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Lucero et al.

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(54) **STRUCTURAL RING INTERCONNECT
PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD ASSEMBLY FOR
A DUCTED FAN UNMANNED AERIAL
VEHICLE**

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H01R 12/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **307/9.1**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 307/9.1
See application file for complete search history.

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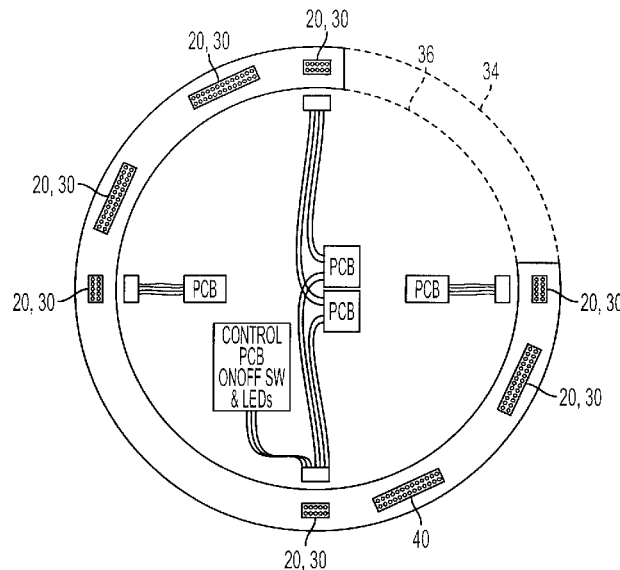
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle that comprises a printed circuit board attached to a core vehicle body, wherein the printed circuit board conforms to the shape of the core vehicle body's airframe skirt, and wherein the printed circuit board provides structural integrity to the core vehicle body.

