

40 Years Later, *Born in the USA*'s Hidden Vietnam War Connection Explored

By Melissa Ziobro

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Abstract: Music critic and writer Stephen Holden wrote in 1984 that, for all its mostly upbeat-sounding songs, the main theme throughout Bruce Springsteen's seventh studio album, Born in the USA, is "the decline of small-town working class life in a post-industrial society."'¹ Bruce himself has noted, "My Born in the USA songs were direct and fun and stealthily carried the undercurrents of [the much quieter, darker] Nebraska."'² The title track in particular has been misconstrued, with many seeing it as a patriotic anthem instead of a lament about the unconscionable treatment of Vietnam War veterans. Bruce fans and scholars, of course, rarely make this mistake. But there's another tie between Born in the USA and the Vietnam War that only a very select few know about, and their numbers are dwindling. It has to do with what's in Bruce's back pocket on the album cover and a military project from the singer's home state of New Jersey.

Music legend and New Jersey native Bruce Springsteen's first two albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ* and *The Wild, the Innocent, & the E Street Shuffle*, debuted in 1973. He'd been playing in bands since his teen years and had by 1973 amassed quite a following at the Jersey Shore (and, incidentally, in Richmond, Virginia, where local friends often booked him to play). His first two professionally recorded and released albums, however, struggled to gain traction. Reviews were mostly positive, but sales were slow. The record company, Columbia, was not

¹ Stephen Holden, "Bruce Springsteen Scans the American Dream," *New York Times*, May 27, 1984.

² Bruce Springsteen, *Born To Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 317.

particularly supportive, especially of *The Wild, the Innocent*. As Bruce recounts in his autobiography:

When we toured to promote *The Wild, the Innocent*, few even knew it had been released. I hit one Texas radio station where I was told a representative from my record company had visited and, while promoting several new Columbia recordings, literally told them to remove mine from airplay, adding “The songs are too long.” This was a new twist. My own record company, trying to get my record off the radio.³

Springsteen’s third album, *Born to Run*, changed everything in 1975. Sales skyrocketed, and when he famously appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* simultaneously that year, it signaled he had “made it” as few had before him, or since. Bruce recalls:

On August 25, 1975, all the aces came up, the sevens rolled round, and an endless river of noise and silver poured forth from the mouth of the one-armed bandit of rock ‘n’ roll – JACKPOT! Bingo! Bull’s eye! We had a HIT!⁴

Born to Run lifted us into another league. We were a new young force to be reckoned with and were removed financially from the red column and placed firmly in the black (hypothetically). We’d landed, a success, for now.⁵

Twenty-plus studio albums later, Springsteen is still enjoying that success, packing stadiums around the globe as this article is being written in 2025.⁶

³Ibid., 194.

⁴Ibid., 223.

⁵ Ibid., 233.

⁶ Gil Kaufman, “Bruce Springsteen Says This is His Most Definitive Album,” *Billboard*, April 28, 2023; Andy Greene, “Watch Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band Kick Off Their 2024 World Tour,” *Rolling Stone*, March 20, 2024; Steven Hyden, *There Was Nothing You Could Do: Born in the USA and the End of the Heartland* (New York: Hachette, 2024), xvii.

Springsteen's seventh studio album, however, remains his best-selling. *Born in the USA*, released over forty years ago in 1984, has sold over 30 million copies worldwide.⁷ As Bruce tells it:

Born in the USA went nuclear. I knew I had a real runner in the title cut but I didn't expect the massive wave of response we received. Was it timing? The music? The muscles? I dunno, it's always a bit of a mystery when something breaks that big.⁸

One of the album's tracks, "Dancing in the Dark," is Bruce's best performing single ever, landing at number two on the Billboard charts.⁹ Then, there's the anthemic title track, the one Bruce called "a real runner." It has often been misinterpreted as an unabashed celebration of America exceptionalism, when it in fact bemoans the plight of Vietnam War veterans and the elusiveness of the American dream.¹⁰ Part of the confusion comes from the song's upbeat synthesizer, pounding drums, and chorus:

Born in the U.S.A.

