

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 129.

Last time, Song Jiang took the major rebel stronghold of Hangzhou Prefecture, though it came at a heavy price, just like every other inch of territory that he had gained on this campaign. He then set his sights on Muzhou (4,1) Prefecture. To get there, he had to first get past Black Dragon Ridge, where rebel forces were holding strong thanks to the geographic advantages of steep mountains and roaring rivers.

After pitching camp near the ridge, Song Jiang sent Li Kui and his posse, which was now down to just the two shield-bearers Xiang Chong and Li Gun, to go conduct recon with 500 shield-bearers. But they had barely approached the foot of Black Dragon Ridge when they were met with a barrage of boulders and logs from above, forcing them to turn back.

Song Jiang then sent four naval chieftains to lead 1,000 men on 100 boats and sail to a point near the ridge. The four chieftains were Ruan Xiaoer, the eldest Ruan brother, the two Tong brothers, and Meng (4) Kang (1) the Jade Flagpole. They had their men beat their drums and sing mountain songs as they approached the foot of Black Dragon Ridge. But there, they were greeted by the sight of the rebels' naval camp, which boasted 500 warships, 5,000 soldiers, and four admirals, who had given themselves the moniker the Four Dragons of the Zhe (4) River. These four rebel admirals used to be boatmen along the Qiantang (2,2) River, but they all got fancy titles after joining Fang La.

The chieftain Ruan Xiaoer and his boat were sailing with the currents and sped to the shore. The rebel admirals had gotten word of enemies approaching, so they had already prepared 50 fire rafts. These rafts were built with large pine logs and piled high with hay, which concealed incendiary fuses. The rafts were placed on the beach. As the four naval chieftains approached the beach, the rebel admirals each waved a pale red flag and pushed off in four fast boats toward the enemy.

Ruan Xiaoer saw them and ordered his men to fire arrows. The four rebel boats backed off, and Ruan Xiaoer now told his men to chase them toward the shore. The rebel admirals abandoned their boats and fled onto the bank and ran, followed by many of their sailors. Ruan Xiaoer did not dare to get too close

to the rebels' naval base, on account of how many enemy ships and soldiers there were, so he and his men returned to their vessels.

But just then, a banner waved on Black Dragon Ridge, and all the fire rafts on the beach were set ablaze and pushed down in the river, which now carried them toward the Song forces' boats. Behind the fire rafts came large rebel warships, filled with sailors wielding long spears and hooks.

When they saw the large enemy fleet coming at them, the two Tong brothers rowed to shore, abandoned their boats, and climbed over the hills to find their way back to camp. Ruan Xiaoer and Meng Kang, however, remained on their boats to face the enemy. But when the fire rafts closed in, Ruan Xiaoer had to dive into the water. Just then, the enemy warships came up and Ruan Xiaoer found himself snared by one of the enemy's hooks. He panicked at the thought of being captured alive and humiliated, so he yanked out his dagger and slit his own throat.

Meng Kang, meanwhile, saw that things were going badly and was just about to dive into the water himself. But suddenly, a string of cannon blasts rang out from the fire rafts, and one of the shots struck him right in the head, pulverizing his skull.

The four rebel admirals now charged in to mop up. The rear of the Song fleet, which was commanded by Li Jun the River Dragon and the two younger Ruan brothers, saw that their front column had been decimated, and so they had no choice but to turn around and retreat back to their camp. The rebels' land forces, buoyed by their victory on the water, also charged down from Black Dragon Ridge and pushed the Song forces back a bit. Song Jiang led his troops back to their base at Tonglu (2,2) County, while the rebels went back up behind their mountain pass.

Song Jiang was now even more brooding and restless, having lost Ruan Xiaoer and Meng Kang. Everyone tried to console him, and even the two young Ruan brothers came to him while in mourning clothes, telling him, "Our brother may have lost his life in service of the state today, but that is still better

than dying on Liangshan and having his name buried forever. Don't trouble yourself and please tend to important state affairs. We two will get our revenge."

Those words brightened Song Jiang's mood a little bit. The next day, he reorganized his troops and wanted to attack again, but Wu Yong said, "Brother, you must not be impatient. Let's find another way to cross this ridge."

