

A BAD DAY AT FORT BRAGG

by Matthew Reilly

**Fort Bragg, North Carolina
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The taxi-cab lurched to a halt in front of the reinforced gates of Fort Bragg.

It was sunset and the giant military complex lay bathed in the glow of a thousand halogen lights.

Mitch Raleigh stepped out of the cab, eyes wide. To write about this sort of stuff was one thing. To see it up close was something else entirely.

A young Army captain was waiting for him at the gatehouse.

‘Mr Raleigh? Mr Mitchell Raleigh. The author?’

‘That’s me. You must be Captain Daniels.’

‘That’s correct, sir. And if I may say so, sir, it is a pleasure to have you here at Bragg. Let me take your bag.’

THE WRITER

Raleigh was a novelist from Australia, in the US on a book tour promoting his latest thriller. Modestly successful, he specialised in geopolitical thrillers that competed pretty well with Tom Clancy.

It was his third book, *Detachment-5*, that had brought him to Fort Bragg.

Set in the Afghan mountains, it had featured a covert battle between three heroic members of the famed Delta Detachment fighting against their American compatriots, a rogue band of US Army Rangers who had been bribed by some Afghan drug-runners into escorting a truckload of pure heroin out of Afghanistan.

The book had been Raleigh’s biggest hit.

It had also, however, seen him receive many emails—most of them complimentary. Of course, some nasty ones came, too. It was always a danger when one wrote about the military: some hardcore soldiers were very sensitive to their depiction as villains in works of fiction.

One of the nicer emails, however, had come from a Captain Dwight Daniels, a member of the Delta detachment based at Fort Bragg who had so loved *Detachment-5* that he had invited Raleigh to visit the base and see some of the D-boys in action.

It wasn’t every day a novelist got invited to see the inner workings of Fort Bragg, so Raleigh had gladly accepted.

Security, naturally, had been tight.

As requested, Raleigh had travelled to North Carolina by bus from D.C. under a false name and told no-one he had been given such prized access. Even his publisher in New York didn’t know he was taking this side trip from his book tour.

INTO THE JUNGLE

Once through the gatehouse, Daniels and Raleigh climbed into a lowslung Light Strike Vehicle—a small dune buggy that appeared to be made entirely of roll-bars.

They whistled through the largely deserted compound.

‘Some of the guys are doing a night-jumping exercise over at Camp MacKall tonight,’ Captain Daniels said. ‘Should be a sight. Thought you might like to see it.’

Within minutes, the LSV had left the weatherboard buildings of the Main Post behind and had entered a strange kind of wilderness.

Sandhills to the left; tree-covered slopes straight ahead; and a wide, swampy river bordering the right-hand side of the road.

‘This is all brand new,’ Daniels explained. ‘The sandhills, the jungle, even the river. Landscaped to match actual fighting conditions around the world.’

Raleigh nodded. ‘Impressive.’

On the opposite bank of the river, he saw some barracks houses with their porch-lights on. Some men wearing straw cowboy hats lounged on the verandah.

‘The Delta barracks,’ Daniels said. ‘That’s where we live when we’re on the base. We’ll stop there on the way back.’

‘Excellent,’ Raleigh said.

They took a fork to the left, headed for the sandhills. The Light Strike Vehicle handled the sandy terrain with ease, winding through several dune valleys before it arrived at a flat dirt clearing in front of a rocky hill.

Buried into the base of the rocky hill was a squat concrete structure: a tunnel entrance.

‘It’s for cave-fighting practice,’ Daniels said, seeing the look on Raleigh’s face. ‘1.6 miles of underground tunnels. Based on actual tunnel systems we’ve found in the mountains of Afghanistan.’

Raleigh frowned. ‘Don’t your men get used to the layout, seeing it over and over again?’

‘Several key walls are set on hinges. You rotate a few of them, and it becomes a whole new tunnel system. Fuse boxes for the lights are also moveable, so they’re always placed in a different position. No man ever sees the system in the same configuration twice.’

There came a loud throbbing noise from somewhere nearby.

Raleigh looked up.

And saw a Black Hawk helicopter swoop in low overhead, banking hard, zeroing in on the clearing.

‘Here they come,’ Daniels said. ‘Quickly, this way.’

SUBTERRANEAN

The interior of the tunnel system was dark and cool, and composed almost entirely of concrete.

Daniels led Raleigh to a viewing balcony overlooking a large concrete-walled cavern inside the system. No less than five separate tunnels intersected at this one gigantic cavern. A cave junction.

‘Here,’ Daniels gave Raleigh a pair of NVGs—Night Vision Goggles. ‘You’ll need them when they blow the lights. Right then. Excuse me a moment, sir. I’ll just go see where they are.’

Daniels left the alcove.

Raleigh stood there, alone, holding his NVGs.

LIVE FIRE

Silence.

A minute passed. Raleigh fingered his NVGs, waiting in tense anticipation for what was to come. Excited.

Waiting...