I was born in the U.S.A.

I was born in the U.S.A.

I was born in the U.S.A.

Born in the U.S.A.

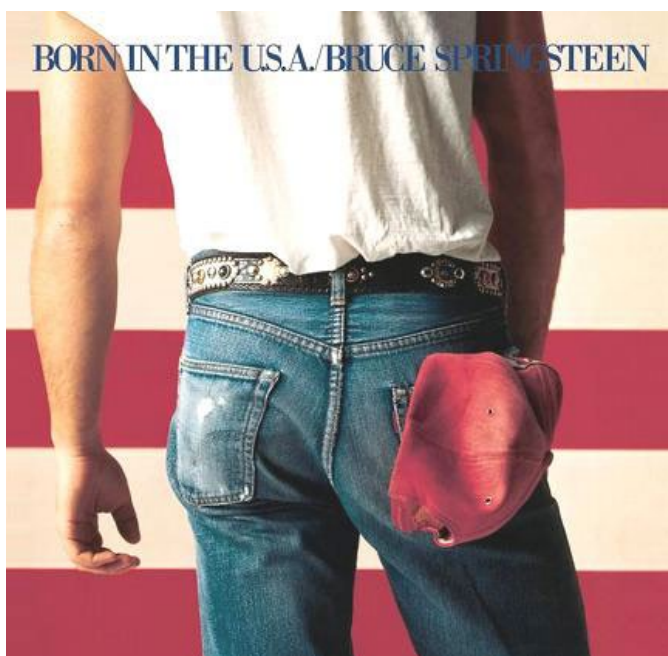
⁷ Hyden, *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, xiii.

⁸ Springsteen, *Born To Run*, 321.

⁹ Hyden, *There Was Nothing You Could Do*, xvi.

¹⁰ For more on the meaning, and misinterpretations of, "Born in the USA," see Bruce Springsteen, *Born To Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017); Bruce Springsteen, *Songs* (New York: Avon Books, 1998); Jim Cullen, *Born in the USA* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2024); and Jon Meacham and Tim McGraw, *Songs of America: Patriotism, Protest, and the Music that Made a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2019). For more on Bruce Springsteen's personal ties to the Vietnam War, see Bruce Springsteen, *Born To Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017) and Melissa Ziobro, "'I remember you in your Marine uniform laughin': Remembering Bart Haynes," in *American Music Perspectives*, Summer 2024.

Also adding to the confusion is the album's imagery. Just close your eyes and picture the *Born in the USA* album cover. Photographer Annie Leibovitz captured Bruce in front of a huge American flag. His back is to the camera, and he's wearing blue jeans. Before reading on, ask yourself—what does Springsteen have in his back pocket?



Born in the USA album cover.

Many will insist it's a red bandana. Bruce actually has a red **hat** in his back pocket. It's a prime example of the Mandela effect, where a group of people collectively misremember a historic fact, image, or some other pop culture touchstone. This is the same red hat you can see Bruce wearing in the "Glory Days" music video, released in 1985. The hat features an unusual patch with "REMBASS" written on the front.



“Glory Days” music video, featuring the same hat worn on the *Born in the USA* album cover.

The same hat, in the custody of the Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music.

Few people have publicly asked—“wait, what’s a REMBASS?” This is where the story gets a little technical, a lot interesting, and unexpectedly ties to the Vietnam War.

Bruce got the hat from Asbury Park musician Lance Larson. Larson has told the story of giving the hat to Bruce many times over the past few decades, relaying in one interview:

Bruce took me out, it was Father’s Day, and my father had died a month and a half before. And I was a little depressed, I was feeling bad about it, and Bruce said, “C’mon, let’s go for a ride.” And we rode around Freehold, he took me out to his old high school, and showed me his old house and stuff. And we’re talking, and he says, “Can I have that red hat?” And I gave him the red hat. And I didn’t see him for four months. I saw him at Club Xanadu, right up the street from the [Stone] Pony. He came running over to me and he goes, “Lance, the hat is history, the hat is history.” I said, “What?!” “The red hat!” And he

put it on *Born in the USA*. That's him standing with the hat in his back pocket. But he knew, being that it was Father's Day, he said "Lance, when you see that hat, think of your pop."¹¹