The brothers Xie Zhen and Xie Bao now came and said, "We were hunters and are used to climbing mountains. Let the two of us disguise ourselves as local hunters, climb up the mountain, and start a fire. That will throw the rebels into a panic and they will abandon the pass for sure."

"That sounds like a good idea," Wu Yong said, "but the peaks here are treacherous and difficult to scale. If you lose your grip, you could be killed."

But the Xie brothers said, "Ever since we broke out of jail and went to Liangshan, we have benefitted from Brother Song's good fortune and been heroes all these years. And we have received a pardon from the court and get to wear silken clothes. Today, for the sake of the court and to repay Brother Song, even if we are smashed to bits, it would not be too much to ask."

Song Jiang quickly shushed them, saying, "Do not speak such unlucky words. I only hope we can accomplish our mission quickly and return to the capital and that the court will not disappoint us. Just do your utmost for the country."

So Xie Zhen and Xie Bao dressed up as hunters, stashed sharp knives, and carried their steel tridents. They took leave of Song Jiang and headed up the mountainside along some back roads. It was around 7 p.m. Along the way, they ran into a couple enemy soldiers lying in ambush, but the Xie brothers made quick work of them. By the time they reached the foot of the ridge, it was about 9 p.m., and they could hear the watchman's drum striking the hour in the enemy's fort above.

The two brothers did not dare to take the main road up any farther, so they grabbed hold of vines and shrubs and climbed up the steep mountainside. It was a clear night, and the moon and the stars

were shining brightly. The two brothers climbed about two-thirds of the way up the mountainside and saw lights on the top of the ridge. So they hid themselves in a hollow and listened.

Soon, they could hear the watchman's drum striking the hour. It was now 3 a.m., and Xie Zhen said, "The night grows short, and it will be light soon. Let's go up."

So the two continued their climb. Soon they reached a sheer cliff face. To scale this, they had to use all their hands and legs, so they had to tie their tridents to their backs. But as they climbed, their tridents got snared on a vine and clanged loudly against a rock.

Immediately, commotion broke out atop the ridge, and the sentries spotted them. Before Xie Zhen could climb into a crevice to hide, he heard a shout of "Got you!" from above, and a long hook on a rope reached down and snagged his hair. Xie Zhen quickly pulled out his knife to cut the rope, but he was in such a panic that he didn't realize his feet weren't touching the ground. As soon as he cut the rope, he plummeted to the jagged rocks below, falling more than 100 feet to a gory death.

Seeing his brother fall to his death, Xie Bao quickly tried to backtrack down the cliff side, but now boulders large and small came tumbling down at him, along with arrows and crossbow darts. In the blink of an eye, Xie Bao also laid dead near his brother by a bamboo grove on the back side of Black Dragon Ridge.

At daybreak, rebels came down, fetched their bodies, and left them exposed to the elements on the ridge as a warning. When scouts reported this to Song Jiang, he wept so hard that he almost passed out several times. He immediately ordered Guan Sheng the Great Saber and Hua Rong the Archer to mobilize troops and attack the pass to avenge the four chieftains who had been slain in the past day.

Wu Yong tried to stop him, saying, "Brother, don't be impatient. Those who have died were destined to meet their end. You must not get reckless if you want to capture the pass. We must use strategy."

But Song Jiang was irate. "We have already lost a third of our brothers! And I cannot bear to see those rebels leaving our brothers' bodies exposed on the ridge. We must move in tonight to retrieve their bodies for a proper burial."

"But the rebels must be setting a trap by leaving their bodies exposed," Wu Yong said. "Don't get reckless."

But Song Jiang refused to listen. He mobilized 3,000 crack troops led by Guan Sheng, Hua Rong, and the halberd twins, and personally led this force up the ridge around 9 p.m. As they approached the ridge, a scout said they saw two bodies up ahead and that they looked like the Xie brothers.

Song Jiang rode on ahead to take a look. He saw two bodies hanging from two trees. On the tree trunk, a piece of bark had been cut off, and on the exposed trunk was written the words, "Song Jiang will be displayed here sooner or later."

Song Jiang was incensed, and ordered his men to retrieve the bodies. But just then, torches rose up all around, accompanied by the sound of drums. Rebel troops surrounded him and his men, arrows flew down from the ridge, and rebel sailors came pouring out of the ships by the shore. Song Jiang went ah crap and immediately ordered his forces to fall back, but the rebel commander Shi Bao blocked their path while the rebel imperial preceptor Zheng Yuanjue came charging down the ridge.

