

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 106.

Last time, the imperial court decided to send the bandits of Liangshan an offer of amnesty. But with just about everyone on both sides who's not named Song Jiang actively working to sabotage the deal, the mission shockingly turned into a debacle, and the envoy, Marshal Chen, barely got out of there with his head attached.

Once Marshal Chen rushed back to the capital, he told Premier Cai about how the bandits had torn up the imperial decree. Premier Cai was outraged.

"How dare these two-bit thugs be so rude?! How can our country allow you to act so recklessly?!"

Marshal Chen then added while weeping, "If not for your blessings, I would have died at Liangshan! I am only standing in your grace's presence because I escaped certain death!"

Premier Cai now summoned Tong Guan (4), the chancellor of the Bureau of Military Affairs, and Marshal Gao Qiu and the Marshal Yang who got beaten by Li Kui previously. They huddled, and the two helpers that Premier Cai and Marshal Gao had sent along on the mission reported to the group how the bandits had torn up the imperial decree, no doubt adding some exaggeration for effect.

Marshal Yang said, "Who was it that suggested offering them amnesty in the first place? How can such a group of thugs be given clemency?"

Gao Qiu said, "If I was at court that day, I would have stopped it. I would have never consented to such a thing!"

Tong Guan scoffed, "These two-bit crooks are no concern! I may be untalented, but I can personally lead an army and set a deadline for cleansing that marsh."

So it was agreed. The next morning at court, Premier Cai informed the emperor of the debacle, and the emperor was irate. He asked who it was that had suggested the idea of amnesty in the first place, and his attendant told him it was the inspector general. So naturally, the emperor ordered that the inspector general be arrested and tried for his failing.

With that taken care of, the emperor now turned to Premier Cai and asked who could be sent to bring the bandits to heel.

“These bandits cannot be tamed without deploying a large force,” Premier Cai said. “In my humble opinion, you must send the Chancellor of Military Affairs to personally lead a large army. He will be victorious in no time.”

So the emperor summoned Tong Guan, who was chomping at the bit to take a shot at the bandits. Marshal Gao and Marshal Yang also supported the idea, so the emperor handed down a decree, putting Tong Guan in command and giving him the power to mobilize troops from wherever he deemed fit in order to put down the Liangshan bandits.

Tong Guan got right to work, calling up 10,000 troops from each of the eight military districts under the command of the capital, to be led by their local commander. He also mobilized another 20,000 men from the Imperial Guard to protect the main body of the army. Gao Qiu, meanwhile, was in charge of sending provisions for the troops.

Once the army was assembled, Tong Guan set out on an auspicious day. Marshal Gao and Marshal Yang gave him a going-away banquet, and the imperial court ordered that money be distributed among the troops as a reward.

The next day, Tong Guan said goodbye to the emperor and headed out of the capital. A little more than a mile into his journey, he was met at an outpost by all the court officials, led by Marshal Gao and Marshal Yang. Tong Guan dismounted, and Marshal Gao offered him a cup of wine, telling him, “Chancellor, you will no doubt render great service to the court on this trip. I wish you a speedy victory. These bandits are at home in their marsh. You should first cut off their food supply, set up strong camps, lure them down from their mountain, and then attack. Then you would be able to capture them all alive, and justify the court’s faith in you.”

“Thank you for your advice; I would never dare to forget it,” Tong Guan said.

Marshal Yang then came over with another cup of wine and said, "You are well-versed in military texts and have a deep understanding of strategy. Capturing these outlaws will be as easy as turning over your hand. These bandits have been relying on their geographical advantage, but I am sure you will have a good strategy once you arrive on the scene."

"I will proceed as the situation dictates when I get there," Tong Guan reassured him.

"We shall eagerly await your triumphant return outside the gates of the capital," both marshal told him as they took their leave. Then, they all got back on their horses, and the various officials saw the army off for a bit before turning back.

Tong Guan's troops now marched in strict order, with him commanding the center. Within a couple days, this impressive army of 100,000 arrived at the borders of Jizhou Prefecture. The local prefect, Prefect Zhang, came out to greet them. While the army encamped outside the prefectural seat, Tong Guan entered the city and met with Prefect Zhang at his office.

