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(54) **SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR RECOVERING AND CONTROLLING POST-RECOVERY MOTION OF UNMANNED AIRCRAFT**

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(75) Inventors: **Stephen B. Heppe**, Hood River, OR (US); **Jaime Mack**, White Salmon, WA (US)

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(73) Assignee: **Insitu, Inc.**, Bingen, WA (US)

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Primary Examiner—Christopher P Ellis
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Perkins Coie LLP

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **244/110 E**; 244/110 F;
244/110 R; 244/100 A

(57) **ABSTRACT**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 244/110 E,
244/110 F, 110 R, 100 A, 107, 100 R; 114/261,
114/262

Systems and methods for recovering unmanned aircraft and controlling post-recovery motion of the aircraft are disclosed herein. An aircraft recovery system for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight in accordance with one embodiment of the disclosure, for example, can include an inflatable aircraft recovery system having an inflatable portion with a generally vertical orientation. The inflatable portion can also include a landing pocket extending at least partially there-through. The landing pocket is sized to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft. The aircraft recovery system can also include a guidance system at least proximate to the landing pocket and positioned to guide the aircraft toward the landing pocket.

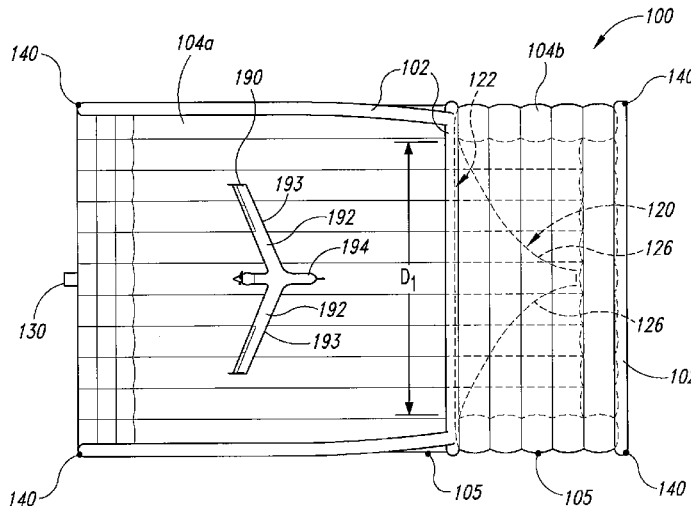
See application file for complete search history.

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26 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



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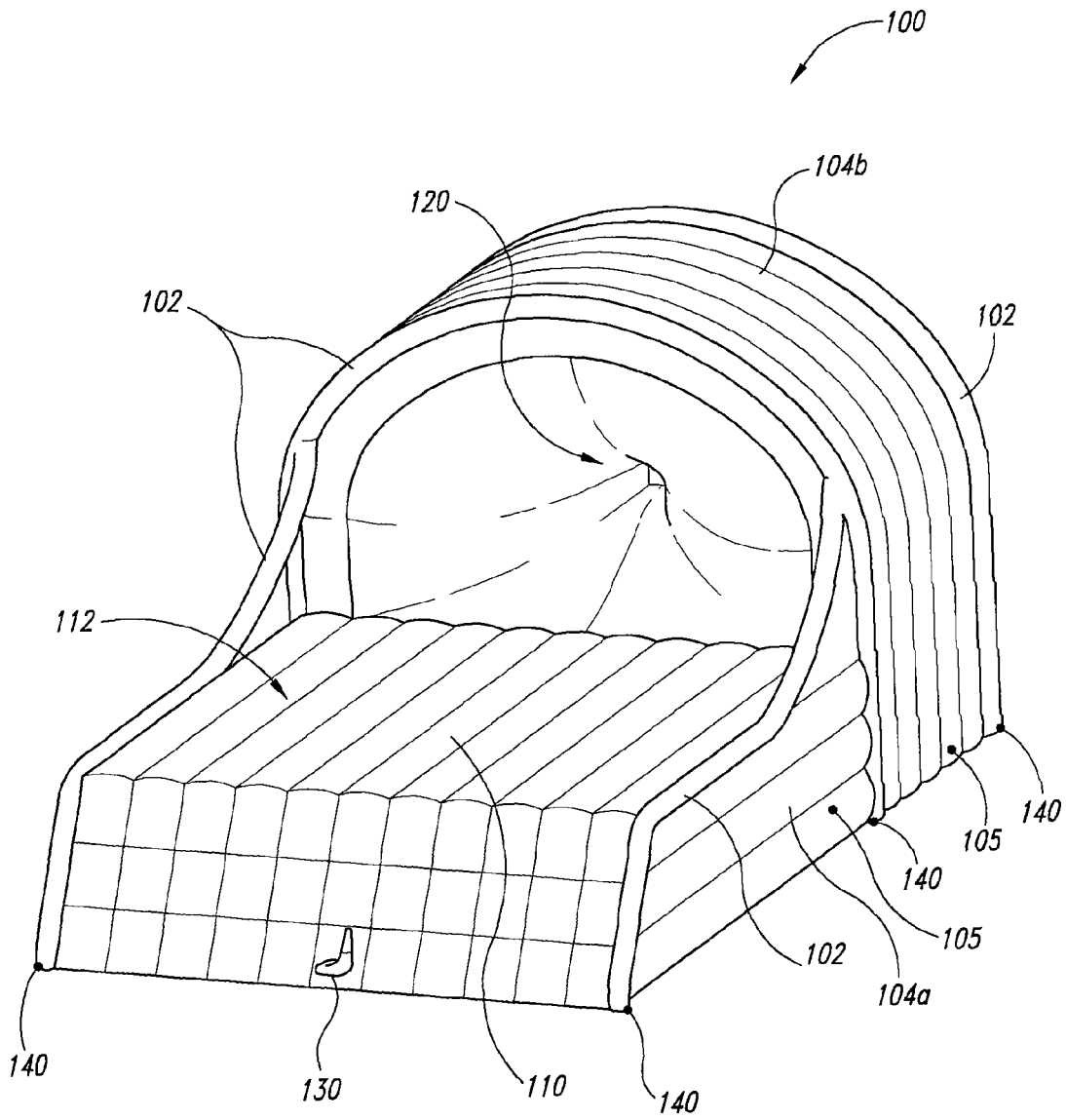