"Song Jiang, surrender now!" Shi Bao shouted.

Guan Sheng the Great Saber rode forth to fight Shi Bao. Before they had traded many blows, more cries of war rose from behind Song Jiang, as the rebel admirals led their forces onto shore, while two rebel generals also charged down from the ridge.

The chieftain Hua Rong quickly fended off the two rebel generals from the ridge. After a few bouts, he turned and rode away. When the generals gave chase, Hua Rong did what he did best and put two arrows through them, killing them both, which scared off their men and the rebel sailors for the time being.

But just then, two more rebel generals charged out with troops, and the two halberd twins rushed over to meet them. As his forces were engulfed in a dogged struggle, Song Jiang panicked. But just then, he heard thunderous cries from behind the rebel forces, and soon, he saw the rebels fleeing. Onto the scene came Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and his shield-bearers, along with 1,000 infantrymen, sweeping in behind the rebel commander Shi Bao. Then, Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim also appeared with 1,000 men, followed by a whole gaggle of cavalry chieftains with more reinforcements. That was enough to scatter the rebels and rescue Song Jiang.

Once he was safe back at camp, Song Jiang said to everyone, "If not for your rescue, I would have joined Xie Zhen and Xie Bao in the underworld."

Wu Yong said, "Brother, you went against my advice. I was worried, so I sent all the officers to back you up."

Meanwhile, back on Black Dragon Ridge, the rebel commander Shi Bao and imperial preceptor Zheng Yuanjue were discussing their next move. Shi Bao said, "Right now, even though Song Jiang has fallen back to Tonglu (2,2) County, if he discovers a backroad across the ridge, then Muzhou Prefecture will be in danger. Imperial preceptor, why don't you personally go to Clear Stream County to see his majesty and ask for reinforcements to defend this key location. Then we can hold it indefinitely."

Zheng Yuanjue agreed, so he went off to Muzhou Prefecture. He first met with the right prime minister and told him that Song Jiang's forces were strong and that the rebels at the ridge needed backup. So the right prime minister accompanied him to Clear Stream County, and they went to the cave palace and relayed the situation to the left prime minister.

The next day, both prime ministers and Zheng Yuanjue went to court to see Fang La. Zheng Yuanjue said, "On your command, I was helping the crown prince defend Hangzhou Prefecture. But Song Jiang's army was too strong when they swept in. Then someone helped them sneak into the city and that led to

the loss of Hangzhou. The prince insisted on fighting and ended up getting killed. Now I have fallen back to Black Dragon Ridge with commander Shi Bao. Recently, we killed four of Song Jiang's generals and boosted our prowess. But Song Jiang has advanced to Tonglu (2,2) County. We worry that sooner or later he will discover a backroad around the pass, and then the ridge would be lost. Your majesty, please hurry and send good generals and stout troops to help defend Black Dragon Ridge, so that we can repel the invaders and reclaim our territory."

But Fang La said, "We have already mobilized all our forces, and recently, we had to send tens of thousands of troops to Shezhou (4,1) Prefecture because of the urgent situation there. The only forces left are the imperial guard, and I need them to defend the palace, so how can I send them elsewhere?"

"If you majesty will not send reinforcements, then there is nothing I can do," Zheng Yuanjue said. "But if Song Jiang crosses the ridge, then how can we defend Muzhou Prefecture?"

The left prime minister now said, "The pass on Black Dragon Ridge is also a critical location. I know that your majesty have 30,000 imperial guards. You can send 10,000 to go with the imperial preceptor to defend the ridge. Please do so."

But Fang La refused to take that advice. After court adjourned that day, the left prime minister discussed with other officials and decided that they would send one general and 5,000 troops from Muzhou Prefecture to go shore up Black Dragon Ridge. So they appointed a general named Xiahou Cheng (2) to lead this reinforcement. They arrived back at Black Dragon Ridge and told the commander Shi Bao what happened.

"Well, since the court refuses to send the imperial guard to repel the Song army, then we all should just stay on the defensive and must not go out to fight," Shi Bao said. "Have the four admirals defend the beaches along the river and turn back any enemy ships that come this way. But we must not go on the offensive."

