



(12) **United States Patent**  
**Hilliard et al.**

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 6,416,019 B1**  
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Jul. 9, 2002**

- (54) **PRECISION PARACHUTE RECOVERY SYSTEM**
- (75) Inventors: **Donald Patrick Hilliard; Michael Patrick Hilliard**, both of Oxnard, CA (US)
- (73) Assignee: **The United States of America as represented by the Secretary of the Navy**, Washington, DC (US)
- (\*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.
- (21) Appl. No.: **09/736,722**
- (22) Filed: **Dec. 12, 2000**
- (51) **Int. Cl.**<sup>7</sup> ..... **B64D 17/80**
- (52) **U.S. Cl.** ..... **244/139; 244/138 R**
- (58) **Field of Search** ..... 244/1 TD, 137.3, 244/138 R, 139, 142, 152

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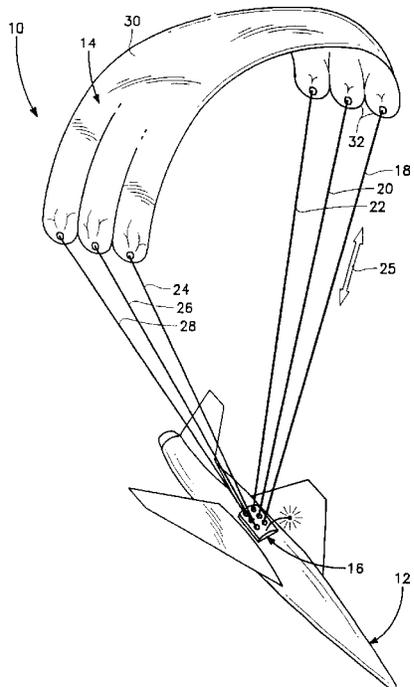
*Primary Examiner*—Charles T. Jordan  
*Assistant Examiner*—Gabriel Sukman  
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—David Kalmbaugh

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A parachute recovery system which provides for the recovery of a payload such as a target drone without damage by allowing for a safe, non-destructive landing of the payload at a desired location. The parachute recovery system comprises a payload, a parachute or parasail and a guidance control electronics and servo system. The parachute, which is rectangular in shape, is connected by a plurality of control lines to the guidance control electronics and servo system, which is attached to the payload. The payload may be an air launch component such as a spacecraft, a target drone, unmanned air vehicle, camera film, or similar apparatus. The guidance control electronics and servo system is used to control glide path trajectory and provide for a safe non-destructive landing of the payload. Servo system adjust the length of each of the plurality of control lines attached to the parachute to provide a means for controlling the parachute so as to control the speed, direction and lift of the parachute recovery system.

