

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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USS *Natoma Bay* (CVE-62)

(CVE-62: dp. 7,800; l. 512'3"; b. 65'; ew. 108'1"; dr. 22'6"; s. 17 k.; cpl. 860; a. 1 5"; 16 40mm., 20 20mm., 28 ac.; cl. *Casablanca*; T. S4-S2-BB3)

Natoma Bay (CVE-62) was laid down as *Begum* (MC hull 1099), 17 January 1943, by the Kaiser Shipbuilding Co., Inc., Vancouver, Washington, under Maritime Commission contract; renamed *Natoma Bay* 22 January 1943; launched 20 July 1943; sponsored by Lady Halifax, wife of the United Kingdom's ambassador to the United States, and commissioned 14 October 1943, Captain Harold L. Meadow in command.

After shakedown off the California coast, *Natoma Bay* performed aircraft and personnel ferrying duties between San Diego and Hawaii for Commander, Fleet Air, West Coast, until 3 January 1944. Then, with VC-63 embarked, she departed San Diego for Pearl Harbor, reporting to ComCarDiv 24, 5th Amphibious Force, 10 January. On 23 January, she sortied with TG-51.2 for the invasion of the Marshalls. Between 31 January and 7 February, as positions on Majuro Atoll were consolidated, CVE-62 furnished anti-submarine and combat air patrols and area searches for the attack force. On 8 February, she extended her operations to Wotje and Maloelap, alternating for the remainder of the month between those islands and Majuro.

Departing Majuro, 7 March, *Natoma Bay* reached Espiritu Santo on the 12th. Three days later, she joined TF-37 for air strikes and surface bombardments against Kavieng, New Ireland, 19-20 March. She then cruised to the north of the Solomons and New Ireland, providing air cover for convoys to and from Emirau, where an air base and a limited naval base were being established. During the next three weeks, she continued to cruise in the Solomons-Bismarck Archipelago area in support of the protracted offensive to neutralize the latter and seal off the Japanese fortress at Rabaul.

On 19 April, she rendezvoused with TF-78 and then steamed toward New Guinea where her planes pounded enemy positions in support of a three-pronged attack by Allied land and naval forces against Aitape, Hollandia, and Tanahmerah Bay, 22 April. During and after the landings, *Natoma Bay* launched protective air patrols and sent fighters and bombers to destroy Japanese installations in the Aitape area. Returning to Manus for engine repairs, 28 April, she sailed 7 May for Pearl Harbor, arriving 18 May.

After loading 37 Thunderbolt (P-47D) fighters of the 7th Air Force, *Natoma Bay* departed Pearl Harbor 5 June enroute to the Marianas. Steaming via Eniwetok, she arrived off Saipan 19 June and was ordered to retire eastward until the Battle of the Philippine Sea was decided. On the 22nd, she steamed westward and commenced catapulting the Army planes toward their destination, Aslito Air Field, Saipan. She dispatched 25 on the 22nd and the remainder early on the 23rd, then retired to a refueling area 45 miles east of Saipan.

There, the formation came under enemy air attack. Intensive anti-aircraft fire prevented damage to

<http://metalab.unc.edu/hyperwar/USN/ships/dats/CVE/cve62.html>

08/27/2000

Figure 1. USS *Natoma Bay* information printed out on 27.08.2000 (with date visible in lower righthand corner).

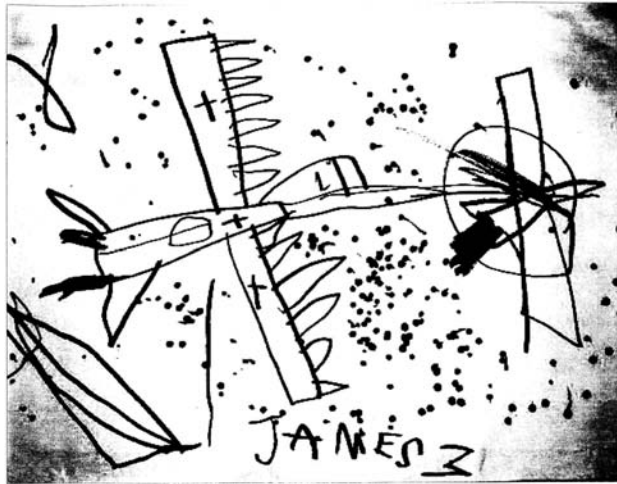


Figure 2. Drawing by James Leininger, signed “James 3.”

assault, he was one of eight pilots from the ship who took part in a strike against transport vessels in a harbor on nearby Chichijima, as the Japanese were preparing a buildup of troop replacements and supplies. His plane appears to have crashed exactly as James had described, as detailed in [Table 1](#). The aircraft action report for the day that Huston's plane was shot down includes a chart of the paths each pilot took ([Fig. 3](#)). Jack Larsen, the one name James gave, is shown as the pilot of the plane next to Huston's. As Huston was the only pilot from *Natoma Bay* killed during the Iwo Jima operation, and as his details closely matched James's statements, his parents concluded that he was the man whose life James had recalled.