He noticed a master light lever on the wall to his right—for use no doubt when the exercise was over. Plus a wind-up wall-phone for communication with—

Bang!

Blackness.

Without any warning whatsoever, every single light in the cave system abruptly went out.

Guess they found the fuse box, Raleigh thought.

He whipped on his Night Vision Goggles...

...and the world changed. He saw the cave junction once again, only now it was bathed in ghostly green-and-black.

It was then that Raleigh saw the first wraith-like figure enter the cave, gun up. Raleigh recognised it as an Heckler & Koch MP-5. The man wore black fatigues, black webbing, black ski mask and mantis-like NVGs.

The soldier gave the signal...

...and suddenly the whole cave junction was alive with muzzle flashes as a dozen D-boys charged in from each of the cavern’s five entrances, guns blazing.

Cardboard cut-outs of Afghan terrorists popped up from slits in the floor and the D-boys razed them with brutal efficiency.

Raleigh couldn’t believe his luck.

This was a *live fire* exercise.

The only people in the world who had seen this were other D-boys, high-ranking Special Forces officers, and now-dead bad guys.

The bullet-noise petered out. Acrid gunsmoke filled the junction. Then voices:

‘Fire Team One! Clear!’

‘Fire Team Two! Clear!’

It was then that Raleigh saw one of the mantis-like Delta men emerge from the haze and look directly up at him...

Raleigh smiled, nodded.

The man responded by raising his MP-5 sub-machine gun and firing it right at Raleigh’s head.

TEACH YOU A LESSON

Raleigh ducked.

The concrete wall above him was shredded to crumbs.

What the...?

And suddenly, Raleigh heard a voice.

Captain Daniels' voice, coming in over the cave's PA system.

'Welcome to the kill zone, Mister Raleigh. You think you know the military, you candy-ass pussy? It's time you learned the difference between book smarts and battle smarts. We're gonna teach you a lesson.'

Another burst of gunfire sizzled over Raleigh's head.

His mind kicked into overdrive: *Twelve armed soldiers are trying to kill you. Why? Doesn't matter. Figure that out later. Right now, you have to get off this viewing platform.*

Raleigh turned, saw the doorway at the rear of the viewing platform.

No.

Too easy. They'd be expecting him to panic and bolt that way.

He'd have to go the other way: over the concrete balcony's railing and down into the cave junction. But to do that, he'd need a distraction...

The master light lever caught his eye.

Raleigh shut his eyes and jammed it upwards. The lights in the cavern blazed to life.

The Night Vision-wearing D-boys were momentarily blinded. They reeled, yanked off their goggles, and as they did so, Raleigh switched the light switch *off* again.

More darkness, but he'd got the moment he needed.

And with that, Mitch Raleigh leapt over the balcony and dropped onto the killing floor of the cave junction.

TUNNEL RUNNING

Into the nearest tunnel. World all green. Walls flashing by on either side. Heart pounding inside his head...

...and heavy footfalls thundering down the tunnel behind him, bullets pinging off the walls.

'Run, run, run, Book-Boy!'

'We's coming to getcha, you Australian pansy!'

Raleigh rushed into the tunnel maze—left, right, left, right—breathless.

'Fire Team One!' Daniels' voice called out. 'Left turn ahead! Fan out in formation Echelon Left!' *Echelon Left.*

As he ran, Raleigh remembered his research. Echelon fire formations were pretty basic combat formations. Four men would form together in a diagonal line to cover a threat coming from the left. Excellent for close-quarters tunnel fighting.

Raleigh found a heavy wooden box on the floor. Waited around a corner. A second later, a Delta man poked his head around the concrete corner and caught the box square in the face.

Raleigh grabbed his gun, just as the Delta net closed and three more D-boys entered his tunnel from the other end.

Time slowed.

Raleigh somersaults over the fallen man as the gunfire begins—lifts him up as a shield—real bullets smacking into flesh—but Raleigh was safe.

Shouts. Returning fire. Running. Into another tunnel.

Have to get out of this maze. Have to get to the outside world and get help. And why the hell am I still alive. These guys should have nailed me by now...

Now armed, Raleigh worked his way back to the cave junction, arrived there just as two D-boys did.

Quick draw.

And Raleigh cut them down with a short burst of the MP-5. The men hit the ground, groaning. Nine D-boys left now.

Raleigh saw the balcony—remembered the wall-phone up there.

The outside world...

Up the wall he climbed, moving like a kid on a jungle gym, hurling himself over the balcony's stone railing and landing with a desperate, clumsy thump.

He grabbed the wall-phone, wound it up.

Dial tone.

'Come on...' he urged.

Clickety-click: 'Hello? Guardhouse.'

'Yes, this is Mitch Raleigh. I'm down in the cave system being fired upon with live ammunition by some of your Delta boys!'

'Who is this?' the voice at the other end demanded.

'I'm a writer. One of your Delta guys, Captain Dwight Daniels, invited me to visit Bragg for research—'

'Listen to me, whoever you are. There is no Captain Daniels in the Delta Detachment here at Bragg. Now, you are calling from a restricted area. I'm sending the MPs down there.'