**13 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets**

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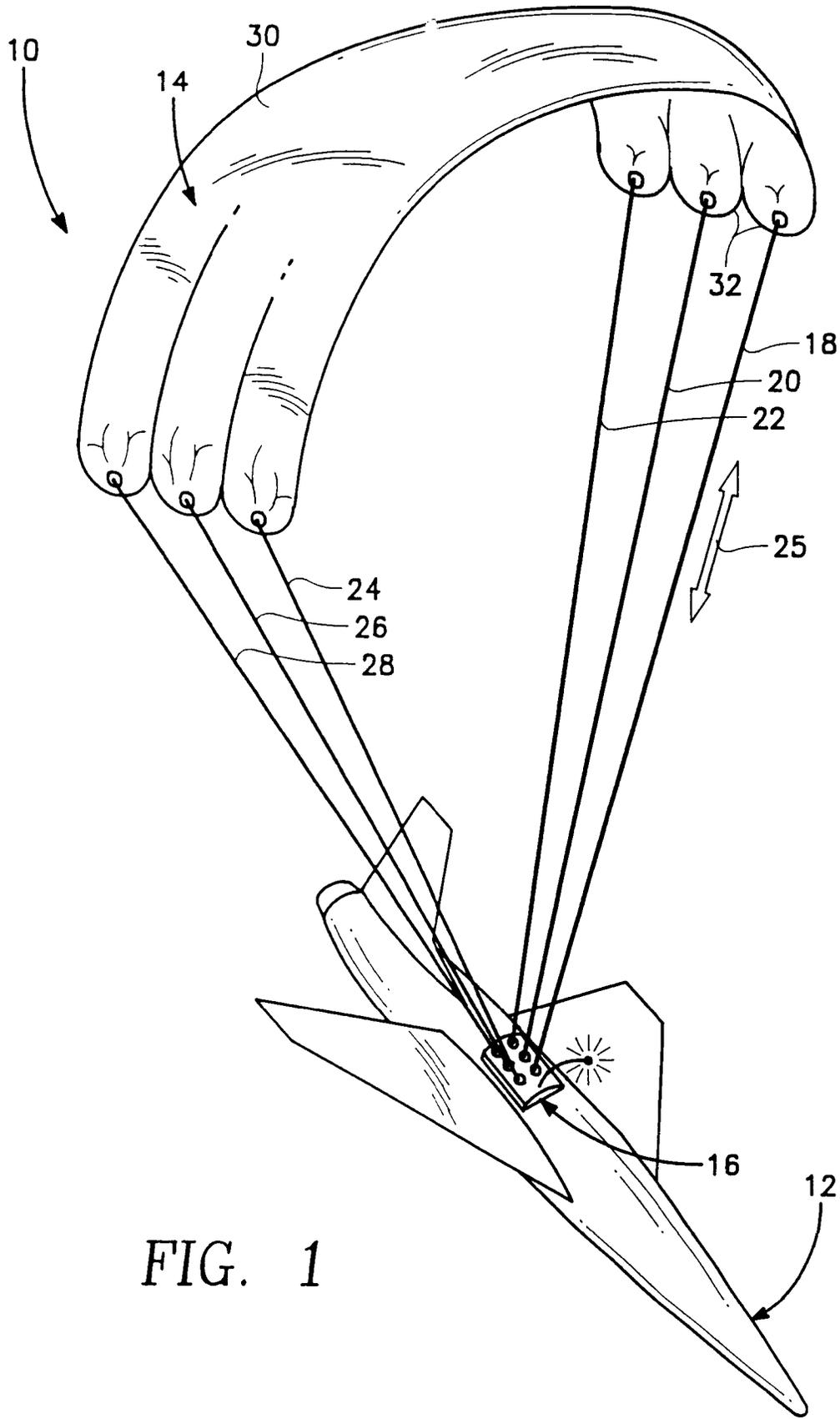