20 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



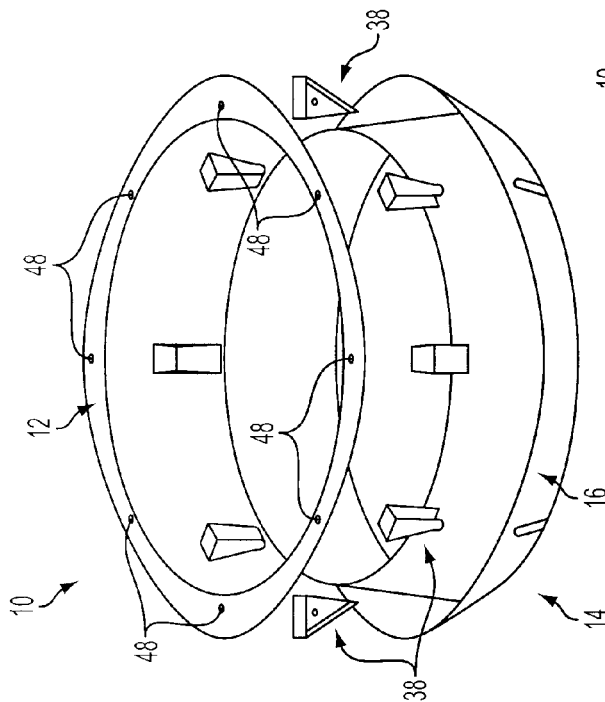


FIG. 1A

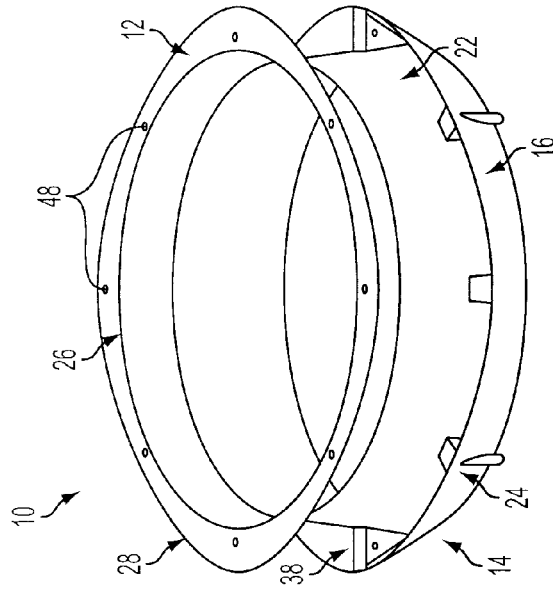


FIG. 1B

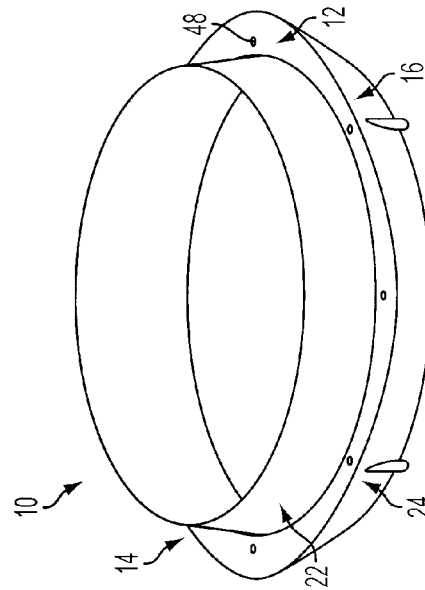


FIG. 1C

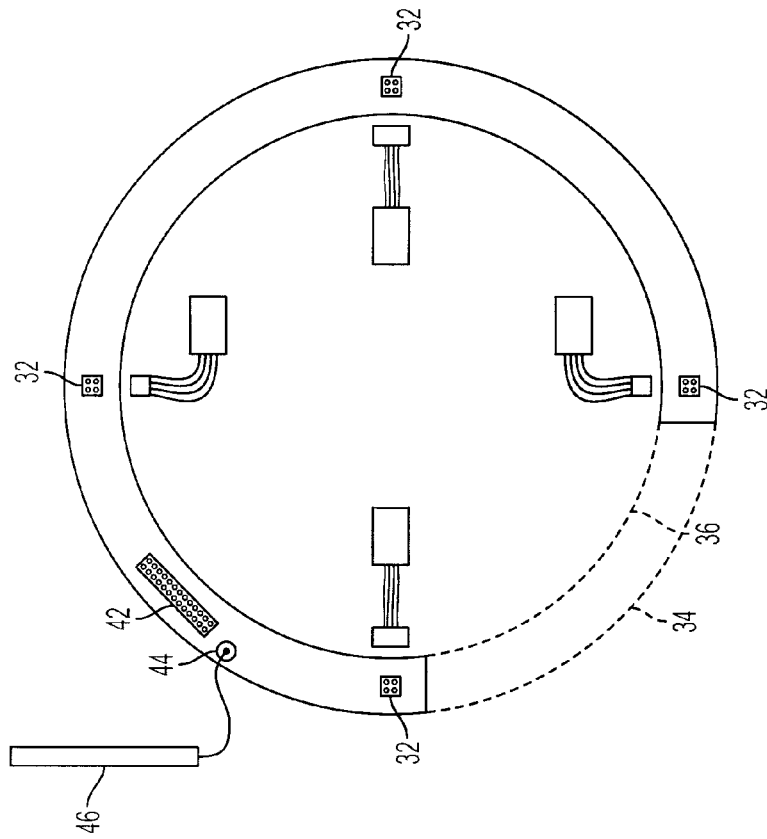


FIG. 2B

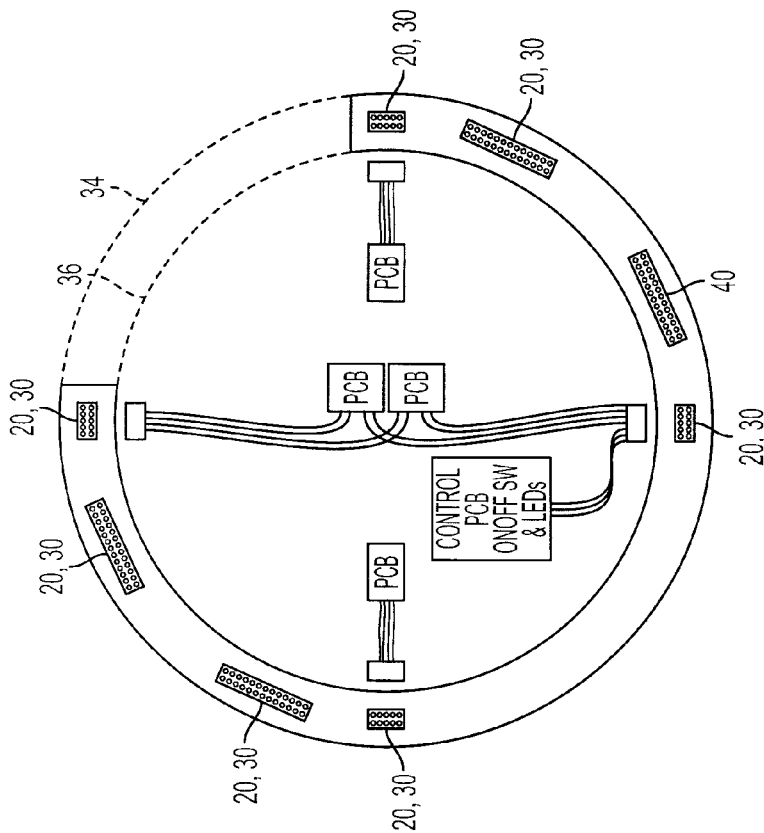


FIG. 2A

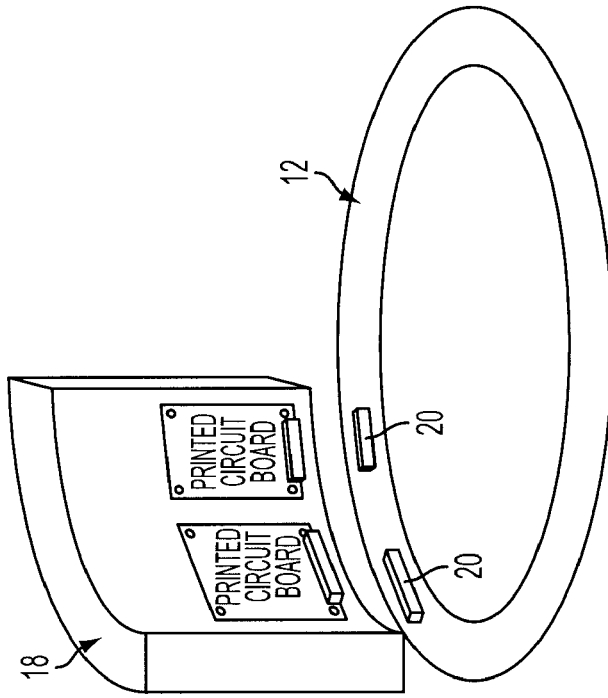


FIG. 3B

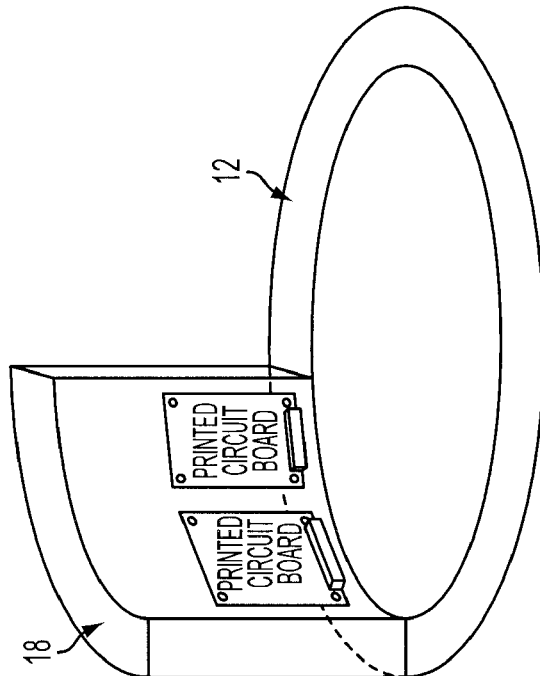


FIG. 3A

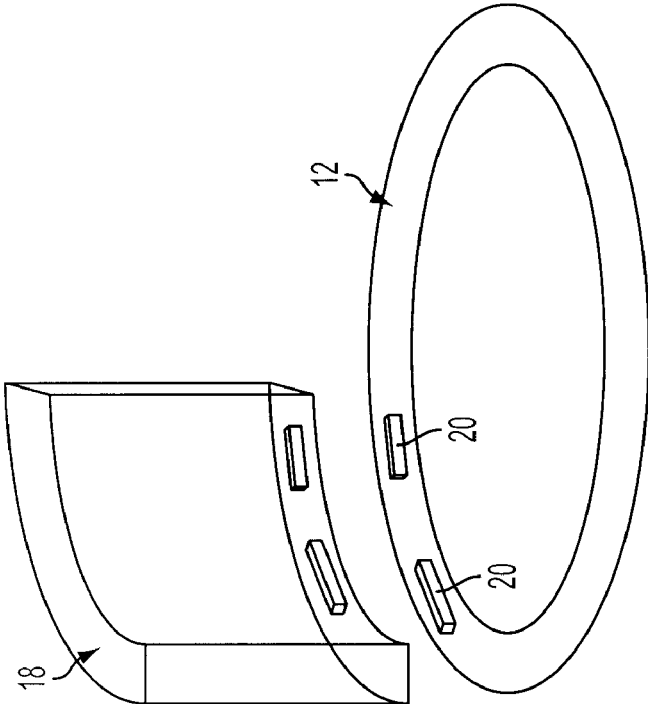


FIG. 3D

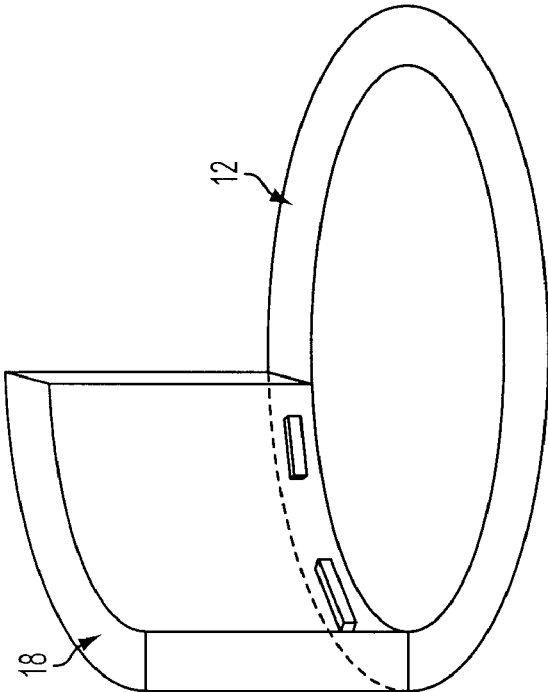


FIG. 3C

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**STRUCTURAL RING INTERCONNECT
PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD ASSEMBLY FOR
A DUCTED FAN UNMANNED AERIAL
VEHICLE**

GOVERNMENT RIGHTS

The United States government may have certain rights in this invention pursuant to Government Contract #W56HZV-05-C-0724 with the U.S. Army (TACOM).

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

In aerospace applications, it is typical to use wire harnesses as interconnects in electrical systems. However, these harnesses are often bulky, heavy, costly to build and maintain, and subject to corrosion and other defects. Further, with the advent of modular ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), the ducted wing is comprised of multiple pods that require a system allowing for quick disconnect and replacement of pods around the circumference of a core vehicle. Particularly with respect