Lance recently confirmed in a 2024 telephone conversation that he gave the hat to Bruce. In this call, he reiterated what he'd said in some of his past interviews—that the word on the hat, REMBASS, *might* have something to do with a fishing company. He wasn't quite sure, though, as he wasn't the original owner of the hat himself.¹²

Research shows that the very unique word—actually an acronym—almost certainly refers to something called the Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System. Developed during and after the Vietnam War era and with subsequent generations still in use to this day,¹³ REMBASS is an intelligence system intended to provide military commanders with information about hostile activity. The high-tech system, in its initial form, detected the movements of both vehicles and personnel by use of seismic, acoustic, magnetic, infrared, and strain wire sensors in possible areas of enemy action. The technology was cutting edge, but the concept was simple: to save the lives of American troops, and help win wars, by detecting and reporting on enemy movements.

The project traces its roots to the Vietnam War era. Then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wanted an electronic means to detect and help destroy supplies traveling the Ho Chi

¹¹ "Bruce Springsteen's Born in the USA album cover is iconic, but do you know the story behind the red hat?" NJ PBS, *Facebook.com*, August 18, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?mibextid=xCPwDs&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2Fv%2Fc7QpBwuVXFgAdyEY%2F%3Fmibextid%3DxCPwDs&v=1468106356604006&rdid=iNoSytnPJMqnFMAo.

¹² Melissa Ziobro and Lance Larson, telephone conversation, July 16, 2024. See also Steve Giegerich, "Bruce Tramps Tell of Brushes with Greatness," *Asbury Park Press*, June 19, 1991; Kevin Coyne, "Jersey: Aging Rocker Tries to Reclaim a Lost Dream," *New York Times*, June 24, 2007; Nick Corasaniti, *I Don't Want to Go Home: The Oral History of the Stone Pony* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 108.

¹³ The Improved Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System (I-REMBASS), developed by the Intelligence and Information Warfare Directorate (I2WD) of the Research Development and Engineering Center, Army Communications- Electronics Command, Fort Monmouth, was even awarded *Government Executive* magazine's 2002 Grace Hopper Government Technology Leadership Award in the category of "Contributing to Advances in Homeland Security and the War on Terrorism." "CACI-Supported Battlefield Sensor System Wins 2002 Grace Hopper Government Technology Leadership Award for Homeland Security," *PR Newswire*, November 6, 2002, <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/caci-supported-battlefield-sensor-system-wins/docview/448910991/se-2>.

Minh trail before they reached the battlefield. The desired electronic blockade didn't quite happen. But efforts to do so introduced technology that improved the US Army's ability to monitor the battlefield in all weather and light conditions.¹⁴ As one technical report notes,

The first tactical unattended ground sensor system was the Southeast Asia Operational Sensor (SEAOPS) system. Fielded in 1967,¹⁵ SEAOPS provided an "electronic curtain" to detect the movement of enemy troops and supplies into South Vietnam. As changes were made during the Vietnam conflict, SEAOPS evolved from a Phase I to a Phase III system...

In 1972,¹⁶ the Army established a system acquisition program to replace its Phase III SEAOPS. This program was identified as the Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System (REMBASS)...¹⁷

¹⁴ Staff Sergeant William T. Beckman, "Intelligence Scouts: REMBASS and Battlefield Surveillance," GlobalSecurity.org, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call_01-15_ch6.htm. See also the January-February 1979 edition of *Army Research, Development, and Acquisition Magazine*, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Army_R_D_A/8r1lxC77M7cC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=rembass&pg=PA28&printsec=frontcover.

