

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 130.

Last time, after a couple bloody defeats at Black Dragon Ridge, Song Jiang found a back road over the ridge, and he set about attacking the key rebel stronghold of Muzhou (4,1) Prefecture. But before his siege could produce results, he got word that a rebel relief force had arrived. He sent the husband-and-wife team of Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger and Hu Sanniang the Ten Feet of Steel at the head of 3,000 troops to conduct recon.

Wang Ying and Hu Sanniang soon ran into the front column of the rebel relief force, which was led by a Marshal Zheng (4). Without exchanging a word, Marshal Zheng rode out and started trading blows with Wang Ying. After a few bouts, Marshal Zheng suddenly started muttering an incantation, and then he shouted, "Speed!"

Immediately, a stream of black vapor shot out from the top of his helmet, and amid the vapor stood a giant divine warrior in golden armor, swinging a big staff at Wang Ying. Wang Ying panicked for a moment, and that was all the opening Marshal Zheng needed, as he ran his spear through Wang Ying, sending him off his horse.

Watching her husband fall from the saddle, Hu Sanniang galloped out. After just one bout, Marshal Zheng turned and fled. All Hu Sanniang could think about was avenging her husband, so she kept up a hot pursuit. But suddenly, Marshal Zheng latched his spear, reached into a pouch around his waist, pulled out a gold-plated bronze brick and hurled it at Hu Sanniang. She wasn't expecting it, and it struck her right in the face, and she fell dead to the ground. Marshal Zheng now turned around and put the Song forces to flight.

The remnants of the recon team scrambled back to camp and told Song Jiang what happened. When he heard that Wang Ying and Hu Sanniang had been killed, Song Jiang was incensed, and immediately mobilized 5,000 men, along with Li Kui the Black Whirlwind and the two shield-bearers, to go meet

Marshal Zheng. When he saw the enemy, Song Jiang could not contain his anger. He rode out to the front line, shouting, "How dare you rebels kill my officers?!"

Marshal Zheng rode out to fight Song Jiang, but a furious Li Kui charged out with twin axes held high. His two shield-bearers quickly followed to defend him. The three of them charged right at Marshal Zheng, and he quickly turned and rode back into his own lines. The trio followed him into the enemy lines. Fearing that Li Kui might get hurt, Song Jiang sent his 5,000 men pouring into the enemy, scattering the rebels.

Song Jiang then ordered his troops to fall back. The two shield-bearers escorted Li Kui back, but just then, dark clouds gathered all around, turning day into night and making impossible to see the roads. This was Marshal Zheng working his black magic, and Song Jiang's troops now stumbled around lost and began to fall into disarray.

Looking up, Song Jiang lamented, "Could this be where I meet my end?"

The clouds lingered until early afternoon, and when they lifted, Song Jiang saw giant divine soldiers all around. The sight of these supernatural warriors sent Song Jiang's men to their knees, awaiting their death. Song Jiang himself dismounted and surrendered, shouting, "Grant me a quick death!" as he crouched to the ground.

Suddenly, he heard the sound of rain and wind, but saw no one. All his soldiers covered their faces as they awaited their death, expecting to meet with a sharp blade any second. But momentarily, the wind and rain passed, and not a single blade had appeared. Suddenly, Song Jiang felt someone take him by the arm, saying, "Please get up."

He looked up and saw a scholar reaching out to him. Surprised, Song Jiang stood up, offered his greetings, and asked the scholar for his name.

“My name is Shao (4) Jun (4),” the scholar said. “ I have always lived here. I came specifically to tell you that Fang La’s time is nearly up. He will be defeated within 10 days. I have helped you many times. Even though you are surrounded at the moment, a relief force has arrived. Do you know that?”

“Sir, when can I capture Fang La?” Song Jiang asked. But just then the scholar gave him a shove, and Song Jiang startled awake, discovering that it was all a dream. As he looked around, he realized that all the giant soldiers he had seen earlier were actually just pine trees. So he shouted for his men to start searching for a way out.

By now, the clouds had dissipated and the sky was clearing up. Soon, they heard shouts coming from outside the pine forest, so Song Jiang and his troops charged out of the forest. There, they saw Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk and Wu Song the Pilgrim leading a relief force and fighting Marshal Zheng’s men.

As the fight was getting hot, the rebel’s Astrologer Bao (1) saw Wu Song charging at Marshal Zheng, so he quickly dispatched his magical Occult Universe sword, which flew into the sky and came crashing down at Wu Song. It struck Wu Song on his left arm, and Wu Song started bleeding profusely and passed out. Fortunately, Lu Zhishen charged in and rescued him and took Astrologer Bao’s magic sword. BUT, they discovered that Wu Song’s left arm was all but severed. When Wu Song came to and saw the condition of the arm, he gritted his teeth and sliced the arm off with his own saber.