Fig. 1

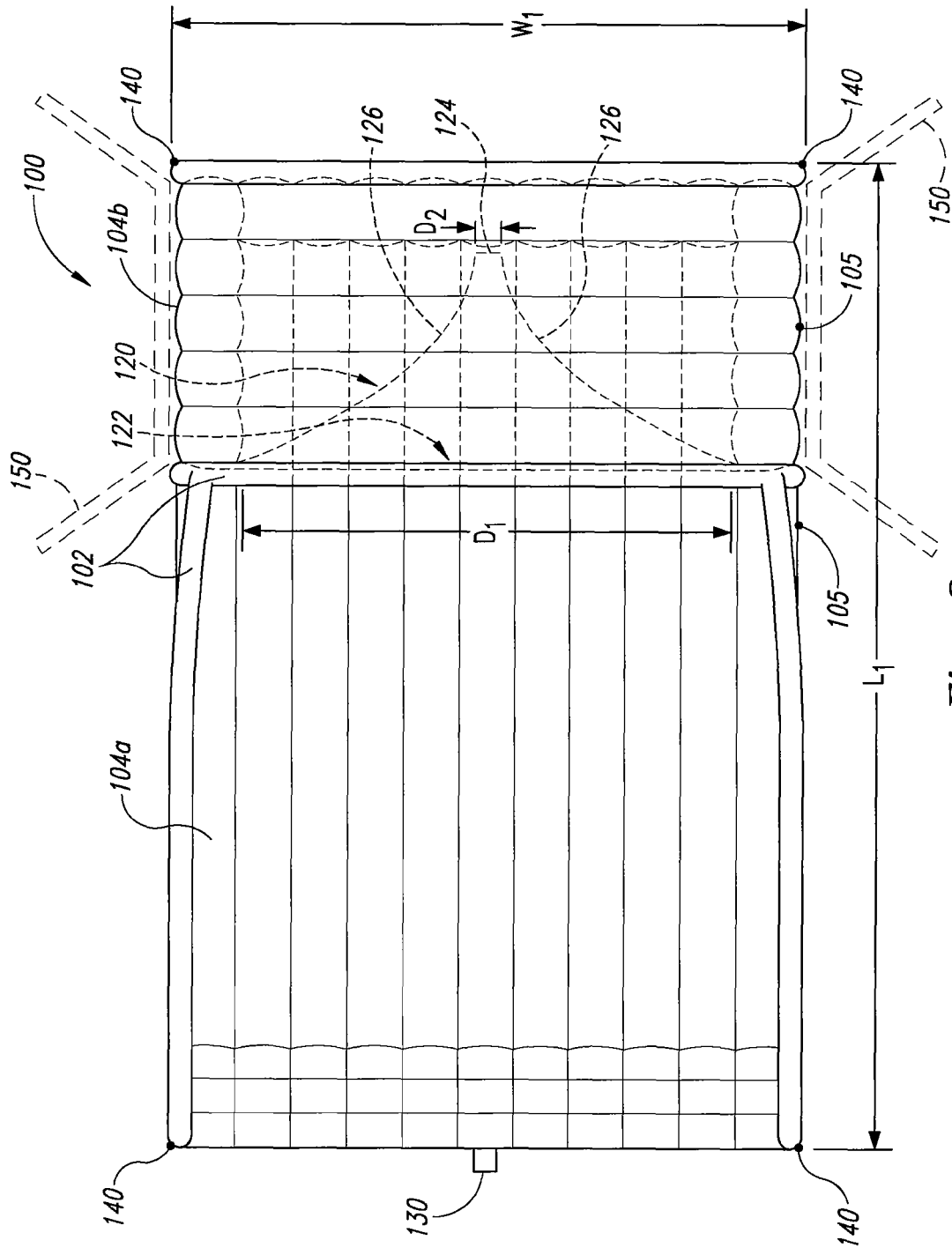


Fig. 2

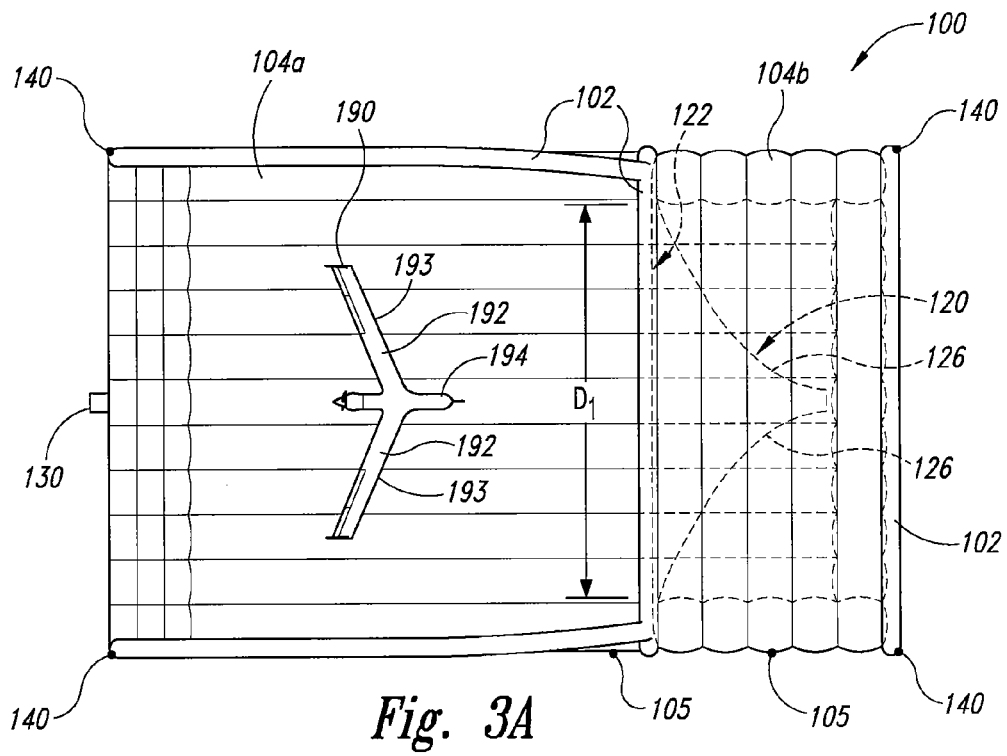


Fig. 3A

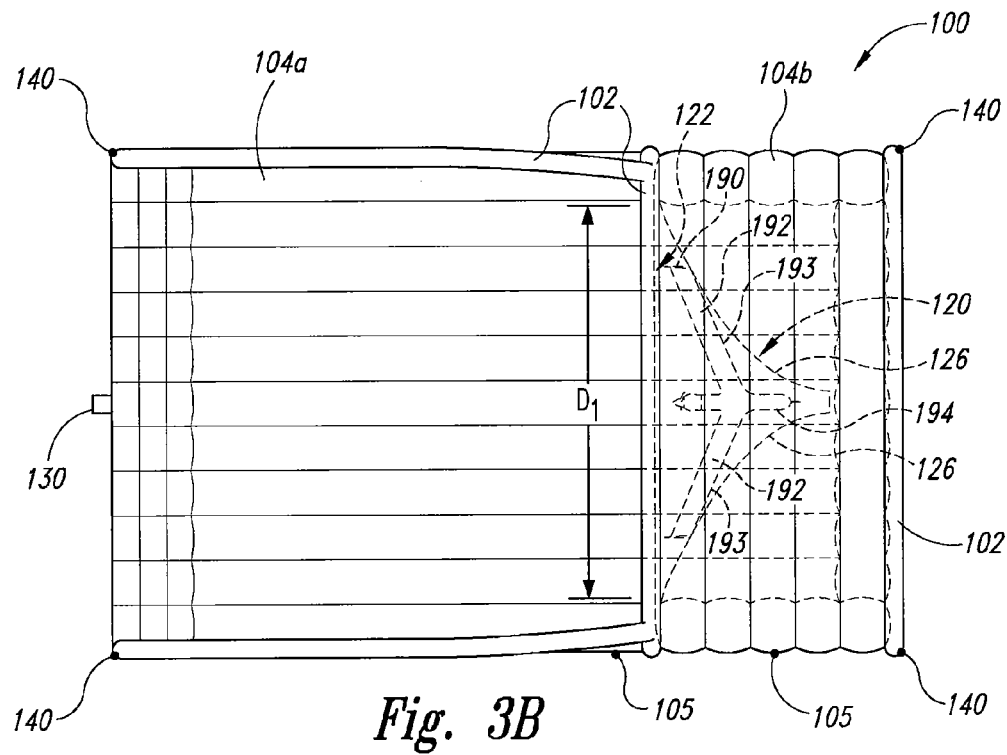


Fig. 3B

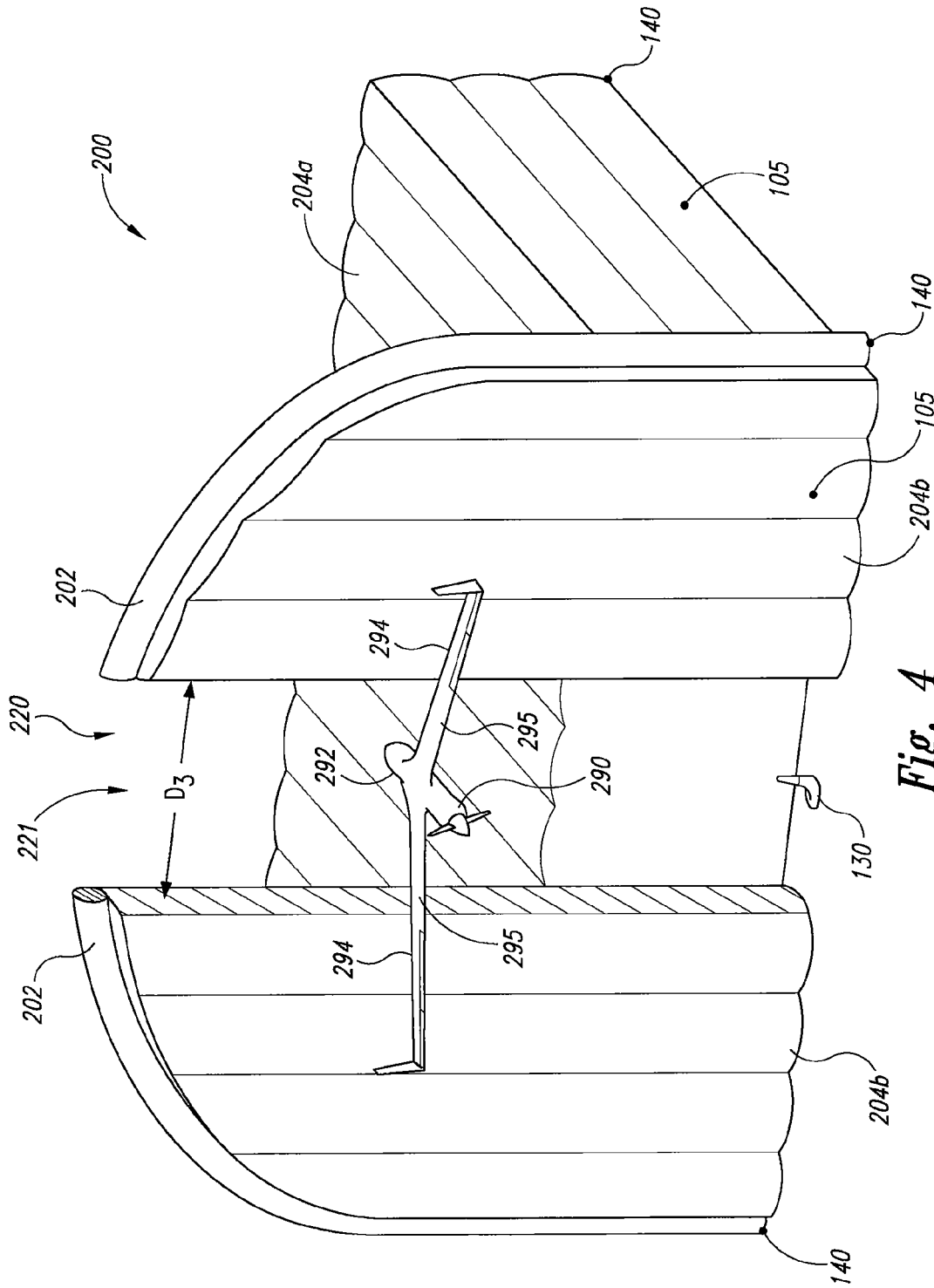


Fig. 4

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SYSTEMS AND METHODS FOR RECOVERING AND CONTROLLING POST-RECOVERY MOTION OF UNMANNED AIRCRAFT

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present disclosure relates generally to systems and methods for recovering unmanned aircraft and controlling post-recovery motion of the aircraft.

BACKGROUND

Unmanned aircraft or air vehicles (UAVs) provide enhanced and economical access to areas where manned flight operations are unacceptably costly and/or dangerous. For example, unmanned aircraft outfitted with remotely operated movable cameras can perform a wide variety of surveillance missions, including spotting schools of fish for the fisheries industry, monitoring weather conditions, providing border patrols for national governments, and providing military surveillance before, during, and/or after military operations.

Many unmanned aircraft systems (which can include the aircraft itself along with launch devices and recovery devices), however, can be difficult to install and operate in cramped quarters, such as the deck of a small fishing boat, land vehicle, or other craft. Accordingly, operating such aircraft systems often includes retrieving or capturing the aircraft with a vertically oriented flexible recovery line when space is insufficient for a normal landing run. While this technique has proven successful in many instances, there is a continual need to improve the effectiveness of systems with which aircraft are recovered.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a partially schematic, isometric illustration of a system configured to recover an unmanned aircraft and control post-recovery motion of the aircraft in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

