults with Huyan Zhuo, as the two men got right down to business.

After 50 bouts, Huyan Zhuo feigned a blow and turned and rode away toward a hill. Han Cunbao wanted to earn some merit, so he gave chase. After the pursuit went on for a couple miles, they had arrived at a deserted spot. Huyan Zhuo now turned, latched his spear, and whipped out his twin staffs.

The two men now traded blows again. After a dozen or so bouts, Huyan Zhuo deflected a blow and once again rode away.

Han Cunbao thought to himself, "That knave couldn't beat me with his spear or his staffs. If I don't catch up to him and capture him alive now, what am I waiting for?" So he kept up a hot pursuit. Soon, he rode through the mouth of a canyon and saw the road branch off in two directions. Han Cunbao didn't know which direction Huyan Zhuo fled in, so he rode up to the top of a hill to get a better look. There, he saw Huyan Zhuo fleeing along a stream.

"Scoundrel, where are you going?! Surrender now, and I'll spare your life!" Han Cunbao shouted.

Huyan Zhuo indeed stopped, but he did not surrender. Instead, he just cursed Han Cunbao. Han Cunbao now rode down the hill and caught up to him. On one side of the road was the mountain, while on the other side ran the stream. The road was so narrow that the horses could not circle each other.

"Surrender now! What are you waiting for?!" Huyan Zhuo shouted.

"I already beat you! Why should I surrender?" Han Cunbao shot back.

"I lured you here to capture you alive!" Huyan Zhuo said. "Your life hangs by a thread."

"I am going to capture YOU alive!" Han Cunbao retorted.

The war of words soon turned into the war of weapons again. After another 30 bouts or so, both men stabbed at each other at the same time, and both twisted to dodge the other's thrust and both clutched the other's weapon under his arm. As they struggled to pry the other's weapon away, Han Cunbao's horse backed into the stream, and soon, Huyan Zhuo and his horse followed.

As the two men continued to tangle in the stream, their horses splashed in the water, drenching both riders. Huyan Zhuo suddenly let go of his spear, kept clutching Han Cunbao's halberd under his arm, and reached for his staff with the other hand. Seeing this, Han Cunbao quickly let go of both weapons and grabbed Huyan Zhuo's arms. The two men pulled and tugged so hard that they both fell off their horses and into the water. Their horses scampered onto shore and ran off toward the hills, but the two

men remained in the stream, weaponless, helmetless, and completely disheveled. But they were still at it, taking swings at each other with their bare fists as they trudged into shallower waters.

Just then, another squad of bandits showed up, led by Zhang Qing the Featherless Arrow. They swarmed in and subdued Han Cunbao. They also tracked down the two horses, and retrieved Huyan Zhuo's weapons for him. While a soaking wet Huyan Zhuo got back on his horse, the bandits tied up Han Cunbao and put him back on his ride, and they headed toward the mouth of the canyon.

But there, they were met by an imperial army, led by two other commandants who were coming to search for Han Cunbao. As soon as they saw that he had been taken prisoner, one of the commandants raised his three-tipped saber and charged toward Zhang Qing. They fought for three bouts, and Zhang Qing turned and rode away. His opponent followed, but was immediately greeted by a flying stone that struck him in the temple, drawing blood. This commandant dropped his weapon and covered his face with both hands.

Zhang Qing now turned around and charged at him, but just then, the other commandant let fly an arrow. Zhang Qing quickly pulled up his horse, and the arrow struck his horse in the eye. That horse immediately fell, and Zhang Qing leaped to his feet, hoisting his spear to fight the other commandant on foot. But while Zhang Qing's aim with the throwing stones was deadly, his skills with the spear were rather mediocre. The other commandant, meanwhile, wasn't messing around, and his spear soon sent Zhang Qing fleeing back into his own troops for cover.

