



COMMENTARY

Response to Sudduth's "James Leininger Case Re-Examined"

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In the last journal issue, Michael Sudduth (2021) presented a reexamination of the case of James Leininger, who as a young boy appeared to remember the life of James Huston, a pilot killed during World War II. Sudduth clearly put a tremendous amount of time into exploring the case. 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.

PERSONAL MEMORIES

The two most important issues in any case of the reincarnation type (CORT) are what the level of evidence is that the child possessed accurate information about the life of the previous personality and whether the child could have learned this information through ordinary means. Answering these requires first determining what information the child actually conveyed, particularly before the previous personality was identified. In some of the cases, families or investigators have documented at least some of the child's claims before the identification was made (Keil & Tucker, 2005). Schouten and Stevenson (1998) termed these B cases, differentiating these with documentation made *before* verification from cases with documentation only made *afterwards*, which they termed A cases. In such cases, the B items are critical since they do not rely on the memories of witnesses who might have been influenced by things they learned about the previous personality after the person was identified.

So it is in the James Leininger case. James's parents, Bruce and Andrea Leininger, reported that beginning at the age of 2, he made various statements about a purported past life. These eventually led them to identify James Huston as the previous personality in the fall of 2002, when James was 4 ½ years old. We were able to verify that some 30 of the statements ascribed to James were indeed accurate for Huston. No one recorded a number of them before confirming that they matched Huston's life, but we have documentation that was made before the fall of 2002 for ten of them. These thus count as B items, and they form the most evidential part of the case.

Sudduth uses the term "early-bird claims" for the B items. His analysis of them is, to put it mildly, idiosyncratic. First of all, he uses the wrong table. He focuses on one from my paper about the case (Tucker, 2016), rather than the one from the longer report I published in one of my books (Tucker, 2013). The table in the paper was not a complete list of the B items. Instead, it was a list of items that were part of a 2002 ABC News feature that included an interview with the Leiningers conducted before Huston was identified. The items there do count as B items (with one exception to be discussed later), but they are not the complete list. Sudduth chooses to focus on it, however, and then adds items of his own for which there is *not* documentation made before Huston was identified. Predictably, he finds them wanting.



Here is the list of James's B statements and behaviors from my book, which I'll address one by one:

- Signed drawings "James 3"
- Flew off *Natoma*
- Flew a Corsair
- Shot down by the Japanese
- Died at Iwo Jima
- "My airplane got shot in the engine and it crashed in the water and that's how I died."
- Nightmares of plane crashing and sinking in the water
- Jack Larsen was there

Signed Drawings "James 3"

We have numerous battle drawings that James signed "James 3." Like Sudduth, I wondered if this was because he was three years old. Sudduth says it doesn't matter that he continued to sign his name James 3 even after he turned four and that there would be nothing psychologically peculiar about it. It sounds pretty peculiar to me. When I interviewed each of his parents, they both stated that James clearly said he signed his name that way because he was "the third James." As it happens, James Huston was James, Jr., which would make James Leininger the third James.

Flew off *Natoma*

James's parents report that James told them one night that the name of the ship he flew off of was "Natoma." After that conversation, Bruce searched the Internet for a ship with that name, eventually finding information about USS *Natoma Bay*, an escort carrier stationed in the Pacific during World War II. He printed out the material, and the footer on the document shows when he printed it: 08/27/2000, when James was 28 months old. Three years later, Bruce sent a chronology to John DeWitt, the Natoma Bay Association historian. In it, he estimated that James had given the name in late October–November 2000. Later, when he checked the document, he saw that James had said it two months earlier. Sudduth tries to make this seem somehow suspicious, connecting it with when the Leiningers first emailed Carol Bowman, the author of two books on children's memories of previous lives (Bowman, 1997, 2001). He posits that Bowman could have gotten involved before James gave the name Natoma and other details. Since she suggested that Andrea tell James that his nightmares were memories from a past life, Sudduth says she and James's parents may have guided James, intentionally or not, to construct the reincarnation narrative he voiced.