"The outlaws of the marsh have been killing innocent civilians, robbing traveling merchants, and committing many wicked acts," Tong Guan said. "Time and again, troops have been sent to apprehend them, but they have not succeeded, and the bandits have been allowed to spread. Now, I am leading 100,000 men and hundreds of officers. I shall promptly cleanse their lair and apprehend all of the bandits to protect the civilians."

But Prefect Zhang said, "Chancellor, these bandits hide in their swamp. Even though they are outlaws, they have among them many men of wisdom and courage. You must not let yourself be governed by anger. You are leading your troops on a distant campaign. You must use strategy in order to succeed."

But Tong Guan became irate at this advice. "It's cowards like you who have let the country down and allowed the bandits to build up their strength. What do I have to fear?!"

That shut Prefect Zhang up, and he just focused on setting up a banquet for Tong Guan. The next day, Tong Guan marched his army forward and set up camp near the marsh surrounding Liangshan. Tong Guan then handed out assignments to his various generals, and after three rounds of drums, the entire army began to advance toward the marsh.

They had gone but a few miles when they saw a cloud of dust in the distance as a bandit scouting party approached. As they drew near, you could hear the jingling of the bells on their horses. It was a party of about 30 riders, all wearing black head scarves and green battle robes. Their horses all had red tassels hanging from their necks and dozens of little bronze bells on each side, while their tails were decorated with pheasant plumes. All the riders carried long, thin lances banded with silver, as well as light bows and arrows.

At the head of this scouting party was Zhang Qing the Featherless Arrow, and he was flanked by his two lieutenants, Gong (1) Wang (4) the Flowery-Necked Tiger and Ding (1) Desun (2,1) the Arrow-Struck Tiger. This group rode to within 100 paces of Tong Guan's army before turning around and riding away.

The two vanguard generals in Tong Guan's army did not dare to give chase without orders. So they just sent word of this to Tong Guan, who was positioned in the main column. Tong Guan now personally rode to the front. As he was deliberating, Zhang Qing and his scouting party came back again. Tong Guan was just about to order a pursuit, but his officers said, "That guy carries a pouch filled with stones, and he never misses with them. We must not give chase."

So Zhang Qing circled back three times in all. Tong Guan did not give chase, so Zhang Qing fell back. Tong Guan's army then resumed its advance. But after less than two miles, they heard the sound of gongs banging from behind a hill, and 500 bandit infantrymen appeared, led by four chieftains: Li Kui the Black Whirlwind, Fan (2) Rui (4) the Demon King of Chaos, and the two shield-bearers, Xiang (4) Chong (1) and Li (2) Gun (3).

This fierce-looking lot spread out in a row across the foot of the hill, protecting its flanks with shields. Tong Guan was less intimidated by this obstacle, so he pointed with his whip and his army charged forward. The bandits split into two groups and fled, dragging their shields behind them as they retreated past the foot of the hill. Tong Guan's troops pursued the bandits through the mouth of the canyon and saw a flat plain, so they lined up in formation. But by then, Li Kui and company had disappeared into the woods and hills.

Tong Guan's men now erected a tall wooden command platform. Two of his strategists went to the top of the platform and directed the troops into position to form a battle formation that resembled four hollow scoops. They had barely finished lining up when cannons rang out from the hills, and an army darted out.

Tong Guan scaled the command platform to see this for himself. He saw the bandit army coming from the east, composed of four units, all carrying different color flags. Just then, another army charged out from the west, also consisting of four units. Tong Guan's generals rushed to the center of the army and set up a defensive formation.

As the bandit forces came closer from the South, Tong Guan's officers could see that they were cloaked in red armor and battle robes and carrying fiery red banners. At their front was a red banner bearing a stitching of the six stars of the Southern Dipper and the emblem of a bird. Where that banner waved, a general galloped out. His command flag said, "Vanguard General Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt." And he was flanked by the Generals of Holy Water and Sacred Fire, Shan (4) Tinggui (2,4) and Wei (4) Dingguo (4,2). All three sat atop red horses and wielded their weapons at the front of the lines.