Song Jiang ordered soldiers to help Wu Song back to camp to recover. Meanwhile, Lu Zhishen charged once more into the fray, plunging into the rear of the enemy’s forces. There, he encountered the rebel general Xiahou Cheng (2). They fought for a few bouts, and then Xiahou Cheng turned and fled, and Lu Zhishen chased him until both men vanished into the hills.

While that was happening, Marshal Zheng came at Song Jiang once again. This time, Li Kui and the two shield-bearers went to meet them. Marshal Zheng was no match for them, so he turned and fled over the mountainside and across a stream. Li Kui and his posse wanted to show off their skills in front of

Song Jiang, so they kept up a dogged pursuit, even though they were in unfamiliar territory. As soon as they crossed the stream, however, 3,000 rebel forces charged out and cut off the rest of the Song soldiers. So it was basically just three of them in enemy territory. One of the shield-bearers, Xiang Chong, tried to turn around, but found his way back blocked by two rebel generals. He called out to Li Kui and the other shield-bearer Li Gun, but they had both gone on ahead in their chase. Xiang Chong tried to jump off the bank of the stream, but was tripped up by a rope. Before he could get to his feet, the rebels swarmed all over him and turned him into mincemeat.

Meanwhile, up ahead, the other shield-bearer, Li Gun, was chasing Marshal Zheng when suddenly he fell while fording another stream, and was immediately riddled by rebel arrows. And now, Li Kui had lost everyone in his posse, and he alone ventured deep into the hills. Behind him, though, came the rebel army from the stream.

But suddenly, another army swept in behind that rebel army. This was led by the chieftains Hua Rong the archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, and Fan Rui the Demon King of Chaos. They scattered the rebels and went deep into the hills and rescued Li Kui. But they could not find any sign of Lu Zhishen the Flowery Monk, so they had no choice but to turn back and meet up with Song Jiang. When they told him how the two shield-bearers had been killed and that they only rescued Li Kui, Song Jiang started weeping bitterly once more. When he did a headcount, he found that he had lost a significant chunk of his men. Plus Lu Zhishen was missing. And Wu Song had lost his left arm. This was NOT a good day.

Just as Song Jiang was crying over yet more casualties, scouts reported that his strategist Wu Yong, along with four chieftains, were coming on the river with 10,000 men. Song Jiang received them and asked why they were there. Wu Yong told him, "Chancellor Tong Guan has led his own forces and generals to the foot of Black Dragon Ridge. We have left only 13 chieftains to defend the camp; the rest are here with me."

Song Jiang now caught them up to speed on that day's losses and told Wu Yong, "Wu Song is now a cripple, and Lu Zhishen is missing. I can't help but be grief-stricken."

Sounding like a broken record, Wu Yong once again told him, "Brother, you must take a broad view of things. Right now is the time to capture Fang La. You must focus on the important affairs of state rather than let grief about your brothers harm your health."

Song Jiang now told Wu Yong about his trippy little dream encounter with the mysterious scholar, and Wu Yong said, "Since you had such a remarkable dream, there might be a temple nearby, and its patron deity appeared to save you."

So he and Song Jiang now walked into the forest to see if they could find such a temple. And sure enough, before long, they spotted a temple among the pine trees, sporting a plaque with golden characters that said, "Temple of the Black Dragon Spirit." They entered the temple and were taken aback. The idol of the dragon spirit bore a remarkable resemblance to the scholar in Song Jiang's dream.

Song Jiang now bowed to the idol and said, "Thank you, Dragon Spirit, for saving me. I hope you can help me again. If I can pacify Fang La, I shall inform the court and have your temple rebuilt and confer an exalted title on you."

Then, he and Wu Yong looked around the temple and saw a stone tablet that told the legend of this Dragon Spirit. As it turns out, this Shao (4) Jun (4) was a scholar from the Tang Dynasty centuries ago. After failing to place on the imperial exam, he drowned himself in the river. The emperor of heaven took pity on him and made him a dragon spirit, and he has been granting the locals' wishes for wind and rain ever since. So they built this temple to offer sacrifices to him.

Seeing this, Song Jiang ordered his men to prepare a black pig and a white sheep and held his own sacrificial ceremony. After that, he walked around outside the temple with Wu Yong, pointing out to him how all the pine trees had been turned into giant soldiers. And according to the novel, that temple apparently remained to the day when the novel was written, and the pine forest also remained standing.