FIG. 2 is a partially schematic, top plan view of the system of FIG. 1.

FIGS. 3A and 3B are partially schematic, top plan views of a system and method for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight and controlling post-recovery motion of the aircraft in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure.

FIG. 4 is a partially schematic, isometric illustration of a system configured to recover an unmanned aircraft and control post-recovery motion of the aircraft in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A. Overview

The present disclosure describes systems and methods for recovering unmanned aircraft and controlling post-recovery motion of the aircraft. An aircraft recovery system for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight in accordance with one embodiment of the disclosure, for example, can include an inflatable aircraft recovery system having an inflatable portion with a generally vertical orientation. The inflatable portion can also include a landing pocket extending at least partially therethrough. The landing pocket is sized to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft. The aircraft recovery system can also include a guidance system at least

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proximate to the landing pocket and positioned to guide the aircraft toward the landing pocket.

Another aspect of the disclosure is directed to a method for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight. The method can include inflating an aircraft recovery system to a desired pressure. The inflatable recovery system includes a first inflatable portion and a second inflatable portion positioned generally normal to the first inflatable portion. The method also includes flying an unmanned aircraft to intercept the recovery system and releasably capturing the aircraft in flight with the recovery system.

Many specific details of certain embodiments of the disclosure are set forth in the following description and in FIGS. 1-4 to provide a thorough understanding of these embodiments. Well-known structures, systems, and methods often associated with such systems have not been shown or described in detail to avoid unnecessarily obscuring the description of the various embodiments of the disclosure. In addition, those of ordinary skill in the relevant art will understand that additional embodiments may be practiced without several of the details described below.

B. Embodiments of Systems and Methods for Recovering and Controlling Post-Recovery Motion of Unmanned Aircraft

FIG. 1 is a partially schematic, isometric illustration of an aircraft recovery system 100 configured to recover an unmanned aircraft (not shown) and control post-recovery motion of the aircraft in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure. The aircraft recovery system 100 can include, for example, a frame 102 and one or more inflatable portions or airbags 104 (two are shown in the illustrated embodiment as a first inflatable portion 104a and a second inflatable portion 104b) carried by the frame 102. As described in greater detail below, the first and second inflatable portions 104a and 104b can each include one or more bladders filled to a desired pressure with a gas (e.g., air) and positioned in a landing zone to intercept an unmanned aircraft in flight. When the aircraft impacts the aircraft recovery system 100, the inflatable portions 104a and 104b are actively deformed and at least a portion of the gas is discharged via one-way valves 105 as the aircraft recovery system 100 absorbs the aircraft's landing forces and recovers the aircraft.

