

James Leininger (reincarnation case)

James Leininger is the subject of a well-known American child reincarnation case. In early childhood, James had frequent nightmares of being trapped in a burning plane that was crashing. In further statements to his parents he said he'd been shot down in a plane near Iwo Jima, had been based on a ship named 'Natoma', and had a friend named Jack Larsen. These and other details were found to match closely with the life of James Huston Jr, an American pilot killed in action in March 1945. James's parents wrote a best-selling book about their investigation, and the case received widespread media attention.

Overview

James Madison Leininger was born on 10 April 1998 in San Francisco, to Bruce Leininger, a human resources executive, and Andrea Leininger, a resume-writer, homemaker and former professional dancer. The family moved shortly thereafter to Dallas, Texas and then to Lafayette, Louisiana. James's expressions of past-life memory manifested mostly between the ages of two and five, following the move to Lafayette. The combination of his detailed memories and the ability of the parents to verify them through painstaking research makes this a particularly interesting case, and it is one of the best-known of its kind in the Western world.

Memories and Behaviours

When James was 22 months old, as reported by his parents, his father took him to the James Cavanaugh Flight Museum in Dallas. There he was transfixed by the sight of the World War II planes, and at the end of the visit had to be forced to leave.^[1]

Passing a toy shop when James was just shy of two years old, his mother noticed a display bin filled with plastic toys and boats. She pulled out a little propeller plane and handed it to James, adding, 'Look there's even a bomb underneath it.' He said, 'That's not a bomb, Mommy. That's a dwop tank' [sic].^[2] Talking about this with her husband later, she learned that a drop tank is an extra fuel tank fitted to an aircraft to extend its range.

Shortly after turning two, James began having nightmares, as often as five times a week, in which he would scream and kick his legs in the air, crying 'Airplane crash! Plane on fire! Little man can't get out!' At 28 months, in response to questions, he told his parents the little man was himself and that his plane had been shot by the Japanese.^[3] About two weeks later, he added more details: his name had been James; he had flown a Corsair; and he had flown from a 'boat', whose name he gave as 'Natoma' – which despite sounding Japanese he insisted was American.^[4] Over the next three months, James added that he had had a friend, a fellow pilot named Jack Larsen,^[5] and that he had been shot down near Iwo Jima.^[6]

In play, James crashed his toy planes into furniture, breaking off the propellers. He also began expressing his memories in art, obsessively drawing naval-aerial battles between Americans and Japanese, in which planes were burning and crashing,

bullets and bombs exploding all around. These were always WWII scenes, with propeller-driven aircraft, not jets or missiles. He named the American aircraft correctly as Wildcats and Corsairs, and referred to Japanese planes as 'Zekes' and 'Bettys', explaining that the boy's name referred to fighter planes and the girl's name to bombers, which was correct.

He sometimes signed the drawings 'James 3', and when asked why, said he was 'the third James',^[7] an apparent reference to him following James Huston Jr, that is, the second.

When buckling himself into the back of the car he would often mime putting on headgear, a movement that his mother recognized during a visit to a local airshow, when he mounted the cockpit of a Piper Cub and put on the pilot's headgear.

Father's Investigation

As a devout Christian, Bruce Leininger was uncomfortable with the idea of reincarnation and began to research his son's statements in the firm hope of ruling it out. He was already aware that the Corsair was an American WWII-era plane. Searching the Internet, he discovered that the *USS Natoma Bay* was an aircraft carrier that served in the Pacific in WWII, taking part in the Iwo Jima operation, and that a pilot named Jack Larsen had been based on the ship.

