

# The long walk to happiness

Dana Liesegang kept quiet after an attack left her paralysed from the neck down. As she recounts the ordeal in a book 25 years on, she tells **Hannah Stephenson** how she even forgave her assailant

DANA Liesegang was a happy-go-lucky 19-year-old US Navy recruit when a vicious attack by a fellow seaman tore her world apart.

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.

"He had an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's on the floor and he laughed about how he'd drunk the whole bottle. 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 at-

tacked and raped her before throwing her off the 75ft cliff and leaving her for dead.

She woke up in intensive care at a San Diego hospital, 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.

She was found her during a search conducted when she was reported AWOL.

"The first thing that came to my mind was, 'I'm paralysed and I don't want to live like this'. I tried to commit suicide by biting on the respirator, trying to cut my air off."

She had broken her neck and critically injured her spinal cord. Liesegang couldn't feel or move anything from her collarbone

downwards and had to learn to breathe again without a respirator. 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.

She says the Navy was clear, 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 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 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."

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 true grit, she has built up her shoulder muscles and triceps and has some finger function on her left side.

She married then divorced after two years. Today, she is single: "My anger at my attacker seeped into my relationships. I didn't see it then but I do now."

Sport and travel 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, and enjoyed the Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

"I love the adventure of life," says Liesegang, now 44. "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.

"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."

During her travels she sought unconventional therapies, including stem cell injections and spiritual healing to help alleviate her post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I still feel threatened when there's more than one teenage boy around."

She later tried to contact her attacker.

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

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

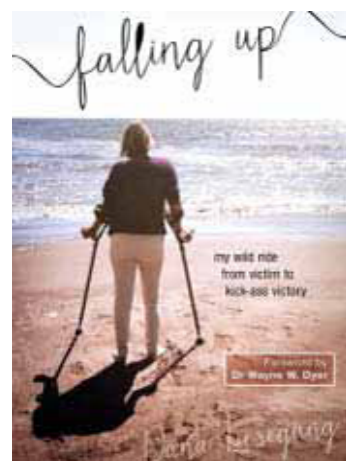
Yet when she discovered he'd died, she had mixed feelings.

"I was happy that I was 100 per cent safe. 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."

She still won't reveal his name but views the attack as the day she was reborn into a new life.

"I learned to forgive the most heinous act, which allows me to love more."

■ *Falling Up* by Dana Liesegang with Natasha Stoynoff is published by Hay House, priced £12.99. Available now





**Dana Liesegang at Crater Lake with her dog Jack.**