We are aware of the possibility that parents could unconsciously guide children into thinking they remembered

a past life. This is particularly true when families in cultures with a strong belief in reincarnation are hoping that a deceased loved one will return. In such a situation, the parents know all about the past life and may be happy to accept any sign suggesting the child knows about it, too. Here, Bowman presumably knew little about World War II escort ships and absolutely nothing about James Huston. Her instruction to tell James he was remembering a past life conceivably could have guided him to construct a fantasy past-life narrative—but not the narrative that matched precisely with the end of Huston's life.

Sudduth says that I didn't list *Natoma* as an "early-bird claim" in my 2016 case report. Well, it's true I didn't include it in a table entitled "Statements and Behaviors by James Leininger Reported in ABC News Interview," and that's because it wasn't mentioned in the interview. Instead, I described in the text of the paper how James had given the name long before the previous personality was identified. In preparing that paper, I talked with one of the producers of the ABC segment, Shalini Sharma. Sudduth mischaracterizes what she told me, stating that I claim that she explained that the 8/27/2000 printout might have been excluded from the segment because other producers judged it as too weak as evidence. What she actually said was that she didn't remember why it was not included. She thought that perhaps a producer had decided that, at that point, there was not enough evidence indicating that James was remembering an actual past life to justify naming a specific ship. A previous personality had not been identified, so James's memories were unverified. But no one was doubting the printout. And no one thought there wasn't sufficient evidence that James had given the name. Even Sudduth doesn't challenge that fact that *Natoma* was part of the story at that time.

Sudduth (p. 1005) says "there is no justification for including [*Natoma*] as an early-bird item." But there is every reason to. The original printout is not the only documentation for it, as there are also emails and postings about it, and it is indisputable that it was part of the story before Huston was identified.

Flew a Corsair

Sudduth does not dispute that James said he flew a Corsair in his past life. He does point out, reasonably enough, that James's parents thought he was saying that he was flying a Corsair when he was killed, which James Huston was not. Sudduth says I should state the claims as they were attributed to James prior to the identification of the previous personality. In fact, in both the book and the paper, I say that James seemed to say he was flying a Corsair when he crashed. The Corsair was a special plane

that was developed during World War II. Huston did indeed fly one; he was part of the squadron that tested it for the Navy. But he was flying a different plane, an FM-2, off *Natoma Bay* when he was killed. Thus, we can view this item as partially correct.

Sudduth argues that James may have seen or heard about Corsairs, perhaps at the Cavanaugh Flight Museum where he and his father visited. The museum did not have a Corsair on display at the time, but Sudduth thinks James could have seen a toy model in the gift shop or perhaps overheard someone say the name. He then concludes that I haven't ruled out the museum as a source for the information.

Sudduth shows a fundamental misunderstanding here of what is most important in these cases. James doesn't get credit for the item based on whether or not he had heard of a Corsair; he could have been standing in front of a Corsair when he said he had flown one and still gotten credit. What makes the statement significant is that he claimed he flew a Corsair in his past life and, in fact, the previous personality did indeed fly one. We know that James was exposed to many types of World War II planes—Sudduth argues he might have been exposed to planes in ways we don't even know about. Out of all those planes, the one James named—the one discussed in the ABC interview before Huston was identified—was one that the previous personality flew. Absolutely no one suggests that James learned at the museum that *Huston* had flown a Corsair. And that is what counts.

Shot Down by the Japanese

James Huston was indisputably shot down by the Japanese military. Sudduth (p. 993) says that statements about being a pilot whose plane was shot down and crashed in the water are "highly general claims and (unsurprisingly) correct." In actuality, slightly fewer than half of the airplane losses during combat missions in Pacific Ocean areas during WWII were due to enemy fire (Office of Statistical Control, 1945). In addition, thousands of pilots were killed in training accidents before they even went overseas. So a claim of being shot down by the Japanese is more specific than it might appear.