FIG. 1

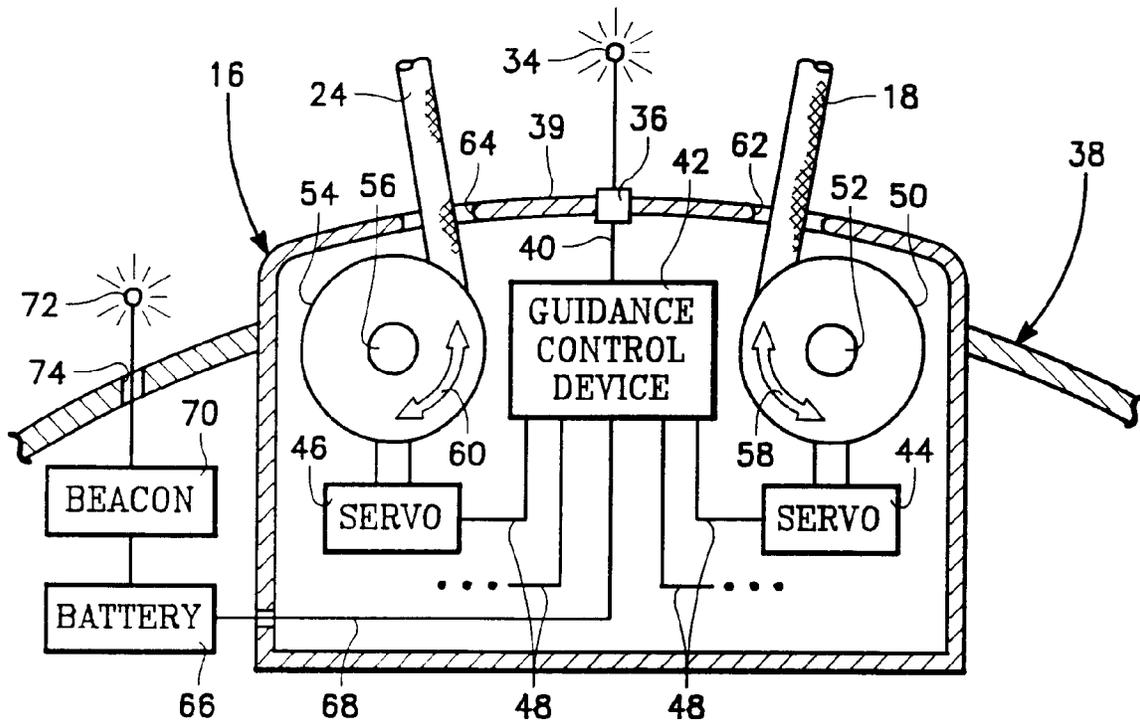


FIG. 2

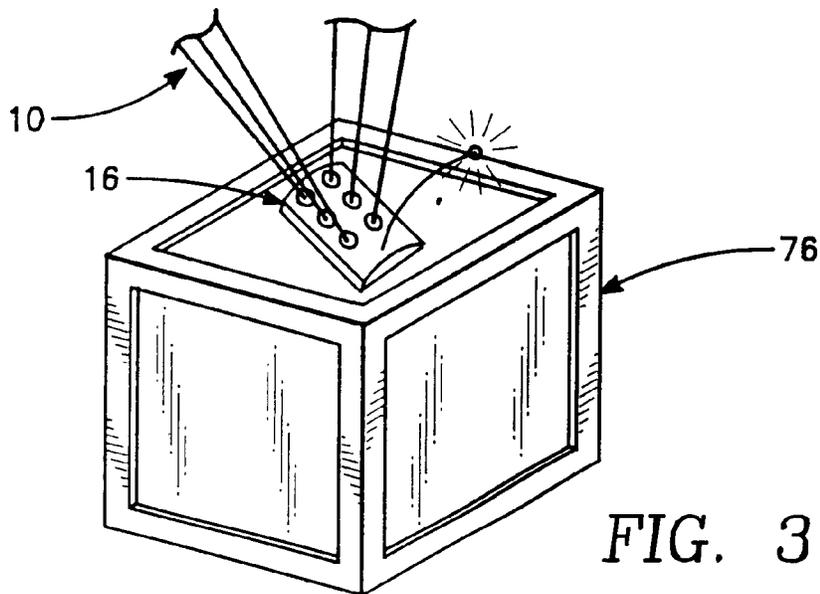


FIG. 3

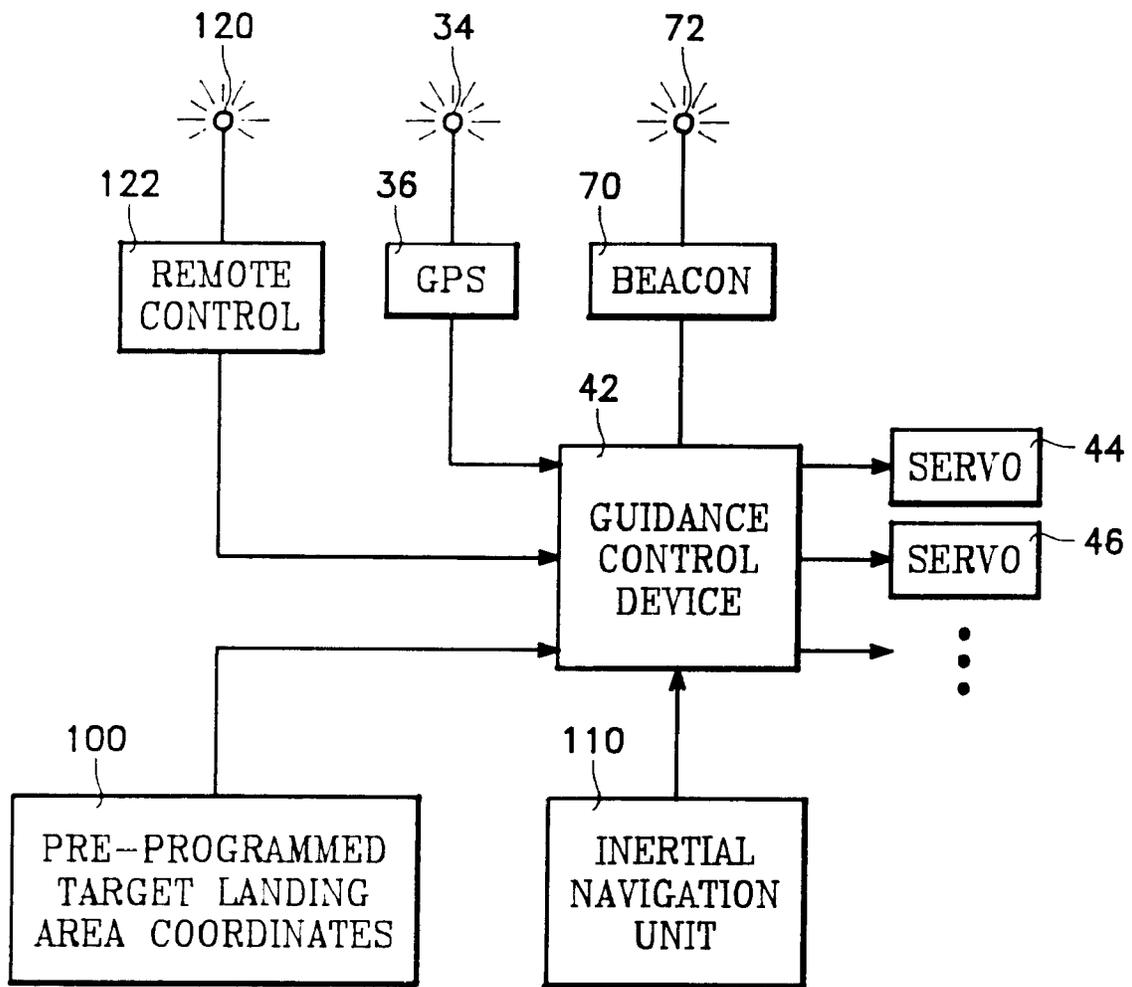


FIG. 4

## PRECISION PARACHUTE RECOVERY SYSTEM

### BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

#### 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to recovery systems used for recovery of a target drone. More particularly, the present invention relates to a precision parachute used in the recovery of a drone target which substantially reduces the possibility of damage to the target drone.

#### 2. Description of the Prior Art

For many years, parachutes have been used for the flight and recovery stage of spacecraft, target drones, camera film and similar items. A problem with ordinary parachutes, which may be circular or conical in design, is that they descend almost vertically through the airstream and are generally carried with the prevailing winds and air currents. This leads to uncertainty as to the landing point. The landing point may be, for example, in rugged and remote mountainous terrain which is difficult or even impossible to reach for retrieval aircraft such as a helicopter.

In addition, the rate of descent of these parachutes is generally in the order of fifteen to twenty-five feet per second. The result may be a rough landing on a solid surface which could lead to damage to the payload the parachute is attached to. When, for example, the payload is a target drone and the target drone is damaged during a rough landing, the cost to repair the target drone can be significant. In addition, the target drone can be totally destroyed during an extremely rough landing, which can result in a loss of several hundred thousand dollars to the military. For example, the BQM-34 aerial target cost the military about half million dollars.

Landings are often conducted on water to avoid rough landings. These water landings involve other complexities, such as auxiliary flotation devices, to keep the payload from sinking. These water landings also require that the payloads be of a type that cannot be damaged by water and be of the type that are protected against water damage.

Ram-air inflated parachutes, such as those used by sports sky divers, are able to move horizontally as much as three or four feet for every foot of vertical descent. This allows the parachutes to make headway into a fairly stiff wind of up to twenty or thirty knots.