James's parents said he gave other details as well, but no documentation of them exists that was made before Huston was identified. James's mother said she made notes of his statements but that she either lost them or threw them away after she and her husband wrote their book. James's parents reported that he gave details about his family life that they confirmed with Huston's sister in a phone conversation. I attempted to verify this with the sister. She was 91 years old at the time I contacted her, and she was unable to recall the details of the conversation from some five years before, other than that James's mother asked whether her father was an alcoholic at one time, which he was.

James's parents reported that he had knowledge about World War II planes in general and about life on *Natoma Bay* that impressed them. His fascination with flying and World War II might explain his general knowledge, but not his ability to give details about *Natoma Bay* that his parents did not know. Again, there is no documentation of those additional statements that was made before Huston was identified.

Investigation and Subsequent Development

After having sporadic correspondence with James's parents for several years, I spent two days interviewing the family in their home as James was approaching his 12th birthday, talking with each parent and with James himself. I had tried to investigate the case earlier, but James's parents wanted to wait until their book was published before meeting with me. They were

completely forthcoming once we did meet. I saw the small bookcase of material that James's father had collected about *Natoma Bay* and related matters. He shared with me all the relevant records about Huston and the ship, as well as a chronology and pictures of the family's experiences. James and both his parents gave written permission to publish using their real names.

I was able to observe and interact with James both formally in an interview and informally during a dinner. I found him to be pleasant and co-operative. Though he had hinted he might still have some memories he could talk about when he was older, he did not report any to me. His development seems to have proceeded well, and now 17, he has recently become an Eagle Scout.

DISCUSSION

This case involves a boy who displayed behaviors that suggested he was recalling a traumatic crash. In addition, he demonstrated knowledge about events from 50 years before he was born. A number of his accurate statements were documented before the previous personality was identified, making him part of the limited number of cases that include such records.

Several explanations warrant consideration.

Fraud

Fraud must always be considered and often cannot be ruled out definitively. In this case, motivation for a hoax appears unlikely. Though James's parents did eventually write a book about their experiences that was published when James was 11 years old, it seems unlikely that this led to a wholesale fraud from the beginning. The uncertain payoff of a book at some point in the future would hardly seem worth a multi-year fraud. A fraud had no other potential benefit and carried a substantial risk of inducing derision from friends and family and even strangers.

Beyond that, if James's parents were perpetuating a fraud, they passed up a golden opportunity to present their story to the world during their interview for the ABC News *Strange*

Table 1. Statements and Behaviors by James Leininger Reported in ABC News Interview, as Compared with James Huston's Death^a

Item	Source of Information	Verification of Match with Huston	Comments
"Mama, before I was born, I was a pilot, and my airplane got shot in the engine, and it crashed in the water, and that's how I died."	James's mother	Memoir of veteran who saw Huston's plane get hit. James's father also talked to three eye witnesses. One later told a television interviewer, "I saw the hit. I would say he was hit head on, yeah, right on the middle of the engine."	
Died in the Battle of Iwo Jima	Narration states that James may have been one of the pilots who died in the Battle of Iwo Jima	History of Composite Squadron Eighty One (VC-81) and aircraft action report	Huston was the one pilot from USS <i>Natoma Bay</i> killed during the Iwo Jima operation. His plane was shot down as he took part in a strike against transport vessels in a harbor on nearby Chichi-jima
Nightmares of plane crashing on fire and sinking and being unable to get out	James's father	Aircraft action report states no wreckage of the plane was left afloat	
Flew a Corsair	James's mother	Pictures of Huston with Corsairs and squadron VF-301; interviews by James's father with veteran and son of veteran who served with Huston in the squadron	James seemed to say that he was flying a Corsair when he crashed. This was incorrect for Huston, who was flying an FM-2 when he died, but Huston had flown Corsairs earlier when he made test flights with VF-301
Plane flew off of a boat	James's mother	Numerous military records document that James Huston was a pilot on USS <i>Natoma Bay</i>	
His plane was shot down by the Japanese	James's mother	History of Composite Squadron Eighty One (VC-81) and aircraft action report	
Corsairs got flat tires when they landed	James	Air Force historian interviewed in the segment stated Corsairs bounced when they landed, leading to flat tires	

^aInterview conducted when James was four years old, before Huston was identified.