Died at Iwo Jima

Sudduth says this statement is false because Huston died in Futami Harbor at Chichi Jima, an island some 150 miles away from Iwo Jima. He says this is analogous to claiming someone died at Gettysburg instead of Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, or in San Diego instead of Santa Monica.

Well, no. Iwo Jima didn't have its own harbor, so when the Japanese were defending it, they were forced to dock

their transport ships at Chichi Jima. They would then load troops and various supplies onto small vessels and transfer them to Iwo Jima. The Americans targeted this route as part of its attack on Iwo Jima (Wright, 1999).

Pilots from *Natoma Bay* took part in the Iwo Jima operation. They made 123 flights in the lead-up to the invasion and 52 more on the day the assault began. In the weeks that the battle continued, they also participated in strikes against the transport vessels in the harbor at Chichi Jima. It was during one of these strikes when James Huston was killed. His death is described in a confidential history of his squadron that was completed days after he was killed. It is included in the section entitled Iwo Jima Operation.

Sudduth then completely mischaracterizes my handling of James's first statement about Iwo Jima. Bruce recalled that when James was 2½ years old, he pointed to a picture of Iwo Jima and said that was where his plane was shot down. Bruce stated this in a 2004 interview when James was 6 years old, after Huston had been identified. Several years later, he remembered James's statement as "when my plane was shot down" rather than "where." As I've just pointed out, this is a minor quibble regardless, since the strikes at the transport vessels were part of the Battle of Iwo Jima. But Sudduth says I accepted the later version and interpreted it to mean James was referring to the time period in which his plane crashed. This is incorrect. In my paper, I only give the earlier quote with "where." In my book, I explain how Bruce's memory of the statement had changed after a few years, but I didn't accept the later version. In fact, I would generally favor earlier recall over later.

"My airplane got shot in the engine and it crashed in the water and that's how I died."

This is a quote that Andrea, James's mother, reported in the ABC interview. The statement includes three items: my airplane got shot in the engine; my airplane crashed in the water; that's how I died. The latter two unquestionably fit James Huston's death. The first one is harder to verify. On the day Huston was killed, eight fighter pilots from *Natoma Bay* had joined eight bombers from another ship, USS *Sargent Bay*, in the attack on shipping in the harbor on Chichi Jima. The *Natoma Bay* pilots were there to strafe the ships and ground positions to keep the anti-aircraft fire down. Huston was the last to dive in the first strafing run, and none of the ship's other pilots saw his plane get hit. What people did see was that his plane suddenly nosed over and went crashing into the water, where it exploded, burned, and quickly sank.

After posting on a Chichi Jima website, Bruce heard from a crewmember of one of the *Sargent Bay* planes and

eventually talked to four veterans who had seen Huston's plane hit. This was not a case of Bruce's questions stirring up vague memories. One of the veterans, Jack Durham, had written an informal war memoir years before Bruce talked to him. In it, he wrote this about Huston: "One of the fighter pilots from the squadron assigned to give us cover, was hit with a direct hit on the nose and all I could see were pieces falling into the bay." Another one, John Richardson, began sobbing as he told Bruce about that day. He talked about seeing Huston's plane and said, "We were no more than thirty yards apart when the pilot deliberately turned his head and looked at me. I caught his eyes and we connected with each other. No sooner had we connected than his plane was hit in the engine by what seemed to be a fairly large shell." He added, "I have lived with that pilot's face as his eyes fixed on me every day since it happened. I never knew who he was. I was the last guy who saw him alive" (Leininger & Leininger, 2009, p. 217).

Sudduth says the testimony of the veterans "*happens* to fit James's description of events." The italics is his. I don't know if he's trying to impugn the integrity of Bruce or that of the veterans, but in his effort to dismiss their eyewitness reports, he is acknowledging that they do in fact match James's statement that his plane got shot in the engine.

Nightmares of Plane Crashing and Sinking in the Water

In the ABC interview, Bruce described how James had nightmares of his plane crashing on fire and sinking, and his being unable to get out. The first two are confirmed for Huston, with records stating his plane crashed in the water and exploded and burned. It then sank "with no wreckage left afloat."