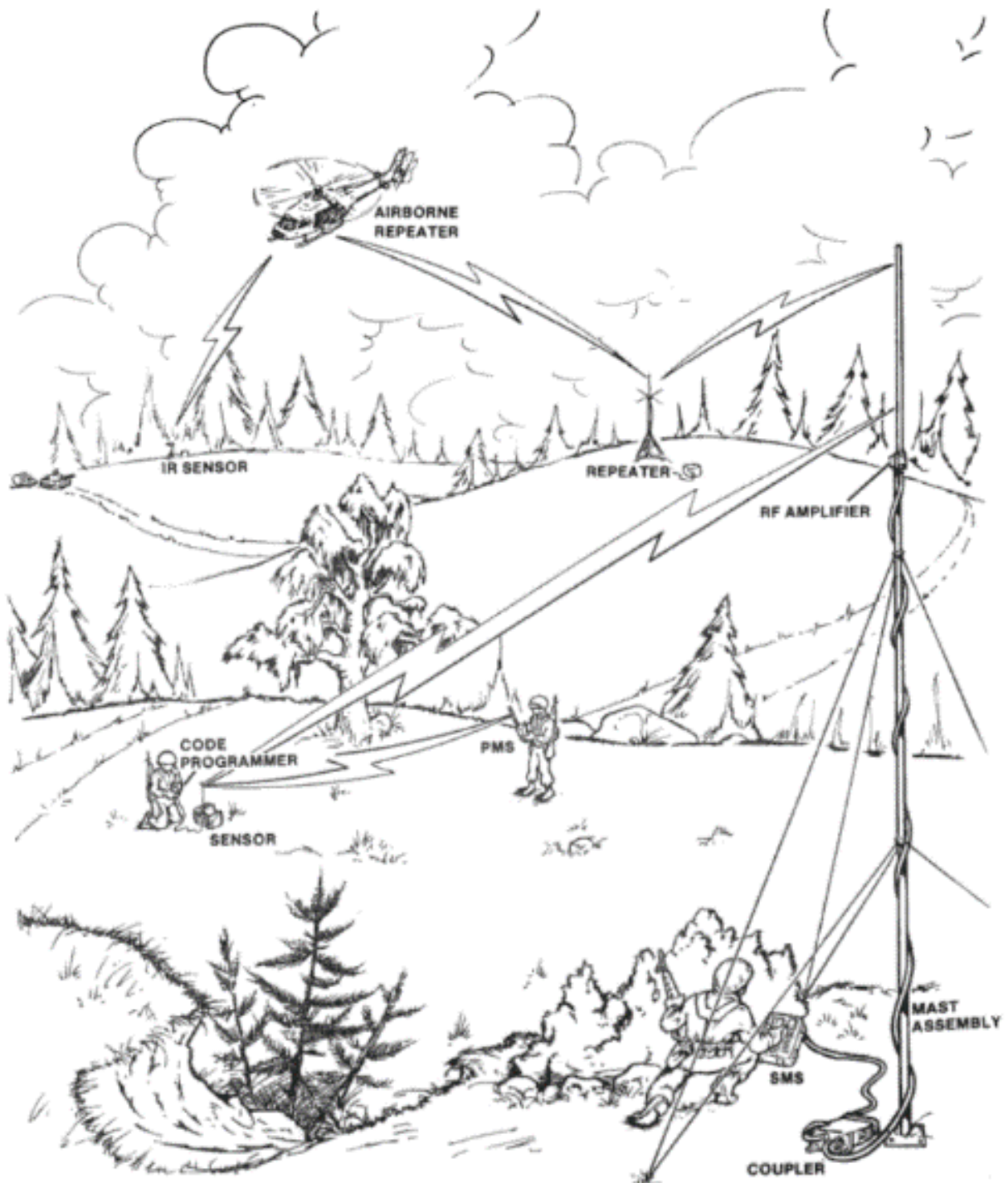
¹⁵ The system was deployed as the number of Americans deployed to Vietnam increased throughout the 1960s, with resultant rising casualty numbers. The National Archives reports 1,928 Americans killed in-theater in 1965, 6,350 in 1966, and 11,363 killed in 1967. National Archives and Record Administration, "Vietnam War US Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>.