Mysteries program. Instead of telling how their son was remembering the life of the pilot James Huston, they only said that he appeared to be recalling the life of a World War II pilot who had not been identified. A subsequent interview with ABC identifying Huston did not come until nearly two years later, and James's parents had no way of knowing that another such opportunity would occur. A number of people other than James's parents had heard him talk about his World War II life by then, including his aunt whom I interviewed and the first ABC News crew, so either they or little James would have had to be party to the hoax. Given these factors, and my impression of James and his parents after spending several hours talking to them, I view fraud as an implausible explanation for this case.

Along with the question of outright fraud, there is the possibility that the memories that James's parents had of the

events in the case were unconsciously influenced by the potential for profit from their book, leading them to recall that James's statements and behaviors were more impressive than they actually were. This is one reason for focusing on the items that were documented before Huston was identified, as James's parents had no ability at that point to steer the details to fit with Huston's death.

Fantasy

With a fantasy explanation, James's apparent memories of the crash would be the result of his imagination, perhaps triggered by his visit to the flight museum. The intensity of his behaviors argues against this. Though children can have nightmares after being exposed to a frightening stimulus, it seems unlikely that a flight museum would be designed in such a way as to be intensely traumatic to a child. In addition, James's nightmares

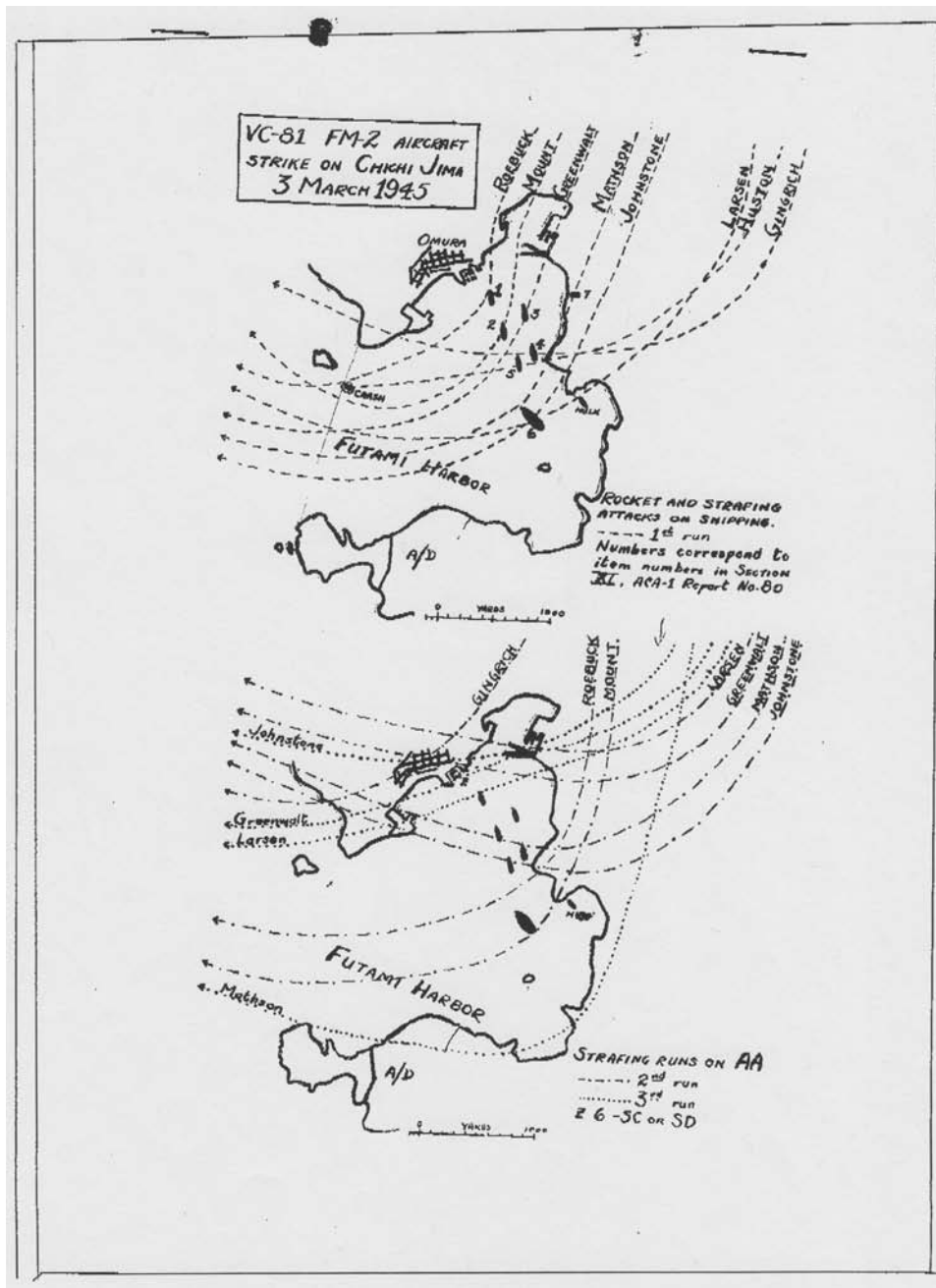


Figure 3. Chart from aircraft action report showing Huston's final flight.