Sudduth challenges the last aspect: James said he was unable to get out of the plane after it crashed, and Sudduth argues this is inconsistent with Huston's death as described in the Aircraft Action Report (AAR). Sudduth says the AAR indicates that the impact of the crash killed Huston. But it doesn't. The AAR said Huston's plane went "crashing into the water, exploding and burning" and that "it is believed that it would have been impossible to survive the crash and resulting explosion." Not only is the report only surmising what happened, but dying in an exploding, burning plane is clearly not the same as being killed on impact.

James screamed in his nightmares that his plane crashed on fire and he couldn't get out. Huston's plane crashed in the water, exploded and burned, and quickly sank. Despite Sudduth's protestations, James's statements were completely consistent with how Huston died.

Jack Larsen Was There

James's parents reported that when they asked who else was present when he was killed in his past life, he gave the name Jack Larsen. I have a copy of when Bruce searched for Jack Larsen in the WWII database on the American Battle Monuments Commission website on 10/16/2000. At that time, James was just under 2½ years old, and this was two years before Huston was identified as the previous personality.

Sudduth cannot deny that Jack Larsen was present when Huston was killed, but he tries to cast doubt on the significance of the fact. He says that when the ABC production team was trying to help the Leiningers locate a Jack Larsen, they ignored the crew of *Natoma Bay* and instead looked elsewhere, finding a naval pilot named John M. Larsen with no connection to *Natoma Bay*. He considers this "bizarre" since a veteran had previously told Bruce that a Jack Larsen had served on *Natoma Bay*. Sudduth doesn't seem to understand that Bruce and the production crew were in fact trying to find out more about the Jack Larsen who was on *Natoma Bay*. Shalini Sharma, the segment producer, emailed Bruce after the filming and told him to keep following the Jack Larsen lead. She had asked a contact at the Center for Naval History about a Jack Larsen. He found records of a John M. Larson, but he turned out to be a different man than the one on *Natoma Bay*.

Sudduth also invokes *the law of near enough*. It says that with wide parameters or vague descriptions, events that are sufficiently similar may be regarded incorrectly as identical. He says that not only does the Jack Larsen on *Natoma Bay* fit James's statement that Jack Larsen was there, but many other Jack Larsens (and men with similar names) in World War II would fit as well. I agree it can be hard to know sometimes where to draw the line to say an item is close enough to count as a match. But there is absolutely no doubt which side of the line this one is on. The AAR includes a diagram showing Larsen's plane right next to Huston's on the day he was killed.

Adding up these personal memories, we see that there are ten B items—ones with documentation that was made before the previous personality was identified—and they are all correct for James Huston (if we give full credit for the Corsair). Sudduth tries to discount the *Natoma Bay* and Jack Larsen items. He says I didn't put them in the category of "early-bird claims" in my 2016 paper but included them in the expanded list in my book. In actuality, I listed all of the statements and behaviors that were recorded before Huston was identified—in other words, all the B items—in my 2013 book. I described all of them in my subsequent 2016 paper, and in addition, I included a table in the paper of "Statements and Behaviors . . . Reported in ABC News In-

terview." *Natoma Bay* and Jack Larsen count as much as the others, and they add remarkable specificity to his claims.

Sudduth (p. 1001) creates his own "Alternative List of Early-Bird Claims" and arrives at a score of 4 out of 11. He says his matches are all very general claims, but that's partly because he excludes two of the most specific ones—*Natoma Bay* and Jack Larsen. He also adds two items that are not part of the record: "I died by drowning" and "My plane was on fire before crashing in the water."

Regarding the question of drowning, Sudduth says I confirmed in correspondence on 08/06/21 that I understood that the claims included that he died by drowning. I did not. He gets the date of my email wrong, but more significantly, I did not say James claimed to have drowned. He asked me if Andrea had ever told me that James said he died by drowning as opposed to being killed by anti-aircraft fire or the crash and subsequent explosion. I responded, "Andrea said that James reported he died when his plane crashed in the water and he couldn't get out." I said nothing about drowning. (Sudduth then audaciously says I seemed to have Andrea's version in mind when I confirmed this item, when in fact he was the one who asked me what Andrea had told me.)