After that little diversion, Song Jiang returned to camp and discussed military matters with Wu Yong until midnight. At that point, he got really tired and lay down in his tent. Suddenly, someone reported, "Scholar Shao (4) is here."

Song Jiang quickly sat up, went outside, and saw the dragon spirit Shao Jun, who said to him, "If not for my help yesterday, the pine trees that Astrologer Bao (1) turned into soldiers with black magic would have captured you already. I have come to thank you for the sacrificial ceremony, and to tell you that Muzhou Prefecture will fall soon, and Fang La will be captured within 10 days."

Song Jiang was just about to invite the scholar into his tent to ask him for more details, but a sudden wind blew, and he awoke in his tent, realizing that it was yet another dream. He quickly discussed it with Wu Yong, who told him, "Since the dragon spirit has appeared to you again, we should attack Muzhou immediately."

Song Jiang agreed, so when dawn broke, he ordered his main army to advance on the prefecture. He left the chieftains Yan Shun the Multicolored Tiger and Ma Lin the Iron Flute Deity to guard the main thoroughfare leading to and from Black Dragon Ridge. He then appointed Guan Sheng the Great Saber, Hua Rong the Archer, Qin Ming the Fiery Thunderbolt, and Zhu Tong the Lord of the Beautiful Beard to lead the attack on Muzhou, laying siege to the north gate. He also instructed Ling Zhen the Sky-Quaking Thunder to aim his mother-and-son cannons at the city, and the shots sent tremors throughout the city and struck fear into the hearts of the rebels, sending them into disarray.

Inside Muzhou Prefecture, Astrologer Bao and Marshal Zheng discussed the situation with the rebel officials and officers defending the city. They decided that the best course of action was to fight it out. So Marshal Zheng led two generals and a dozen or so lieutenants and came out of the north gate with some crack troops. Seeing this, Song Jiang told his army to back up the length of half of an arrow's flight, so

that the two sides had space to line up and prepare for battle. Meanwhile, Astrologer Bao sat atop the city wall to watch the action, along with the right prime minister and other officials.

On the battlefield, Marshal Zheng and Guan Sheng the Great Saber went at each other. Before long, it was obvious that Marshal Zheng was no match for Guan Sheng, so he got up to his usual tricks, muttering an incantation and shouting, "Speed." And just like before, a stream of black vapor rose from his helmet, and in the vapor a giant golden-armored soldier materialized and looked as though he was about to strike Guan Sheng with his staff. At the same time, dark clouds rose up from the rebel ranks.

Seeing this, Song Jiang quickly summoned Fan Rui the Demon King of Chaos. So remember that Fan Rui was a Daoist priest, and he had studied under Gongsun Sheng after joining Liangshan. So even though Gongsun Sheng wasn't present, Song Jiang kind of had the next best thing. Fan Rui started working his counter-magic, and Song Jiang also read the wind-breaking spell from his divine scrolls. As they did so, a white cloud rose from Guan Sheng's helmet, and within this cloud, another divine warrior appeared, this one riding a black dragon and holding a mallet.

This supernatural soldier now started fighting the giant soldier on the rebel's side, while both armies cheered on. After a few bouts, in the heavens, the dragon-riding warrior fought off his foe, while down on the battlefield, Guan Sheng cut down Marshal Zheng.

Meanwhile, Astrologer Bao saw Song Jiang casting a wind-breaking spell and was just about to get up and respond, but Ling Zhen fired a cannon blast right at him. The shot struck Astrologer Bao square on, shattering him to smithereens.

The rebels now fell into total chaos, and the Song forces used that opportunity to charge toward the city. Zhu Tong stabbed the rebel commander in the city to death, while Li Ying (4) the Striking Hawk killed another general with one of his throwing knives. All the rebel soldiers atop the wall had fled after seeing Astrologer Bao get blasted by the cannon shot, and Song Jiang's forces now poured into the city. They captured the right prime minister and several other officials, while slaughtering countless lieutenants.

Once the city was in his hands, Song Jiang first burned the palace since, again, you can't leave such artifacts of rebellion around. He took the gold and fabric from the storehouses and gave them to his officers as a reward, and then posted notices to calm the civilians.

But as he was doing a headcount, scouts brought an urgent report: Yan Shun and Ma Lin, the two chieftains guarding the road from Black Dragon Ridge, were dead. The rebel forces from the ridge came down to fight, and Ma Lin was stabbed by a rebel general, and the rebel commander Shi Bao then cut him in two with one swing of the saber. Yan Shun then took on Shi Bao, but was killed by his throwing mallet. The rebel forces were now marching on the city.