were much more than a bad dream or two. By the report of his parents and his aunt, he had nightmares multiple times each week, always involving the same scenario. During the day, he repeatedly made the statement, "Airplane crash on fire," and he displayed what appeared to be post-traumatic play²⁰ with his compulsive play of plane crashes. These types of nightmares and play appear very similar to those that children who have experienced trauma in their current life display, only James's seemed associated with events from the distant past. Such

behaviors are common in children who report memories of previous lives.^{21,22}

The fantasy explanation also requires that James's statements matched Huston's life purely by chance. Observers may have different thresholds for when they will accept coincidence as a reasonable explanation for correlated events, but the specifics present in this case would seem to undermine its plausibility. For a child to give an unusual name like Natoma for a ship that was indeed in the place he reported

seems remarkable enough. When Jack Larsen's name and the accurate details of Huston's death are added to it, coincidence appears to be an inadequate explanation.

Knowledge Acquired Through Normal Means

Is it possible that James learned about *Natoma Bay* and James Huston through normal means? He could not have learned from the people around him, because they knew nothing about either the ship or Huston when he began talking about them. James had made all of the documented statements by the time he was four years old, so he could not have read about them. Regardless, no published materials about James Huston are known to exist. No television programs focusing on *Natoma Bay* or James Huston appear to have been made either.

There is one slight geographical connection between James and Huston's family. James was born in San Mateo, California, which is approximately 30 miles from San Jose, a city of 900,000 people, where Huston's sister lived. James's family lived at the time in Pacifica, another 15 miles away, and his parents know of no contact they had with her. The family moved to Texas when James was four months old and then to Louisiana when he was approaching his second birthday. There is no known association in those places with Huston or his family and no obvious way that James could have learned about him through normal means.

Psi-Mediated Information Transfer

If we accept the evidence that James had knowledge about Huston's life that he did not acquire through normal means, the question of how he did acquire it needs to be addressed. One possibility is that he learned about Huston through psi or super-psi.²³ James's parents denied that he showed any other psychic abilities, which would suggest that for a paranormal transfer of information to occur, there would need to be something distinct either about Huston's memories or about the connection between Huston and James. As noted above, there is no evidence to indicate the latter.

Keil has proposed the idea that "thought bundles" or a "thought pool" may be emitted when a person dies. Though not a living entity, this pool of information would continue to exist for some time and might get attached to "particular objects and situations."^{24p96} It would then get absorbed somehow by a very young child who would develop apparent memories of the past life. Nahm and Hassler²⁵ have written a forceful challenge to the model. Among their objections are reports by some of the children of memories of the intermission period between lives,²⁶ including some in which they reported meeting deceased family members who gave them information they likely could not have acquired through normal means.^{2p172} (James described events from the intermission period, but there is no documentation of his statements that was made contemporaneously.)

James's case involved a traumatic death, which might increase the likelihood that a thought bundle would be released. If he did absorb Huston's memories, they might have then produced the nightmares and post-traumatic play that introduced the case. Why James would have absorbed a thought bundle from Huston, however, rather than the many others who died in the war is unclear, and at this point, the

conceptual difficulties noted by Nahm and Hassler make such an explanation highly speculative.

Reincarnation

The documentation in James's case provides evidence that he had a connection with a life from the past. On the face of it, the most obvious explanation for this connection is that he experienced a life as James Huston, Jr. before having his current one. The facts in the case indicate that this explanation warrants serious consideration.

CONCLUSION

Numerous cases of children who report memories of previous lives have been studied over the past 50 years. The idea that they are created through normal means via social and cultural factors is challenged by cases in the West, particularly ones with good documentation such as James's case described here.

The nightmares and post-traumatic play that James experienced, which are typical of the behaviors many of these children display, demonstrate how difficult apparent past-life memories can be for children to have. An understanding of the link between the apparent memories and the emotional and behavioral issues these children experience may be helpful to families, particularly in situations in which the parents are inclined to dismiss the possibility of a past-life connection. Awareness of cases such as James's, ones with documentation of a close agreement between events from a life in the past and memories a current child expresses, may lead the parents to be less likely to discount their children's reports and more able to help them through the experience.

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