The first inflatable portion 104a is operably coupled (e.g., using Velcro®, snaps, or another suitable attachment feature) to the second inflatable portion 104b and positioned at an angle relative to the second inflatable portion 104b. In the illustrated embodiment, for the example, the aircraft recovery system 100 has a generally "L" shaped configuration. More specifically, the first inflatable portion 104a has a generally horizontal orientation and the second inflatable portion 104b has a generally vertical orientation such that the second inflatable portion 104b is generally normal to the first inflatable portion 104a. In this way, the first inflatable portion 104a can act as a runway or approach portion to assist in guiding the aircraft toward the vertically-oriented second inflatable portion 104b during landing or recovery operation. The first inflatable portion 104a may also provide stability to the second inflatable portion 104b. Furthermore, in several embodiments an upper surface 110 of the first inflatable portion 104a may be sloped downward toward the second inflatable portion 104b to at least approximately match an aircraft's flight path relative to the aircraft recovery system 100 during landing operations and assist in guiding the aircraft into the sec-

ond inflatable portion **104b**. In other embodiments, however, the upper surface **110** of the first inflatable portion **104a** may not be sloped downward.

The first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** can be composed of a rip-stop polyester material or another suitable lightweight, durable material. The material(s) of which the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** are composed can be fire resistant, UV resistant, tear resistant, and easily repairable. Furthermore, the material(s) may be provided in a variety of different colors and/or color schemes (e.g., camouflage) depending upon the desired operational requirements. In the illustrated embodiment, the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** are generally composed of the same material. In other embodiments, however, the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** may be composed of different materials. In still other embodiments, the first and/or second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** may be composed of one or more materials having different qualities and/or characteristics than those discussed above.

The second inflatable portion **104b** may also include a landing pocket or opening **120** positioned to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft. The landing pocket **120**, for example, can include a cavity sized to initially receive a nose portion of the fuselage during landing operations. The landing pocket **120** is described in greater detail below with reference to FIG. 2.

The first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** can be inflated, for example, to a pressure of from about 1 psi to about 20 psi. In other embodiments, however, the first inflatable portion **104a** and/or the second inflatable portion **104b** can have a different pressure. The pressure can vary depending upon the size of the inflatable portions **104a** and/or **104b**, the desired operational characteristics, the environmental conditions, and one or more other factors. In several embodiments, the first and second inflatable portion **104a** and **104b** may be fluidly coupled together and share one or more common bladders. In other embodiments, however, the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** can be separate components having discrete bladders. In some embodiments, the system **100** may also include a safety monitor (not shown) operably coupled to the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** and configured to ensure that each inflatable portion is properly inflated prior to landing and recovery operations. The first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** can be inflated using one or more fans (not shown) or other suitable inflation components.

The frame **102** can include an inflatable, semi-rigid, and/or generally rigid structure configured to support the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b**. The frame **102** can be used, for example, to (a) hold the inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** in the desired position before landing operations, and (b) support the inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** during landing operations to help prevent the aircraft and its components from hitting the ground or surrounding structures with excessive force. In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 1, for example, the frame **102** is an inflatable component that can be filled with a gas to a desired pressure (e.g., from about 5 psi to about 30 psi) and used to support the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b**. Such an arrangement can be generally similar, for example, to an inflatable frame used in many kiteboarding systems. In other embodiments, however, the frame **102** can be composed of a semi-rigid (e.g., rubber) and/or a generally rigid (e.g., plastic or metal) material. In still other embodiments, the frame **102** can have a different arrangement and/or can be composed of different materials. Moreover, the frame **102** may not be included in some embodiments. In such instances, the first and second inflat-

able portions **104a** and **104b** may be supported using other suitable support assemblies and/or may be self-supporting components.

The aircraft recovery system **100** may also include a guidance system **130** at least proximate to the first and/or second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** and configured to guide the aircraft toward the system **100** during landing operations. In the illustrated embodiment, for example, the guidance system **130** is a GPS antenna positioned at a front portion of the first inflatable portion **104a** and configured to precisely and actively guide the aircraft into the landing pocket **120** for capture and recovery. The guidance system **130** can be carried by the system **100** or installed at a fixed location relative to the system **100**. In the illustrated embodiment for example, the GPS antenna is carried by the first inflatable portion **104a**. In other embodiments, the guidance system **130** may include two or more antennas or receivers carried by and/or positioned at desired locations relative to the system **100**. For example, the guidance system **130** can include two GPS antennas positioned to precisely guide the aircraft along a desired flight path and to the aircraft recovery system **100**. In still other embodiments, the guidance system **130** may include an instrument landing system (ILS), a microwave landing system (MLS), a visual guidance system, and/or other suitable guidance systems.

In several embodiments, a cover layer or reinforcement layer **112** (e.g., a "skid" sheet) can be removably positioned over at least a portion of the upper surface **110** of the first inflatable portion **104a** and the landing pocket **120**. The cover layer **112** can provide a desired level of friction between the aircraft and the system **100** and help prevent damage (e.g., tears, punctures, etc.) to the inflatable components **104a** and **104b** of the system **100** during landing and recovery operations. The cover layer **112** can include a rip-stop material or other suitable material. In several embodiments, the cover layer **112** may be composed of a different material than the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b**. In other embodiments, however, the cover layer **112** and the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** may be composed of the same material. The cover layer **112** may not be included in some embodiments.

The system **100** may also include one or more tie downs or attachment features **140** (shown schematically) configured to releasably secure the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** to the ground or another suitable support platform (e.g., a truck or other suitable land vehicle, a boat or other water vehicle, or a building). The number of tie downs **140** can vary depending on the operational conditions.