However, a pilot is required to steer these ram-air inflated parachutes to the selected landing point. Specifically, Ram-air inflated parachutes are steered by pulling down on a pair of steering toggles which lower trailing edge flaps at the rear of the canopy. Pulling down on the right flap steers the canopy to the right and pulling down on the left flap steers the canopy to the left. Pulling on both flaps simultaneously results in a flair which reduces forward speed and vertical descent rate for a short period of time. This allows for a much more precise and gentle touchdown and landing than a parachute of conventional design.

Since a pilot is required for the use of ram-air inflated parachutes to land a payload for the purpose of recovering the payload, ram-air inflated parachutes are not the optimal choice for use in the recovery of a payload such as a target drone.

It is preferable that a parachute operate in a manner similar to a ram-air inflated parachute but not require the use of a pilot to steer the parachute.

#### SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention overcomes some of the disadvantages of the prior art including those mentioned above in that

it comprises a relatively simple yet highly effective precision parachute recovery system which provides for the recovery of a payload such as a target drone without damage by allowing for a safe, non-destructive landing of the payload at a desired location.

The parachute recovery system of the present invention comprises a payload, a parachute or parasail and a guidance control electronics and servo system. The parachute, which is rectangular in shape, is connected by a plurality of control lines to the guidance control electronics and servo system, which is attached to the payload. The payload may be an air launch component such as a spacecraft, a target drone, an unmanned air vehicle, camera film, or similar apparatus.

The guidance control electronics and servo system is used to control glide path trajectory and provide for a safe non-destructive landing of the payload. The servo system adjusts the length of each of the plurality of control lines attached to the parachute to provide a means for controlling the parachute so as to control the speed, direction and lift of the parachute recovery system.