The other commandant now charged and killed about 60 enemy riders, scattering the bandit forces and rescuing Han Cunbao. But just as he was turning back, loud roars rose up at the mouth of the canyon, as two units of bandit reinforcements arrived, led by Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt and Guan Sheng the Great Saber. These two guys were more than a match for the commandants, and they once again recaptured Han Cunbao while sending his two comrades fleeing for their lives. Zhang Qing now found another horse, and Huyan Zhuo summoned his remaining strength, and they joined the battle,

chasing the imperial troops all the way back into Jizhou Prefecture. The bandits then called it a day and returned to Liangshan with their hard-won prisoner.

As soon as Song Jiang saw his men bring the bound Han Cunbao into the Hall of Loyalty and Honor, he waved off the guards, personally untied the prisoner and offered him a seat. Han Cunbao was quite moved by Song Jiang's kindness. Song Jiang now asked his other captured general, Dang (3) Shixiong (4,2), to join them. He told them both, "Generals, please do not hold any suspicions. We harbor no ill intent. It's just that we were forced here by corrupt officials. If the court would pardon our crimes and grant us amnesty, we are willing to serve the country."

"But why did you not abandon your misguided path when Marshal Chen came here previously to offer you amnesty?" Han Cunbao asked.

"It was because the court's decree was not clear, and the imperial wine was switched with country brew," Song Jiang explained. "So my brothers were not convinced. Plus, that Officer Zhang and Officer Li were putting on airs and insulting us."

"So the country's important undertaking was derailed because there was no qualified person in charge," Han Cunbao lamented.

Song Jiang then threw a banquet for the two captured generals. The next day, he prepared horses for them and escorted them out. As the two men rode back to Jizhou Prefecture, they could not help but talk about how great Song Jiang was.

It was late in the day when they arrived outside the prefectural seat, so they waited until the next morning to enter the city. They went to see Marshal Gao Qiu and told him how Song Jiang had released them. But Gao Qiu was irate.

"This is the bandits' crooked scheme to hurt our troops' morale. How dare you come back to face me?! Men, take them outside and execute them!"

But all the other officers kneeled and pleaded, “This is not their doing. It’s a scheme by Song Jiang and Wu Yong. If you execute them, the bandits would laugh at you.”

After much begging, Gao Qiu relented and spared the two men’s lives. But he stripped them of their positions and had them taken back to the capital to await punishment.

Now, one of these two disgraced generals, Han Cunbao, just so happened to be the nephew of the former premier. And when you are a former premier, that usually means you have lots of current court officials who got their start as a retainer in your service. So as soon as Han Cunbao got back to the capital, he looked up one of those officials who owed their careers to his uncle and asked him for help. That official went to see another minister, and the two of them then went to see the current premier, Cai Jing, and told him, “Song Jiang has no ulterior motive; he’s just hoping for an amnesty from the court.”

“But when we offered them amnesty last time, they destroyed the decree,” Premier Cai said. “Such disrespectful bandits cannot be pardoned, only apprehended.”

But the two officials said, “That attempt failed because the envoys did not convey the virtuous intent of the court with kind words and instead just threatened the bandits.”

Eventually Premier Cai was convinced. The next morning at court, he petitioned the emperor to grant another amnesty to Liangshan.

The emperor said, “Marshal Gao has sent someone to invite a village scholar named Wen (2) to be his adviser. Let’s send him as the envoy. If the bandits are willing to surrender, then I will pardon their crimes. But if they still refuse to mend their ways, then tell Gao Qiu to set a deadline for apprehending them all and bringing them back to the capital.”

So Premier Cai wrote up a draft decree and sent men to fetch that village school teacher Wen (2) Huanzhang (4,1). This guy was a well-known scholar and was acquainted with many court officials. So they all attended a feast to welcome him before he disembarked for Jizhou Prefecture.

Meanwhile, back in Jizhou Prefecture, Marshal Gao Qiu was hanging out in the prefectural seat and feeling mighty annoyed when he got word that the confidant he had dispatched to gather ships had arrived. He immediately summoned the guy, whose name was Niu (2) Bangxi (1,3) and asked how the mission went.

