

'I was raped, thrown off a 75ft cliff and woke up paralysed from the neck down ... I really didn't want to live like that'

For years ex-US Navy recruit Dana Liesegang kept quiet about the horror attack that changed her life forever and, as she reveals in her new book, when she did trace her assailant she made a chilling discovery. By **Hannah Stephenson**

Dana Liesegang was a feisty, happy-go-lucky 19-year-old US Navy recruit, when a vicious attack by a fellow seaman tore her world apart. She left ship to mail a birthday card to her boyfriend and on her way back, a young male diver from a neighbouring ship offered her a ride.

She remembers everything about that night, and still has to compose herself to stop the tears when she talks about it.

"I had a birthday card for my boyfriend back home and went to mail it. As I was walking back, I took a ride from this young man, thinking

I was safe. He was another military man on base," she says.

"He had an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's on the floor and he laughed about how he'd drunk the whole bottle. I thought, 'Whoah, that's a lot', but he was driving fine so I didn't think anything of it. I was 19 — what did I know?"

He drove to Sunset Cliffs, a local beauty spot, where he attacked and raped her before throwing her off

the 75ft cliff and leaving her for dead.

"I did wake up at the bottom of the cliff and it was only when I heard the helicopter above that I

completely blacked out."

She woke up in intensive care at a San Diego hospital, flat on her back and in traction, hooked up to a respirator that was keeping her breathing. She'd been in a coma for 18 hours and wasn't expected to live.

The helicopter had found her during a search conducted when she was reported AWOL. Police had found her clothing and military identification.

"I was paralysed from the neck down. I couldn't move. The first thing that came to my mind was, 'I'm paralysed and I really don't want to live like this'. I tried to

commit suicide by biting on the respirator, trying to cut my air off. It didn't work," she says.

She had broken her neck and critically injured her spinal cord. Liesegang couldn't feel or move anything from her collarbone downwards, had to learn to breathe again without a respirator and screws were inserted into her skull to secure a metal brace around her head and chest to immobilise and support her neck while it healed — it remained in place for four months.

She says the Navy was clear about its position. If she remained silent and didn't press charges, she would keep all her Navy privileges, including hospital and rehab costs. If she took her attacker to court it would be her word against his and she would lose the support from the military. She felt she had no choice but to remain silent, and so her attacker was never charged.

Now, on the 25th anniversary of the attack, she has written *Falling Up*, charting her story from harrowing encounter to miraculous recovery.

While doctors gave up hope, Liesegang was determined to walk again. "I was upright as soon as I was able, with leg braces, within the first three years," she says.

At 29, a decade on, she walked on her own without the braces.

"I took a couple of steps — it was huge. They said this was impossible. I felt excitement and thought of the endless possibilities."

Through intense physiotherapy, exercise and dogged determination, she has built up her shoulder muscles and triceps and has some finger function on her left side.

As well as the highs of her physical progress, there have been many lows along the way. She married then divorced after two years. Today, she is single.

"My anger at my attacker seeped into my relationships. My ex-husband used to tell people I hated men all the time. I didn't see it then, but I do now," she says.

Sport and travel have helped enormously in her recovery, she reflects, both physically and mentally. She became involved with

the National Veterans' Wheelchair Games, has played quad rugby,

been rafting through the Grand Canyon, taken up cross-country skiing and skydiving, sat on the Great Wall of China and enjoyed the Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

"I love the adventure of life," says Liesegang, now 44. "Just because I broke my neck, doesn't mean my personality went away.

"Because of the spinal cord injury, my bones aren't as dense as they should be, but I can fix that," she adds. "I can walk half a mile with crutches, no braces, just tennis shoes. I can walk up a flight of steps. If a bathroom door is too small for my wheelchair, I can stand up and go in anyway."

She lives independently in a house in Colorado with an outdoor lift, and gives talks to women on healing and forgiveness. She hopes to do more public speaking, teaching people how they can heal themselves.

"I can't walk around without my chair for any length of time. My wheelchair is still my primary mode of transportation and my independence. I can't carry a cup of coffee and walk around. The day I can do that, I can probably

leave my chair," she says.

During her travels to India, China and beyond, Liesegang sought unconventional therapies, including stem cell injections and spiritual healing, and uses Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and craniosacral therapy to help alleviate her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

For a long time, she couldn't go on a beach because of panic attacks. The nightmares have now subsided, but elements of her PTSD remain.

"Teenage boys tend to scare me. I feel threatened when there's more than one teenage boy around. They seem to have the least amount of control," she says.

Three years ago she tried to contact her attacker, to let him know she'd forgiven him.

"I Googled him and saw an article about him kidnapping a woman and holding her hostage for six days. Underneath that was

his obituary," she recalls.

"I found out he'd been in and out of jail for domestic violence, for drug trafficking and had basically gone on to a life of crime. The

military had released a criminal into the civilian world. He was able to serve the rest of his term in the military, they released him and he basically almost got away with murder."

Yet when she discovered he'd died, she had mixed feelings.

"I was happy that I was 100% safe. He'd gone and I know he can't come back and finish the job. But I was sad, because I didn't get to tell him personally that I forgave him."

Liesegang, who still won't reveal her attacker's name, subsequently contacted his mother. "She was really nice on the phone. I only talked to her once, to tell her I forgave her son. She asked what she could do for me and I told her to forgive herself and forgive her son. I wanted to make sure she knew I live a good life. He didn't steal my life from me, I didn't allow it."

**Falling Up by
Dana Liesegang
(with
Natasha
Stoyanoff). Hay
House, £12.99**



**My ex-husband
used to tell
people that I
hated men'**



**Battling on:
(top) Dana Liesegang
with her dog Jack,
and (above) Dana
taking part in the
National Veterans'
Wheelchair Games**