to micro-air vehicle UAVs, the wire harness configuration and resultant connectors are cumbersome and weigh too much when placed around the circumference of the duct to connect to each pod. These wire harnesses do not provide structural integrity to the UAV and additional material must be used to thicken walls and bulkheads, for example, to provide such support. This additional material necessarily adds more weight to the UAV assembly. In addition, the wire harnesses are frequently modified at a significant cost to accommodate changes in these various pods.

Printed circuit boards (PCBs), on the other hand are rugged, inexpensive, and highly reliable. PCBs provide both the physical structure for mounting and holding electronic components as well as the electrical interconnection between components. A PCB consists of a non-conducting substrate, known as prepreg, upon which a conductive pattern or circuitry is formed. The most common type of prepreg is fiberglass with epoxy resin. Prepreg is available in different styles with varying amounts of resin and glass fibers, which allows the manufacturer to control the thickness between the layers and to provide the appropriate amount of resin flow between circuitry. Copper is the most prevalent conductor, although nickel, silver, tin, tin-lead, and gold may also be used as etch resists or top-level metal. Multilayer PCBs consist of alternating layers of conductor and insulating material bonded together. The conductive layers are connected by plated through-holes, which are also used to mount and electrically connect components. PCBs may be either rigid, flexible, or a combination of the two known as a rigid-flex.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

PCBs are employed most often as backplanes or motherboards in standard home computers, which is essentially a large circuit board that contains sockets for expansion cards. These former PCBs were simply delicate components in an operating system that played no role with regard to the overall structural integrity of the device. In the present invention, the backplane is specifically designed to provide structural integrity to the UAV. For example, the backplane's edges are contoured to fit the shape of the core vehicle's outer shell and the backplane is integrated into the UAV to prevent warping of the core body due to bending moments. The backplane also provides a lightweight surface to bear the weight of the pods that join together to form the UAV's duct. Further, the use of

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the multilayer PCB in a ducted fan UAV allows for impedance matching and offers electromagnetic interference shielding for conductors. In addition, the backplane of the present invention allows straightforward redesigns to accommodate various pods, which would be inexpensive and quick compared with wire harness redesign.

