

THE CASE OF JAMES LEININGER: AN AMERICAN CASE OF THE REINCARNATION TYPE

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Abstract: Numerous cases of young children who report memories of previous lives have been studied over the last 50 years. Though such cases are more easily found in cultures that have a general belief in reincarnation, they occur in the West as well. This article describes the case of James Leininger, an American child who at age two began having intense nightmares of a plane crash. He then described being an American pilot who was killed when his plane was shot down by the Japanese. He gave details that included the name of an American aircraft carrier, the first and last name of a friend who was on the ship with him, and a location and other

specifics about the fatal crash. His parents eventually discovered a close correspondence between James's statements and the death of a World War II pilot named James Huston. Documentation of James's statements that was made before Huston was identified includes a television interview with his parents that never aired but which the author has been able to review.

Key words: reincarnation, memory

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INTRODUCTION

Cases of young children who report memories of previous lives have been systematically studied for the last 50 years.^{1,2} Though individual cases were investigated earlier, it was Stevenson³ who began the work in earnest with a trip to India in 1961. He spent the bulk of the next 40 years studying the cases, which he referred to as cases of the reincarnation type (CORT).⁴⁻⁹ In many of them, the details the children gave were found to match the life of one particular deceased individual, whom Stevenson called the previous personality.

Other investigators followed Stevenson's lead, documenting similar cases that were studied independently.¹⁰ All of the researchers worked primarily in areas where cases were easiest to find, cultures with a general belief in reincarnation, though Stevenson did study European¹¹ and American¹² ones as well.

Since most of the identified cases have occurred in places where people believe in reincarnation, some have suggested that social and cultural issues are critical factors in producing the phenomenon.¹³ It is argued that the parents' beliefs and expectations shape both their interpretations of their children's statements and their later memories of what the child knew about the previous personality before that individual was identified. It is thought that after the child's family meets the previous family and they exchange information, the child is credited with more specific knowledge about the previous personality's life than he or she actually expressed.

A factor challenging such an explanation in some of the cases is a record of at least some of the child's statements that was made before the previous personality was identified. In that situation, there can be no question of whether the child actually made the statements before the previous personality was identified. A limited number of cases include such a record, 33 in 2005.¹⁴ A Western case with documentation like this is of particular note.

James Leininger is the son of Bruce and Andrea Leininger, a Protestant couple in Louisiana in the United States. Beginning at the age of two, he made statements and demonstrated behaviors that suggested he remembered the life of an American pilot killed during World War II, a young man who has now been identified as one James M. Huston, Jr. The case has garnered significant attention, as the Leiningers told their story in several television interviews and eventually wrote a book about their experiences.¹⁵ I also included a chapter on the case in a recent book.¹⁶ This report includes a more thorough review of the documentation of James's statements and behaviors that was made before the pilot Huston was identified, which is critical in assessing the evidence of a past-life connection that the case provides. Though the case has the weakness that James's father was the one who worked to identify the previous personality, the substantial documentation that is available suggests a striking similarity between James's statements and the details of the life and death of one particular pilot.

CASE PRESENTATION

Statements and Behaviors

James was born on April 10, 1998. As related by his parents, the first noticeable incident in the case occurred in February,

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2000, when he was 22 months old. His father took him to the Cavanaugh Flight Museum outside of Dallas, as they were living in Texas at the time. James was fascinated by the planes and in particular by the World War II exhibit. When they left after three hours, James had some toy planes, as well as a video called *It's a Kind of Magic* about the Blue Angels, the Navy's flight exhibition team. James loved the video, and he watched it repeatedly for weeks. The trip and the video started (or uncovered) his love for planes. This passion may have led to some of the knowledge of planes and flying that James often surprised his parents by voicing. The video, however, was clearly not the source of James's information about World War II, since the Blue Angels group was founded in 1946 after the war ended.

James and his father made a second trip to the museum later that spring, on Memorial Day weekend. James was again excited throughout his time there, though he grew quiet in the hanger that housed the World War II aircraft. He stood staring and pointing at the planes, as if in awe.