¹⁶ 1972 is the year before the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, and three years prior to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

¹⁷ Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, "Audit Report: Unattended Ground Sensor Systems," February 26, 1991. Courtesy US Army Communications-Electronics Command Historical Office, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. See more about the history of REMBASS in Master Sergeant Raymond Davis, "REMBASS: New Dimension in Battlefield Intelligence," *Arrowhead*, February 1972, 14-15, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Arrowhead/Rzk-umMK_eIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=rembass&pg=RA1-PA15&printsec=frontcover; the September–October 1976 edition of *Army Research and Development News Magazine*, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Army_RD_A_Bulletin/p6IrAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=rembass&pg=RA4-PA12&printsec=frontcover; and the January-February 1979 edition of *Army Research, Development, and Acquisition Magazine*, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Army_R_D_A/8r1lxC77M7cC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=rembass&pg=PA28&printsec=frontcover.

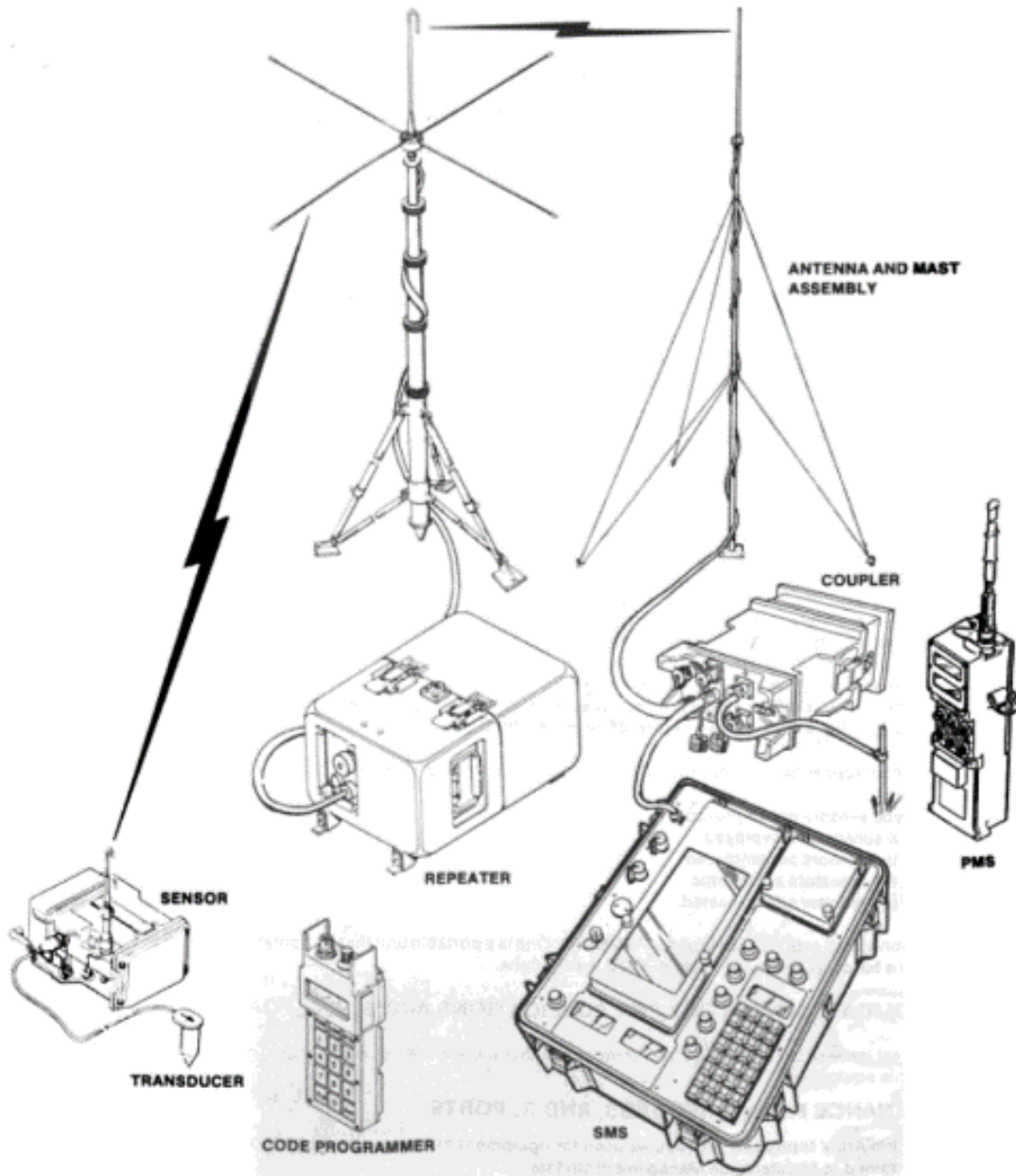
REMBASS was an improvement over SEAOPS for a number of reasons, including fewer false alarms.¹⁸