The discovery presented herein outlines a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that has the beneficial effects of providing structural integrity to the core vehicle body, providing a lightweight supporting surface for the UAV's pods, and providing quick and inexpensive redesign options.

In a first aspect, the present invention provides a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle that comprises a printed circuit board attached to a core vehicle body, wherein the printed circuit board conforms to the shape of the core vehicle body's airframe skirt, and wherein the printed circuit board provides structural integrity to the core vehicle body.

In a second aspect, the present invention provides a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle that comprises a plurality of printed circuit boards attached to a core vehicle body, wherein each of the plurality of printed circuit boards conforms to the shape of the core vehicle body's airframe skirt, and wherein each of the plurality of the printed circuit boards provides structural integrity to the core vehicle body.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1a is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board, v-blocks, and the airframe skirt prior to attachment according to one embodiment.

FIG. 1b is a perspective view of the v-blocks in place within the airframe skirt prior to attaching the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly according to one embodiment.

FIG. 1c is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly after attachment to the airframe skirt and v-blocks according to one embodiment.

FIG. 2a is a top view of the printed circuit board according to one embodiment.

FIG. 2b is a bottom view of the printed circuit board according to one embodiment.

FIG. 3a is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board connected to a pod containing printed circuit boards with card-edge connectors according to one embodiment.

FIG. 3b is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board separated from a pod containing printed circuit boards with card-edge connectors according to one embodiment.

FIG. 3c is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board connected to a pod with a printed circuit board and connectors attached on the pod's bottom side according to one embodiment.

FIG. 3d is a perspective view of the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board separated from a pod with a printed circuit board and connectors attached on the pod's bottom side according to one embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED
EMBODIMENT

In a first aspect, the present invention provides a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly 10 for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that comprises a

printed circuit board **12** attached to a core vehicle body **14**, wherein the printed circuit board **12** conforms to the shape of the airframe skirt **16** of the core vehicle body, and wherein the printed circuit board **12** provides structural integrity to the core vehicle body **14**.

As used herein, a printed circuit board (PCB) **12** provides the physical structure for mounting and holding electronic components as well as the electrical interconnection between components. The PCB **12** consists of a non-conducting substrate, known as prepreg, upon which a conductive pattern or circuitry is formed. The most common type of prepreg is fiberglass with epoxy resin. Prepreg is available in different styles with varying amounts of resin and glass fibers, which allows the manufacturer to control the thickness between the layers and to provide the appropriate amount of resin flow between circuitry. Copper is the most prevalent conductor, although nickel, silver, tin, tin-lead, and gold may also be used as etch resists or top-level metal. Multilayer PCBs consist of alternating layers of conductor and insulating material bonded together. The conductive layers are connected by plated through-holes, which are also used to mount and electrically connect components. PCBs **12** may be either rigid, flexible, or a combination of the two known as a rigid-flex.

As used herein, a core vehicle body **14** is the unitary portion of the ducted fan UAV, shown in FIGS. **1a-1c**. Pods **18** connect to the core vehicle **14** to form a complete duct on a UAV. As used herein, pods **18** are streamlined, detachable housings that may contain various payloads, such as weapons or fuel. The arrangement of the various pods **18** relative to one another is limited only by the location of the connectors **20** on the core vehicle **14**, the desired center of gravity, and other basic operating parameters.

As used herein, the airframe skirt **16** of the core vehicle body **14** forms the lower portion of the duct on a UAV, shown in FIGS. **1a-1c**. The airframe skirt **16** is preferably substantially v-shaped such that when a pod **18** is connected to the airframe skirt **16** the profile or cross-section of the resulting duct is in accordance with standard streamlined profiles known in the art. As shown in FIGS. **1a-1c**, the inner wall **22** of the airframe skirt is typically taller than the outer duct wall **24** of the airframe skirt. As detailed below, the PCB **12** is inserted onto and/or into the airframe skirt **16** at the opening of the top of the "V" and is attached to the airframe skirt **16** via screws, rivets, glue, or a combination of these, for example, or by any other attachment means known in the art. The PCB **12** is preferably mounted within the airframe skirt **16**. Alternatively, the PCB **12** may be mounted on top of the airframe skirt **16**, which would generally be used for those embodiments in which the PCB **12** is a single layer or multilayer that is still relatively thin such that a smooth transitional surface is provided between the pods **18** and the airframe skirt **16**. In another embodiment the PCB **12** may contain one or more layers that rest on top of the outer duct wall **24** of the airframe skirt **16** coupled with one or more PCB layers that fit within the airframe skirt **16**, essentially providing a PCB **12** with a top lip (not shown) running along the PCB's outer edge **28**. This outer lip would aid in alignment of the PCB **12** with the airframe skirt **16** prior to and during attachment.