He then began to approach *Natoma Bay* veterans, who proved forthcoming. An initial candidate for James's memories, Jack Larsen, turned out however not have been killed in action. Attention then shifted to James McReady Huston Jr of Pennsylvania, who had been killed near Iwo Jima, aged 21, and whose life James's statements seemed to match. An exception was that Huston was shot down in a FM2 Wildcat, not a Corsair; veterans could recall no Corsairs on *Natoma Bay*. Nor could the details of James's account of the plane being shot down be confirmed. However, a visit to Huston's sister Anne Barron uncovered a photograph of Huston standing in front of a Corsair, confirming that he had flown this aircraft.^[8] Clinching testimony came from eyewitnesses who had seen the plane was hit in the engine, which exploded in a ball of fire before it crashed, confirming James's account.^[9] A unit logbook recording the crash can now be [viewed online](#) (scroll to page 32).

At a reunion of the *Natoma Bay* pilots, James recognized one of them, Bob Greenwalt, by his voice.^[10]

Anne Barron also verified other details James had made earlier about his previous family, including the problems caused by his father's alcoholism. After speaking with James, she became convinced that he was indeed her brother reborn, from his knowledge of facts known only to Huston, such as the existence of a painting by their mother of Anne as a child.^[11]

According to the Leiningers, James suffered a nightmare on the anniversary of Huston's death.^[12] He made statements about two memories of the period between incarnations. First, he said he remembered choosing the Leiningers as his parents, and gave some veridical details of the time prior to his conception, including correct details of a hotel on Hawaii they had been staying at during a vacation.^[13]

Second, when his parents asked him why he had named his three GI Joe dolls Billy, Walter and Leon, he answered, ‘Because that’s who met me when I got to heaven.’^[14] The parents later learned that three squadron-mates of Huston who had been killed prior to his own death had been named Billie Peeler, Walter Devlin and Leon Conner.^[15]

Carol Bowman

When James was three, Andrea Leininger contacted regression therapist and author Carol Bowman after reading her book *Children’s Past Lives: How Past Life Memory Affects Your Child*.^[16] Bowman suggested some techniques for relieving James’s nightmares, the chief of which was to give reassurance that the catastrophe was over, that it had happened in the past and that he was now safe in his current life. This caused a steep drop in the frequency of the nightmares.^[17] Bowman continued to correspond with the Leiningers for eight years, and put them in touch with her literary agent for purposes of publishing a book telling James’s story.^[18] The book, *Soul Survivor: The Reincarnation of a World War II Fighter Pilot*,^[19] was published in 2009 and had a brief run on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

ABC Primetime

Just before James’s fourth birthday, Bowman was asked by the TV network ABC, which planned to air a TV show on children’s past-life memories, for her best case. She introduced the producers to the Leiningers.^[20] Some footage was recorded, but the show never aired. According to the Leiningers, the producers decided the case was weak evidentially.^[21] However, [Jim Tucker](#), a child psychiatrist and investigator of children’s past life memories at the University of Virginia Department of Psychiatry’s [Division of Perceptual Studies](#), who was also scheduled to appear on the show, recalls that the entire show was considered too weak, not James’ case in particular.^[22] Tucker was given a copy of the footage.^[23]

Two years later, ABC contacted the Leiningers again, asking if they would be interested in participating in a segment for *ABC Primetime*, hosted by Chris Cuomo. By this time, Huston had been identified and further evidence had been found. The segment was broadcast on 15 April 2004 and can be viewed [here](#). It generated further media attention, including articles in major newspapers worldwide, and further TV reports.

Impressed by the strength of the case now, Tucker once again contacted the Leiningers. At first they were willing to be interviewed, but then, overwhelmed by media attention, and having decided to publish James’s story as a book, they temporarily declined. Only in 2010 was Tucker able to interview the family.^[24]

Tucker’s Investigation

Tucker wrote an informal account of the case as a chapter in his 2013 book *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives*, then published a formal case report in 2016.^[25] He noted that while the Leiningers’ original written records of the case were lost, the fact that James made the statements before

Huston had been identified was proved both by the video footage Tucker had received from ABC in 2002, and by written materials, such as dated Internet print-outs, confirming that Bruce searched for information on the *Natoma Bay* in 2000,^[26] and engaged in correspondence to find Jack Larsen.