To the east another bandit army lined up. They were dressed in green and carried green flags. The lead banner boasted an image of the four stars of the Eastern Dipper and a green dragon. At the head of

this army was Guan Sheng the Great Saber, flanked by his lieutenants Xuan (1) Zan (4) the Ugly Prince Consort and Hao (3) Siwen (1,2) the Wood Dog of Well.

On the west side lined up a bandit army dressed in white and carrying white banners. Their lead banner bore the five stars of the Western Dipper and a white tiger. The lead chieftain on this side was Lin Chong the Panther Head, accompanied by Huang (2) Xin (4) the Suppressor of Three Mountains and Sun Li (4) the Sick Yuchi (4,2).

Well, the novel goes on like this for quite a while, detailing every cavalry and infantry unit on the bandits' side, but for the sake of time, I'm just going to get on with it. Needless to say, it was all an extremely impressive display. The bandit forces were laid out in the shape of an octagon, bristling with weapons and looking like they meant business.

Seeing this flex from his command tower, Tong Guan was scared out of his mind, and he could not help but mutter, "No wonder every army sent to apprehend these bandits was crushed. Turns out they are so fearsome!"

As he looked on dumbfounded, he suddenly heard the sound of drums and gongs from the bandit army, challenging for battle. Tong Guan now descended the tower, got back on his horse, and rode out to the front of his army. He asked which officer would dare to answer the challenge, and one stout general immediately answered the call. It's the district commander from Zhengzhou (4,1) Prefecture, one of the places that sent its army to join this campaign.

Tong Guan gave him the go-ahead, and this district commander rode out to the sound of drums, hoisted his saber, and shouted, "You wicked bandits! You rebellious traitors! The heavenly troops have arrived. Surrender now, or it will be too late for regrets when we grind your flesh and bone into mud."

From the bandit forces to the south charged out Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt. He was not going to stand for that kind of trash talk. The two warriors raised their weapons and went at it. After 20-some bouts, Qin Ming left an opening for his foe, who took the bait and swung at him. But the swing came up

empty, and at the same moment, Qin Ming's wolfe-toothed mace landed on his foe's head, crushing his skull and sending him tumbling to the ground. Qin Ming's two lieutenants galloped out and seized the dead enemy's horse and escorted Qin Ming back to his lines in victory.

Watching his comrade score the opening victory from the southeast lines, the chieftain Dong (3) Ping (2) the General of Double Spears thought to himself, "We have already seized the momentum. If we don't charge and capture Tong Guan right now, what are we waiting for?"

So Dong Ping let out a thunderous roar and flew toward the enemy lines with twin spears in hand. The sight of this incoming missile sent Tong Guan scurrying into his army. At the same time, the chieftain Suo (3) Chao (1) the Impatient Vanguard was similarly impatient about seizing the day, so he also let out a roar and charged toward the enemy while swinging his giant axe. Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt needed no further encouragement, as he ordered his troops to sweep forward as well.

So the three bandit vanguard units all poured into Tong Guan's lines, slaughtering his army en masse. The government troops fell into total disarray, abandoning all their possessions and crying out for their mommies and daddies. By the time the massacre was over, the government had been sent running for 10 miles and lost more than 10,000 men. And the only reason it wasn't worse was that the strategist Wu Yong signaled for the bandit army to fall back, telling them, "We must not throw everything into the chase just yet. This was just to send a message."

While the bandits returned to base to celebrate, Tong Guan regrouped his tattered army and set up camp. He was quite troubled when he met with his officers to discuss next steps. Two of his generals, however, told him, "There's no need to be concerned. The bandits knew we were coming, so they set up this formation to wait for us. We fell into their trap only because we had just arrived and didn't know their true strength. These bandits are relying on their geographic advantage and putting up a strong front. Let's reorganize our troops, rest for three days to rebuild our strength. And then we can deploy our

forces in the long serpent formation and advance all on foot. This formation is like a long mountain snake. If they attack the head, the tail end will respond. If they attack the tail, the head will respond. If they attack the center, then both the head and tail will respond. So our troops would be in an uninterrupted line. This will net us great success for sure.”

“That’s a brilliant idea; just what I was thinking, too” Tong Guan said.

So his troops rested for three days and got themselves back into form. On the third day, they made breakfast at 5 a.m. and then marched out in full force, streaming toward Liangshan Marsh again. They sent 300 armored riders on ahead to scout out the roads, and these guys reported back that there’s not a single soul on the battlefield where they met the bandits three days earlier.

