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Movie premiere has Bragg abuzz

By Amneris Solano
Staff writer

Hollywood will invade Fort Bragg on Saturday, and hundreds of Nicholas Sparks fans couldn't be more thrilled.

Sparks' novel "Dear John," about a romance between a Special Forces soldier and a Wilmington college student, has been turned into a major motion picture. The movie's world premiere is being staged at Fort Bragg complete with appearances by Sparks and the film's stars - Channing Tatum of "G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra" and Amanda Seyfried of the TV series "Big Love."

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Melissa Gomez, a military wife and Sparks fan, expressed the general sentiment felt by local Sparks aficionados.

"Everybody is just going nuts," said the mother of two. "I think we're all super excited. We're all going to try our best to get in there."

Free tickets were distributed last week to military ID holders through Fort Bragg's Morale Welfare and Recreation. On the afternoon of the premiere, the first 600 ticket-holders in line will be admitted inside York Theater, where the movie will be shown to hundreds of soldiers and their families for the first time. The film opens nationwide on Feb. 5.

Arranging a film premiere can be quite a production behind the scenes. Tom McCollum, a Fort Bragg spokesman, said the actors will ride to York Theater in Humvees, where a camouflage carpet will await them.

"We're dressing up York Theater with items that will help depict who our Special Forces are and what they are capable of doing," McCollum said. "We want to make sure this has a Fort Bragg thumbprint."

The camouflage carpet and the Special Forces decals will be rolled out the morning of the premiere. The inside of the theater is being cleaned and polished as well. The post has developed a plan with Military Police to ease traffic flow. McCollum recommends carpooling and parking at a distance from the theater.

"We're asking for people to get inside the theater (quickly) and also to be patient," he said. "There is a lot of interest in this."

The story

In the movie, Tatum plays John, a soldier who falls for a college student (played by Seyfried) while he is on leave. The two spark a romance which is kept burning through years of correspondence. The letters touch on deployments, John's re-enlistment after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and other family matters.

"We live that stuff, so I think that type of movie premiering here is fitting," said Gomez, whose husband, Louis, is an Army staff sergeant.

Kareana Willey, an Army wife with two boys, got her ticket for the premiere last week. Her husband, Ian, is a Special Forces soldier, just like the character in the book. That makes the "Dear John" story close to her heart.

"I was watching the preview, and I just got teary-eyed because it makes me think of my husband," said Willey. "I definitely want to dress up because it's a huge deal."

Jennifer Oliff hopes to get a chance to meet Sparks so he can sign her copy of "Dear John." She started a book club last year after her husband deployed to Afghanistan and has read several of Sparks' books. "Dear John" is her favorite.

"We just sort of fell in love with Nicholas Sparks because he writes about North Carolina and he writes about things that are close to the heart," said Oliff. "His books are really easy to relate to, and they hit close to home."

"Dear John," Oliff said, is special because the main character reminds her of her husband, Bradley, a soldier in the 82nd Airborne Division. She and Bradley have two children ages 6 and 4 months.

Oliff stood in line with her friend and fellow book club member, Adlin Isom, last week to get tickets for the premiere.

"The trailer for it looks amazing," she said. "I'm going to wear mascara so I won't cry."

Isom, whose husband, Scott, is deployed, said "Dear John" is the best book she has read in a while. She enjoyed the story because she was able to relate to the characters.

"If for some reason we don't get to see the movie, it wouldn't be that big of a deal," said Isom, who is most interested in getting to see Sparks.

Holly Caddell, whose husband, Joshua, is a private first class in the Army, owns all of Sparks' books. The story of "Dear John" mirrors her courtship with her husband, who kept in touch with her through letters during a deployment. The couple have been married for three

years.

"I seriously thought that Nicholas Sparks must have read my journal when he wrote 'Dear John,'" Caddell said. "We wrote a letter to each other every day when he was gone."

Staff writer Amneris Solano can be reached at solanoa@fayobserver.com or 486-3521.

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