TM 11-6350-219-13



REMBASS System

TM 11-6350-219-13



REMBASS Equipment

1-2

Illustrations from Army Technical Manual 11-6350-219-13, "Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System (REMBASS) System Manual, December 15, 1987.

REMBASS just happened to be a product of central New Jersey's historic Fort Monmouth military base, in coordination with government contractors such as RCA.¹⁹ Fort Monmouth, open from 1917–2011, was located not far from Bruce's hometown of Freehold or places he'd later live and perform along the coast, like Long Branch and Asbury Park. It was for many years known as the "Home of the Signal Corps," the branch of the Army charged with all manner of military communications. The base trained men (and later, women) for war and contributed to the development of scores of technologies that saved personnel on the battlefield and now impact everyday life in America, such as radar, GPS, and computing and weather forecasting technologies. It was an enormous economic engine for New Jersey and had an outsized presence in the community, hosting "Armed Forces" days for the public, sending soldiers out to visit local schools, and more. Bruce Springsteen actually played at the base several times over the decades, first as a teen and later as a global phenom who appreciated the privacy a military facility could offer (but that's a story for another day).²⁰

Back to REMBASS. A small group of Fort Monmouth personnel had for years been claiming the *Born in the USA* album cover hat was one distributed to members of the Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System team. Some even claimed to have their own matching hats. The story never quite gained traction—until 2024, when former REMBASS project team member Donald Blue Sr. (an Army veteran and longtime Fort Monmouth civilian employee) presented his own REMBASS hat to this author, who happens to be the last Command Historian at Fort

¹⁹ As one local reporter quipped, "You probably know RCA as an entertainment company, but plenty of kibble was flowing into Nipper's bowl by way of contracts from the Department of Defense and NASA." "When Camden Was Silicon Valley," *NBC 10 Philadelphia*, January 31, 2014, <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/local/when-camden-was-silicon-valley/2122655/>. See also M.J. Kurina, "Electronic packaging for an artillery -delivered sensor," *RCA Engineer*, January–February 1981, 63. See <https://www.worldradiohistory.com/ARCHIVE-RCA/RCA-Engineer/1981-01-02.pdf>.

²⁰ For more on Fort Monmouth history, see Melissa Ziobro, *Fort Monmouth: The US Army's House of Magic* (Philadelphia: Brookline Books, 2024), and visit the InfoAge Science and History Museums at the Camp Evans National Historic Landmark in Wall Township, New Jersey.

Monmouth and the current Director of Curatorial Affairs for the Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music at Monmouth University. And now, here we are. A side by side analysis of the hats seems to confirm that they are near twins—though Bruce’s has obviously spent a lot of time in the sun. Any minor variations in the hats can almost certainly be attributed to the fact that this was locally produced merchandise, created and distributed in small batches over the years.