An antenna and its associated GPS receiver receives GPS data from a transmitting station. The GPS data may include longitude, latitude and altitude data as well as rate of descent data which the guidance control electronics and servo system processes to steer the precision recovery system to a precise location and to control the rate of descent of the recovery system allowing for a gentle touchdown and soft landing of the payload. The guidance control electronics and servo system includes a guidance control device/digital computer and a plurality of servos each servo of which adjust the length of one of the control lines to steer the parachute recovery system to a safe non-destructive landing of the payload.

The parachute recovery system also includes an inertial navigation unit, a remote control unit a preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit and a beacon connected to the guidance control device. The inertial navigation unit provides payload position data to the guidance control device and may be used may with the GPS receiver, in place of the GPS receiver or as a backup to the GPS receiver. The remote control unit sends servo/guidance commands to the guidance control unit for flight path control of parachute recovery system and may be used in conjunction or as an alternative to the GPS receiver and inertial navigation unit. The preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit supplies preprogrammed target landing coordinates for the parachute recovery system to the guidance control device and may be used for autonomous guidance without the use of the remote control unit. The beacon sends payload position data to a remote receiving station and may be used for feedback to the remote control unit, to provide payload position data to recovery crews or it may be deactivated for covert operations.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a perspective view illustrating the precision parachute recovery system for use in the retrieval of a payload which constitutes the present invention;

FIG. 2 illustrates a side view illustrating the control electronics and servo system for the parachute recovery system of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a perspective view illustrating the bottom portion of the parachute recovery system of FIG. 1 affixed to a payload; and

FIG. 4 is a block diagram of an electronics system for providing navigation and current location data to the guidance control device illustrated in FIG. 2.

### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring first to FIG. 1, there is shown the precision parachute recovery system **10** in accordance with the present invention. The precision parachute recovery system **10** comprises a payload **12**, a parachute or parasail **14** and the guidance control electronics and servo system **16**. Parachute **14** is connected by a plurality of suspension or control lines **18, 20, 22, 24, 26** and **28** to the guidance control electronics and servo system **16**, which is attached to the payload **12**. Parachute **14** must be of sufficient size to support the weight of payload **12**.

Payload **12** can be any desired object or payload. Payload may, for example, be an air launch component such as a spacecraft, a target drone, unmanned air vehicle, camera film, or similar apparatus. As shown in FIG. 1, payload **12** is a target drone such as a MQM-107 aerial target used by the military to test and evaluate the performance of missiles and other weapon systems. In flight, payload **12** is supported by parachute **14**. Since the cost of target drones may exceed a million dollars, it is highly desirable to have a safe, non-destructive landing of the payload in a location which is easily accessible to a recovery crew.

Parachute **14** may be any parachute which is steerable such as a ram-air parachute or a parasail. Ram-air parachutes are well known in the prior art and are designed to include a fabric parachute body **30** having a plurality of individual cells **32** arranged side-by side along the width of the parachute **14**.

Parachute **14** may be constructed from any of a number of parachute fabrics including Nylon, Dacron, Kevlar or the like and may be generally rectangular in plan view, and may have an airfoil section such that lift may be developed by forward motion. The shape of the parachute body **30** may be sustained by the air flow over and through parachute body **30** as is known in the art. The specific parachute design may be tailored to the weight and size of the payload affixed to the parachute.

Control lines **18, 20, 22, 24, 26** and **28** may comprise cables or ropes used to carry aircraft, such as drone **12** and may typically be constructed from materials such as Dacron, Kevlar, Spectra or the like. Control lines **18, 20, 22, 24, 26** and **28** provide a means for controlling parasail **14**.

Referring to FIGS. 1 and 2, the guidance control electronics and servo system **16** is used to control glide path trajectory and provide for a safe non-destructive landing of the payload **12**. Servo system **16** adjusts the length of each of the control lines **18, 20, 22, 24, 26** and **28** thereby providing a means for controlling parachute **14** so as to control the speed, direction and lift of precision parachute recovery system **10**.

Payload trajectory control in the air may be accomplished by controlling the relative location of parachute body **30** and the rest of recovery system **10** and varying the angle of attack of the parachute body **30**. Payload trajectory control in the air may, for example, be accomplished by lowering a portion of the back and of parachute body **10**. This requires shortening control lines **22** and **28**.

Referring to FIG. 2, the guidance control electronics and servo system **16** used in the preferred embodiment of the present invention may include an antenna **34** and its associated receiver **36** which receives external signals. These signals may be used by guidance control electronics and servo system **16** to direct the flight of the precision parachute recovery system **10**. External signals may include direct

control signals from a transmitting (e.g. ship or aircraft) or ground station. The external signals may be also be GPS data from GPS satellites or from a transmitting station.