Meanwhile, Song Jiang kept his army in camp for 20-some days after his recent string of defeats. Suddenly, word came that Tong Guan, the Chancellor of Military Affairs had arrived in Hangzhou Prefecture with imperial rewards for the army. When Tong Guan learned that Song Jiang and Lu Junyi had divided their forces into two, he sent one of his generals to go deliver rewards to Lu Junyi's army, while Tong Guan himself was headed to Song Jiang's camp. So Song Jiang and his officers went six or seven miles outside their camp to welcome their ... umm ... favorite chancellor of military affairs. Tong Guan read the imperial decree and distributed the rewards to the officers, and then they threw a welcome banquet for him.

During the banquet, Tong Guan said, "I heard that you have lost many officers on your campaign."

At that, Song Jiang wept and said, "Last year, when I followed Commissioner Zhao on the campaign against the Liao kingdom, we were victorious and did not lose a single officer. But since we received the imperial edict to pacify Fang La, first we lost Gongsun Sheng before we even left the capital. Then the court kept a number of my brothers in its service. After we crossed the river, we have lost men at every location. Recently, we left another eight officers in Hangzhou because of illness, and their fates are uncertain. We have fought two engagements at Black Dragon Ridge up ahead, and also lost several officers. This place has steep cliffs and raging rivers, so it's hard to wage a battle and we have not been able to breach the pass quickly. I've been very troubled; thank goodness you are here."

Tong Guan said, "His majesty has heard that you have rendered great service, and later he heard that you have lost many officers, so he sent me and two generals to come help. One of my generals has gone to distribute rewards to Lu Junyi." He then introduced the other general to Song Jiang and company, and they then stayed in Song Jiang's camp.

The next day, Tong Guan organized his troops and wanted to go attack Black Dragon Ridge. But Wu Yong said, "Chancellor, you must not act lightly. Let's have the officers Yan (1) Shun (4) and Ma (3) Lin (2)



go follow the stream to some local villages and ask around to see if they can find a back road around the pass. Then we can attack the enemy from both sides, and the pass will be ours.”

Song Jiang agreed that was a good idea, so he sent Yan (1) Shun the Multicolored Tiger and Ma Lin the Iron Flute Deity with a few dozen soldiers to go ask civilians in the villages. One day around dusk, they brought back an old man and told Song Jiang that he was a native of these parts and was familiar with the mountain roads.

“Sir,” Song Jiang said to the old man, “please point me to the right path. Once I cross Black Dragon Ridge, I will reward you handsomely.”

The old man told Song Jiang, “My family have been peasants here for generations and we have long suffered at the hands of Fang La, but had nowhere to run to. Thank goodness your divine troops are here. The people will be fortunate enough to see peace again. I will point you to a back road that leads over the ridge. On the other side is the town of Dongguan (1,3), and that’s not far from Muzhou Prefecture. Near the city’s north gate, swing around past the west gate, and Black Dragon Ridge will be right there.”

Song Jiang was delighted. He rewarded the old man with silver, kept him in camp and treated him to wine. The next day, Song Jiang asked Tong Guan to stay and guard the camp, while he led his army to go to Muzhou Prefecture and then swing around to attack Black Dragon Ridge. Song Jiang mobilized 12 generals and 10,000 men for this mission. They removed bells from horses and marched with sticks in their mouths to remain silent as they followed the old man. When they were halfway over the ridge, they ran into an enemy unit blocking their path. Song Jiang sent in Li Kui and the two shield-bearers, and they quickly scattered the roughly 500 rebels in their way. Around 3 a.m., they arrived at the town of Dongguan (1,3). The rebel general there only had 3,000 men under his command, and he figured he was no match for Song Jiang’s army, so he fled at the first sight of the enemy and ran back to report to the right prime minister, who was overseeing the defense of Muzhou Prefecture.

While the rebels were scrambling, Song Jiang ordered Ling Zhen the Sky-Quaking Thunder to do his thing, and he blasted off a string of cannon shots, which shocked the rebel commander Shi Bao on Black Dragon Ridge. Shi Bao sent a general out to scout, and that general quickly returned and said that Song Jiang's banners had covered the hillside.