As RCA company historian Fred Barnum tells it:

RCA Camden, NJ regularly produced a variety of promotional marketing items for many of its major products and programs which were distributed to both its employees and government customers to help build team morale and a create a sense of team identity, while also providing free advertising for the product or program. Unique logos were typically designed by RCA Camden’s Art Department for most products or programs and were displayed on all types of promotional items, including coffee cups, shirts, jackets, and baseball caps. After being awarded the initial contract for development of the Remotely Monitored Battlefield Sensor System (REMBASS) in 1972 by the US Army Project Manager REMBASS, Fort Monmouth, NJ, RCA Camden designed a special logo for the program, consisting of a two-colored, curvy-sided square outer border with an orange bullseye in the middle and the word REMBASS beneath it. The logo was designed to look like the screen icon used on the REMBASS display monitor to indicate the geographical location of the deployed REMBASS sensors overlaid on a military map.²¹

²¹ Fred Barnum email to Melissa Ziobro, July 27, 2024.



REMBASS Program logo designed by RCA Camden, NJ.

RCA applied the REMBASS logo to coffee cups and red baseball caps, both of which were handed out to the RCA Camden and US Army Fort Monmouth employees involved with the REMBASS program from 1973 to 1988. Courtesy Fred Barnum.

Since its inception to support troops during the Vietnam War era, various generations of REMBASS have been deployed to different theaters of war and in countless noncombat situations. They've been used along the US/Mexico border and along the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.²² Donald Blue and his colleague, Frank Dennis, even deployed with a REMBASS system to help New York State Police provide security at the Lake Placid 1980 Winter

²² "REMBASS," *Forecast International*, April 1998, https://www.forecastinternational.com/archive/dispatch_old_pdf.cfm?ARC_ID=860.

Olympics (the same Olympics that saw the young American hockey team defeat the heavily-favored Soviet professionals in what became known as the “Miracle on Ice”).²³

Furthermore, Dennis observed that not only has REMBASS been widely deployed by the government over the past several decades, but sensors that the average American uses every day, like with Ring, Blink, or Nest cameras, are all outgrowths of that technology.²⁴



REMBASS team at Fort Monmouth, undated. Courtesy Donald Blue Sr. and Frank Dennis.

Lance Larson, when reached for comment and shown the REMBASS hat from Donald Blue, agreed it must be related to the hat he gave Bruce. He was surprised and delighted to hear,

²³ Melissa Ziobro interviewing Donald Blue Senior, July 17, 2024. Courtesy Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music; “Security at Olympics NMIA luncheon topic,” *Monmouth Message*, November 15, 1978; Melissa Ziobro, “Fort Monmouth Technologies Helped Secure 1980 Olympics,” *Two River Times*, July 26, 2024.

²⁴ Melissa Ziobro interviewing Donald Blue Sr., July 17, 2024. Courtesy Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music.

after all these years, that the famed hat has such a meaningful hidden history—one inadvertently tied to a major theme of the *Born in the USA* album, the Vietnam War, by way of a military program intended to keep soldiers safe on the battlefield.²⁵ Forty years after the release of *Born in the USA*, new fans are still discovering the album. New articles and books are still being written about it. And we are still learning more about the famed iconography of its cover.

²⁵ Melissa Ziobro and Lance Larson, telephone conversation, July 16, 2024.



Top Left: The very well-loved *Born in the USA* hat.

Top Right: Donald Blue's well-preserved hat.

Bottom: A hat in the custody of the RCA Heritage Program at Rowan University. Courtesy Joe Brandt for NJ.com.

Melissa Ziobro began her career as a historian, archivist, and curator for the US Army in 2004 prior to returning to her alma mater, Monmouth University, to teach full-time. She has taught over a dozen different courses, including Intro to Public History; Oral History; Museums and Archives Management Basics; and Historic Site Preservation, Interpretation, and Management. In August of 2023, she became curator of the University's Bruce Springsteen Archives & Center for American Music, after having worked with the Center for many years in her faculty role (to include curating the Center's first traveling exhibit, "Springsteen: His Hometown," with the Monmouth County Historical Association in 2019). Her most recent books include Fort Monmouth: The US Army's House of Magic (2024) and The Battlin' Bastards of Bravo: Bravo Company, 1/506th, 101st Airborne, in Vietnam and Beyond (2025). Her current book project is Born in the USA: Bruce Springsteen, Bart Haynes, Walter Cichon - and the Vietnam War.