Tong Guan got suspicious and consulted the two generals who gave him the plan of attack for today. He asked whether they should fall back, but they told him to not worry about it and just keep forging ahead. So the government troops kept marching. But they did not see a single enemy as they made their way to the edge of the marsh. In the distance, they could see smoke coming out of the thick reeds, and even farther away, they saw a yellow banner flapping in the wind atop the mountain, but no other movement.

Just then, they saw a small boat across the way, with one person on board. That guy was wearing a conical hat and a cape made from coconut fiber. He sat sideways on the boat, with his back to the government troops, and he seemed to be absorbed with fishing.

Tong Guan’s infantrymen shouted toward the boat, “Where are the bandits?!”

But the fisherman did not even react. Tong Guan now ordered two of his top archers to shoot at the guy with arrows. The two archers rode to the beach, reined in their horses, took aim at the fisherman’s back, and let fly an arrow. It struck the guy’s hat but just glanced off into the water. They took aim again and let fly another shot, but this one just bounced off the cape and into the water as well.



The two archers were stunned and reported back to Tong Guan that whatever that guy was wearing, it seemed to be impervious to arrows. Tong Guan thought, hmm, maybe what we need are more arrows. So he sent 300 more capable archers to go to the beach and shower the fisherman with arrows. But the fisherman showed no sign of fear. Most of the arrows fell into the water, and the ones that struck him just bounced off his hat and cape like before.

Well, since arrows couldn't do any damage, maybe it's time to get up close and personal. Tong Guan now ordered some soldiers who could swim to take off their armor and swim over there to capture the fisherman. About 50 guys dove into the water and swam toward the boat. The fisherman heard the sound of splashing in the water behind his boat, but still showed no panic. He casually put down his fishing rod and picked up an oar that was lying next to him.

The first soldier swam up to the boat, and crack! The oar came down on his head. The next guy got close, and crack again! And so it went for the first handful of soldiers, who all sank to the bottom of the marsh. The rest saw this and immediately turned around and swam back to shore.

Tong Guan was irate and now ordered 500 men to dive into the water. He was dead set on catching that fisherman, and any soldier who dared to turn around would be executed. So 500 soldiers now disrobed and dove into the water. That finally got a rise out of the fisherman, who now turned his boat around, pointed at Tong Guan and cursed aloud, "You are a treasonous official who throws the country into chaos and a beast who harms civilians! You have come to offer up your life; you just don't know it yet!"

Tong Guan responded with an angry command for his troops to fire more arrows. But the fisherman laughed, pointed, and said, "Our troops are coming." He then discarded his hat and cape and dove into the water.

As the 500 soldiers swam near the boat, they suddenly started crying out in distress, and before you knew it, they all began sinking beneath the surface.

So, the fisherman was Zhang Shun the White Streak in the Waves. The hat and cape he was wearing were forged from bronze, which was why arrows just bounced off of him. And once he dove into the water, he pulled out a dagger and started stabbing the oncoming soldiers. Before long, the bodies were piling up at the bottom of the marsh, the surface of the water was turning red with blood, and the lucky and not-quite-so-dumb among the soldiers were doggy-paddling back to shore.

Tong Guan was stunned as he watched this bloody scene unfold. Just then, one of his officers pointed and said that the yellow banner atop the mountain was waving. Tong Guan saw it, but neither he nor his officers had any idea what that might signal. One of his generals suggested that they send 300 riders in two detachments to scout out the area behind the hills.

Those scouts had barely reached the foot of the hills when suddenly, a thunderous cannon shot rang out from amid the reeds, setting off a swirl of flames and smoke. The scouts rushed back and told Tong Guan that there's an ambush. Tong Guan was panicking, but his two top generals ordered their troops to stand their ground. They rode up and down the line, announcing, "Anyone who dares to flee will be executed!"

With their troops temporarily held in check, Tong Guan and his officers now looked around some more. Just then, they heard earth-shattering sounds of drums and cries of battle rising from behind the hills, and an army of 5,000 flew out, bearing yellow flags. The two chieftains at their head were Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard and his tag-team buddy Lei Heng the Winged Tiger.