As used herein, the PCB **12** conforms to the shape of the airframe skirt **16** of the core vehicle body **14** such that the PCB's inner and outer edges **26**, **28** are contoured to substantially mate with both sides of the airframe skirt's v-shell **16** along the PCB's entire arc length. With respect to the layer or layers of PCB that rest on top of the airframe skirt **16**, the PCB's outer edge **28** substantially matches the outer perimeter of the outer duct wall **24** of the airframe skirt **16** to create a smooth transition between the two, while the PCB's inner

edge **26** essentially abuts the inner wall **22** of the airframe skirt **16**. With respect to the layer or layers of PCB that rest within the airframe skirt **16**, the PCB's outer edge **28** essentially abuts the outer duct wall **24** of the airframe skirt **16**, while the PCB's inner edge **26** essentially abuts the inner wall **22** of the airframe skirt **16**. Therefore, embodiments using multilayer PCBs **12** require that the shape of the PCB **12** will taper according to the aerodynamic taper of the airframe skirt **16**. By configuring the PCB **12** in this manner, the outer and inner walls **24**, **22** of the airframe skirt **16** are reinforced and they can better resist bending moments. The PCB **12** also provides structural stability so that a major component, like the engine, can be mounted to the inner wall **22** of the airframe skirt **16**.

In one embodiment, the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly **10** further comprises at least one connector **20** on a surface of the printed circuit board **12**, shown in FIGS. **2a-2b**. As used herein, the at least one connector **20** may comprise a socket connector, a servo connector, a maintenance connector, or other type of connector known in the art. A connector **20** may be located on the top or bottom surface of the PCB **12** or act as an edge connector ninety degrees lateral to the PCB **12**.

In one embodiment, the at least one connector **20** comprises at least one socket connector **30** on a surface of the PCB **12**, shown in FIG. **2a**. The at least one socket connector **30** may interact with a complementary connector on a PCB **12** that is attached either to a pod **18**, shown in FIGS. **3a-3d**, or to a vertical routing channel contained within a mechanical strut contained in the airframe skirt **16**.

In one embodiment, the at least one connector **20** further comprises at least one servo socket connector **32** on a surface of the PCB **12**, shown in FIG. **2b**. The at least one servo socket connector **32** interacts with a complementary connector on a servo motor to control flight direction by manipulating the UAV's vanes.

In one embodiment, the PCB **12** comprises a plurality of layers. The appropriate number of PCB layers is based on the specific structural need, for example, the weight of the vehicle payload or size of the UAV. The exact number of layers can be calculated by performing a vehicle structural analysis using techniques known in the art.

In one embodiment, one or more of the plurality of layers is a ground plane to shield conductors from electromagnetic interference.

In one embodiment, the arc length of PCB **12** extends at least 180 degrees around the circumference of the airframe skirt **16**, shown in FIGS. **2a-2b**. The inner and outer walls **36**, **34** of the airframe skirt **16** that do not contain or do not abut the PCB **12** can be thickened with a lightweight material, such as a carbon fiber composite, to maintain the vehicle's structural rigidity. Under this embodiment, the PCB **12** still remains a lighter weight alternative to wire harnesses and structural rigidity is still achieved.

In one embodiment, the arc length of the PCB **12** extends 360 degrees around the circumference of the airframe skirt **16**, shown in FIGS. **1a-1c**.

In one embodiment, the PCB **12** is attached to and supported by a plurality of v-blocks **38** contained in the airframe skirt **16**, as shown in FIGS. **1a-1b**. As used herein, the v-blocks **38** are lightweight supports or placeholders on which the PCB **12** rests during and after assembly. The PCB **12** may be attached to the v-blocks **38** via glue or screws **48**, for example, or alternatively, the v-blocks **38** may simply act as passive supports while the PCB is attached to the walls of the airframe skirt. The v-blocks **38** may be formed as part of the molding of the airframe skirt **16**. Alternatively, the

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v-blocks **38** may be separate components placed within the airframe skirt. Regardless of whether the v-blocks **38** are molded as part of the airframe skirt or are separate components, the v-blocks **38** are considered to be part of the core vehicle body **14**. The v-blocks **38** extend from the point where the inner and outer duct wall meet and fuse together up toward the opening of the airframe skirt's "V." The exact height of the v-blocks **38** is dictated by the thickness and number of layers of the PCB **12**.