In operation, the system **100** can be deployed to a desired location and configured as the primary device for landing and recovery operations. The system **100**, for example, may be a modular system and an operator can transport the system components in a generally disassembled or partially assembled state to a landing zone and assemble the components on-site. In another embodiment, however, the system **100** may be transported to the desired landing zone in a generally assembled configuration. The first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** can be inflated to a desired pressure when the system is at the desired location. Before, during, and/or after inflation, the system **100** can be pivoted or otherwise moved to a desired orientation (e.g., by an operator pulling on at least one corner of the first inflatable portion **104a** or the second inflatable portion **104b**) in preparation for landing and recovery operations.

FIG. 2 is a partially schematic, top plan view of the aircraft recovery system **100** of FIG. 1. As best seen in FIG. 2, the landing pocket **120** (shown in broken lines) has a generally

conical configuration with an opening 122 adjacent to the first inflatable portion 104a, a closed or end portion 124 facing away from the first inflatable portion 104a, and tapered lead-in surfaces 126 extending from the opening 122 to the end portion 124. The opening 122 has a cross-sectional dimension D_1 , and the closed portion 124 has a cross-sectional dimension D_2 less than the cross-sectional dimension D_1 . As described in greater detail below with reference to FIGS. 3A and 3B, the dimensions of the opening 122 can be based, at least in part, on the dimensions of the aircraft to be captured using the system 100. In other embodiments, the landing pocket 120 can have other suitable configurations.

The aircraft recovery system 100 is a scalable system that can be used as a primary aircraft recovery system for a variety of different aircraft configurations and/or arrangements. For example, the system 100 can have an overall length L_1 and width W_1 based, at least in part, on the particular dimensions of the aircraft to be recovered, the operational conditions of the aircraft, and/or the operational considerations of the system 100 (e.g., the location of the system 100, the desired transportability of the system 100, etc.). In one particular embodiment, for example, the length L_1 can be about 30 feet and width W_1 can be about 17 feet. In other embodiments, however, the length L_1 and width W_1 can vary.

In one alternative embodiment, the system 100 may not include the first inflatable portion 104a or the frame 120. The vertically-oriented second inflatable portion 104b may be supported by a frame 150 (shown in broken lines) having an A-frame configuration. In other embodiments, the second inflatable component 104b may be supported via other suitable frame structures or support arrangements.

FIGS. 3A and 3B are partially schematic, top plan views of the system 100 recovering an unmanned aircraft 190 in flight and controlling post-recovery motion of the aircraft 190 in accordance with an embodiment of the disclosure. Beginning with FIG. 3A, the aircraft 190 is over the first inflatable portion 104a and is at least approximately aligned with the landing pocket 120. The guidance system 130 (shown schematically), which was described in detail above with respect to FIG. 1, can be used to precisely guide the aircraft 190 toward the system 100 and into the landing pocket 120.

Referring next to FIG. 3B, the aircraft 190 enters the landing pocket 120 and impacts the second inflatable portion 104b. As discussed above with reference to FIG. 2, the opening 122 of the landing pocket 120 has a dimension D_1 . The dimension D_1 is generally greater than a spanwise dimension of the aircraft 190 such that the aircraft 190 can enter into the landing pocket 120 during capture and recovery operations. After the aircraft 190 enters the landing pocket 120, a leading edge portion 193 of at least one wing 192 of the aircraft 190 impacts the corresponding lead-in surfaces 126, while a nose portion 194 of the aircraft 190 initially remains at least generally out of contact with the second inflatable portion 104b. In this way, the wings 192 and corresponding structure can absorb a significant amount of the aircraft's landing forces. Moreover, because the stresses on the aircraft 190 during landing operations are primarily exerted on the wing structures during impact, the delicate components (e.g., turret, pitot tubes, etc.) at the nose portion 194 of the aircraft 190 and the other fragile portions of the aircraft 190 experience few or no stresses during landing operations.

In some situations, the aircraft 190 may be in a "crabbed" or angled configuration relative to the lead-in surfaces 126 and the wings 192 may not contact the lead-in surfaces 126 at the same time. Accordingly, the aircraft 190 may yaw after the first wing 192 makes initial contact and before the second wing 192 comes into contact with the corresponding lead-in

surface 126. The landing pocket 120, however, is configured to help prevent excessive yawing of the aircraft 190 and to keep the nose portion 194 at least initially out of contact with the second inflatable portion 104b during landing operations.

After initial impact, the first and second inflatable portions 104a and 104b actively deform as the landing forces of the aircraft 190 are transferred to the system 100. Further, at least a portion of the gas in the first and second inflatable portions 104a and 104b is discharged via the respective one-way valves 105 as the system 100 absorbs the aircraft's landing forces and recovers the aircraft. The frame 102 can help support the inflatable portions 104a and 104b, as well as absorbing at least some of the landing forces. For example, in embodiments in which the frame 102 is an inflatable component, the frame 102 can also be configured to actively deform as the aircraft 190 impacts the second inflatable portion 104b. In other embodiments, however, the frame 102 may remain generally rigid during landing operations. In several embodiments, the tie downs 140 may also be configured to allow the system 100 to shift or move during capture operations and thereby assist in absorption of the landing forces. In other embodiments, however, the tie downs 140 may be configured hold the system 100 generally stationary during landing operations.

One feature of the system 100 and methods described above with reference to FIGS. 1-3B is that the system 100 can be quickly deployed and configured for landing operations in a variety of different environments and operational conditions. Many conventional recovery systems, for example, require elaborate and complex components that are relatively immobile and require a significant amount time and expense to deploy. In contrast with such conventional systems, the system 100 is a modular system that can be easily transported in a disassembled state to a wide variety of different operational environments, and quickly assembled and deployed for landing operations with minimal manpower. Moreover, the aircraft 190 can be quickly recovered from the system 100 after landing operations and prepared for storage and/or another mission.