The GPS or other position data may be in a radio frequency signal format from a transmitting or ground station (not illustrated). The GPS data or other position data may include longitude, latitude and altitude data as well as rate of descent data which the guidance control electronics and servo system **16** processes to steer the recovery system **10** to a precise location and to control the rate of descent of the recovery system **10** allowing for a gentle touchdown and soft landing of payload **12**. As shown in FIG. 2 antenna **34** and receiver **36** are mounted on the upper surface **39** of a support structure **38** which has the electro-mechanical elements of the guidance control electronics and servo system **16** mounted therein. Antenna **34** and receiver **36** may also be mounted elsewhere on parachute recovery system **10**, and not limited to being mounted on the upper surface **39** of a support structure **38** as shown in FIG. 3.

It should be noted that receiver **36** may be an internal unit which does not have to be mounted on the upper surface **39** of a support structure **38**. Receiver **36** may be a GPS receiver as shown in FIG. 4.

The GPS data received by antenna **34** is transferred via an electrical cable **40** to a guidance control device **42**. The guidance control device **42** then processes the GPS data generating a plurality of digital positioning commands/signals which are converted to an analog format prior to being supplied to a plurality of servo motors **44** and **46**. Electrical cables **48** connect each of the plurality of servo motors **44** and **46** to guidance control device **42**.

At this time it should be noted that guidance control device **42** may be a commercial available light weight, compact, impact resistant digital computer or microprocessor.

The plurality of servo motors each have a shaft and a capstan/spool attached to the shaft of the servo motor. As shown in FIG. 2, capstan **50** is attached to the servo motor shaft **52** for servo **44**, while capstan **54** is attached to the servo motor shaft **56** for servo **46**. Control line **18** is wound around capstan **50** and control line **24** is wound around capstan **54**. Each of the remaining control lines **20, 22, 26** and **28** has a servo associated with the control line **20, 22, 26** and **28**.

The capstan **50** rotates in the clockwise direction to lengthen/extend control line **18** and in the counterclockwise direction to shorten/retract control line **18** (as indicated by arrow **58**). The capstan **54** rotates in the counterclockwise direction to lengthen/extend control line **24** and in the clockwise direction to shorten/retract control line **24** (as indicated by arrow **60**). The control lines **18** and **24** respectively pass through openings **62** and **64** within the upper surface **39** of support structure **38**.

There is a rechargeable battery **66** mounted within support structure **38** which is connected to guidance control device **42** by an electrical cable **68** to supply power to guidance control device **42**. Power for the servos **44** and **46** is routed through guidance control device **42** and electrical cables **48** to each servo **44** and **46**. Power for recharging the battery **66** may also be provided by the engine of the target drone **12**.

Recovery system **10** also includes a beacon **70** which has an antenna **72** for transmitting radio frequency signals to the ground station. These radio frequency signals provide data relating to the altitude of recovery system **10**, the rate of descent of recovery system **10**, direction of flight of recovery system **10** and the current position of recovery system **10**.

including its latitude and longitude. Computers at the ground station process this data calculating new GPS coordinate and rate of descent data which is then transmitted to the guidance control device 42. The guidance control device 42 generates new positioning signals which are supplied to the servos for each of the control lines 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28 adjusting the length of the control lines 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28 as required to steer the parachute recovery system 10 on a flight path which allows for a gentle touchdown and soft landing of payload 12.

At this time it should be noted that the number of control lines from the six control lines illustrated in FIG. 1. for example, recovery system 10 could have eight, ten or twelve control lines and their associated servos to steer recovery system 10.

It should also be noted that guidance control device 42 can be programmed to control glide path trajectory and provide for a safe non-destructive landing of the payload without requiring the use of a ground station to process position data relating to the current position of recovery system 10 including its latitude and longitude.

Referring now to FIGS. 1 and 3, there is shown a container 76 which is another type of payload compatible with parachute recovery system 10. Container 76 may, for example, have precision instruments, camera film or other apparatus contained therein which require that recovery system 10 have a non-destructive landing to prevent damage to container 76 and its contents.

Container 76 may also be a package that needs to be precisely delivered to a target landing area such as for a search and rescue operation or for military operations involving the use of special forces.

Referring now to FIGS. 1, 2 and 4, FIG. 4 depicts an electronics system for providing navigation and current location data to the guidance control device 42. Connected to guidance control device 42 are GPS receiver 36 and its associated antenna 34; beacon 70 and its associate antenna 72; and a remote control unit 122 and its associated antenna 120. A preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit 100 and an inertial navigation unit (INU) 110 are also connected to guidance control device 42.