Click. Tone.

But Raleigh was already frozen.

'There is no Captain Daniels in the Delta Detachment here at Bragg...'

Daniels wasn't Delta.

But if Daniels wasn't Delta, what was he then?

And then it hit Raleigh.

Echelon Left...

Real D-boys would never use Echelon Left. They were too good to use procedures as basic as Echelon formations. No, Echelon formations were more suited to...

...Army Ranger groups.

Junior Army Ranger groups.

Infantry soldiers learning the basics of ground warfare.

This wasn't a group of Delta men at all.

This was a group of regular Army Rangers—young Army Rangers—*hardcore* Rangers who mustn't have been pleased at Raleigh's negative depiction of their branch of the military in his book.

And so they had decided to teach him a lesson.

Bring him to Bragg...on a bus under a false name...ensuring that he didn't tell anybody he was coming. Hell, so far as Raleigh's publisher knew, right now he was relaxing in D.C. So if he vanished at Bragg, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, he had just disappeared in Washington, D.C.

Right, Raleigh thought. Time to blow this joint.

RACE FOR THE SURFACE

The young Ranger team was rattled.

Two of their men were shot plus the one he had used as a human shield.

Shouts rang out from the tunnels: 'Where'd he go!'—'Damn it!'—'Find that cocksucker!'

When he saw them go back into the cave system, looking for him, Raleigh made a break for the surface.

Two men were guarding the exit.

Raleigh faked a scream and dropped to the dusty ground, just within sight of the two guards.

The two guards came to investigate. Two shots to their chests. Both men went down.

Raleigh bolted for the entryway...

RALEIGH DRIVING

...and burst out into the cool night-time air.

He saw the Light Strike Vehicle parked nearby.

Vrrrooom!

The LSV kicked up a spray of sand behind it as it roared its way through the sand dunes, heading back towards the Main Post with Raleigh at the wheel.

With a gigantic roar, the Black Hawk that had dropped the Rangers at the tunnel system came blasting over a sand dune, all guns blazing, raining hell down on Raleigh's LSV.

The Light Strike Vehicle skidded. Bullets raked the sand. The LSV turned—as more gunfire pelted the road in front of it.

Two more Light Strike Vehicles came bursting forth from the vicinity of the tunnel system—the Rangers in hot pursuit.

And then, with a *whoosh*, Raleigh skipped out of the sandy terrain and rushed onto bitumen.

He was at the riverside road, not far to go now.

He saw the barracks across the river, saw the men in straw cowboy hats now standing up on their porches, watching this unexpected pursuit curiously.

The Black Hawk swooped in low, loosed another burst.

The two Ranger LSVs behind Raleigh's car pulled in close to his tailbar

It as then that Raleigh realised.

He wasn't going to make it back to Bragg.

Then you'd better do something else, stupid! A voice yelled inside his head.

Right...

And so, as he whipped alongside the wide flat river, his pursuers now almost beside him, Raleigh did what no-one expected him to do.

He swung his speeding LSV left—*towards* the river.

The move took all the Rangers by surprise. The Black Hawk overshot his sharply-turning car. The pair of pursuing LSVs also reacted too late, shooting past Raleigh's skidding mobile.

The Light Strike Vehicle straightened and hit the banks of the river at speed and took off...soaring into the air, flying high.

And then it smashed with a glorious explosion of water smack-bang in the middle of the river.

Although Raleigh had been bracing himself for the inertial fling, when it happened, the force of it still took him by surprise.

The car hit the water nose-first, kicking up its rear-end, turning the LSV into a virtual catapult that flung Mitchell Raleigh a further fifteen yards into the river.

Raleigh landed with his own ugly splash—but at least now he was already halfway across the river.

He started swimming, saw the cowboy-hatted men at the barracks start running towards him. Looked back: saw the Rangers on the opposite bank, drawing their guns, but not firing, realising that it was too late.

Two cowboy-hatted men lifted a sogging and sagging Mitch Raleigh from the river.

‘Christ, a civilian,’ one of them said.

‘Who *the hell* are you?’ the other asked.

‘My name’—*breath*—‘is Mitchell Raleigh’—*breath*—‘I’m a’—*breath*—‘writer...’

The second cowboy looked out at the Ranger group on the other side of the river as he herded Raleigh towards the barracks.

He turned to his buddy. ‘Better give the MPs a call. Looks like some of the Ranger bunnies have been up to some naughty shit tonight.’

The cowboy draped Raleigh’s arm over his shoulder and helped him toward the barracks.

‘My name’s Rick Coltin,’ he said, ‘I’m a captain with Delta. Mitchell Raleigh, huh? The author, right? God, man, I’ve read your books—that *Detachment-5* was a real kick-ass read. Although if you don’t mind my saying so, I reckon you have to brush up a little on your real-life warfare research. You can read whatever books you like, but until you’ve been there, it just ain’t the same.’

THE END