In one embodiment, one of the at least one socket connector **30** is a power supply socket **40**, as shown in FIG. **2a**. As used herein, the power supply socket **40** may interact with a complementary connector attached to a pod **18** or to a power filter housing residing in the airframe skirt **16**.

In one embodiment, the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly **10** further comprises a radio socket connector **42** on a surface of the PCB **12**, as shown in FIG. **2b**. As used herein, the radio socket connector **42** may interact with a complementary connector attached to a radio.

In one embodiment, the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly **10** further comprises an antenna coaxial cable connector **44** on a surface of the PCB **12**, as shown in FIG. **2b**. As used herein, the antenna coaxial cable connector may interact with a complementary connector attached to an antenna **46**.

In one embodiment, the PCB **12** is either rigid or rigid-flex. As used herein, the standard fiberglass material used in PCB rigid or rigid-flex may be tailored for a UAV's specific structural need based on a vehicle structural analysis conducted according to known techniques. In order to incorporate additional strength, a layer of carbon fiber can be added to the PCB **12** or carbon fiber can be added directly into the prepreg material.

In one embodiment, the PCB's prepreg material is FR-4. FR-4, an abbreviation for Flame Retardant 4, is a type of material used for making a PCB **12**. FR-4 describes the board itself with no copper covering. The FR-4 used in PCBs **12** is typically UV stabilized with a tetrafunctional epoxy resin system. FR-4 is typically a yellowish color. FR-4 that is manufactured strictly as an insulator (without copper cladding) is typically a difunctional epoxy resin system and a greenish color. FR-4 is similar to an older material called G-10. G-10 lacked FR-4's self-extinguishing flammability-characteristics. FR-4 has widely replaced G-10 in most applications. Some military applications where destruction of the circuit board is a desirable trait will still utilize G-10.

A PCB **12** needs to be an insulator to avoid shorting the circuit, physically strong to protect the copper tracks placed upon it, and to have certain other physical electrical qualities. FR-4 is preferred over cheaper alternatives such as synthetic resin bonded paper due to several mechanical and electrical properties; it is less lossy at high frequencies, absorbs less moisture, has greater strength and stiffness and is highly flame resistant compared to its less costly counterpart. FR-4 is widely used to build high-end consumer, industrial, and military electronic equipment and is also ultra high vacuum (UHV) compatible.

In one embodiment, the ground plane is a carbon fiber skin composite.

As used herein, all the foregoing descriptions and embodiments with respect to the first aspect are equally applicable to the following second aspect as well. Furthermore, all embodiments disclosed for each aspect may be combined with other embodiments.

In a second aspect, the present invention provides a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly **10** for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle that comprises a plurality

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of printed circuit boards **12** attached to a core vehicle body **14**, wherein each of the plurality of printed circuit boards **12** conforms to the shape of the airframe skirt **16** of the core vehicle body **14**, and wherein each of the plurality of the printed circuit boards **12** provides structural integrity to the core vehicle body **14**.

As used herein, the plurality of PCBs **12** are spaced around the circumference of the airframe skirt **16** based on the specific UAV needs. The plurality of PCBs **12** may combine to form a 360 degree PCB **12** or may alternatively contain spaces in between. Where there are spaces between the plurality of PCBs **12**, the inner and outer walls **36, 34** of the airframe skirt that do not contain or do not abut a PCB **12** can be thickened with a lightweight material, such as a carbon fiber composite, to maintain the vehicle's structural rigidity. Under this embodiment, the PCB **12** still remains a lighter weight alternative to wire harnesses and structural rigidity is still achieved.

In one embodiment, the arc length of each of the plurality of PCBs **12** extends between 45 and 90 degrees around the circumference of the airframe skirt **16**.

In one embodiment, the inner and outer duct walls **36, 34** of the airframe skirt **16** are thicker in sections of the airframe skirt **16** in spaces between each of the plurality of PCBs **12**.

In one embodiment, the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly **10** further comprises at least one connector **20** on a surface of each of the plurality of PCBs **12**.