It should be noted that although remote control unit 122 and antenna 120 are not depicted in FIG. 2, antenna 120 and unit 122 can be mounted anywhere on the parachute recovery system 10 including on or within support structure 38. It would also be possible to combine antenna 34 and receiver 36; antenna 120 and remote control unit 122 and/or beacon 70 and antenna 72 into a single multi-functional antenna and receiver/transmitter unit.

The real time payload position of parachute recovery system 10 is determined through payload position data input to guidance control device 42 from either GPS receiver 36 or inertial navigation unit 110. A combination of GPS receiver 36 and inertial navigation unit 110 may be utilized to enhance the accuracy of the data and to insure a fail-safe redundancy for the landing of payload 12. GPS satellite signals from earth orbiting satellites are received via antenna 34 and then processed by GPS receiver 36 to continuously update the payload position estimate of payload 12. This data is then provided to guidance control device 42.

Inertial navigation unit 110 updates payload position data continuously and then provides this data to guidance control device 42. Unit 100 supplies preprogrammed target landing coordinates for parachute recovery system 10 to guidance control device 42. The payload position data from GPS receiver 36 and/or inertial navigation unit 110 and the target

landing coordinates from unit 100 are processed by guidance control unit 42 to calculate the required servo/guidance commands for guiding payload 12 along the payload flight path to the target landing area. Guidance control unit 42 may use conventional and well known guidance algorithms, such as Kalman filtering, to calculate the servo commands. Guidance Control device 42 then executes the servo commands in real time to guide the payload 12 to the target landing area.

Beacon 70 may then be used to transmit, via antenna 72, the payload position information to target and recovery crews during flight and after landing of the payload 12. For certain military operations of specialized nature, beacon 70 may be deactivated or may be configured to transmit low-probability of intercept signals.

Remote control unit 122 may be used in conjunction with GPS receiver 36 and/or inertial navigation unit 110 to send servo/guidance commands to guidance control unit 42 for flight path control of parachute recovery system 10. Remote control unit 122 may also be used to update target landing area coordinates when a coordinate change is necessary or when preprogrammed coordinates are not available for parachute recovery system 10. Remote control signals are intercepted by antenna 120, provided to remote control unit 122 which processes the signals and then inputs the guidance commands to guidance control device 42.

Whenever there is a requirement of complete autonomous flight path control for parachute recovery system 10, remote control unit 122 is not utilized. Autonomous guidance and control of payload flight path and landing require the use of antenna 34 and GPS receiver 36 and/or inertial navigation unit 110 along with preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit 100.

Guidance control device 42 continuously updates remote control stations with payload position data for parachute recovery system 10.

While GPS data is normally used to calculate payload position, remote control unit 122 operates as a backup in case of a GPS receiver failure or the like. Further, an inertial navigation unit for guidance control may be a less expensive alternative to GPS data and may be available on certain payloads including target drones such as illustrated in FIG. 1. It should be understood that guidance control device 42 has the capability to receive and process position data in any format including GPS data, data from an inertial navigation unit, data from a remote control unit and programmed target landing area coordinates.

During parachute deployment there is considerable stress placed on parachute recovery system 10 and its individual components. In particular, the servos 44 and 46 must have the capability to survive parachute deployment related stresses. This survival capability may be accomplished by utilizing servos with strength which is sufficient to overcome the id effects of stresses which occur during parachute deployment. As an alternative, the servos 44 and 46 may be protected from deployment stresses by conventional load bearing devices such as load bearing clamps which secure control lines 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28 during initial deployment of parachute recovery system 10. When parachute 14 is fully deployed and parachute recovery system 10 is in flight the load bearing clamps are released to allow servos 44 and 46 to operate.

From the foregoing, it may readily be seen that the present invention comprises a new, unique and exceedingly useful precision parachute recovery system which constitutes a considerable improvement over the known prior art. Many

modifications and variations of the present invention are possible in light of the above teachings. It is to be understood that within the scope of the appended claims the invention may be practiced otherwise than as specifically described.