"Since the court won't send us reinforcements, we should just stay on the defensive instead of rendering aid to Muzhou Prefecture," Shi Bao said.

But the imperial preceptor Zheng Yuanjue disagreed. "Commander, you're wrong," he said. "If we don't send help to Muzhou and it falls, then our position would be lost too. If you won't go, then I will."

Shi Bao tried to talk him out of it, but Zheng Yuanjue insisted on going. He took 5,000 men, along with the general Xiahou Cheng, who had come here with the relief army, and went down the ridge.

Now, after Song Jiang made it over the ridge, instead of going to attack Muzhou Prefecture, he instead swung around and went to attack Black Dragon Ridge. As he was going toward the pass, he ran into Zheng Yuanjue's army. When the two sides lined up, Zheng Yuanjue rode out to challenge for battle. Hua Rong the archer saw him and whispered a few words to Song Jiang. Song Jiang nodded and then whispered a few words to Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt.

Qin Ming now rode out to take on Zheng Yuanjue. They fought for five or six bouts, and Qin Ming turned and rode away, while Song Jiang's troops scattered. Seeing this, Zheng Yuanjue tried to chase down Song Jiang. But as he approached, Hua Rong suddenly flashed out from behind Song Jiang and let fly a shot. The arrow struck Zheng Yuanjue in his face, sending him off his horse, and he was immediately killed by Song Jiang's soldiers. Song Jiang's forces then swept forward and put the rebels to flight. The rebel general Xiahou Cheng could not hold it together, so he fled to Muzhou Prefecture. Song Jiang's army fought their way to the foot of Black Dragon Ridge but was met with a barrage of boulders and logs

from above. So instead of trying to go up the ridge, they turned around and went to attack Muzhou Prefecture.

Inside Muzhou, the rebels' right prime minister saw Xiahou Cheng fleeing back into the city and reporting that Zheng Yuanjue was dead and that the Song forces had already crossed the ridge and were on their way to the city. So the prime minister sent Xiahou Cheng to the imperial palace at Clear Stream County to ask the left prime minister to tell Fang La about the dire situation and ask for help. Fang La was shocked and immediately dispatched 15,000 imperial guards under the command of a Marshal Zheng (4) to go save Muzhou Prefecture. The marshal requested that the royal astrologer, Bao (1) Daoyi (4,1), accompany the army as a strategist. Fang La agreed and summoned Astrologer Bao (1).

"Song Jiang's forces have repeatedly sacked our cities and are about to hit Muzhou Prefecture," Fang La told Astrologer Bao (1). "I hope you will use your magic to save the country and our people so as to protect our enterprise."

"My lord, don't worry," Astrologer Bao said. "I am untalented, but with my knowledge and your blessings, we will wipe out Song Jiang's forces."

Fang La then treated him to a banquet before sending him on his way. Astrologer Bao now huddled with Marshal Zheng and the general Xiahou Cheng about how to proceed. So this astrologer Bao had been a Daoist since his youth, and he had studied an unorthodox school of Daoism. Later, he joined Fang La's rebellion, and used his magic to defeat enemies in battle. He had a special sword called the Occult Universe, with which he could kill a man from 100 paces. He was also the master of the Marshal Zheng who was leading this relief force. That Marshal Zheng used to be a constable and was adept at spears and staffs. He also had a fondness for Daoist and had learned a lot of magic from Astrologer Bao. As for Xiahou Cheng, he used to be a hunter and was skilled with a trident.

As the three of them were discussing strategy, Fang La's personal eunuch came to pay them a visit. He told them, "I heard that you three are going to fight the Song forces. I have been observing the night sky, and all the general stars of the South are dim, while half of Song Jiang's general stars are still bright. I worry your mission will not go well. Why not advise his majesty to discuss terms of surrender instead and save the country from calamity?"

Astrologer Bao was irate when he heard that, and his Occult Universe sword flew at the eunuch and cut him in two. And then, they set out with Marshal Zheng leading the vanguard, Astrologer Bao leading the center column, and Xiahou Cheng bringing up the rear.

To see how this relief force will fare against Song Jiang, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, how will Song Jiang cope with black magic now that he no longer has Gongsun Sheng around? Join us next time. Thanks for listening.