Within two months of the first trip, James developed a habit of saying "airplane crash on fire," and slamming his toy planes nose first into the family's coffee table. He repeated this behavior over and over, producing dozens of scratches and dents on the table. James's father traveled a lot, and when James and his mother would see him off at the airport, James would often say, "Daddy, airplane crash on fire." This happened repeatedly, despite his father's admonishments.

Around this time, James began having nightmares. His behavior during them seems to have involved only screams at first, but then included words as well: "Airplane crash on fire! Little man can't get out." (In their book, James's parents quote him as saying, "Airplane crash! Plane on fire! Little man can't get out!" but in an earlier writing and an earlier interview, they used the shorter quote.) James would shout this over and over while thrashing about and kicking his legs up in the air.

After a few months of this, he had several conversations with his parents about the dreams, usually as he was preparing to go to sleep. He indicated that they were memories of events from the past. He said his plane had crashed on fire and that it had been shot by the Japanese. Two weeks after those statements, James said his plane was a Corsair, which was a fighter plane that was developed during World War II, and he talked about flying a Corsair several times.

On August 27, 2000, when James was 28 months old, he told his parents he had flown his plane off a boat. When his parents asked him the name of the boat, he said, "Natoma." After that conversation, his father searched online for the word and eventually discovered a description of the USS *Natoma Bay*, an escort carrier stationed in the Pacific during World War II. He printed out the information he found, and the footer of the printout includes the date he did (Fig. 1).

James's parents asked him a number of times for the name of the little man in his dreams. He always responded with only "me" or "James." A few weeks after James gave the word Natoma, his parents asked him if he could remember anyone else who was with the little man. James responded with the name Jack Larsen.

One day when James was just over two and a half, his father was looking through a book he was planning to give his own father for Christmas, one called *The Battle for Iwo Jima 1945*.¹⁷ His father reports that James pointed to a picture showing an aerial view of the base of the island, where Mt. Suribachi, a dormant volcano, sits, and said, "That's where my plane was shot down." His father said, "What?" and James responded, "My airplane got shot down there, Daddy."

A week after that, James's father talked to a veteran from *Natoma Bay* who remembered a pilot named Jack Larsen. He said Larsen flew off one day and never returned, so no one knew what happened to him.

With the ongoing nightmares, James's parents eventually contacted Carol Bowman, who had written a book about children's past-life memories.¹⁸ They began a lengthy correspondence. Following Bowman's advice, James's mother started acknowledging to him that the events he was describing had indeed happened to him before, while emphasizing that they were in the past and he was now safe. The nightmares then grew less violent and less frequent.¹⁹

James's parents said that when he became old enough to draw, he drew hundreds of battle scenes involving planes (Fig. 2). He signed them "James 3." When his parents asked him about this, he said the 3 referred, not to his age, but to his being "the third James," and he continued to sign his pictures that way even after he turned 4. James may have thought of himself as the third James because James Huston, the pilot, was James, Jr.

In June of 2002, James's parents were interviewed by ABC News for a segment that was to be part of a program called *Strange Mysteries*. The program never aired, but since I was also interviewed for it, ABC sent me a copy of the segment. At the time of the interview, Huston had not been identified. Table 1 lists the items that were included in the report, and their subsequent comparison to Huston's experiences. They were all correct, or at least partially correct, for Huston.

Following the interview, James's father corresponded with an ABC producer about the name Jack Larsen. She had a contact at the Center for Naval History who found a John M. Larson. Though it was ultimately determined that this man was not the Jack Larsen on *Natoma Bay*, the correspondence between James's father and the producer is useful as documentation that he was indeed searching at the time for a man with that name. Two months later, James's father wrote a letter to the veteran who had told him that a Jack Larsen had served on *Natoma Bay*. In the letter, he mentions this John M. Larson, again documenting this part of the search.

A month after that, James's father attended his first *Natoma Bay* reunion. He learned that the Jack Larsen from *Natoma Bay* had survived the war. Though he was not at the reunion, he was still alive and James's father soon visited him. He also learned that only one pilot from the ship was lost during the Battle of Iwo Jima, a 21-year old from Pennsylvania named James M. Huston, Jr.

After the reunion, James's father turned his focus to Huston, as documented by a posting he made on a website looking for information. He learned that Huston did not actually die on Iwo Jima itself. Instead, as the battle continued after the initial

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