

"And then the war came on," he says.

That fact drastically changed life. Young men went to enlist, and Hamlin was no exception.

He initially sought enlistment in the Naval Air Corps, but after discovering he had an enlarged heart -- a result of a bout of rheumatic fever -- he was disqualified.

That fact, however, didn't keep him out of the military. Instead, he joined the Coast Guard on Feb. 4, 1942. It was a decision which, he assumed, meant he wouldn't leave the United States.

"I thought, 'Well, the Coast Guard — you'll never go overseas. You're here to protect the United States,'" he says. "I found out that was wrong."

That fact was never more evident than in June 1944, when he prepared to be part of the invasion of Normandy on D-Day, June 6.

As ships took their places before the invasion, energy was high, even though the troops didn't truly know what was coming.

"We didn't know what to expect," says Hamlin. "We knew that we were going to be what they called 'Rescue Flotilla One.' We didn't know how we were going to do it until it actually happened."

There was something else, however, that Hamlin wasn't expecting in the hours before D-Day: A friendly face, all the way from the Ozarks.

Thousands of miles from home and surrounded by hundreds of boats, Hamlin happened to look over at the next ship. He saw that it was Landing Ship, Tank (LST) number 50. It was the same LST he believed Ralph Carter, one of his buddies from Springfield, was aboard.

"So they pulled alongside it, and I started yelling, 'Do you happen to have a Ralph Carter on board?' And believe it or not, someone yelled out, 'Absolutely we do — he's our commander. Who is this?' I said, 'Just tell him Jack Hamlin.'

"He says, 'Hamlin, what the hell are you doing in that rowboat?' I said, 'Let me tell you something, Lt. Carter, if your LST is sunk or torpedoed, you'll be the last SOB I pick out of the water.'"

Soon, it was the day which was never to be forgotten. Some 156,000 Allied soldiers stormed the French beaches, which ultimately led to the liberation of Western Europe from Nazi Germany's control.

Instead of fighting, Hamlin's job was to rescue soldiers. He'd never officially helped anyone from the water before that day, but he jumped in, tethered with a flotation device to a small cutter. Over the next several hours, he brought injured soldiers back to the boat before transporting them to a

hospital ship about 10 miles from the shore. "You didn't know who to choose, really," he says. "Most of them were dead. You didn't know if they'd lost their arms or legs or what. Most of them had head injuries. We probably saved 70 that day."

A few months later, Hamlin was involved in another major moment of the war.

On Christmas Eve 1944, he received word -- amid preparations for a little holiday party with some French nurses -- that the S.S. Leopoldville, a Belgian cruise ship pressed into service, was in trouble. Even though most of the crew had headed ashore for the evening, Hamlin and the rest of the sailors headed to help in their 83-foot-long cutter.

As it turned out, the ship had been torpedoed by a German submarine. Hamlin and his crewmates worked as quickly as they could to rescue soldiers from the stricken ship, took them to port, and came back to help some more.

On their return, however, they were greeted with a situation of emerging tragedy. It was clear that the ship was sinking; soldiers were jumping, trying to reach rescue boats. Some made it, while others were crushed between ships as waves pushed them together. Others perished in the 48-degree water of the English Channel. Life jackets weren't being worn by most.

According to Leopoldville.org, a website dedicated to preserving the memory of horrific event, nearly 800 people perished in the disaster. Little was known about the sinking until the 1950s, when the information was declassified.

After his service was through, Hamlin came back to the United States, and picked up life where he left off.

He spent some time at Cumberland University, where he played football, before enrolling at the University of Missouri to continue the family tradition of law.

"My father was a lawyer, his father was a lawyer, my father's brother was a lawyer," says Hamlin. "His father's brother was a lawyer, and his father's brother had two sons and they were lawyers."

Some traditions, however, are meant to be broken.

"I went to law school, I graduated, and I flunked the bar," says Hamlin with a laugh. That fact, however, didn't keep him from the Missouri House of Representatives, to which he was elected at only around 30 years of age.

Later, he decided to go into insurance. He started his own agency in 1952, which he independently operated for more than 40 years before joining Ollis & Company in 1986.