“I have commandeered 1,500 vessels large and small, and they are all here,” Niu Bangxi said.

Marshal Gao was delighted and rewarded him. He then ordered that all the vessels be placed in a wide channel. Every three vessels were nailed together. Wooden planks were placed across them, and the back of the boats were latched together with iron chains.

Now, if you listened to my Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast, you might recognize this as a smaller-scale implementation of the chain-linked ships strategy that Cao Cao had deployed at the Battle of Red Cliff. And you would know how poorly that went. But Gao Qiu apparently did not read his classics, and so he filled the linked vessels with his infantry, while his cavalry staked out along the bank to protect the fleet. In this way, his troops practiced on the ships for a couple weeks until they had gotten used to fighting on water.

Now, Marshal Gao once again mobilized his troops. He put his confidant Niu (2) Bangxi (1,3) in charge of the navy, assisted by Liu (2) Menglong (4,2), the admiral who oversaw the navy’s first debacle in the swamp, and Dang (3) Shiyong (4,1), the brother of one of the disgraced generals who were captured, released, and sent back to the capital for punishment as a result of Marshal Gao’s first defeat. Marshal Gao also personally donned his armor and led his army and navy forward toward Liangshan, accompanied by the sound of drums and battle cries and an endless parade of ships.

This impressive looking navy sailed deep into the marsh and met no resistance. Gradually, Golden Sand Beach, the bandits’ main port, came into view. Just then, they saw two fishing boats among the reeds, each carrying a couple people who were clapping and laughing raucously.



The admiral Liu Menglong ordered the imperial navy to shower these two boats with arrows, which sent their occupants diving into the water. Liu Menglong then hurried his warships toward Golden Sand Beach. Along the shoreline, they saw a lot of willow trees. Hitched to one of these trees were two oxen. On the nearby grass, about three or four young cowherds looked like they were taking a nap. In the distance, they saw another young boy, riding on another oxen and playing a flute.

Liu Menglong figured his mighty navy could handle a few young lads, so he ordered his vanguard to charge onto land. The napping cowherds suddenly leaped to their feet, laughed out loud, and disappeared into the forest of willow trees.

A force of about 700 imperial soldiers now climbed ashore and followed their trail into the woods. Just then, a cannon blast rang out, followed by the sound of drums from both flanks. From the left charged out a bandit squadron dressed in red, led by Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. From the right dashed out a squadron dressed in black, led by Huyan Zhuo the Twin Staffs. Each squadron consisted of 500 bandits, and they charged toward the bank.

Liu Menglong hurriedly ordered his vanguard to get back onto the ships, but most of them never made it back. Meanwhile, the commander of the fleet, Niu (2) Bangxi (1,3), heard the commotion coming from the front of the fleet, so he ordered the back of the fleet to turn around and retreat. But it was too late.

A string of cannon shots blasted down from the mountain, and the thick reeds swished all around. This was the doing of the Daoist priest Gongsun Sheng, who was working his magic atop the mountain to summon a strong gale. The wild winds swept through the woods, moving sand and pebbles and whipping up white foams across the surface of the water. Meanwhile, black clouds gathered and blocked out the sun.

The admiral Liu Menglong ordered the fleet to fall back immediately, but at that moment, small boats emerged from the reeds all around his ships. These little boats crashed into the fleet, and at the

sound of a drum, they were all set ablaze. In the blink of an eye, a huge fire was roaring toward heaven, spreading across the water, and consuming the imperial navy.

Seeing things go south, Liu Menglong quickly ditched his helmet and armor and dove into the water to flee yet again. He did not dare to swim to shore, since that was bandit territory, so he swam toward open water. Suddenly, he saw someone rowing toward him on a small boat. Liu Menglong quickly dove under water, but someone was waiting for him down there and put a bear hug on him, dragging him out of the water and onto the boat. The guy rowing the boat was the chieftain Tong (2) Wei (1) the Cave Emerging Dragon, while the guy who captured Liu Menglong was the chieftain Li (3) Jun (4) the River Dragon.