Tong Guan now ordered his top two generals to go meet the enemy. After some prerequisite trash talk, Lei Heng and one of the generals went at it, trading blows for 20-some bouts without a winner. At that point, Zhu Tong and the other general also joined the fray, and Tong Guan could not stop cheering as he watched these four warriors square off.

After the fight had gone on for a while, both Zhu Tong and Lei Heng suddenly turned and fled toward their own lines. Their opponents gave chase, and the bandit army fell back toward the hills. Tong Guan ordered his men to give chase, but once they passed the foot of the hills, they heard the sound of horns coming from above. They looked up just in time to see two cannon blasts ring out.

Recognizing a trap, Tong Guan ordered his army to halt their pursuit. Just then, he saw the yellow banner flash out atop the mountain again. It said, "Delivering justice on heaven's behalf." As Tong Guan looked toward that side of the mountain, he saw a swarm of colorful banners on the peak, and beneath them was none other than Song Jiang, accompanied by the strategist Wu Yong, the Daoist priest Gongsun Sheng, Hua Rong the Archer, Xu Ning the Golden Lancer, and an array of other chieftains.

Tong Guan was hopping mad now and ordered his troops to ascend the hills to capture Song Jiang. But they were greeted by blaring music and raucous laughter from the bandits, which made Tong Guan even angrier. Grinding his teeth, he barked, "How dare that outlaw taunt me?! I must capture him today!"

One of his generals advised that, hey, they probably want you to try to go up there. It's obviously a trap. Why don't we fall back and try again another day? But Tong Guan said, "Nonsense! We're already here, how can we retreat?! We were instructed to engage the outlaws as soon as possible. Now that we have seen them, we cannot retreat!"

But at that moment, the rear column of his army started shouting, and a scout rushed onto the scene, telling him, "An army charged out from behind the western hills and split our rear column into two."

Tong Guan was shocked and quickly rushed to the rear of his army to provide support. But just then, drums echoed from the hills to the east, and an army of 5,000 flew out, with half the troops carrying red banners and the other half carrying green banners. They were led by Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt and Guan Sheng the Great Saber. They galloped toward Tong Guan, shouting for him to leave them his head.

Tong Guan ordered his two generals to go face the enemy, but at the same time, his rear column was still under assault. So he ordered a retreat. But facing attacks from two sides, the retreat soon turned into chaos, and Tong Guan was reduced to fleeing under the protection of his two generals.

As they were running, they were accosted by another bandit force, this one led by Lin Chong the Panther Head and Huan Zhuo the Twin Staffs. Lin Chong made quick work of one of Tong Guan's district commanders, which took the fight out of the other officers, and they just all kept running. Just then, they were hit again by an infantry unit of bandits, led by Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim. And they smashed the remaining government troops into pieces.

Tong Guan and the survivors fought their way out of this melee, went around a hill, and was just catching their breath when they heard another cannon blast, followed by the sound of drums and the appearance of yet more bandit forces. And so it went, as Tong Guan and company got hit by one bandit ambush after another on their way out, losing four of his district commanders in the fighting.

By now, Tong Guan and his top two generals were trapped on a hill with nowhere to go. One of the generals said, "I saw that we still have a large force positioned to the south and their banners have not fallen. They can save us. You stay here, and I will fight my way out to bring that army here to rescue you."

And so he went, and this guy actually did manage to reach those reinforcements and brought them back to the hill where Tong Guan was trapped. By now it was night. They met up with Tong Guan and decided to fight their way out that night. So around 9 p.m., they surrounded Tong Guan and charged down the hill. All along the way, they could hear bandits shouting, "Don't let Tong Guan get away!"

And yet, that's exactly what Tong Guan did. After about four hours of hard fighting, he and the remnants of his troops actually made it out alive. Tong Guan thanked heaven for sparing his life, and he and his troops limped back toward Jizhou (4,1) Prefecture.

But they had barely finished saying their prayers when they saw a sea of torches appear in the hills ahead, while the shouts of battle drew near from behind. To see if Tong Guan will make it out of this

alive, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, we'll see what the imperial court's next step will be after this debacle. So join us next time. Thanks for listening!