Another feature of the system 100 described above is that it can be used to recover aircraft having a variety of different configurations in addition to the aircraft 190 described above with reference to FIGS. 3A and 3B. One advantage of this feature is that the system 100 can be used with existing fleets of unmanned aircraft without requiring expensive and/or time-consuming modifications to such aircraft. Furthermore, because the system 100 can be used with a variety of different aircraft, a single system 100 may be deployed and used for landing operations in a particular area or region for an entire fleet of different unmanned aircraft.

C. Additional Embodiments of Systems and Methods for Recovering and Controlling Post-Recovery Motion of Unmanned Aircraft

FIG. 4 is a partially schematic, isometric illustration of an aircraft recovery system 200 configured to recover an unmanned aircraft 290 and control post-recovery motion of the aircraft in accordance with another embodiment of the disclosure. The aircraft recovery system 200 can include, for example, a frame 202 and one or more inflatable portions or bladders 204 (two are shown in the illustrated embodiment as a first inflatable portion 204a and a second inflatable portion 204b) operably coupled to each other and carried by the frame 202. The system 200 differs from the system 100 described above with reference to FIGS. 1-3B in that the frame 202 and the first and second inflatable portions 204a and 204b have a

different configuration relative to each other than the frame **102** and first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** in the system **100**.

More specifically, the second inflatable portion **204b** in the system **200** is positioned such that the aircraft **290** impacts this portion before passing over or otherwise contacting the first inflatable portion **204a** during landing operations. In the illustrated embodiment, the second inflatable portion **204b** has a generally vertical orientation and the first inflatable portion **204a** has a generally horizontal orientation and is generally normal to the second inflatable portion **204b**. The first and second inflatable portions **204a** and **204b** can be composed of materials generally similar to the first and second inflatable portions **104a** and **104b** described above with reference to FIG. 1.

The second inflatable portion **204b** may also include a landing pocket or opening **220** positioned to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft. In the illustrated embodiment, for example, the landing pocket **220** comprises a slot **221** extending completely through the second inflatable portion **204b**. The slot **221** has a width D_3 less than a spanwise dimension of the aircraft **290**. As described in greater detail below, the slot **221** is configured to function in much the same way as the landing pocket **120** described above with reference to FIGS. 2-3B and help prevent damage to the fragile components at the nose and other portions of the aircraft **290**.

The frame **202** can be generally similar to the frame **102** described above. For example, the frame **202** can include an inflatable component that can be filled with a gas to a desired pressure (e.g., from about 5 psi to about 30 psi) and used to support the second inflatable portion **204b**. In several embodiments, the frame **202** may also be configured to support the first inflatable portion **204a**. In other embodiments, the frame **202** may also include a semi-rigid or generally rigid component.

The system **200** also includes the guidance system **130** (shown schematically) at least proximate to the first and/or second inflatable portions **204a** and **204b** and configured to guide the aircraft **290** toward the system **200** during landing operations. In the illustrated embodiment, for example, the guidance system **130** positioned proximate to the slot **221**. In other embodiments, however, the guidance system **130** can be positioned at a different location relative to the system **200**.

In operation, the guidance system **130** precisely guides the aircraft **290** toward the system **200** and, more specifically, toward the landing pocket **220**. As the aircraft **290** nears the system **200**, a nose portion **292** of the aircraft **290** is at least partially received in the slot **221**, while a leading edge portion **294** of each wing **295** contacts the second inflatable portion **204b**. In this way, the wings **295** can absorb a significant amount of the aircraft's landing forces. Moreover, as with the system **100** described above, the delicate components (e.g., turret, pitot tubes, etc.) at the nose portion **292** of the aircraft **290** experience few or no stresses during landing operations because the landing stresses on are primarily exerted on the wing structures during impact.

After initial impact with the system **200**, the frame **202** and the first and second inflatable portions **204a** and **204b** actively deform as the landing forces of the aircraft **290** are transferred to the system **200**. Moreover, the system **200** may also include one or more tie downs **140** configured to allow the system **200** to shift or move during capture operations and thereby assist in absorption of the landing forces. In other embodiments, however, the tie downs **140** may be configured hold the system **200** generally stationary during landing operations.

From the foregoing, it will be appreciated that specific embodiments of the disclosure have been described herein for

purposes of illustration, but that various modifications can be made without deviating from the spirit and scope of the disclosure. For example, the system **100** and/or **200** may include one or more additional inflatable portions. Moreover, specific elements of any of the foregoing embodiments can be combined or substituted for elements in other embodiments. For example, the landing pocket **220** in the system **200** may not extend completely through the second inflatable portion **204b**. Furthermore, while advantages associated with certain embodiments of the disclosure have been described in the context of these embodiments, other embodiments may also exhibit such advantages, and not all embodiments need necessarily exhibit such advantages to fall within the scope of the invention. Accordingly, embodiments of the disclosure are not limited except as by the appended claims.

We claim:

1. An aircraft recovery system for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight, the system comprising:

an inflatable aircraft recovery system having an inflatable portion with a generally vertical orientation, wherein the inflatable portion has a landing pocket extending at least partially therethrough, and wherein the landing pocket is sized to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft; and

a guidance system at least proximate to the landing pocket and positioned to guide the aircraft toward the landing pocket.

2. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein the inflatable portion is a second inflatable portion, and wherein the system further comprises:

a first inflatable portion operably coupled to the second inflatable portion, and wherein the first inflatable portion has a generally horizontal orientation and is positioned generally normal to the first inflatable portion; and

a support structure carrying at least one of the first inflatable portion and the second inflatable portion.

3. The aircraft recovery system of claim 2 wherein the support structure is an inflatable structure coupled to at least one of the first and second inflatable portions.

4. The aircraft recovery system of claim 3 wherein:

the first and second inflatable portions are filled with a gas to a first pressure and a second pressure, respectively; and

the support structure is filled with a gas to a third pressure, and wherein the third pressure is greater than the first and second pressures.