The verified statements from the footage are:

- His plane was shot in the engine and crashed in water.
- He died in the battle of Iwo Jima.
- The plane was on fire and sank, and he could not get out.
- He flew a Corsair.
- His plane flew off a boat.
- His plane was shot down by the Japanese.
- Corsairs tended to get flat tires when they landed.^[27]

If the Leiningers were creating a complex fraud, Tucker argued, they would surely have presented as good a case to ABC in 2002 as they did in 2004, not knowing they would have another media opportunity. Other grounds to doubt fraud as an explanation, Tucker argued, were the length of time the case took to develop and the number of people involved in the investigation, all of whom would have had to be conspiring together. Tucker also ruled out fantasy, since James's persistent nightmares and behaviours such as repeatedly crashing toy planes, and his pain-filled drawings, were more characteristic of children who have suffered traumas than children fantasizing. With regard to coincidence, Tucker considered the possibility of such detailed statements exactly matching the identity and circumstances of a particular deceased individual by pure chance to be implausibly small.^[28]

Tucker noted that all the documented statements leading to the identification of Huston were made by James himself. He could not have read about Huston or the *Natoma Bay*. Nor could he have been exposed to any television program on these topics, and his parents and other people around him had no knowledge of them.^[29]

Criticisms and Responses

Paul Kurtz, the late founder of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, was quoted on the *Primetime* segment saying the parents were 'self-deceived' and 'fascinated with the mysterious', and had built up a 'fairy tale'. Kurtz claimed James must have gained his knowledge of WWII planes by overhearing his parents' conversations or talking to his young friends.^[30] He offered no explanation for the intensity of James's emotion as manifested in the extremely-frequent nightmares, for the ongoing plane-crash re-enactments in play, or for the prolific and dramatic drawings.

A Sceptico blogpost attributed James's experiences to his first visit to the Cavanaugh Flight Museum, noting that one of the planes displayed there is a Corsair. It further suggested that a fantasy had been nurtured through leading questions by his parents, grandmother and Bowman, as well as gifts of toy planes; that James signed his drawings 'James 3' because that was his age at the time; that the *Natoma Bay* verification is questionable because James only said 'Natoma', not

the full name; and that the name Jack Larsen could have been prompted, misremembered or fudged. The article also argued the case was invalidated by the fact that James Huston was shot down while flying an FM2 Wildcat rather than a Corsair.^[31]

However, Tucker contacted the Cavanaugh Flight Museum and learned that it had no Corsair on display between 1999 and 2003, the time in which James's first two visits had occurred.^[32] Tucker also disputed the claim that Bruce Leininger was party to a manufactured reincarnation fantasy, having observed first hand Leininger's refusal to believe that reincarnation was the explanation, and noting that his extensive research was in fact intended to disprove the notion.^[33] Tucker noted also that James continued to sign his drawings 'James 3' after he turned four.^[34]

In November 2021, philosopher Michael Sudduth announced in a blogpost that he had conducted a two-year investigation of the case and would demonstrate that it was fraudulent in a lengthy critique forthcoming in the *Journal for Scientific Exploration (JSE)*. In the blogpost he wrote, 'The James Leininger story is a sham', and 'It's evidence of a flight of fancy', both of which lines were removed later.^[35] The 30,000-word critique, published without a response from Tucker, accuses the Leiningers of covering up young James's exposure to multiple possible sources of information from which he could have derived his knowledge, and repeatedly changing the story of what James had said when to match newly discovered facts. Sudduth also argues that discrepancies in details of the previous incarnation's death between James and eyewitnesses render his account non-evidential, and accuses Tucker of incompetence in not uncovering the normal information sources and ignoring the discrepancies.^[36]

In the next JSE issue, after a change of chief editor from philosopher [Stephen Braude](#) to parapsychologist James Houran, Tucker published a short response in which he corrects inaccuracies in the Sudduth critique, stating:

Unfortunately, his report is filled with distortions, mischaracterizations, and at times, outright misinformation. There are too many instances to list every one, but large and small, they all contribute to an inaccurate picture that denigrates the credibility of James's parents as informants and my competence as a researcher.^[37]

Sudduth in his rejoinder argues that Tucker's response is not cogent to the critique's arguments.^[38]

Reincarnation researcher [James G Matlock](#), invited by Houran to comment on both sides and provide recommendations for improving reincarnation research methodology, divided his commentary into two parts. For the first he conducted his own re-investigation of the case and its documentation so as to produce a robust timeline, correcting both that of the Leiningers and that of Sudduth.^[39] In Part 2, Matlock makes a detailed refutation of Sudduth's key points, showing by use of tables how the vast majority of James's memories and behaviours could not have been drawn from the normal sources Sudduth named. Matlock then gives twelve methodological recommendations, including making full use of current technology for recording subjects' utterances and for performing verification research; dividing

each case investigation between one team gathering information on the subject and a second team attempting verification, working independently of each other; and experiments with [planned reincarnation](#) and [experimental birthmarks](#).^[40]

Media Follow-Up

After the publication of *Soul Survivor* in 2009, Fox 8 News broadcast a follow-up segment by Suzanne Stratford, which can be viewed [here](#). It contains interviews with *Natoma Bay* veteran Leo Pyatt, describing how James recognized the other veterans, and Huston's sister Anne Barron describing how James knew things that Huston had done as a boy and other private family matters.

The segment also recounts how a Japanese TV station paid the family's passage to Chichi-Jima, the small island nearest which Huston had died, from where they travelled in a fishing boat to visit the exact site. The Leiningers performed a memorial service and James, then eleven, threw a bouquet of flowers into the sea. The trip, recounted in *Soul Survivor*,^[41] appeared to bring about a healing catharsis, as his drawings afterwards became less destructive and chaotic. In this video, James comments:

I hope that it helps people understand the meaning of how precious life is, how fast it can just blow away. And I also hope that it opens people's eyes up to reincarnation. I hope it opens people's eyes up to the fact that reincarnation can happen, it is a possibility, it's not a lie.

In a 2012 segment on *Fox and Friends*, Bruce describes the successful investigation, while James, now fifteen, describes how the nightmares ceased after a 'spiritual release' experienced at the site of the crash. James goes on to suggest that reincarnation can be the source of what seems like innate knowledge. He adds that he occasionally remembers his previous life but is moving forward with his current one. This segment can be viewed [here](#).

KM Wehrstein

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 21.
2. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 16.
3. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 55-56.
4. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 67-68.
5. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 79.
6. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 91.
7. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 106.
8. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 199; see accompanying insert.
9. ^ E.g., John Richardson; see Leininger & Leininger (2009), 217.
10. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 244.
11. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 236.
12. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 207.
13. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 154.
14. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 157.
15. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 158.
16. ^ Bowman (1997).
17. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 102; Bowman (2021), 36.
18. ^ Bowman (2021), 36.
19. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009).
20. ^ Bowman (2021), 36.
21. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 117.
22. ^ Personal communication, 29 March 2017.

23. ^ Tucker (2013), 64.
24. ^ Tucker (2013), 64-66.
25. ^ Tucker (2016).
26. ^ Tucker (2016), Fig. 1.
27. ^ Tucker (2016), Table 1.
28. ^ Tucker (2016), 205.
29. ^ Tucker (2016), 206.
30. ^ A transcript of the segment can be viewed [here](#).
31. ^ Skeptico (2005).
32. ^ Tucker (2013), 69.
33. ^ Tucker (2013), 71.
34. ^ Tucker (2013), 73.
35. ^ See Sudduth (2021a and 2022a).
36. ^ Sudduth (2022b).
37. ^ Tucker (2022), 84.
38. ^ Sudduth (2022), 91.
39. ^ Matlock (2022).
40. ^ Matlock (forthcoming).
41. ^ Leininger & Leininger (2009), 252.