Song Jiang wailed again at the loss of two more brothers. But he had no time to mourn. He ordered his chieftains to prepare to face the incoming rebel force and to capture the pass on Black Dragon Ridge. His forces marched to the ridge, and ran into Shi Bao's army.

"Rebel, how dare you kill my brothers?!" Guan Sheng the Great Saber cursed.

Shi Bao had traded blows with Guan Sheng before and had no desire to do it again, so he fell back up the ridge, but ordered one of his generals to come down and fight Guan Sheng. The two had traded blows for only 10 bouts when suddenly, the rebels on the ridge rang their gongs to signal retreat. Guan Sheng did not give chase, but the rebel forces on the ridge had already fallen into disarray.

So, Shi Bao was so focused on fighting Song Jiang on the east side of the ridge that he forgot to watch the west side, and the army led by Tong Guan used that opening to charge up the ridge. One of the Tong Guan's generals even killed one of the rebel generals on the way up. So umm, wow, Tong Guan actually did something right for a change. I'm as shocked as you are.

But what happened next was not really a shock anymore. The halberd twins Lü Fang and Guo Sheng were leading the charge up the west side of the ridge. But as they rode up, a giant boulder came flying down and crushed Guo Sheng. Lü Fang, meanwhile, found himself in a dogged fight against another rebel general. At one point, they both ditched their weapons and grabbed hold of each other. As they



tangled on the steep mountainside, their horses lost their footing, and in the blink of an eye, both warriors, and their horses, went flying down a steep cliff side to their mutual deaths.

Despite those two losses, however, the Song forces were winning the day. While Tong Guan's army breached the west side, Guan Sheng and the other chieftains fought their way up the east side on foot. As they closed in on the top of the ridge, the rebel commander Shi Bao realized the day was lost. Not wanting to be captured and humiliated, he slit his own throat, and the pass fell. Guan Sheng sent word of the victory to Song Jiang.

Meanwhile, another Song army was attacking the rebel navy around the ridge. Those four rebel admirals saw that both the ridge and Muzhou Prefecture had fallen, so they abandoned their ships and fled across the river. But on the other side, two of them were captured by pissed-off civilians, who turned them into the Song forces at Muzhou. The other two vanished in the chaos.

The victorious Song forces now all headed to Muzhou Prefecture. There, Song Jiang welcomed Tong Guan and company. Once they pitched camp, they posted notices to once again reassure the civilians that they were safe. Countless rebels now surrendered. Song Jiang opened the grain stores and distributed their contents to the civilians and allowed them to go about their lives as, quote, law-abiding citizens once again.

Then, it was retribution time. They cut out the hearts of the two captured rebel admirals and offered them as a sacrifice to the slain naval chieftains Ruan Xiaoer and Meng Kang. They also performed services for all the chieftains who were killed in the various battles for Black Dragon Ridge. They also sent all the captured rebel officials to Military Governor Zhang for execution. Finally, they confiscated all the rebel boats and put them under the command of Li Jun the River Dragon.

Still, Song Jiang was devastated again about the loss of the halberd twins. He now kept his army in place and waited for Lu Junyi to join them before advancing on the rebel palace at Clear Stream County.

So, let's leave Song Jiang and go back in time a bit and follow Lu Junyi on his mission. He was leading 28 chieftains and 30,000 men toward Shezhou (4,1) Prefecture along mountainous back roads. Along the way, they passed through an ancient capital before approaching Yuling (4,2) Pass. That pass was defended by one of Fang La's top generals, whose name was Pang (2) Wanchun (4,1). He was a standout archer, and he was aided by two lieutenants who wielded strong crossbows and big spiny clubs. They had about 5,000 men under their command.

As Lu Junyi's army approached Yuling (4,2) Pass, he sent out six chieftains to lead a scouting party on ahead. The six were Shi Jin the Nine Tattooed Dragons, Shi Xiu the Daredevil, Chen Da the Stream-leaping Tiger, Yang Chun the Flowery Serpent, Li Zhong the Tiger-Slaying General, and Xue (1) Yong (3) the Sick Tiger. They rode out with 3,000 foot soldiers and went toward Yuling Pass. Along the way, they did not encounter any resistance, which made Shi Jin the Nine Tattooed Dragons very suspicious.