When Sudduth referred to Andrea's version, he was talking about a somewhat ambiguous post she made on reincarnationforum.com three years after Huston was identified. It said, in part: "James Huston was shot down at the battle of Iwo Jima, flying at a relatively low altitude. After his plane was hit in the engine, it crashed nose first into the water. From what my little James told me after his nightmares, he was alive in the plane when it went into the water, and was kicking to try and break out the canopy to escape the sinking plane. His friends who flew over said that no wreckage was seen floating on the water; just an oil slick. James Huston drowned in the plane, not as a result of the crash." She seems to have deduced that Huston drowned. I can find no instance in which Bruce or Andrea reported that James actually said he drowned, and there is definitely no record of such a statement that was made before Huston was identified. (This is not to say definitively that Huston did not in fact drown, the Aircraft Action Report stating only that "it is believed" that he could not have survived the crash and explosion.)

Sudduth's "alternative" list aside, a fair assessment of the actual list of documented items shows that James's purported memories are an extremely impressive match with details from the end of James Huston's life.¹

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

One item from the ABC interview does not count as a B statement. James is shown in the segment saying that

Corsairs got flat tires when they landed. That constitutes general knowledge rather than memories of a specific life, so although the statement is documented, it would not count as a past-life memory.

Sudduth changes the item in his "alternative list" to "Corsairs had a unique problem of getting flat tires when they landed." We can be confident that the little 4-year-old did not say that Corsairs had a "unique problem." Sudduth (p. 995) also says, "Tucker cites an unnamed Air Force historian he didn't personally interview in support of the claim." Although literally true, this is an example of when Sudduth, with apparent intent, misleads the reader into drawing a negative inference. What I did was describe how after James said that Corsairs got flat tires, the ABC crew interviewed a military historian (his name was Michael Modica) who was shown stating that Corsairs bounced quite a bit when they landed so they would lose tires.

Although James clearly knew a remarkable amount about planes for a young child, we typically place little significance on general knowledge the children convey. This is for the very reason that Sudduth belabors so extravagantly: We can never know with certainty what the child may have learned through ordinary means. Yes, James watched videos about planes and visited flight museums. As I stated in my paper, his passion about planes may have led to some of the knowledge of planes and aviation that he often surprised his parents by voicing. But not even Sudduth supposes that he learned about the specific past life, James Huston's life, from videos or flight museums. And it is the specific past life that is the core of any case of purported past-life memories.

Sudduth quotes Stevenson regarding potential ordinary sources of information and his emphasis on the need to "show a specific matching between a subject's statements and a definitive source of information providing the ingredients of those statements." Sudduth believes he has done that with a video on the Blue Angels, the Navy flight demonstration squadron formed in 1946, along with two trips James took to a flight museum.

But of course he hasn't. Yes, James was exposed to information about planes and World War II. It is not enough, however, to show that he learned that planes can take off from boats or that planes can crash. It is also not enough to show that James was exposed to imagery² of planes crashing or burning or even imagery of a pilot named Larsen or a Corsair plane. He was exposed to many, many images and names in his young life, including many planes. What is important is whether the ones he said were part of his past life actually matched a life someone lived. James reported memories of being a particular person in a particular place. You would need to show that he learned that a pilot took off from the *Natoma* and that his plane crashed during the

Battle of Iwo Jima in a particular way and that his friend Jack Larsen was nearby when it happened. Sudduth has not done that.

BEHAVIORS

Sudduth says that I "admit" that James's behavior when he was little, such as his nightmares and his repeated play or drawings of plane crashes, is important. It's hardly an admission to say that James showed behaviors consistent with the memories he reported, but the behavioral features are an ancillary part of the case, not the crux of it.