In one embodiment, the at least one connector **20** comprises at least one socket connector **30** on a surface of the PCB **12**. The at least one socket connector **30** may interact with a complementary connector on a PCB **12** that is attached either to a pod **18** or to a harness route channel, such as a stator or engine mounting strut contained in the airframe skirt **16**.

The invention claimed is:

1. A ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) comprising a structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly, the UAV comprising:

an annular duct one end of which comprises an airframe skirt; and

a ring-shaped printed circuit board attached to the airframe skirt, wherein the printed circuit board conforms to the shape of the airframe skirt, and wherein the printed circuit board is configured to increase structural integrity of the airframe skirt when attached thereto.

2. The UAV of claim 1 further comprising at least one connector on a surface of the printed circuit board.

3. The UAV of claim 2, wherein the at least one connector comprises at least one socket connector on a surface of the printed circuit board or at least one servo socket connector on the surface of the printed circuit board.

4. The UAV of claim 3, wherein one of the at least one socket connector comprises at least one of a power supply socket, a radio socket connector, or an antenna coaxial cable connector.

5. The UAV of claim 1, wherein the printed circuit board comprises a plurality of layers and wherein one or more of the plurality of layers is a ground plane configured to shield conductors from electromagnetic interference.

6. The UAV of claim 5, wherein the ground plane is a carbon fiber skin composite.

7. The UAV of claim 1, wherein an arc length of the printed circuit board extends at least 180 degrees around a circumference of the airframe skirt.

8. The UAV of claim 7, wherein the arc length of the printed circuit board extends 360 degrees around the circumference of the airframe skirt.

9. The UAV of claim 1, wherein the printed circuit board is attached to and supported by a plurality of v-blocks contained in the airframe skirt.

10. The UAV of claim 1, wherein the printed circuit board is either rigid or rigid-flex.

11. The UAV of claim 1, further comprising a plurality of payload pods connected to the airframe skirt to form at least a portion of the annular duct of the UAV.

12. The UAV of claim 1, wherein each of the plurality of payload pods comprise at least one electronic component, wherein the printed circuit board comprises a plurality of connectors configured to connect electronic components of the plurality of payload pods, and wherein the printed circuit board forms a platform on which the plurality of payload pods are arranged to connect the electronic components of the plurality of payload pods via the plurality of connectors of the printed circuit board.

13. The UAV of claim 1, wherein the airframe skirt comprises a generally v-shaped shell comprising a first wall arranged radially inward from a second wall, wherein a first end of the first wall is connected to a first end of the second wall, and wherein the printed circuit board connects the first wall to the second wall distal to the first ends of each wall.

14. The UAV of claim 1, wherein an outer edge of the printed circuit board substantially matches an outer wall of the airframe skirt and wherein an inner edge of the printed circuit board abuts an inner wall of the airframe skirt.

15. A structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly for a ducted fan unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the structural ring interconnect printed circuit board comprising: a plurality of arcuate printed circuit boards configured to be attached to an airframe skirt of the UAV, wherein the airframe skirt defines at least a portion of one end of an

annular duct of the UAV, wherein each of the plurality of printed circuit boards conforms to the shape of the airframe skirt and the plurality of printed circuit boards are configured to form a ring-shape when arranged together and connected to the airframe skirt, and wherein each of the plurality of the printed circuit boards is configured to increase structural integrity of the airframe skirt when attached thereto.

16. The structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly of claim 15, wherein an arc length of each of the plurality of printed circuit boards extends between 45 and 90 degrees around a circumference of the airframe skirt.

17. The structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly of claim 15, wherein an inner wall and an outer wall of the airframe skirt are thicker in sections of the airframe skirt corresponding to spaces between each of the plurality of printed circuit boards.

18. The structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly of claim 15 further comprising at least one connector on a surface of each of the plurality of printed circuit boards.

19. The structural ring interconnect printed circuit board assembly of claim 18, wherein the at least one connector comprises at least one socket connector on a surface of at least one of the plurality of printed circuit boards.

20. An unmanned aerial vehicle comprising: a ducted fan comprising a duct, wherein one end of the duct comprises a core vehicle body comprising an air frame skirt; a plurality of payload pods connected to the core vehicle to form the duct; and a printed circuit board attached the core vehicle body, wherein the printed circuit board conforms to a shape of the airframe skirt, and wherein the printed circuit board is configured to increase structural integrity of the airframe skirt when attached to the core vehicle body.

* * * * *