5. The aircraft recovery system of claim 2 wherein:

the first inflatable portion includes a plurality of inflatable bladders releasably coupled together; and

the second inflatable portion includes a plurality of inflatable bladders operably coupled together and coupled to at least one of the support structure and the first inflatable portion.

6. The aircraft recovery system of claim 2 wherein:

the first and second inflatable portions are positioned along a flight path of the aircraft such that the aircraft engages the second inflatable portion before passing over or contacting the first inflatable portion; and

the landing pocket of the second inflatable portion comprises a slot extending completely through the second inflatable portion, and wherein the slot has a width greater than a fuselage of the aircraft and less than a spanwise dimension of the aircraft.

7. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein:

the first and second inflatable portions are positioned along a flight path of the aircraft such that the aircraft passes

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over or contacts the first inflatable portion before the second inflatable portion; and the landing pocket comprises a generally conical cavity that does not extend completely through the second inflatable portion.

8. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein the inflatable portion includes a one-way valve that allows a gas within the inflatable portion to actively discharge during aircraft contact with the inflatable portion.

9. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein the recovery system is a primary system for recovering the aircraft.

10. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein the guidance system includes a GPS antenna.

11. The aircraft recovery system of claim 10 wherein the GPS antenna is carried by the inflatable portion.

12. The aircraft recovery system of claim 10 wherein the GPS antenna is spaced apart from the inflatable portion.

13. The aircraft recovery system of claim 1 wherein the inflatable portion is a second inflatable portion, and wherein the system further comprises:

a first inflatable portion having a generally horizontal orientation operably coupled to the second inflatable portion;

an inflatable frame positioned to carry at least one of the first and second inflatable portions and support the first and second inflatable portions during landing operations; and

wherein the guidance system comprises a GPS antenna at least proximate to the first inflatable portion.

14. An apparatus for handling unmanned aircraft, the apparatus comprising:

an inflatable aircraft recovery system having a first airbag and a second airbag positioned generally normal to the first airbag, wherein the second airbag is positioned to contact at least a portion of a wing of the aircraft, and wherein the individual airbags include one-way valves configured to release a gas in the respective airbags during aircraft contact with the recovery system; and

a GPS antenna positioned at least proximate to the recovery system, wherein the GPS antenna is positioned to guide the aircraft along a flight path to the recovery system.

15. The apparatus of claim 14 wherein the first airbag and the second airbag are composed of a polyester material.

16. The apparatus of claim 14, further comprising a cover layer removably positioned over at least a portion of an upper surface of first airbag, wherein the cover layer is selected to provide a desired level of friction between the aircraft and the first airbag.

17. The apparatus of claim 14, further comprising a frame operably coupled to the recovery system and positioned to support at least one of the first airbag and the second airbag.

18. The apparatus of claim 14 wherein the first airbag and the second airbag are inflatable to a pressure of from about 1 psi to about 20 psi.

19. A method for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight, the method comprising:

inflating an aircraft recovery system to a desired pressure, the aircraft recovery system including a first inflatable portion and a second inflatable portion positioned generally normal to the first inflatable portion;

flying an unmanned aircraft to intercept the recovery system; and

releasably capturing the aircraft with the recovery system, wherein at least a portion of a wing of the aircraft contacts the second inflatable portion during capture.

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20. The method of claim 19 wherein the recovery system is a primary recovery system for the aircraft, and wherein releasably capturing the aircraft in flight with the recovery system comprises flying the aircraft to intercept the recovery system without contacting or engaging another structure.

21. The method of claim 19 wherein the first inflatable portion has a generally horizontal orientation and the second inflatable portion has a generally vertical orientation, and wherein:

flying an unmanned aircraft to intercept the recovery system comprises flying the aircraft to intercept a landing pocket extending at least partially through the second inflatable portion.

22. The method of claim 21 wherein flying the aircraft to intercept the landing pocket comprises flying the aircraft to intercept a generally conical cavity that extends only partially through the second inflatable portion.

23. The method of claim 21 wherein flying the aircraft to intercept the landing pocket comprises flying the aircraft to intercept a slot extending completely through the second inflatable portion, and wherein the slot has a width less than a spanwise dimension of the aircraft.

24. The method of claim 19 wherein inflating an aircraft recovery system to a desired pressure comprises filling the first inflatable portion and the second inflatable portion with a gas to a pressure of from about 1 psi to about 20 psi.

25. The method of claim 19 wherein the second inflatable portion is positioned generally normal to the first inflatable portion, and wherein:

inflating an aircraft recovery system to a desired pressure comprises inflating one or more bladders within the first and second inflatable portions to a desired pressure;

flying an unmanned aircraft to intercept the recovery system comprises at least partially guiding the aircraft along a flight path to the recovery system with a GPS antenna positioned at least proximate to the recovery system and toward a cavity extending at least partially through the second inflatable portion and positioned to receive a nose portion of the aircraft; and

releasably capturing the aircraft with the recovery system comprises actively discharging a gas from one-way valves in the first and second inflatable portions during aircraft contact with the recovery system.

26. An aircraft recovery system for recovering an unmanned aircraft in flight, the system comprising:

an inflatable aircraft recovery system having a first inflatable portion having a generally horizontal orientation;

a second inflatable portion having a generally vertical orientation operably coupled to the first inflatable portion, wherein the second inflatable portion has a landing pocket extending at least partially therethrough, and wherein the landing pocket is sized to receive at least a portion of a fuselage of the aircraft; and

an inflatable frame positioned to carry at least one of the first and second inflatable portions and support the first and second inflatable portions during landing operations; and

a guidance system positioned to guide the aircraft toward the landing pocket, wherein the guidance system comprises a GPS antenna at least proximate to the first inflatable portion.