I commented in my book that children who have witnessed a traumatic event sometimes develop post-traumatic play in which they repeatedly reenact the event. I said it wasn't obvious in James's case how to distinguish normal behavior from post-traumatic play, but when combined with his recurrent nightmares, his repetitive behaviors suggested a child trying to work through a traumatic event, which in this case seemed to be one from a past life.

Sudduth takes exception to this and accuses me of misapplying clinical work on childhood trauma, an odd criticism to come from a philosopher. He says that two psychiatric sources, Terr (2003) and *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013),³ presuppose that the clinician has observed the subject engaged in play. In fact, Terr (2003, p. 325) says "the presence or absence of behavioral reenactments may at times be better determined from interviews with third parties," and I can think of no diagnosis in the *DSM* that requires that the patient show specific symptoms while in the psychiatrist's office. Certainly, the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder do not.

CONCLUSIONS

Much of Sudduth's paper is ultimately beside the point. Yes, James was exposed to materials about WWII and airplanes; we already knew that. How much of it a 2-year-old could have taken in during his visits to the museum is unclear, but young children can surprise us at times. And yes, in telling their story over the years, Bruce and Andrea Leininger may have been inconsistent at times on some of the details. *That's why we go by the documentation.* The documentation shows that James provided a number of specific details he said were from his death in a previous life, details that precisely matched a pilot who was killed in WWII. That was one James M. Huston, Jr., a 21-year-old pilot from Pennsylvania, who was killed only days before his ship was scheduled to leave Iwo Jima. Try as he might, Sudduth is not able to change that. The case remains unscathed.

A final note: Sudduth generally uses measured language in his paper. But he shows no such constraint on his blog ([http://michaelsudduth.com/crash-and-burn-james-](http://michaelsudduth.com/crash-and-burn-james-leininger-story-debunked/)

[leininger-story-debunked/](http://michaelsudduth.com/crash-and-burn-james-leininger-story-debunked/)). He titles his post about the paper "Crash and Burn: James Leininger Story Debunked." In it, he calls the case "a fiction James's parents exaggerated." He says it is an example of "drawing bogus inferences from alternative facts" and that it's based on "falsehoods." He finishes the post by saying we need to cultivate more conscientiousness in our inquiries to prevent us from "promoting bullshit." I see no justification for disparaging the Leiningers' integrity in that way. It would be one thing if Sudduth had proven fraud. But he has not.

Nonetheless, his paper, in its own strange way, represents a significant contribution. Sudduth has demonstrated that the case is so strong that a determined critic can devote endless time and energy trying to debunk it and still not make a dent in it. His accomplishment is marred only by his inability to see what he has done.

NOTES

- ¹ Sudduth evokes the law of combinations to dispute this in a way I find deceptive. He says that although the multiple elements of the B statements might seem to limit the range of possible matches, they actually increase it because the law of combinations says that the number of combinations of interacting elements increases exponentially with the number of elements. A well-known example of the law of combinations is the "birthday problem." It asks how many people have to be in a room for there to be a greater than 50% chance that two of them have the same birthday. The answer is 23, which seems surprisingly low. If I'm in a room with 22 other people, the chances that one of them has *my* birthday are extremely small. But the chances that *any two of us* have the same birthday are more than 50% because there are so many potential combinations (22 + 21 + 20 . . .). If you add more people to the room, you increase the number of potential matches even more, thereby increasing the chances that two of the group will have the same birthday. But that's not analogous to the situation here. Adding elements to the list of claims is more like looking for three people in the room with same birthday instead of two, rather than increasing possible combinations by adding more people to the room.
- ² Sudduth seems to suggest that James pointed to the photograph of Iwo Jima as the place where his plane was shot down because he had seen the picture at the museum. Or perhaps he's saying there was a similar picture there. Either way, the painting he shows in figure 12 is from another battle and looks nothing like the aerial photo of Iwo Jima that James identified.
- ³ Sudduth writes it as "DSM-V" and does not provide a reference.

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