What is claimed is:

1. A parachute recovery system comprising:

- (a) a generally rectangular shaped parachute having a parachute body, said parachute body having a plurality of individual cells arranged side-by-side along the width of said parachute;
- (b) a plurality of control lines having one end thereof connected to said parachute and an opposite end;
- (c) a preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit for providing target landing area coordinates defining a target landing area for said parachute recovery system;
- (d) a servo system having the opposite end of each of said control lines connected thereto, said servo system including:
  - (i) an antenna for receiving position data in a radio frequency signal format;
  - (ii) a guidance control device connected to said antenna to receive said position data and said preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit to receive said target landing area coordinates;
  - (iii) a plurality of servo motors connected to said guidance control device, each of said servo motors having a shaft and a capstan attached to the shaft of each of said servo motors, the capstan of each servo motor having the opposite end of one of said control lines connected thereto;
  - (iv) said guidance control device processing said position data and said target landing area coordinates to generate a plurality of positioning signals and to provide said positioning signals to said servo motors;
  - (v) said servo motors, responsive to said positioning signals, rotating said capstans to continuously and separately adjust the length of each of said control lines steering said parachute on a flight path to a non-destructive landing of said parachute recovery system within said target landing area;
- (e) an inertial navigation unit connected to said guidance control device, said inertial navigation unit being adapted to operate as a backup unit for said antenna to provide said position data to said guidance control device whenever said antenna fails to provide said position data to said guidance control device; and
- (f) a payload removably coupled to said servo system to allow said payload to be removed from said servo system after the non-destructive landing within of said parachute recovery system said target landing area.

2. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said plurality of control lines comprises six control lines.

3. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said payload comprises a target drone.

4. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said payload comprises a container having therein a package which is delivered to a precise location when said parachute recovery system executes said non-destructive landing.

5. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said servo system further comprises a beacon having an antenna for transmitting radio frequency signals which provide location data for said parachute recovery system relating to a direction of flight of said parachute recovery system and a current position for said parachute recovery system.

6. The parachute recovery system of claim 5 wherein said servo system further comprises a battery connected to said beacon and said guidance control device.

7. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said guidance control device comprises a digital computer.

8. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 wherein said position data comprises Global Positioning System data which includes longitude, latitude and altitude data and rate of descent data for said parachute recovery system which said control system processes to steer said parachute recovery system to a precise location and to control a rate of descent for said parachute recovery system allowing for a non-destructive touchdown and said non-destructive landing of said payload.

9. The parachute recovery system of claim 1 further comprising a remote control unit having an antenna, said remote control unit being connected to guidance control device.

10. A parachute recovery system comprising:

- (a) a generally rectangular shaped parachute having a parachute body, said parachute body having a plurality of individual cells arranged side-by-side along the width of said parachute;
- (b) a plurality of control lines having one end thereof connected to said parachute and an opposite end;
- (c) a preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit for providing target landing area coordinates defining a target landing area for said parachute recovery system
- (d) a servo system having the opposite end of each of said control lines connected thereto, said servo system including:
  - (i) an antenna for receiving global positioning system data in a radio frequency signal format, said global positioning system data, said global positioning data including longitude, latitude and altitude data and rate of descent data for said parachute recovery system;
  - (ii) a receiver connected to said antenna to receive said global positioning system signals;
  - (iii) a digital computer connected to said receiver to receive said global positioning system data and said preprogrammed target landing area coordinates unit to receive said target landing area coordinates;
  - (iv) a plurality of servo motors connected to said digital computer, each of said servo motors having a shaft and a capstan attached to the shaft of each of said servo motors, the capstan of each servo motor having the opposite end of one of said control lines connected thereto;
  - (v) said digital computer processing said global positioning system data and said target landing area coordinates to generate a plurality of digital positioning signals and to provide said digital positioning signals to said servo motors;
  - (vi) said servo motors, responsive to said digital positioning signals, rotating said capstans to continuously and separately adjust the length of each of said control lines to steer said parachute on a flight path to said target landing area and to control a rate of descent for said parachute recovery system which allows for a non-destructive touchdown and landing of said parachute recovery system within said target landing area;
- (e) an inertial navigation unit connected to said digital computer, said inertial navigation unit being adapted to operate as a backup unit for said antenna and said receiver to provide inertial navigation system position data to said digital computer whenever said antenna and said receiver fail to provide said global positioning system data to said digital computer; and

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(f) a target drone removably coupled to said servo system to allow said target drone to be removed from said servo system after the non-destructive landing of said parachute recovery system within said target landing area.

**11.** The parachute recovery system of claim **10** wherein said plurality of control lines comprises six control lines.

**12.** The parachute recovery system of claim **10** wherein said servo system further comprises a beacon having an antenna for transmitting radio frequency signals which pro-

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vide location data for said parachute recovery system relating to a direction of flight of said parachute recovery system and a current position for said parachute recovery system, and a battery connected to said beacon and said digital computer.

**13.** The parachute recovery system of claim **10** further comprising a remote control unit having an antenna, said remote control unit being connected to said digital computer.

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