The imperial fleet commander Niu (2) Bangxi (1,3) saw all his ships go up in flames and was just about to dive into the water as well. But someone from one of the boats caught him with a long hook and pulled him into the water. This was Zhang Heng (2) the Boat Flame. The only remaining imperial fleet commander, the general Dang (3) Shiyong (4,1), now rowed away on a small boat, looking for a way out, but he rowed right into an ambush and took a few hundred arrows, ending up dead at the bottom of the marsh.

Meanwhile, the bandits were slaughtering the imperial forces yet again, choking the marsh with the bodies of their enemies. Among the imperial soldiers, some who could swim managed to get away. The ones who couldn't swim all drowned. And the ones who were captured alive were all taken up to the bandits' lair.

The chieftains Li Jun and Zhang Heng soon met up, escorting the captured enemy commanders Liu Menglong and Niu Bangxi. They were going to take their prisoners up to the base, but then they thought, "Well, Song Jiang would just wine them, dine them, and let them go, like he does with every prisoner of war. What's the fun in that?" So the two chieftains decided to take matters into their own hands and just killed their two prisoners on the spot, cut off their heads, and presented those to Song Jiang instead.

While all this was happening, Marshal Gao was leading his army and waiting for news by the water's edge on the other side of the marsh. All he could hear, though, were strings of cannon shots and the ceaseless sound of drums. He figured that meant there was action on the water, so he led his forces a little closer to get a better look. What he saw dismayed him: A swarm of his own soldiers were climbing out of the water, fleeing for their lives. He asked them what happened, and they told him that the navy had gone up in flames and that all the commanders were missing.

That intel sent panic through Gao Qiu's heart, as did the echoes of battle cries and the black smoke that filled the air. He now led his army back the way they came, but soon, they heard the sound of drums from in front of some hills, and an army darted out, blocking their path. This force was led by the chieftain Suo (3) Chao (1) the Impatient Vanguard, who hoisted his giant axe and galloped toward Gao Qiu.

One of Gao Qiu's district commanders, Wang (2) Huan (4), rode forth to tangle with Suo Chao. They traded a few blows before Suo Chao turned and rode away. Gao Qiu ordered his troops to give chase, but when they went through the mouth of a canyon, Suo Chao had disappeared, so Gao Qiu and his army continued their retreat. But soon, another bandit force, led by Lin Chong the Panther Head, appeared from behind and took a swipe at them. This was followed a couple miles later by a similar assault led by Yang Zhi the Blue-faced Beast. Then, three miles later, it was Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard who gave chase.

All of these attacks were part of the plan drawn up by the bandit strategist Wu Yong. He didn't set down any ambush to block Gao Qiu's retreat, but instead just sent wave after wave of bandits to give chase and hurry Gao Qiu along as he fled. Gao Qiu and his army needed no extra motivation, as they kept running for their lives, ditching their rear column.

It was around midnight when Gao Qiu and the remnants of his army scurried back into Jizhou Prefecture. They had barely set foot inside when they got word that the army's camp outside the city had also gone up in flames. This was yet another bandit ambush, as 500 bandit troops were hiding nearby and set a few fires before they took off. By now, Gao Qiu was scared out of his mind, and he did not calm down until a series of scouts returned to report that the bandits had left. Only then did he gather himself and tally up the damage. And it was extensive. He had lost the majority of his army.

After this second defeat, Gao Qiu was even more troubled than before. And as he was fretting, word came that an envoy from the imperial court had arrived. This was the scholar Wen (2) Huanzhang (4,1), and he was carrying another offer of amnesty.

To see how this second attempt at a peaceful resolution will go, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, peace hinges on an ambiguous point of grammar. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!