

'Decoration Day' explores military racism in WW II

Veterans James Garner and Bill Cobbs co-star

By AMY SCHMIDT

Why would anyone turn down the Congressional Medal of Honor? That is the subject of "Decoration Day," a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie airing Sunday, Dec. 2, on NBC. "Decoration Day" is based on the novella by John William Corrington.

Judge Albert Sidney Finch is a lonely widower existing in a gloomy retirement. His only contact with the world is through his irascible but loyal housekeeper Rowena.

James Garner ("The Rockford Files") stars with Bill Cobbs ("Rage of Angels"), Judith Ivey ("Down Home"), Ruby Dee ("Do the Right Thing") and Larry Fishburne ("Colton Club") in this human-interest story set in 1975 Georgia.

Judge Finch (Garner) is jolted out of his languor when he is asked to champion the cause of a former boyhood friend, Gee Peniwell (Cobbs), a black World War II veteran. On a point of principle, Peniwell has refused to accept the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Why? In a recent interview, Judith Ivey, who plays the woman who helps the judge begin his life anew,

wouldn't give that away: "It's part of the mystery of the piece which is unwoven by James Garner," she said enigmatically. She did tell us this: "Ultimately it's dealing with the racism that he felt existed at the time while he was in battle."

It is interesting to note that both Garner and Cobbs are military veterans, and Cobbs' father fought in World War II. "I had very strange feelings as a boy," said Cobbs, "seeing my father in the service, and then seeing him as a second-class citizen." A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Cobbs recalls, as a boy, visiting his father at Orlando Air Base, in Florida and hopping up onto a counter seat at a local drugstore. "I found out that I had no right to sit in that chair, that we had to go to the back of the drugstore and wait until everyone else had been taken care of."

Garner also recalls racial discrimination within the Army when he was in Korea. "The Army was still basically segregated. I remember there was a black unit of 14 soldiers, and nobody knew what to do with them."

"Then unit was too small to really stand alone, and nobody else wanted them in their section," said Garner. "When I heard about it, I said, 'My God, give them to me. They can join my section.' And you know what, after that I had the best section of all."

The passing of friendships is also an issue in this film. "I think it's awfully important to try to maintain relationships with people you know and like," said Garner. "In the story, Albert Sidney has let about 30 years pass without talking to his closest childhood friend, a black guy named Gee. I guess everybody lets that happen, but it's a real shame."

If there is one thought that Garner says he would like audiences to take away from "Decoration Day," it is that people should never give up on life. "Here's Albert Sidney, his wife's gone and died on him, he's quit his job, he's bored out of his mind, he's feeling terribly sorry for himself. And then he's presented with a challenge and he starts living again. He even falls in love, for heaven's sakes," said Garner. "You know, it doesn't matter what curves life throws us, it's not over 'til it's over. This story is all about hanging in there, and picking up the pieces, and moving on."

STAR NOTES

Kirstie Alley left interior design behind for acting

By Candace Havens

She stars as the very sexy, but slightly neurotic Rebecca on the popular NBC series *Cheers*. Kirstie Alley has made a name for herself in her short, but successful career in both television and movies.

A native of Wichita, Kan., Alley began her drama career at the art school of the University of Kansas after attending Kansas State University. She then pursued a career in interior design. It was a tough period in Alley's life because she had started using

cocaine. She finally kicked the habit and moved to L.A. in 1981 to pursue an acting career.

After about six months of beating the pavement, Alley landed the lead female role in *Star Trek II*. She's gone on to star in several feature films including *Summer School*, *Runaway*, *Mad House*, *Shoot to Kill*, *Look Who's Talking* and her latest, *Sibling Rivalry*. *Look Who's Talking Too* is slated to premiere in theaters soon.

She joined the cast of *Cheers* in 1987. Viewers and cast members alike were curious to see if she could fill Shelley Long's shoes. She did, and the continues to do so.

Alley is married to Parker Stevenson and has done many projects with him. The two live on a large estate with several animals, from opossums to dogs and chickens.



Dylan Walsh plays Louie Klein on *Gabriel's Fire*, airing Thursdays on ABC.