As Shi Jin and the other chieftains were talking this over, they arrived at the foot of the pass. Atop the pass, they saw a white flag, under which stood the enemy general Pang (2) Wanchun (4,1). Pointing down at them, Pang Wanchun laughed and cursed, "You two-bit bandits should've stayed in Liangshan Marsh instead of accepting amnesty from the Song court. How dare you come to our turf to play hero?! Have you heard of my name? I have heard that you have a Hua Rong in your ranks. Tell him to come out and pit his archery skills against mine. Let me give you a taste of my skills first!"

Before he finished talking, Pang Wanchun had already let fly an arrow, and it struck Shi Jin, sending him off his horse. The other five chieftains rushed forward and helped him back onto his saddle, and they fell back. But just then, a gong sounded from the hills, and a blanket of arrows came flying out from the pine forests on both sides of the road. Now, the other five chieftains couldn't even worry about Shi Jin, and they all just fled for their lives. But no sooner did they go around the mouth of a canyon were they cut off by an ambush led by the two enemy lieutenants, who showered them with crossbow darts.

No hero could survive that kind of onslaught, and before long, the six chieftains, and most of their men, lay dead in a pile at the foot of the pass.

So, ouch! That's a lot of guys to lose in one go. This part always hurts whenever I read the novel, especially because it killed off some favorite characters like Shi Jin and Shi Xiu. Of the 3,000 foot soldiers, only about 100 managed to escape, and they told Lu Junyi what happened. Lu Junyi was so shocked that he couldn't say anything for a long while.

His strategist, Zhu Wu, now said, "Don't be so troubled that you would let it derail our mission. Let's figure out another plan to capture the pass and kill the rebels so that we may avenge our brothers."

Lu Junyi said, "Brother Song entrusted me with so many officers, and yet I have lost six of them before winning even one battle. And only 100-some soldiers out of 3,000 made it back. How can I face him at Shezhou Prefecture?"

Zhu Wu told him, "As the ancients said, 'Terrain trumps timing, but unity with the people trumps terrain.' We are all from Shandong and Hebei Provinces. We are not used to fighting on water, so we are at a disadvantage when it comes to the terrain. So we must win over the local villagers and have them direct us along the mountain paths."

"You're quite right," Lu Junyi said. "Who should we send to find directions?"

"In my opinion, Shi Qian the Flea on a Drum is the best choice," Zhu Wu said. "He can fly over roofs and climb walls. If anyone can find a way, he will."

So Lu Junyi sent Shi Qian off into the mountains with a knife and some provisions. Shi Qian walked for half a day, and as evening fell, he saw a flicker of light in the distance. He figured that must be a household, so he rushed toward it.

Turns out it was a small monastery, with lamp light coming from inside. Shi Qian peeked in and saw an old monk sitting on the floor, reciting scripture. Shi Qian now knocked, and the old monk told a young acolyte to open the door. Shi Qian went in and paid his respects.

“Sir, please don’t bow to me,” the old monk said. “There are tens of thousands of soldiers at war right now; how did you get here?”

Shi Qian, somewhat surprisingly, came straight out and told the monk, “To be honest with you, I am an officer under Song Jiang of Liangshan. My name is Shi Qian. We have been commanded by the emperor to pacify Fang La. But the rebels on Yuling Pass killed six of our generals with arrows, and we have no way to capture the pass. So I have been sent to find another route. I came into the mountains and stumbled upon this place. I hope you will point me in the right direction. If we can find a small path to get around the pass in secret, I will repay you handsomely.”

The old monk said, “The civilians here have all suffered at the hands of Fang La, and to a man they all detest him. I am dependent on the local villagers’ donated grain, and now all the villagers have fled, and I have nowhere to go, so I had no choice but to stay here. Thank goodness the heavenly troops have arrived. It is a blessing for the people. Now that you have come to eliminate this scourge, I dare not say too much, lest the rebels find out. But if you go straight to the western ridge, there is a small road there that leads up to the pass. But the rebels might have cut it off in recent days.”

Shi Qian now asked, “Does that path lead all the way to the rebel camp?”

“It leads to behind the rebel camp. Once you go down from the ridge, you’ll find the road leading to the pass, but the rebels might have blocked it off with boulders, making it difficult to traverse.”

“No matter,” Shi Qian said. “As long as there is a road, I’m not worried about them blocking it. I can handle it. Since I have a lead, I will report back to my commander, and we will thank you later.”

“General, please don’t tell outsiders that I was the one who told you the way,” the monk requested.

“Of course. I’m a smart guy. I won’t reveal your identity.”

To see if this lead will help Lu Junyi, tune into the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, see who else is getting killed off, since we’re starting to run out of chieftains here. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.